

# THE NEW GREAT GAME AND INDIA'S INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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## Abstract

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the formation of the Central Asian states in 1991 have increased the geostrategic significance of the region, which attracted the major powers. The region is a transit route between Europe and South and East Asia. Even though India had historical ties to Central Asia during the Kushan and Mughal periods, it failed to recognise the region's geopolitical importance for its growing global ambitions until recently. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to five Central Asian republics in 2015 indicates India's foreign policy shift towards the extended neighbourhood. The India-Central Asian cooperation can potentially significantly boost India's position in the global order. The paper's primary objective is to understand the region's strategic importance and the new 'great game' played by the global powers for their geopolitical and geo-economic interest. It also examines the regional interests of global powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. This paper also focuses on India's relationship with Central Asian states through the Connect Central Asia Policy.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, New Great-Game, Geopolitics, Energy Politics, Connect Central Asia Policy.

## 1.1 Introduction

The relationship between India and Central Asia has a long history of cooperation and partnership. The two regions have had profound cultural and cultural ties for over two millennia regarding people-to-people contact, trade, and commerce. Both regions were occupied by ancient kingdoms such as the Kushana Empire. These historical and civilisational ties have influenced religion and society in various ways. These ties were bolstered in the Middle Ages by the arrival of Islam and, later, the formation of Muslim

sovereignty in India, with many rulers hailing from Central Asia.

The Central Asian region is considered part of India's "extended neighbourhood". Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan make up the Central Asian region. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, all five countries became independent. As Central Asian republics were once part of the Soviet Union, which had perfect connections with India, the two regions-maintained touch, unlike other nations which lost contact with the region due to strained

relations with Moscow. In truth, India had strong diplomatic ties with the region since it was one of the few countries possessing a consulate in Tashkent, the former Soviet Union's Central Asian territory. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India's connections with this region appeared to be drifting. Many reasons have been proposed for this shift, the most significant of which is that India was deeply involved with its close neighbours, particularly Pakistan, over the Kashmir problem. In the early 1990s, Russia, the successor state of the Soviet Union, was experiencing a severe economic crisis. As a result, India's bilateral engagement objectives evolved gradually and steadily to meet its demands, and it's safe to assume that Central Asian governments were low on India's priority list, at least in the first decade after independence. India was slow to recognise Central Asia's rapidly shifting geopolitical and geoeconomics realities. During the last ten years, the region has become a centre of power struggles over energy resources. At the same time, India's emergence as an economic and regional power was being noticed worldwide. If India wants to remain a "rising power" in the world system, it can no longer afford to ignore Central Asia. Another reason for a fresh look at Central Asia was that India was losing its "immediate neighbourhood" to China, which had formed strong political and economic ties with practically all of India's borders, thereby encircling India strategically (Jha, 2016).

Central Asia is increasingly attracting the attention of global players as an area with enormous resources and quickly developing transit possibilities bordered by nuclear-armed states. Russia is working hard to re-establish its economic clout through the Eurasian Economic Union. The Silk Road Economic Belt is helping China to expand. In what is gradually becoming a critical portion of the world, the United States and India have the only small presence. However, India lags behind other regional players, and what it needs to do now is to realise its potential as an emerging great power and strengthen its strategic presence in Central Asia. Because of India's growing relevance as a developing continental power, failing to expand its footprints risks delaying India's global ascension and compromising the US global mission of sustaining the global

order amid accelerating power shifts (Muzalevsky, 2015).

A New "Great Game" is being played out in Central Asia, one in which powers on the periphery compete for influence, and Central Asian states themselves are active players. As the world shifted from a bipolar to a multipolar focus, the nations of Asia searched for new trans-regional security arrangements. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, which resulted in the formation of five Central Asian republics, has complicated the security relations of the Asian states. This new struggle is not a repeat of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Great Game", in which these states are but pawns of great powers as they race for power and position. But instead, Central Asian states are active players in this power struggle, in a unique geostrategic position to influence immediate neighbours Russia, China and even beyond the Indian subcontinent (Smith, 1996).

