THE ROLE OF OTHER REGIONAL POWERS

After the disintegration of Soviet Union and the declining status of Russia in the vast Post-Soviet space made Central Asian region a breeding ground for great power politics. Not only Russia and the US are the only powers, but also other powers such as China, India, Iran and Turkey are involved in the Central Asian region for their stakes in the vast natural resources of this region. Except these two great powers, these powers have important roles in the geopolitics of Central Asia. All these powers have historical, cultural and economic linkages with the Central Asian region. A fact is that the ancient silk route had passed through Central Asian region which could connect India, China and Iran. China has border contiguity with the Central Asian region. India has historical ties with Central Asia. Iran is one among the Caspian littoral states. Turkey has also its historical linkage with this region.

As all the Republics of this region have Muslims population, the impact of the Islamic states such as Iran and Turkey is unavoidable. Though, the leaders of these states are cautious about the Islamic fundamentalism, yet they cannot avoid the influence of Islamism in their states. The main interests of these powers are to exploit the natural resources of Central Asian and Caspian region, as it has been discussed earlier. They are involved in this region along with the two great powers such as Russia and the USA both as partners and competitors. They are also involved in the great power struggle through bilateral and multilateral regional frameworks. Thus, the analysis of the great power rivalry cannot be fulfilled without analyzing the roles of these powers.

China

At first, China shares more than 3000 kilometers common border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China is also close to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Secondly, settling border issues is an important area of work between China and Central Asia. Because, most of the western Sino-Soviet borders became
Sino-Central Asian borders with most of the Central Asian states and is the closest territoriality to them. Thirdly, China and Central Asia shared more than a two-thousand year long history, and customs, which can only but lead to special relations between China and Central Asia. Fourthly, though, both the regions had shared a long historical relation, which had come to a halt only one and a half century ago (Huasheng 2004: 120).

Thus, these factors have made China as an influential power in Central Asian geopolitics. Along with these factors, China’s most distinctive advantages are its geographical proximity, growing economy, convenient transportation network, its use of Central Asia as a possible alternative energy route with stable consumption of the region’s energy resources, and its image of an equal and friendly partner.

After getting independence, the Central Asian republics were in search of options for diversifying their economic and security relations. The power vacuum created as a result of Soviet disintegration made Central Asia a ground for the incursion of many external and regional powers. In this context, China is regarded emerging power in Central Asia. China started its engagement in this region immediately after the disintegration of Soviet Union. It recognized these newly independent states and started taking interests in Central Asian geopolitics, because of its need in hydrocarbon resources of this region. Initially, China never wanted to assert itself in Central Asia due to Russian factor. Rather, it supported Russia as the powerful regional actor to provide enough security assistance to these states in case of any regional instability.

China wanted to settle its border issues with Russia as well as Central Asia for security reason. Here it is imperative to mention about the Uyghur problem in China’s Xinjiang province. In April 1994, Chinese Premier, Li Peng, made an official visit to Central Asia, visiting Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. It was the first attempt of Beijing to convince the Central Asian states
to assist in fighting against the separatist forces and prevent them gaining popularity among the mass. Because, China has been facing problems in its Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) since a long time and a chunk of Uyghur Diaspora is residing in Kazakhstan, those who have link with the Uyghurs of XUAR. During Li Peng’s visit, China signed an agreement with Kazakhstan on the demarcation of their joint border (ibid: 62).

**Uyghur problem and China-Central Asia Relations**

Uyghur problem in Xinjiang region has its roots in the Han rule at the republican era i.e. 1911-49. During this phase, Han officials had governed Xinjiang at the provincial and several sub-provincial levels. Under Han’s governance, Uyghurs had faced discrimination in the spheres of employment and political appointments. Chinese officials had also tried to impose the culture and language of Hans over the Uyghurs. Before coming to the power, the Chinese Communist party had promised to provide autonomy to include government by Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, the regulation of the economy to benefit the region and its inhabitants, control over cultural and linguistic matters, and freedom to practice their religion. However, the Han’s domination had remained the same in the political decision making. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) could not keep its prerevolutionary promise, which it had committed. Additionally, CCP had established its nuclear testing programme in 1964. Beijing has still retained Xinjiang as its nuclear site. As a result, growing disaffection in Xinjiang has emerged in various forms such as protest and riots between Han and Uyghur communities. Here it is important to mention about the role of trans-national organizations, because they have main roles in China-Central Asia relations (Dwivedi 2006: 139).

