

# **Geopolitical, Geo-strategic and Eco-strategic Importance of Central Asia**

**Bahram Amirahmadian<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

Central Asia, a landlocked region in the heart of Asia, is unique because it was the counterpoint of British and Russian empires in 19<sup>th</sup> century and still has the same importance now, but among the other players. Two decades after independence, Central Asia is not a stable region and some political crisis is still unsolved here. This situation is created by some players which include trans-regional and regional players looking after their own interests. The interaction and countering of the players in the region have resulted in the present situation that created an undeveloped region, while potentially it has many importances due its geopolitical, geo-strategic and eco-strategic point of view. In this paper, the importance of concepts and the soft-security imperatives of the region and its outcomes are discussed.

## **Key Words**

Central Asia, Eco-Strategy, Ethnic Conflict, Geopolitics, Geo-strategy

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<sup>1</sup>. PhD of Political Geography, researcher and expert on Eurasian geopolitical issues and academic member of Institute for International and Political Studies (IPIS), Tehran, Iran.  
Email: [b\\_amirahmadian@yahoo.com](mailto:b_amirahmadian@yahoo.com)

## Introduction

Central Asia, in Persian "Varàrud" or "Faràrudan" which the Arabs renamed "Màveràolnahr" and Greeks called "Transoxina", (meaning Trans- river territory) is a very important region. From the historic point of view, this region has a very important role. The territory once belonged to the Iranians was taken over by the Turks who removed the Iranian elements and replaced them. In the bargain, these newcomers established the Persian culture and civilization and became Persian Turks.

Central Asia is a land situated in the heart of Asia which ends at the Caspian Sea from the west, borders China in the east, limits the watershed of the Ural-Irtish rivers basin and Russian Southern plains in the north, and borders Iran and Afghanistan in the south.

Since 1924-25, Central Asia was known as "Turkistan". In some sources, Central Asia was named "West Turkistan" or "Russian Turkistan" (Turkistan-e Rus) against Sing Xiang or "Chinese Turkistan" (Turkistan-e Chin). In some geographical sources, it was called "Middle Asia" which is an incorrect term. This has been derived from the Russians who called this territory "Serednii Azii" (Middle Asia). This term mostly was used by Russians who in Soviet era termed it so due to administrative division. The Soviet Union was divided into 18 economic regions (Ekonomicheski Rayoni), and 4 Central Asian Republics including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan which formed "Middle Asia Economic Region" and Kazakhstan the sole economic region" called "Kazakhstan Economic Region".

At the same time, another geographical term with the name of "Tsentralnaya Azia" (Central Asia) among Russian geographers, had been defined which consisted of a physical territory that included inner Asia located in the inside Asian continent and from east and south limited by Greater Khingan, and Taykhanshan mountain range, from south with tectonic lowland of India and Brahmaputra, from the west and north with Eastern Kazakhstan, Altai and Eastern and Western Shayan mountain range. The area of mentioned territory has 5-6 million square kilometers. Most part of China, Republic of Mongolia is included in Central Asia. In this paper, the term Central Asia is the same region that consists of five above- mentioned republics.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the five Central Asian countries which became independent in 1991, share a culture and a way of living enriched by many centuries of experience as the agents of social, artistic, scientific, religious and commercial exchanges between the East and the West. (<http://www.unesco.org/webworld/centralasia/intro.html>)

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Central Asia is important in point view of three parameter; a) Geo-political, b) Eco-strategic and c) Geo-strategic.

#### **A: Geopolitical Importance of Central Asia**

The "Great Game" of 19th century between the British Empire and Russia Empire, has changed to the New Great Game on the threshold of the 21st Century. Central Asian states are the cradle of Iranian and Islamic civilization. Most Muslims of the region are Sunni Muslims and the re-seeking identification caused some challenges and disputes among peoples and authorities reminded the Soviet period where democracy and liberty was unknown. These, besides economic factors, caused the collapse of Soviet Union. Now, Central Asia has become an East-West and North-South connection bridge, and is earning privileged situation which the territory of Iran facilitates.