## **1.2 Strategic Importance of the Region**

### **1.2.1 Geopolitical Significance**

The strategic importance of an area or a state's location is a significant feature of various interventionist policies aimed at expanding political power across borders. The concept of strategic relevance arose in the late nineteenth century as a substantial discourse in conceptualising international political events, and it continues to be a dominant feature in international politics' strategic picture. Rather than ideologies, the factors that play an essential role are geopolitics, geoeconomics, and strategic positions and holdings of significant resources that dominate contemporary international politics. Although Central Asian countries are landlocked, they share borders with emerging world powers. The word "Central Asia" refers to a broad region stretching from the Chinese border to the Caspian Sea in the West, Russia in the north to Iran and Afghanistan in the south. Since the days of the Silk Route, the region has played an essential role for invaders and traders. At this time, Central Asia has gained unique status as an East-West and North-South link bridge. It has attracted the interest of great powers throughout history because of its growing geostrategic relevance and potential as a source

of energy. The territory was more of a battleground for outsiders than a source of power in and of itself. Central Asia is strategically located at the center of Eurasia and Asia. The region's significance is recognised for its geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic position. The Central Asian republics are central to Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory, which he proposed in his 1904 book "Geographic Pivot of History." Nicholas Spykman refined this hypothesis in 1944, giving it a new interpretation known as the Rimland Theory. New theories and strategies have emerged in the post-Cold War period, with Central Asia serving as an important region for global power politics (Dar, 2014).

The National Security Advisor of the US, Zbigniew Brzezinski, termed Central Asia an 'Arc of Crisis, and after years, the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, viewed it as an 'Arc of Opportunity. Therefore, the region has a positive distinctiveness, and it has proven to be a tactically promising field for attack and defence efforts in past wars. During the long Cold War, this land served as a counter-region for the US and its allies in the maritime geostrategic domain and the erstwhile Soviet Union and its allies in the continental geostrategic realm. Similarly, new developments in this region are likely to push the United States, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan into competition and conflict to control Central Asia for their long-term military and energy security. After the 9/11 attack, the region became the heart of Afghanistan's logistic network, 'Operation Enduring Freedom'. Because the region has proven to be strategically crucial for the US and NATO, and they have established military bases in three of the five Central Asian states. The presence of the American military in these Central Asian states initially alarmed Russia, China, Iran, and even Turkey. Despite the United States' claim that its military presence in the region was temporary and contingent on the fight against terrorism, the international community, particularly Russia and China, we're concerned that this quick deployment of American troops would become permanent and formalised in a set of bilateral treaties (Choo, 2022). Central Asian states emerged as a significant concern for major powers in this geopolitical rivalry. The creation of a new great

game among major countries, in which the United States plays a vital role, is due to its unique geopolitical location and the geo-economic potential of energy resources. To balance their energy security demands, Russia, China, India, and other regional nations are commanding and controlling the region's strategic location (Dar, 2014).

### 1.2.2 Geo-Economic Implications

Central Asia is not only significant from a geopolitical dimension but also a geo-economic dimension. The landlocked region has the possession of rich natural resources. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the independence of the states in the 1990s and unlocked the region for international energy and open markets, which heightened its strategic significance at the geo-economic forefront. The discovery of abundant energy sparked fierce competition among the leading countries to gain geopolitical clout over Central Asian republics and control these energy resources. Russia, China, the United States, and India are involved in a fierce competition for pipeline diversification of oil and gas. The diversification race is from the South Stream of Russia to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan BTC and Nabucco of the West and Eastern China-Turkmenistan-Xinjiang gas pipeline, Kazakh-China cross-border oil pipeline, and South-Eastern TAPI to Pakistan to India. Due to its abundant energy resource, the region is contested by regional and trans-regional powers. The region is emerging in international politics in the strategic sphere because of the rising consumption of oil and gas demands (Dar, 2014).