There are some separatists groups such as East Turkestan Islamic movement, the “East Turkestan” State Liberation Organization, the World Uighur Youth Congress, and the East Turkistan Information Centre; those have aimed at setting up an independent “East Turkestan” state. Central Asia has been the main region, which is closely associated with the “East Turkestan” separatist forces. A fact is that ethnic groups in Central Asia are estimated at about 350,000, two thirds of all the Uyghurs living outside China. They
started establishing formal political organizations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan soon after the demise of Soviet Union. These political organizations extended their supports to Xinjiang and sought greater international prominence for the independence movement. The oldest Uyghur political organization is still operating in Turkey. Thus, Central Asia has become a safe-heaven for the Uyghur separatists, which is China’s main strategic concern in its Central Asia policy (Huasheng 2004: 117). Along with security issue, Xinjiang is Beijing’s major beneficiary in Central Asian economic cooperation. Ten of the 16 ports in Xinjiang, authorized by the central government are linked to Central Asia. Xinjiang’s economic development is largely dependent on the economic cooperation with Central Asia. Between 1991 and 2000, the total trade volume between Xinjiang and the Central Asian countries has been calculated at about US $ 7 billion with a 45 per cent per year increase and it continues to grow. In the first ten months of 2003, the volume of trade with Kazakhstan was almost twice as that of the previous year (ibid: 120).

China’s strategic move in its Central Asia policy was to persuade the newly independent republics of Central Asia to take measures against these trans-national organizations. In this context, Kazakhstan is one of the Central Asian republics shares 1,533 kilometers border with China and 1.4% of its population is consisted of Uyghur ethnic group (CIA Worldfact Book 2009). China’s border contiguity with Kazakhstan is playing a major role in their relationship. The border issue between the two republics has its root in 17th century, which was a buffer between Russia and China. In 1864, the Kazakh borders were delineated between both the countries, which became the contemporary Xinjiang region. In the 1950s, the USSR had exerted strong influence in Xinjiang till 1962. From 1960s, China asserted its claim over the large part of eastern Kazakhstan as its own part. After getting independence, Kazakh president tried to resolve the border dispute with China through initiating friendly relations. It was resulted in the signing of a joint declaration by the both the presidents in 1996. As per the declaration both the republics agreed “to further consolidating good neighbourliness and cooperation in the border regions between the two countries as well as strengthening Sino-Kazakh confidence and understanding”. In 1998, after more than five years of talks, China and Kazakhstan finally signed an agreement settling the centuries old border dispute (Levinsson and Svanberg 2000).
Along with border issue, China is relying on Kazakhstan for exporting the gas resources of this country to the Eastern market. Here, energy is a major factor in Sino-Kazakh relations. The West-East and the China-Kazakhstan pipelines are constructed for supplying the gas resources of Kazakhstan to China. Kazakhstan-China pipeline is 613 mile-long and has 200,000 billion barrels per day capacity. It runs from Atasu, in northwestern Kazakhstan to Alashankou in China’s northwestern Xinjiang region. Additionally, around 85,000 billion barrels per day of Kazakh crude flowed through the pipeline during 2007 (Energy Information Administration 2007).

China-Central Asia Relations

At multilateral level, China has successfully established Shanghai Cooperation Organization along with Russia. Though, SCO was established as a regional security structure to resolve border issues with Russia and Central Asia member states, due to China’s interest, it started including the regional security problems along with economic issues in the Central Asian region. Now, SCO has the plan to establish an “energy club” to challenge the West in Caspian region. Beijing has successfully persuaded the Central Asian member states of SCO to reign over the Uyghur population and trans-national organizations, those who are supporting “East Turkistan Movement”. After maintaining formal relationship with the Central Asian republics during the early period of independence, China has reached in the sphere of great power-rivalry between Russia and the US. Though, China has successfully established its relations with Russia and the US, it has yet to compete with them in the “new great game”.