Central Asian territory has been located between two great powers, China and Russia, and regional and trans-regional players such as Iran, Pakistan, and India and to some extent Afghanistan. From the other side, trans-regional powers have changed it into an important geopolitical region of the present century, with rivalry among them causing crisis in the region. This region, which is located in Eurasia and heartland increased its geopolitical importance.

Extremist Islamic movements (such as Salafism, Sufism, Wahabism and Talebanism), drug trafficking, arms smuggling, separatism, mass destruction weapons, radio active material, besides separatist movements and colorful revolutions, poverty and prostitution, unemployment, corruption, money cleaning, mafia have all changed the region into an unstable territory. Existence of illegal armed groups and secret armies in mountainous areas of Pamir and Badakhshan, Tian Shan and Farghana Valley, openly and secretly have terrified the people in the region.

Domestic war in Tajikistan in early 1990's on the threshold of independence, under the leadership of Abdullah Nuri (who died in the summer of 2006), are among Islamic movements which was against the central government. In Kyrgyzstan, the Islamic movement in Batken in Farghana valley in early 2000 was opposed to the central government that should be mentioned. This movement, which was aimed at removing the gap between the prosperous North and undeveloped South, in 2004, has caused Kyrgyzstan colored (Violet) revolution which resulted in the fall of the Aghayev Government, Hizb-ol-Tahrir of Uzbekistan, which is relatively expanded movement against central government, has spread activities and gathered a lot of

volunteers. Andijan incident in Farghana Valley, which occurred at the beginning in Nowruz celebration in spring 2006, has been attributed to Hisb-ol-Tahrir by central government, and suppressed the revolt cruelly.

Water crisis and disputes on water resources that will be created in the region in near future have become a challenge for regional authorities. Thus, the factor of water will play significant role in Central Asia and now the signs of water conflicts are going to be seen. This factor is considerable both from geopolitics and eco-strategic point of view.

Central Asia is a land-locked territory which is located in the heart of Asia. This land has a continental climate and is under the influence of Atlas ocean humid currents. Therefore, the desert and semi-desert condition is prevailing and existence of two great deserts - Karakum (in Uzbekistan), and Kizilkum (in Turkmenistan) - show that the region suffers harsh climate. In spite of this difficult situation for agriculture in Central Asia, the main haven of economic support for the people's employment is agriculture that has suffered due to underdevelopment. This factor especially has got importance in the independence period.

Access to water resources is still vital for the agricultural sector. Because of central planning, there were no problems in such issues during the Soviet period, but after the independence of the republics they have faced with water supply, economic stagnation, specialist and skilled manpower emigration, decreasing of mutual cooperation between republics and social disorders. (Ohara, Summer 2000, 165-6) The president of Tajikistan remarked that "the value of water is not less than the value of oil, gas and other energy resources". (Rakhsha Weekly, April 2001) It has been said that in the future in the Middle Eastern countries, oil will be exchanged with water between oil producing Arab countries and water supplier countries such as Turkey. They believe that 'you have oil and we have water, let us exchange it.'

This is dangerous thinking which seriously will challenge the region. Everybody knows that this is not a real comparison. International laws emphasize the distribution of common water resources righteously and fairly between the countries that historically and actually need and use these waters and their lives depend on it. Besides, the waters especially surface waters obtained without any operation and investments are a gift of God. But the oil should be extracted and it needs investment to be produced. Water is a renewable and oil is not.