So the Central Asian region gained popularity due to its abundant energy resources and strategic location. Central Asia is blessed with substantial energy deposits, and the competition among states to achieve a position of control over the energy economy, i.e., production, pipelines, and refining, is particularly fierce. These deposits are critical to Central Asia's economic success and connectivity with the global economy. Kazakhstan is a major oil and uranium exporter, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are major gas exporters in the region. Membership in international and regional organisations such

as the United Nations Organization (UNO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has improved Central Asia's prominence in the globe. Non-state and extremist entities such as Al-Qaida, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) made this region extremely important. Being in the middle of the Eurasian region and surrounded by dominant Islamic, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu civilisations, the Central Asian region is the most convenient transit route for international trade and business. The strategic location and abundant energy reserves attracted numerous foreign actors, resulting in a new great game, rivalry, and battle for domination in the Central Asian region between Russia, China, the United States, India, Pakistan, Japan, Turkey, and Iran (Kumar and Teja, 2021).

### **1.3 Global Powers Interests in the Region**

#### **1.3.1 China**

Since Central Asia gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, China's relations with the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have grown significantly. During the Soviet era, the borders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan with China were disputed, resulting in tense relations between Beijing and Moscow. China moved fast to settle its borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as with the Russian Federation, following the breakup of the Soviet Union and the independence of these three Central Asian governments. When this work was finished in 1996, the Shanghai Five was formed to foster closer collaboration between these countries. With the addition of Uzbekistan in 2002, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was born (Sajjanhar, 2021). The new Belt and Road Initiative has highlighted Central Asia's strategic importance to the West and opened up a bonanza for Chinese economic, political, and security interests. This was initiated to revive the historical Eurasian Silk Road to reconnect Europe with Asia and Africa through modern transportation, boost trade, investment and

economic development, and improve diplomatic relations, scientific progress and cultural exchanges for all countries and regions across the Eurasian continent. The Silk Road Economic Belt directly links China to European Union, which strengthens economic ties and eases fears about a new 'Great Game' in Central Asia and the Caucasus involving Russia and China in an alliance against the West. The recent game theory is further undermined by free trade and greater cooperation in various fields. (Pradhan, 2017).

There are a few reasons why Central Asia is significant for China; first, as it shares borders with three Central Asian nations, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, it has become a vital zone for the security of Xinjiang in western China. Second, the Central Asian region is rich in natural resources, including gas in Turkmenistan, oil, gas, and uranium in Kazakhstan, uranium and gas in Uzbekistan, and hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Third, as a "testing ground" for China's international engagements, such as multilateral institution-building. Fourth, the region is marked by lower wages and governments' willingness to offer tax exemptions and other incentives to foreign investors in critical industries and access to the European market (Sidana, 2022).

Beijing's interests in the Central Asian region remain mainly focused on preventing ethnic conflicts along its borders, resolving outstanding border conflicts, and dealing with non-military concerns such as drugs and ethnic instability. However, in recent years, China's position has shifted in a direction similar to that of the United States: China is becoming increasingly concerned about maintaining a reliable supply of energy and sees Central Asian oil and natural gas deposits as critical to that goal. China is also aggressively involved in Central Asian energy exploration, reflecting the country's long-standing fear of reliance on unreliable foreign supply sources. As China's economy grows, its demand for all energy sources proliferates; notably, oil and natural gas will increase. The Central Asian Republics can help China reduce its dependence on West Asia for its energy needs; as a result of this, China will play a more active role in Central Asian energy politics in the coming decade, which may well bring it into conflict

with America's strategic goals in the region (Choo, 2022).

While China is eager to increase its economic presence in Central Asia, this sentiment is not shared by all of the region's states. Central Asians are getting increasingly unhappy with China's presence in the region, according to a 2020 survey by Central Asia Barometer. Only 7% and 9% of the populations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively, expressed "strong support" for Chinese energy and infrastructure projects in their nations, even though tensions over Chinese investors have been developing for some time. Locals in Uzbekistan, which, unlike Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, do not have a direct border with China, are more enthused about Chinese investments, but distrust is developing there as well. In 2019, while 65 per cent of Uzbeks said they "strongly support" Chinese investment, only 48 per cent did in 2020. The people of Central Asia remain unconcerned about the broader strategic and security threats posed by China's rising influence in the region. Instead, they are eager to overcome the hardships of daily life and participate in the economic boom they are witnessing. Because of its natural borders with Central Asia, China will always have a vested interest and influence in the region (Sajjanhar, 2021).