Additionally, China participated in Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme, where the providers are the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Bank (WB), etc. For the period from 2006 to 2008, CAREC plans to provide over $2.3 billion for more than 40 projects. Thus, the engagement of China in Central Asia has provided an opportunity for the newly independent states to diversify their trade and energy routes to the sea and gain port-access on China’s east-coast. They have welcomed China’s involvement in order to avoid
Russian domination. The Taliban government in Afghanistan can be regarded as an important factor, which triggered a fear of radical Islamism spreading throughout the region. It caused for the deeper relations between Central Asian states with China and Russia for getting more security assistance (China Daily October 10 2006).

In the sphere of trade, Chinese officials stated that trade with all the republics of Central Asia was expanded in 2007. Central Asian Republics still accounts for only 1.3% of China’s Foreign Trade. Kazakhstan ranks along with Russia as China’s largest trade partner. Kyrgyzstan ranks second after Kazakhstan in regional trade turn over with China. Sino-Kyrgyz bilateral trade may substantially increase in coming years after the Kyrgyz-China border post at Irkesham is linked by an improved highway to Kyrgyzstan’s southern city of Osh and Andijan (Uzbekistan). (Xuetang 2006: 126-7).

Since the early 1990s, Kazakhstan has been the top trade partner of China in the Central Asian region. China is also among the 5 largest foreign investors in the country, reportedly contributing $8 billion of investment by mid 2007. A railway line from Kazakhstan’s city of Almaty to the border post of Dastyk-Alatau and to Urumqui in Xinjiang is currently the only rail link (ibid: 127).

In August 2006, Chinese and Tajik military forces held a joint exercise at a Russian military base in Tajikistan. In August 2006, Chinese and Tajik military forces held joint exercise at Russian military base in Tajikistan. In August 2007, an SCO military exercise took place in Xinjiang and Southern Russia, the first that included representatives of all member countries.

China’s Central Asia policy is greatly influenced by geopolitical factor such as border issues and natural resources of this region. The main task of China to guarantee the energy supplies demanded by China’s sustainable economic development and to diversify a stable energy supply. China’s energy export has been increasing rapidly in
recent years. Between 1997 and 2002, China’s oil import amounted to 35.47 million tonnes, 27.32 million tonnes, 70.26 million tonnes, 60.25 million tonnes per year, respectively. China’s energy import doubled heavily in five years. In 2003, China’s energy import reached 90 million tonnes. China is bound to depend heavily on the international market. About 50% of China’s energy import is from the Middle East and over 22% from Africa (Huasheng 2004: 119).

China’s engagement in the energy sector of Central Asia is driven by some following factors. In 2003, Japan emerged as a competitor for an extension of the Siberian oil field. Japan tried to persuade Moscow in late 2002 to extend pipeline to the Pacific coast instead. Thus, China has regarded Japan as a competitor in Central Asian geopolitics. China’s energy cooperation with Turkmenistan was also expanded at the turn of the century. Beijing also signed a deal with Turkmenistan in April 2006 to build a pipeline capable of supplying 30 billion cubic meters of gas to China over a 30 year period starting in 2009 (ibid: 119).

Thus, China has emphasized its strategic relations with Kazakhstan. Here, geopolitical factor is also playing vital role. Kazakhstan has the vast potential of natural resources of oil and gas. For fulfilling its geopolitical needs, China has to assert itself in Central Asian geopolitics. It has to compete with the two major powers such as the US and Russia. In this context, it is quite important to analyze the Sino-Central Asia bilateral relations.

The West-East Gas pipeline is the transport route for gas resources of Central Asian region, which would supply gas in western China and the markets in the eastern part of the country. The Chinese government promoted the construction of this pipeline to boost natural gas consumption. This pipeline was commissioned in 2004 and is China’s single-largest natural gas pipeline at 2,5000 miles in length. The eastern section of the line would run from the China-Kazakhstan border to Guangzhou in Guangdong province, whereas the western section of the line would supply for the gas markets of Shanghai and
is scheduled to begin operations at the end of 2009. These supplying roots are satisfying China’s energy requirements. Along with the energy issues, China has broadened its bilateral cooperation with Kazakhstan (Xuetang 2006: 128).