There are some water reservoirs which have been constructed in Soviet period in Central Asia to store and distribute waters among the republics such as some reservoirs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan mountainous republics. In those times, the

Central government of Soviet Union paid the cost of operations and maintenance. Now these costs are the responsibilities of owner republics. In return, these countries need to be supported by financial help of other republics such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. But they do not want to pay any money and they want it to be as it was in Soviet times. This is the problem of creating critical conditions on water crisis. The Republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which hold 60% of water resources of Central Asia are both poor countries and they have no energy resources, except hydro-electrical. They need oil and gas that are mainly supplied from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and now they have not enough funds to pay for importing energy. This is the main problem.

#### Current waters supply in Aral basin

Republics	Amu Dary river	Sir Darya river	Total	
			km. <sup>3</sup>	%
Tajikistan	62.9	1.1	64	57.7
Kyrgyzstan	1.9	27.4	29.3	26.4
Uzbekistan	4.7	4.1	8.8	7.9
Turkmenistan	0	0	0	0
Afghanistan	8.9	0	8.9	8
Total reserve in supplying	78.4	32.6	115.6	100

(Rakhsha weekly, April 2001)

The volume of waters which flow has not changed and is like past years but the demand of water has increased in lower basin countries and this is why the current waters do not flow to Aral Sea and create environmental catastrophe.

Common use of water resources management between two or more countries from surface and underground waters of the region has got political characteristics. Hence, the countries that they are located in the upper streams of international rivers, if they implement such projects that will decrease the water flow, the creation of disputes are inevitable.

Negotiations will not be carried on because there are no international methods and laws to resolve the problems and disputes on trans-governmental waters. However, in many cases, the governments compromise and get actual agreements on the basis of good-neighborliness and fair revenue. It is clear that these principles haven't been

determined and there are no clarified procedures and effective executive guarantee.  
(Beschoner, 1993, 14)

### ***Ethnic Crisis in Central Asia***

There are many disputes among Central Asian republics. According to studies conducted by "Atlantic Council of the United States," some of them can be mentioned as below:

Country	Conflict	Description	Status
Kazakhstan:	Vostochnyy Kazakhstan	Ethnic Russian separatists-call for independence in southern border	occasional incidents
	Eastern border	Uighur separatist support for compatriots in Xinjiang	active
	Southern border	Skirmishes and tensions with Uzbekistan	active
Kyrgyzstan:	Batken & Lailek	periodic guerrilla activity	
	SW border/Ferghana	Tensions skirmishes with Uzbekistan	Active(at intervals)
Tajikistan:	Civil war	Government vs. United Tajik opposition	cease fire since 1997
	Khujand	Tension and skirmishes with Uzbekistan	Active
	Gorno- Badakhshan	separatist activity of Ismai'lis	Potential/latent
Turkmenistan:	Chirag (Caspian)	demarcation dispute with Azerbaijan	Active
Uzbekistan:	eastern, northern and southern borders	incidents with neighbors/ skirmishes with guerrillas	Active
	Kara Kalpakstan	Separatist actives	Potential/latent

(Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia, January 2001, 18)

The other geopolitical issue in Central Asia is administrative divisions and borders determining which remain most disputable and is inheritance of Soviet policy. The protests of Tajiks of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, who are residing among Uzbek Turks in the territory of Uzbekistan on Stalin's policy to separate them from Tajikistan, is one of the most important problems which has not been solved and has

potentially power to be arise. As we know, in the beginning of Bolshevik revolution, in Central Asia the anti Communism Islamic movement called "Basmachis" was mainly led by Tajiks and based on Tajikistan and resisted in mountainous regions. Thus, after suppression of resistance, those mentioned parts of Central Asia were given to Uzbekistan. Now they want to be united and annexed to Tajikistan.

The inclination of Russians residing in north of Kazakhstan and their willingness to annex to Russia is very important challenge to central government of Kazakhstan. They constitute about 40% of all population of the country.