### 1.3.2 the United States

Central Asia, with its political and economic instability and vast reserves of natural resources, has garnered the interest of many nations and non-governmental organisations. The United States' interest and relationship with countries of the Central Asian Region started after the end of the cold war and the disintegration of the Soviet Union. These relations mainly consisted of military and economic assistance but can be best described as limited as the United States assessed that the scope of the area would be narrow (Oliker & Shlapak, 2005; p. 5).

After the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001, the American government-initiated Operation Enduring Freedom against terrorism worldwide. The terrorist group responsible for the 9/11 attack was Al-Qaeda, headed by Osama Bin Laden, and they were based out of Afghanistan. The Bush Administration

intervened in Afghanistan to wipe out terrorist organisations in the country, thus starting the longest war in American history, which lasted almost 20 years. This Operation, in turn, increased the importance of the Central Asian countries to the United States as they had to base their attacks and bring in troops and military equipment, and neighbouring countries of Afghanistan were required for the same.

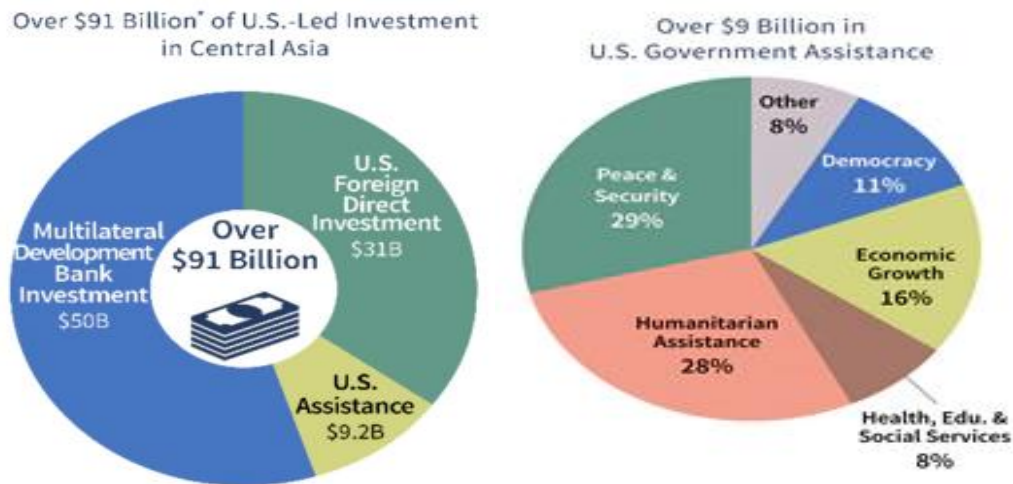
The region's energy and gas reserves have gained the attention of the world's major players, including the United States. The Caspian Oil-rich region's resources have not been fully measured, and the lack of infrastructural development makes it difficult to access the full potential and capability of the region. Even though a direct pipeline or transport of gas and oil to the United States would be complex, the countries can play a critical role in increasing their amount in the international market, which would benefit the US (Oliker & Shlapak, 2005; p. 6). Many American companies have invested in the energy market, and it's in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. At the same time, developmental and economic assistance is provided to Tajikistan to tackle the high poverty rate existing in the country and to stabilise the fragile economy. The United States has also been working to eliminate any post-Soviet era weapons facilities from the region, especially from Kazakhstan (Nichol, 2013).

The proximity and influence of Russia and China are ever-growing, and the formation of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization has strengthened it. Another United States objective will be to limit the two countries' influence in the region. A substantial amount of aid was given to Pakistan post 9/11, and we strengthened the relationship with India to support the emerging Asian countries to increase their influence and, by extension, the US interests in the region (Kaushiki, 2013). "Other US objectives include promoting free markets, democratic energy development, and the forging of East-West and Central Asia" (Nichol, 2013).

The United States has further developed the 'C5+1 Diplomatic Platform' to strengthen its ties with the Central Asian countries. The platform focuses on dealing with security threats in the area, stability of Afghanistan, better relationship between the C5 countries and Afghanistan, sustaining the independence

of the region, promoting democracy, human rights, law reforms and investing in the development of the region (US Department of State, 2020).