In the sphere of bilateral trade, in 2007, bilateral trade volume reached US 13.87 billion, 66 per cent more than the previous years. According to the Kazakh National Bureau of Statistics, China is the third biggest market for Kazakhstan's exports and the second biggest exporter for Kazakhstan during the period from January to September, 2007 (Xinhua October 29 2008).

On August 18 2007, during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao to Kazakhstan at the invitation of his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan a communiqué was set up to enhance the cooperation between the two republics. Both sides agreed to maintain the momentum of exchange of high-level visits and hold consultations as well as negotiations on bilateral relations and international issues. Both the leaders pledged to set up exchanges between the two countries’ parliament carry out multilevel friendly exchanges and cooperation, and try to improve the legal basis of bilateral cooperation. Additionally, the two countries determined to extend their cooperation in sphere of security, cracking down on the “three evil forces” of terrorism, separatism and extremism, and combating transnational crimes and drug trafficking under the aegis of SCO. The two countries shared the view that SCO member states should conduct concrete cooperation in the field of security, economy, social affairs and humanitarianism, so as to benefit their people. In the communiqué, the two countries agreed to continue the transition from large-scale oil and gas projects to conduct major cooperation in non-resource field such as the areas of oil and gas machinery manufacturing, food industry, etc. (Xinhua August 18 2007). In this context, both have emphasized on joint military ventures under the aegis of this multilateral forum. Kazakhstan has also participated in the military exercises led by SCO in order to threat the growing power of the US in Central Asia.
Likewise, the diplomatic relations between China and Turkmenistan was established on January 1992. China has also opened its embassy in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Both the republics have already signed 69 agreements and treaties at interstate, inter-governmental and interdepartmental level for strengthening the bilateral ties. The trade turnover between the two countries increased 18 times during the period 2000-07. The Chinese commerce ministry says that the bilateral trade turnover during the first six months of 2008 was US $380 million. Chinese companies are participating in 49 investment projects in Turkmenistan with total value of US $1.285 billion and Yuan 1.478 billion. The biggest Chinese project in Turkmenistan is the Turkmen-China gas pipeline, which is done by CNPC and its subsidiary organizations and subcontractors (News Central Asia September 1 2008).

In the sphere of energy trade, China’s state owned oil company, China National Petroleum Corporation reached an agreement with the Turkmen Petroleum Ministry to build a cross-border gas pipeline to China- a pipeline vigorously promoted by the Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov. The project was scheduled to cost around US$12 billion according to a feasibility study jointly carried out by CNPC, Exxon and Mitsubishi in 1996 (Liao 2006: 62). In this context, it is imperative to describe about the China’s energy policy towards Turkmenistan in the context of Central Asian geopolitics. As it has already mentioned that Turkmenistan is a Caspian littoral state with the potential of hydrocarbon resources, China’s main priority has emphasized on the pipeline route to bring the natural gas to its country in order to supplement its energy requirements.

In 2006, President Suparnurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan agreed to sign a deal with China to build an export pipeline to the east that would break Russia’s monopoly on export routes for Turkmen gas (Kimmage 2006). In August 2007, both the presidents pledged to build a pipeline that would begin transporting Turkmen natural gas to China in January 2009. China called it Central Asia Gas Pipeline, which would run some 7000 Kilometers. It would have two branches, one going through Kazakhstan and the other through Uzbekistan (News Central Asia August 30 2007).
The two republics have successfully maintained their relations for a long time. Now, both the sides are focusing on broadening of the bilateral relations in the spheres of trade, energy and security. Both the countries are the member-states of SCO and have worked for the common security problems. Thus, China's relation with Turkmenistan has important role in Central Asian geopolitics. Beijing's presence in Central Asia has provided the scope for Turkmenistan to diversify its trade and energy routes to the East. It can avoid Russia's monopoly over its energy issues.

As it has already been discussed that, China has been successfully maintaining its relations with the newly independent republics of Central Asian region since 1990, now the relationship has been reached in a phase, where, China can be regarded as an important power in the Central Asian region. In June 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and in June 2004, the SCO launched a regional anti-terror structure in Uzbekistan's capital Tashkent.