The identity and dual citizenship of Russians in Central Asian Republics is another significant factor in instability in the region. Regaining of identity and the problem of national identity also are challenging problems among the people of the region and nation-building and nation-state which are the main subject of governments. Multination and multi ethnic composition of the region's population are another disputable issue which needs the efforts of the governments. Meskhetian Turks are an example that has arisen in the beginning of independence of the republics and has not been settled yet.<sup>2</sup>

Islamic movements and sometimes their extremist operation, Hizb-ol-Tahrir movement in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan mainly in Farghana Valley such as Andijan and Batken events, are among geopolitical issues in Central Asia.

All of five Central Asian Republics have potential ability to separate and disintegrate because of their national and ethnic population composition, the gaps between geographical regions, the distance between governments and society, and so on. This is why they had to gather and establish regional collective security and also forming the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

## **B: Eco-strategic Importance of Central Asia**

In geographical landscape and economic structures of Central Asian Republics, there are several similarities. The Republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, together formed an economic region in which were concentrated agricultural activities mainly cotton and grain harvesting, oil and gas extraction,

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<sup>2</sup> . They enforced to migrate to Central Asia (Farghana Valley) from Georgia in 2<sup>nd</sup> World War by direct order of Stalin. They were accused to spying (that never proven) and never allowed to return to their homeland. In early 1990's they were enforced by local people to left valley, so they migrated forcibly and settled in Azerbaijan and North Caucasus.

metallurgy, mainly colorful metal production, and their economic foundation and infrastructures were formed on the basis of inter-republics activities. The main problems of these republics were extracting and use of natural resources. Now, after the collapse of Soviet Union and independence of the republics in the beginning of 1990s, their economies are shaping on the basis of their national interests and economy.

The watershed basin of Central Asia is an internal basin, with vast deserts, hidden natural resources in high mountain ranges which make it difficult to extract and take advantage of them in economic terms. On the other side, the immigration of skilled and specialized manpower, which was mainly Russian, and the lack of national capital to invest and no attraction for foreign investments (due to disputed and political crisis and bad social conditions) make the economic activities difficult and complicated. Besides these problems, the irrigation system and networks and also the climatic condition related with growing cotton, warm and long summers play spoilsport.

Central Asian rivers are the main sources of water supply and energy generation. These resources were unequally distributed in the region. These rivers after originating from high mountain ranges in eastern part of the region flow to the lowlands in the central and western part and with the use of irrigation canal networks all used to irrigation and urban water supply because there are no facilities and need for them in mountainous areas. The main oasis of Central Asia has been located in lowland. Only the great and full water rivers such as Amudarya and Sirdarya can flow in hot and warm deserts to the demand of water and discharge to Aral Sea. For supplying the water, demand of oasis located in deserts, equipments, facilities, infrastructures including water reservoirs and dams, canal networks have been constructed in Soviet period which have been spent a huge amount of money. The production of hydroelectric in the region is equal with one sixth of total hydroelectric energy in Soviet Union. Generating electrical energy and irrigation is the main base for economic activities. This activity can be implemented by water supplying equipments which include dams, water reservoirs, hydro-electric power stations and irrigating canals networks.

The main mineral resources of Central Asia include oil, natural gas, colorful metals such as gold and silver, and chemical raw materials.

Due to environmental valuable potentials such as existing colorful and rare metals including uranium, titanium, manganese and industrial metals including iron, copper and also rich resources of oil and gas in the region, make it very important to

the west. Because of these potentials, this region became the economic battlefield for super and big powers of west and east. Russia considers the region as its security territory and the US is seeking new energy resource, but in terms of replacing it with Middle East oil. After 9/11, the United States under the pretence of fighting against international terrorism has entered in the region and wants to expand its domination there. Russia is also interested to preserve its presence in the region which it considers its home turf and named "near abroad". Due to these factors, regional and trans-regional powers have and will have main roles in stability and security of the region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has got a powerful role in eco-strategic agenda and the events followed by it including colorful revolution in Kyrgyzstan and unsuccessful one in Uzbekistan and Andijan incident in 2005. Economic cooperation between the member countries are going to develop because of several reason including energy, transportation and transit, oil and gas pipeline and so on. Transportation and the role of outside players such as European Union and its economic structures and organizations like TRACECA effect Central Asian political environment. Asian highway and some other networks can be considered as eco-strategic problem.