Graph: 1 US Assistance to Central Asian Countries



Source: US Department of State (2020).

### 1.3.3 Russia

The formation of the Central Asian countries after the disintegration of the Soviet Union created a power vacuum in the region for some years. Russia has tried to take advantage of this using its proximity to the region and cultural links to enhance its relationship and opportunities in the region. The formation of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization has, in some way, better the relationship with the Central Asian Countries.

The prime objective will be to improve diplomatic and economic relationships with these countries to limit the influence of the external powers like the United States, China, European countries, India, Pakistan, Japan etc. Even though Russia has strengthened its relationship with China and India; they will try to limit the association of these countries with the Central Asian countries for their own historical, economic and political interests in the region (Kumar and Teja, 2021; Kaushiki, 2013).

The Russian Federation has entered into various agreements with the different countries in the region to enhance its position. They have extended the basing rights in Tajikistan until

2042 and Kyrgyzstan until 2032. They also secured military cooperation with Kazakhstan in 2013 for a missile defence system (Kaushiki, 2013). The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 has facilitated the region's economic integration as it calls for free trade practices and easy transportation of goods and services across the region. The European model of the single currency in the entire region is one of the organisation's future goals.

To better its position and role in the region, Russian Federation have employed pipeline politics. Turkmenistan has the largest reserves in the Central Asian region and is essential to Russia. The federation has also inherited an extensive network of pipelines across the region, which significantly transport energy resources to the European region. This can be of significant importance as the accessibility of the European region by the Central Asian countries can be obtained only through Russia, which can have a massive impact on the association of the C5 with Russia (Kaushiki, 2013).

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a large number of Russian citizens stayed back in the Central Asian countries, thus forming a

large diaspora. This has transformed into significant soft power in the area. The Russian policies, governmental decisions, entertainment industry and so on influence the people and politics of the Central Asian region (Gusev, 2019). Russian Federation can use this to gain an advantage over other global players in the region and fulfil its objectives in the region.

The Central Asian countries have been cautious in the recent Russia-Ukraine crisis, and the nations have taken a neutral stance. They have neither condemned nor approved Russia's special military action. They also abstained from UNGA resolutions. The Russia-Ukraine crisis has affected the international arena in more ways than one; regionally, the impact has been quite significant on Central Asian countries. The economic and security challenges and, above all, the challenges of dealing with the consequences of pandemics (Wahlang, 2022).

#### **1.3.4 India**

India has historical, economic, cultural and civilisational ties to the Central Asian countries. The transfer of goods and ideas occurred between the two regions through the Silk route from 3 BC to 15 AD. India, however, has not been able to take advantage of these close ties due to the difficulty of accessibility as India does not share boundaries with these countries. The change and diversification in Indian foreign policy initiatives and objects after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which did not give due importance to the region, also played a part in the little ties between India and the region (Sajjanhar, 2017).

One of India's most important foreign policy objectives is preserving the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty and countering terrorism. The stability of the Central Asian countries and the removal of terrorist elements from the region, including Afghanistan, are essential to the country and its policies. Cooperation for security and peace is thus crucial to eradicating violent organisations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) (Kumar and Teja, 2021).

India has been strengthening its position in the South Asian region with its economic and

strategic policies for the region. India wants to do the same for its extended neighbourhood in the Central Asian region. China's dominance in the region has been increasing, and they have been outperforming India in various aspects. India wants to expand its presence and act as a check for the Chinese influence in the area. The United States' strengthened relationship with India would also mean that the United States will look to India as an essential ally in the region to counter the dominance of the Chinese dominance in the South Asian and Central Asian regions. India will look to play an independent role in the region (Kaushiki, 2013) and its role as a trusted partner of the United States.

India possesses a nominal amount of energy reserves and exports large amounts of oil and gas from other countries. The abundance of natural resources in the Central Asian region can be a significant source to the Indian market. The proximity to the area would also mean that oil transportation can be convenient at less cost. The unavailability of direct land access to the country can act as a challenge that can be overcome by using pipelines connecting the countries in the region. India hopes to improve its bilateral relationship with each of these countries to enhance its position as an energy importer and trusted partner (Sajjanhar, 2017).