Since then, China and Uzbekistan have been maintaining active and effective cooperation within the SCO framework and achieved further development of bilateral ties. In May 2005, Chinese President Hu Jintao and Uzbek President Islam Karimov signed a treaty on friendly and cooperative partnership in Beijing, signaling new determination on both sides to further consolidate their traditional friendship and cooperation. According to statistics released by the General Administration of Customs of China, the total volume of bilateral trade between China and Uzbekistan in 2008 (from January to November) was US $1.498 billion up to 48.9 percent over the previous year (Xinhua News Agency June 26 2009).

The oil industry is central to Chinese economic interests in Uzbekistan due to the growing need of China's energy requirement. In July 2005, Uzbekneftegaz National Holding Company of Uzbekistan and Sinopec, a Chinese oil company signed an agreement to involve the creation of a joint venture between Uzbekneftegaz and a
subsidiary of Sinopec, the Dong Sheng. Chinese investments in the Uzbek oil sector are expected to reach US $600 million in the long run (McDermott 2005).

Additionally, Nasriddin Najimov, Chairman of the Uzbek Agency for Foreign Economic Relations, has shown his great hopes on links with China as a trading partner. He also confirmed that the Uzbeks have drafted and handed a package of investment proposals to Chinese companies, which includes 50 projects in the spheres of information technology, machinery and engineering, chemical and electromechanical industries, and the manufacturing of construction materials, furniture, etc. (ibid).

In October 2008, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) signed a cooperation deal with the Uzbekistan State Holding Oil and Gas Company, Uzbekndftegaz, on the joint exploration of the Mingulak oil field in Uzbekistan. The recoverable reserves in the field total more than 30 million tonnes. In June this year, an electrification project of the Tukumachi-Angren Railway in Uzbekistan was formally launched. It is the first railway reconstruction project, which China will develop in central Asia (Xinhua News Agency June 26 2009).

In June 2008, China officially started work on its section of a dual 1,801 kilometer-long Central Asian natural gas pipeline, which stretches from the border of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the west, through central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan, and enters China at Horgos Port in Xinjiang. Initially one pipeline was expected to become operational by the end of this year and the other in 2010. On June 15 2008, Karimov said at a meeting with President Hu Jintao in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg that Uzbekistan appreciated its relationship with China, which featured friendship, mutual trust and cooperation (ibid).

China-Uzbekistan relation is very important in Central Asian geopolitics, because, Uzbekistan has successfully maintained its relations with the US and Russia, the two
main powers of "new great game". After losing its relation with the US due to the causes of Andijan incident and the closure of Karshi-Khanabad base for the allied forces, Uzbekistan has improved its relations with China and Russia, the leading members of SCO. In the sphere of energy, Tashkent has got the opportunity to diversify its energy resources to the East.

Likewise Kyrgyzstan shares 858 kilometers of its borders with China and 1% of its population is consisted of Uyghur ethnic group (CIA Worldfact Book 2009). After getting independence, Kyrgyzstan has started maintaining friendly relation with China. In 1994, Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao visited Kyrgyzstan to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the spheres of trade, communications, energy and mining. In 2004, he again visited Kyrgyzstan to facilitate the bilateral cooperation between China and Kyrgyzstan. During Wen's visit in 2004, a joint document was signed by both the leaders which stated that the two countries pledged to fully tap potential areas of cooperation such as politics, economy, trade, security and culture. The two ministers also signed a compendium on cooperation priorities and programmes for the next ten years. In this context, Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev said, "the compendium will effectively enhance such ties" (China Daily September 23 2004).

Both the countries pledged to work together in communications, ports, energy, agriculture, food processing, aviation, textile, science and technology, telecommunications and finance. As per the agreement, both of them agreed to facilitate railway, aviation and highway links and in particular renovate and open the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan transnational highway as soon as possible. In 2006, Kyrgyz President visited China to enhance the cooperation between China and Kyrgyzstan. In August 2007, Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Kyrgyzstan and in this occasion, both the leaders pledged to further efforts to promote trade and economic cooperation. Hu also praised its achievement in a wide range of fields such as trade and economy, transport, energy, mineral exploration, telecommunication and agriculture. He stated that bilateral trade volumes achieved several record highs in a
row and a string of large-scale cooperation projects have been set into operation one after another (Xinhua September 9 2007).