There is crisis in border keeping because of drug trafficking, smuggling goods and arms and also illegal passengers who create problems for both Russia and Kazakhstan. President Nazarbayev worked adroitly throughout the breakup of the USSR and since has been more willing to make tactical compromises in order to ensure the greatest possible degree of sovereignty. It was Nazarbayev who sought continued union with the Slavic Republics in 1991 and who even after independence spoke out for a Eurasian Union or at least a strengthened CIS. When this seemed improbable, Nazarbayev was still ready for a closer relationship with Russia than most other non-Russian states and is a member of the customs union with Russia, Belarus, the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan. In late 2000, this was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Community. Russia and Kazakhstan have agreed that Kazakhstan will control its own border guards, with a substantial Russian Federation liaison section. Presumably, this is adequate for routine operations, but what actually would happen in a crisis on the 4,000-mile Russian or the 900-mile Chinese border is less clear.

For Kazakhstan, such basic needs as national border protection and defense must be viewed as long-term, nation-building issues. Ideally, respect for Kazakhstan's borders by its neighbors, together with modest technical assistance from the

international community, would create stable borders over time even without major forces to defend them, not unlike the U.S. border with Canada.

Minimal trade barriers and market pricing are the best way to prevent smuggling of legitimate goods, but narcotics and other contraband remain a major challenge. Stable borders also require wise political and economic policies on both sides, so that nationalist and economic pressures do not cause massive shifts in Russians, Chinese, Uighurs or Kazakhs across them (Central Eurasia, p. 33).

### **Oil and Gas Resources of the Region**

There is no doubt that the Central Asian oil and gas resources are very important. There are considerable hydrocarbon resources in the region that is invaluable for great economies and powers of the world. China as the second great world economic power needs imported energy and in world market dominant power such as United States control the international trade marine routes of oil transportation, alongside important energy producing region like Middle East, North Africa, West Africa, Latin America and East Asia. Thus, Central Asian energy resources are available for China that without outside player can supply energy by intercontinental pipeline network from Central Asia, even Iran. Also Central Asian energy resources are constant and useful for China's developing economy.

Therefore in near future China will invest considerable amount in Central Asian and Russian energy resources and in fact she is perforce to do that.

Inauguration of oil transit pipeline from Kazakhstan to China in early 2005 is considerable on this point of view. Besides the energy, China is also seeking raw materials which are available in Central Asia. Transit of Uzbekistan gas to Russia and from there to regional market along with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan oil and gas via Russia and Iran to China, Russia, Turkey, Caucasian Republics and Ukraine, These show the eco-strategic importance of Central Asia.

In this regard, the shaping and forming of Shanghai Cooperation Organization in which are great energy producers and consumers both within it is very attractive.

### **Oil and Natural Gas Reserves in Central Asia**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Oil Reserves</b>		<b>Gas Reserves</b>	
	<b>Amount (Billion Barrel)</b>	<b>% Compare with total world</b>	<b>Amount (trillion cubic feet)</b>	<b>% Compare with world total</b>

<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>39.6</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>105.900</b>	<b>1.7</b>
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	<b>.546</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>102.370</b>	<b>1.6</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	<b>.594</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>65.658</b>	<b>7.0</b>

(BP Energy Report, 2005)

### **C: Geo-strategic Importance of Central Asia**

Most of the 4 million square kilometer area of Central Asia consists of positive peculiarity in geo-strategic point of view, which almost all its territory coincides with Mckinder Heartland theory. Therefore, it has valuable condition for defense and attack operations. This territory was counter region for both marine geo-strategic realm (with the leadership of United States and its allies in NATO and its branches including SEATO and CENTO) and continental geo-strategic realm (with leadership of Soviet Union and its allies in Warsaw Pact). Nowadays also, the same thought with changed form and model which is derived from the collapse of Soviet Union, is going to settle in this region, which probably will be able to bring USA and Russia in ideologically and military clashes.