#### **1.4 India's Policy towards Central Asia**

India's Connect Central Asia Policy was announced at the India-Central Asia Dialogue held in Kyrgyzstan in 2012. India's then External Affairs Minister E. Ahmed stated that "the policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, information technology (IT) centres, an e-network in telemedicine connecting India to the CARs, joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, joint scientific research, and strategic partnerships in defence and security affairs." Apart from the political and economic cooperation of the countries, the policy strives for regional connectivity and infrastructural and educational development of the area as well (Jha, 2016).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all five Central Asian countries in 2015, thus enhancing the importance of the policy. The 'people-to-people' connectivity and soft power

can be instrumental in the policy's success. Many students from Central Asian countries have come to India to pursue their education and vice versa. India needs to improve and facilitate the opportunities for students from these countries. Indian goods, songs, cinemas and other forms of entertainment have been a hit in these regions since the Soviet Union. Using soft power sometimes accomplishes things that diplomacy, force or hard power may fail to achieve. The policy should not be limited and should include the various aspects of the economic, political, cultural and social domains (Jha, 2016).

The TAPI pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India was conceived at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1814km long pipeline has been envisioned to transport 33 million meters of gas from the Galkynysh gas field in Turkmenistan. The TAPI Pipeline Co. Ltd was founded to facilitate the building of the pipeline, but the works have stagnated for various reasons. The conflict scenario between India and Pakistan is one of the foremost reasons. The Taliban forming government in Afghanistan after capturing the major cities and the prominent institutions after the departure of the United States military also did not help the pipeline as India is concerned about the security of the project. The Indian government has also not recognised the Taliban government in Afghanistan, making the situation more difficult (Basu, 2022).

The economic condition and need for money have made Afghanistan and Pakistan push for the execution of the project. The Turkmenistan government has also been going for the restarting of the project as it would be a massive boost to their economy. Even though the gas requirements are becoming higher, India will only be open to the execution of the project after the security and completion concerns have been addressed. This has hampered the performance even after the Asian Development Bank had passed 200 million dollars. The project's completion would benefit India as they will gain access to cheaper gas, but the various hindrances have curtailed this (Basu, 2022).

The three India- Central Asia Dialogues happened in 2019, 2020 and 2021, and the India-Central Asia Summit occurred in 2022. All the Presidents of the five Central Asian

countries were present at the virtual summit, where the partnerships between the countries were reviewed, and dialogue for neutralising the security threats and sustained peace coupled with political and economic cooperation was conducted. This summit was seen as a green flag for bolstering the relationship of India with the Central Asian countries and securing more connectivity to the region.

### **1.5 The Heartland Theory and the New Great Game in Central Asia**

In 1904, Halford John Mackinder came up with a theory that postulates the importance of the Central Asian region. In his paper, 'The Geographical Pivot of History', he describes the area between the Russian Empire and Magnolia as the 'Pivot' region due to its strategic location, natural reserves and land available for agricultural production (Mackinder, 1904). Later in 1919, in his book 'Democratic Ideals and Reality', he transformed the theory into the 'Heartland theory'. He described the Heartland as the interior Asian and Eastern European in his theory. At the same time, the inner crescent included countries with boundaries and proximity to the region, such as Germany, Turkey, China and India. The outer crescent included countries with strategic interests in the area but was not close by, like Great Britain, the United States of America, Japan, Canada and Australia. The 'world island' describes the three continents – Asia, Europe and Africa (Mackinder, 1919) (Kumar and Teja, 2021). He states that:

*“Who Rules East Europe-Commands the Heartland*

*Who Rules Heartland-Commands World Island*

*Who Rules the World Islands-Commands the World”* (Mackinder, 1919).

Mackinder initially predicted that the Russian Empire would control the region, but he changed his prediction after the fall of the Tsarist regime after the revolution. The loss of Germany in the second world war proved that wrong, and no country could rule the 'World Island' in the years to come. He also predicted that the United States and the United Kingdom would have to play stabilising role in the region (Mackinder, 1919).