Kyrgyzstan is important for China, because, a new gas pipeline is built from Uzbekistan to China, a section of it cutting across Kyrgyzstan. To tie it with existing infrastructure, Uzbekistan’s state-controlled oil and gas concern, Uzbekneftegaz is modernizing the old gas pipeline running from Mubarek to Yangyer and Andijan to Osh, Kyrgyzstan. It is joined by Kazakh and Chinese companies to continue the pipeline from Osh to Kashgar. When completed, it is to carry at least 20 billion cubic meters of gas a year (EIA 2008).

Like other Central Asian republics, Kyrgyzstan has successfully maintained its bilateral relations with China in the spheres of security and trade, which it requires to improve. In the sphere of energy security, Kyrgyzstan has followed the pragmatic approach, while signing agreements and protocols with Beijing, so that it can diversify its routes and develop its region.

Tajikistan, the Central Asian republic shares 414 kilometers borders with China and has maintained cordial relations with China after its independence. As a member-state of SCO, Tajikistan has also strategic relations with China. Both the countries have developed their relationship under the aegis of SCO. Both have concern for the regional security problems of Central Asia. During the SCO summit in 2001, both the Tajik president and Chinese president met in Shanghai and discussed about the regional security problems. On regional security, Jiang Zemin, the Chinese Prime Minister said that separatism, terrorism and extremism were major threats to regional security and stability. Both the leaders pledged to cooperate on combating the “three forces” and to uphold regional security. He added that a pact would be signed on combating the three forces, which would serve as a solid legal guarantee for cooperation among parties concerned in the area of security.
In 2006, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao and Tajikistan Prime Minister Akil Akilov met and agreed that the two countries would enhance bilateral cooperation on trade and other areas. In this occasion, Wen Jiabao said that China was a good neighbour and partner of Tajikistan and the two sides showed mutual respect and high-level trust. The two leaders agreed to negotiate and sign as early as possible China-Tajikistan good-neighborliness, friendship and cooperation treaty.

In 2007, China and Tajikistan signed the treaty on good neighborly friendship and cooperation, agreeing to push bilateral relations to higher levels. As per the treaty, the two countries agreed to strengthen coordination and cooperation between relevant departments of both countries within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and continue to take strong measures in jointly fighting terrorism, separatism and extremism in any form, including the "East Turkistan" terrorist forces, and organized crimes, illegal migration, illegal trafficking of drugs and weapons and other cross-border crimes. China’s relation with Tajikistan is mainly security in nature, because of its border contiguity and Uyghur problems. China needs the support of Tajikistan to exert pressure on the Uyghur separatists’ groups. In this context, the role of Tajikistan is very important. Thus, Tajikistan has to strengthen its cooperation with China in order to broaden its bilateral relation.

China’s assertion in Central Asia in both bilateral and multilateral levels has changed the security balance of this region after the disintegration of Soviet Union. In terms of Central Asian geopolitics, Central Asian republics have got new opportunity to diversify their trade routes. In terms of regional security problems, these newly independent republics have got a new platform for resolving the security issues in the multilateral level. In this context, Russia has also come forward to provide them security assistance, because of China factor. In the “new great game” phase, Russia and China are the competitors and Moscow has never wanted the growing influence of China in Central Asian geopolitics.
India

Likewise India has strong historical linkages with Central Asian region. Both India and Central Asia were two powerful centers of ancient oriental civilization with a great deal of interaction. The historical past of both the centers has a strong foundation for exchanges in cultural, political and economic spheres. The ancient “silk route” had used to connect India with Central Asian region in the spheres of trade and people to people contact. Even, India is struggling to develop strategic relationship with Central Asian republics in current scenario and there are common grounds such as economy and trade, culture, and geopolitical factors for both the centers during the intense competition between Russia and America.

