

India's Central Asian Struggle

[BY SREERAM CHAULIA]

Central Asia is the most coveted area in the world for strategic influence. By virtue of its location at geopolitical crossroads and its vast mineral treasures, the region of the six 'stans' (Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) has been a prized object of contention for great powers of different eras. In the 13th century, Mongolia's Chinggis Khan swept across the area, killing 15 million people and plundering its resources. Chinggis's imperialism in the Caucasus and Russia was facilitated by his control of the Central Asian steppes.

In the 19th century, Russia and the British Empire locked horns over Central Asia in the 'Great Game', an intense rivalry for mastery of the region. For London, Afghanistan was a staging post for the Russians to invade India, the jewel in the Victorian crown. For the ambitious Czars, subjugating the Muslim khanates of Central Asia was necessary for Russian traders to carry their wares westwards to lucrative markets.

The late 20th century revival of the 'Great Game' between the United States and the USSR centred on the swing state of Afghanistan. Moscow's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan was aimed at shoring up the former's 'southern frontier' against American destabilisation. The ensuing American arming of the *mujabideen* forces via Pakistan turned Central Asia into a deciding ground of the Cold War. The Russian defeat in Afghanistan in 1987 was instrumental in determining the final outcome of the Cold War.

Since the end of the Cold War, the world



has witnessed the rise of two new great powers in Asia- China and India. These two giants made remarkable economic progress in the last two decades and began to be acknowledged as important players in their own right, not as satellites of the US or Russia. Apart from the perennial strategic stakes in Central Asia, China and India saw the 'stans', host to the largest untapped oil and gas reserves on the planet, as potential sources of energy.

Chinese and Indian quests for energy are complicated by their mutual competition for greatness. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh echoed this fact by saying, "China is ahead of us in planning for its energy security. India can no longer be complacent." China and India add to the pre-existing energy-driven melee in Central

Asia that pits the US against Russia. Russia has been ably countering the American attempt to 'free' Central Asian oil and gas from the Russian stranglehold through a proposed Trans-Caspian Pipeline. The Sino-Indian scramble for Central Asian energy works under the larger rubric of a Russo-American 'new Cold War'.

Islamic fundamentalism is a new factor motivating great powers to seek leverage in Central Asia. The anti-Soviet jihad of the 1980s unleashed a powerful tool of political mobilisation based on *jihad*. From Afghanistan, the virus of violent Islamism spread to the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs and Turkmens, turning the entire area into a nursery for global terrorism. All the four major contenders in Central Asia- the US, Russia, China and India - have a

direct interest in managing the threat of Islamism emanating from the 'stans'.

India's struggle for gaining a foothold in Central Asia rests on two legs - Afghanistan and Tajikistan. In the former, India has an abiding interest in neutralising the Taliban-Al Qaeda duo. The direct links between the Taliban and Pakistan-based anti-India terrorist formations like the *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* and the *Jaisb-e-Mubammad* imply that India can never be secure until *jihadis* from Central Asia are silenced.

The American-led overthrow of the Taliban government in 2001 opened a window of opportunity for New Delhi to boost ties with the new Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, which was eager to repel Pakistani dictation of Afghan politics. India's generous economic and infrastructural assistance to the Karzai government has won the appreciation of the authorities in Kabul. The closeness between India and Afghanistan is underlined by a common animosity for Pakistan's sponsorship of cross-border terrorism on two fronts- the Durand Line to the west and the Line of Control to the east.

A striking example of India-Afghanistan partnership is the road construction venture by New Delhi's quasi-military Border Roads Organisation (BRO) to connect distant corners of Afghanistan and strengthen its territorial integrity. India is paying the price for this initiative not only financially but also in blood. In April 2008, Taliban terrorists killed two Indian construction workers of the BRO in a suicide attack. In December 2005, the Taliban kidnapped and killed an Indian BRO driver with a demand that all Indians should leave the country. Following this incident, India dispatched 300 paramilitary forces of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) to provide security to the Indian workers in Afghanistan. The move rang alarm bells in Pakistan about Indian military presence in Afghanistan for the first time since Pakistan's creation as a nation state.

The Taliban, who operate with impunity with the connivance of Pakistani intelligence, carried out another suicide attack in January 2008 that killed two ITBP personnel. The

Islamist hatred for India's sincere attempts to shore up the Karzai government has not been limited to attacking official Government-of-India personnel. In April 2006, the Taliban abducted an Indian engineer working for a Bahraini telecommunications company in Afghanistan and decapitated him.

The targeting of Indians in Afghanistan exemplifies the hurdle posed by Pakistan to New Delhi's ambitions. A shadow of doubt hangs over the reliability of Pakistan as a transit state for oil to be transported to India from Turkmenistan or Iran. At every step, Islamabad is determined to prevent India from making inroads in Afghanistan. India has expressed grave reservations at the Yusuf Raza Gilani government's recent negotiated deal with the Taliban, wherein the Pakistani army will halt campaigns and hand over arrested Taliban members in return for a cessation of terrorist attacks on Pakistani soil. The essence of this pact is that the Taliban will be free to go berserk in Afghanistan as long as they do not cause havoc inside Pakistani territory. Attacks on NATO coalition troops in Afghanistan as well as on Indian BRO and ITBP staffers are likely to escalate as a result of this agreement. A previous ceasefire between General Musharraf's government and the Pakistani Taliban in 2006 yielded a similar crop of violence in Afghanistan.

In Tajikistan, India faces an equally strong set of obstacles as in Afghanistan. Since the late 1990s, India operated a field hospital at Farkhor, southeast of the capital Dushanbe, as part of its role in helping Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in the fight against the Taliban regime.

This facility was upgraded into a military outpost and eventually an air base in 2003, becoming the first of its kind for India on foreign soil. The Ayni air base was to be established close to the Afghan border with the permanent presence of the Indian Air Force and Army. Since the Indian base was supposed to be "co-located" alongside the Russian base at Ayni (which counters American designs), the agreement between New Delhi and Dushanbe was probably facilitated by Russia.

In 2007, though, the Indian base in Tajikistan

ran into trouble. The Tajik government, reportedly under Russian pressure, ordered the eviction of Indian forces from the base. The diversification of India's arms imports away from Russia towards the US had apparently miffed Moscow. Although this narrative was denied in Moscow and New Delhi, the uncertainty about India's continued hold over Ayni reflected the competitive fragility that characterises Central Asia. In 2008, matters seemed to return to normal after India delivered promised development aid to Tajikistan. The Tajik defence minister announced that Dushanbe had "temporarily stalled" India's ejection from Ayni after New Delhi released the financial assistance. One would assume that Russia too has eased its objections to the Indian base at Ayni in the interests of continued diplomatic and military cooperation with New Delhi.

It bears mentioning here that the Ayni base is also desired by the US and China. The Chinese military journal, *Binggi Zhishi*, argued in 2004 that India's forays into Central Asia are "containing Pakistan and pinning down China's development." The Beijing-Islamabad nexus will expectedly leave no stone unturned in rolling back India's attempt to become a prominent actor in the 'stans'. China intends to use the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and pipeline diplomacy to impress its own hand on Central Asia. Since Russia is unwilling to cede the keys to the region to any power, be it the US or China, India will be a balancing necessity, and New Delhi will have to cultivate this aspect of its friendship with Moscow.

The desolate terrain of Central Asia has for time immemorial enticed greedy great powers. India's advent is the latest arrival on an already crowded scene akin to a 'Hare and Hounds' game among lead states and pursuer states. Unless New Delhi plays its diplomatic cards with Russia and the US more adeptly, its struggle to obtain a toehold in Central Asia will be in vain. 

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