Mackinder's theory received little attention in Britain but was taken seriously in the United States. Mackinder formulated this theory as the importance of naval dominance was decreasing. The Central Asian region did not have any accessibility by waterways, and they were landlocked by the Rimland countries making it more difficult (Mackinder, 1919). Even though Mackinder's predictions were wrong, the theory has started to get its due importance due to the increasing volume of the region. In a world driven by energy resources, any country that dominates the 'heartland' could influence the politics around the world.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the competition for domination over the Central Asian region was mainly between Russia, Britain and Germany. This is termed the 'old great game' as the countries tried to assert influence over Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Kumar & Teja, 2021). After a period of a power vacuum after the disintegration of the Soviet Union to form the 5 Central Asian countries, the region has increased its importance for various strategic reasons and availability of natural reserves. This has led to multiple countries, including the global powers showing a renewed interest in the area. The question of a 'New Great Game' has been raised by scholars worldwide as these countries try to get the upper hand over the other in their quest to better relationships with five countries of the Central Asian region.

Various countries have their vested interests in the region to assert their dominance. The Caspian region has become the hub for the power struggle between the great powers, thus leading to a great game between the countries and turning the region into a combat zone for the countries due to their strategic location, availability of natural resources like oil and gas, hydroelectric potential and its importance to bring peace and security to the region. The former Vice President of the United States in the Bush Administration, Dick Cheney, spoke about the region's importance in his speech to oil industries. He stated, "I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian" (Kleveman, 2003; Bhat, 2020).

The Russian interest in the area stems from a historical and energy perspective. The Central Asian countries were part of the erstwhile

Soviet Union and gained independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia wants to assert its dominance in the region and control the monopoly over natural and transportation to the rest of the world. The Chinese have been working hard on gaining momentum in the region. The region's stability and controlling border conflicts and extremism is the priority of the Chinese government, along with accessibility to sustainable energy.

The growing power of the Chinese in the region has increased the interest of the United States in countering China's influence in the region. The presence of the energy resources and the stability of the region act as critical markers for their interest. The US also wants to spread democratic values, human rights, western ideas and market reforms in the region. United States use India as an ally and a strategically important partner in the Central and South Asian area, especially to balance China's growing power.

India's foreign policy in recent times has been cornered in countering terrorism and extremism in the region. The Central Asian region and its stability are pivotal for this. The energy requirements of the country and the need for a transit route to the European region have made India prioritise ties with the region and develop policies for a better relationship with the extended neighbourhood. The strengthening of connection with the United States also means that India has to act as their ally and pursue its regional interests.

The emergence of new players, especially the regional ones, has increased the competition to gain influence in the area. Countries like Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia can become crucial due to their proximity to the region and religious homogeneity. The presence of the regional players and the global powers has changed the dynamics of the New Great Game between the countries, turning the Central Asian region into a battleground for gaining dominance and influence (Bhat, 2020).

## 1.6 Conclusion

The geostrategic importance of the region, coupled with its abundant energy reserves, has renewed and revived the interests of various countries across the globe. Countries like the

United, Russia, China, and India have vested interests in gaining regional dominance. These countries are formulating and implementing various policy initiatives and investment strategies to strengthen the relationship with the C5 countries. This has led to a new Great Game in the region.

India's interest in the area mainly lies in countering the extremism in the region, the need for energy and a transit route to the European region. The lack of shared boundaries and connectivity to the region has hampered the growth of Indian influence. However, the visits of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, to the Central Asian countries can be seen as a symbol of India's new interests in the region. This has also led the government to formulate policies like Connect Central Asia to enhance the relationship between the Central Asian Countries.

The foreign policies of Russia and China and their other initiatives in the region have been successful in bolstering their relationship with the countries. These countries have also emerged as the most significant trading partners with the Central Asian countries. With its Belt and Road Initiative and policies specific to the extended neighbourhood, China has been the most successful in asserting its influence in the region (Muzalevsky: 2015; Kumar and Teja, 2021). The United States is trying to counter China's influence while the other players are trying to get a foothold in the region using specific regional policies.

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