The Central Asian Republics are located in the southernmost part of former Soviet Union. Approximately, one-third of the territory is located in above 40 North geographical latitude. These republics are limited to Kopet Dagh mountain range in South, Tian Shan and Pamir mountains in East, which is difficult to pass and the only ways are high passes, and narrow gorges. From Kushka, that is the most far southern point of Central Asia, there is a narrow road to Afghanistan. Transit and transportation of goods and passengers between region and Afghanistan can be exchanged via this road.

Marine routes of Caspian Sea facilitate the relations between Central Asian Republics with Caucasus, Iran and Russia and by Volga-Don waterway canal they can connect with free waters and many countries.

In the north, vast Kazakh plain and lowlands and low-height mountains connect Central Asia via railroad and road network with Russia.

This territory located between two great Asian power (China) and Asian-European (Russia) and regional players such as Iran, Pakistan, and India influenced and affected it and play their roles. To enter this land-locked territory one should pass the territory of neighboring countries.

From southwards one should pass Iran or Afghanistan territory. In the current situation, to cross through mountainous Afghanistan is impossible and the presence of expanded foreign troops hardly can be arranged and the local people can disturb

them. Iran is opposed to the presence of foreign troops and protects infiltration through its territory.

One of the reasons for American presence in Afghanistan in the east and Iraq in the west of Iran (both occupied by USA), is to surround Iran and Russia to have access to heartland which is formed in the beginning of the third millennium.

From the other side, the territory of Central Asia in the north is bordered with Russia. Due to this reason, to enter the heart of Russia is possible only via Central Asia and this is why Russia is against the presence of any foreign and trans-regional power in the region.

Access to this territory from the eastward is available by passing China's western part (Xin Jiang Uighur Region). China will never allow any trans-regional power to enter its critical, geopolitically very important western region and from there to Central Asian territory at all.

The only passage to enter Central Asia by foreign powers is the Caucasus in the west of the region which will be available via the Caspian Sea. This is why the Caucasus region has got a gateway situation and the Caspian Sea itself changed to the gate of Central Asia.

Georgia in the west of the Caucasus is located in the mouth of the Caucasian natural corridor and is a gateway to enter the Caucasus. During the Cold War era, it was strongly defended by the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia attempted hard to preserve it, but after one decade, the western powers by implementation of the Rose Revolution headed by Mikhail Saakashvili in 2003 changed this position and allowed the west to enter the Caucasus. The formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the territory of Central Asia and neighboring countries is the outcome of this geo-strategic challenge between East and West. This is some kind of new strategy for confrontation against America's hegemonic movements.

## Conclusion

There are two movements in Central Asia and beyond. One is led by the West in the west-east direction from the Black Sea towards Central Asia through the Caucasus, Caspian Sea and the other from North to South led by Russia in the vertical direction which cuts the west-east axis. The counter point of these two is the Caspian Sea. This is why the Caspian Sea has vital importance for both sides. (Amirahmadian, winter 2006) America tries to enter the region that has been sent out by Uzbekistan in 2005 and has been invited to host an air base by Kyrgyzstan. While Kyrgyzstan is a member of SCO, how can it be possible to play in two opposite directions? This is a paradox for

SCO and Central Asian Republics and regional organization. Russia within security and economic regional organizations attempted to remove the American influence in the region and already has its effective means that America doesn't have it. There are some initiatives in the region which plays basic roles on security and geo-strategic environment of Central Asia. In fact, the future of Central Asia depends on the outcome of the New Great Game between America and Russia. Economic, geopolitics and geo-strategy of the Central Asia are very complicated.

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