India's relation with Central Asia has been shaped by Islamic culture. The historical Moghul rule along with the popularity of Sufi culture has reflected the cultural intimacy between India and Central Asia. On the contrary, India and Central Asian republics are the victims of Pakistan sponsored terrorism. Thus, Islamic fundamentalism can be considered as an important factor in India-Central Asia relations. The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan was a matter of pressing concern for both the centers. The proposed gas pipelines would pass through Afghanistan and Pakistan, which can be considered as a major obstacle in India-Central Asia trade relations. Despite these problems, both the centers have cooperated with each other for tackling the issue of terrorism.

In this regard, India has set up the Joint Working Group to deal with extremism and counter-extremism with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. It provides for better coordination, sharing of experience and information, regular consultations and training facilities to build up paramilitary forces (Joshi 2005: 226). India can play an effective role in defence-cooperation with Central Asia, because there is a possibility for exporting small arms manufactured in India to Central Asia states. For instance, military-technical cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been signed. The Russian border guards sought India's help in combating terrorism on the strategic border of the CIS. India provided training and extended help to
the Northern Alliance in the war against the Taliban. India had provided technical assistance in running defence related industries of Soviet times, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (ibid: 227). At the multilateral level, India is an observer country in Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In the current scenario, India has always been supported by Central Asian countries to foster regional cooperation.

India has been supporting of Kazakh idea on the Conference Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Indian Prime Minister attended the first CICA meeting in Alma Ata in June 2002. Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev hoped that CICA could be Asian’s answer to Europe’s Conference on Security and Cooperation. CICA could be emerged as a forum for resolving regional disputes over border, the use of resources such as water and illegal migration and drug trafficking (CICA Declaration). In the same year, both the countries signed an agreement on setting up an India-Kazakhstan Working Group for joint fight against terrorism, narcotic trade, small arms trade, etc. (Patnaik 2004: 135).

India became the fourth country after Russia, America and German to establish its military base in Ayani, Tajikistan. It indicates the military cooperation between India and Central Asia on regional security issues. This base will be under the command and control of Russia, Tajikistan and India on rotation basis. India also supported Northern Alliance those who were fighting against Taliban in Afghanistan by providing military assistance. After the fall of Taliban in 2001, India strengthened its relations with Tajikistan and Afghanistan for checking the regrouping of the extremist groups in these states. India signed a bilateral agreement during Indian defence minister’s visit to Tajikistan in April 2002. As per the agreement, ‘India will train Tajik defence personnel, service and retrofit Soviet and Russian military equipment and teach English to army and air force personnel’ (ibid: 130).

Apart from security cooperation, India has maintained cordial relations with Central Asia in the area of trade. India needs the hydrocarbon resources to satisfy its
geopolitical interests. India has been asked to participate in Central Asia is the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan. India is not ready to join the pipeline venture due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. But, India has an alternative, which will be laid to bypass Afghanistan and Pakistan. This trans-Asian oil pipeline will extend from Kazakhstan to the coast of the Indian Ocean. India’s ONGC Videsh is doing the groundwork to lay this pipeline. This pipeline will be laid across the city of Kashi in Xinjiang region of China and then along the so-called Line of Truce going across the Siachen Glacier to Indian Kashmir, then will go on to Himachal Pradesh and on to New Delhi. The pipeline, according to the current plans, will be built from Kazakhstan to Ladakh region of India through China’s restive Xinjiang province. In fact, there is an old trade route, the Silk route, which connects Ladakh and Xinjiang. But, the technical feasibility of laying the pipeline through Siachen is uncertain (Jacob 2005: 309).

India is a big market for energy and its demand would go up over the years. In this regard, energy cooperation and sharing arrangements only with countries whose actions do not undermine India’s security and which have demonstrated a willingness to cooperate meaningfully with India. Secondly, tripartite agreement signed among Turkmenistan, India and Iran in February, 1997: A pipeline network could be laid along this route. Later, Kazakhstan, and Russia could utilize this route, either by exporting oil through barges to Iran or constructing a network from Russia via Kazakhstan. In January 2003, Iranian President suggested for a new transport corridor and India would help Iran to develop a new port at Chou Bahar on the Persian Gulf and then transport the goods by railroad via Afghanistan to Uzbekistan. This transport corridor, when functional would give access to Central Asia. The North South corridor is an alternate to India to reach out to Central Asia. Besides, the transport corridor would lead to sustainable development in Central Asian region such as physical infrastructure power, engineering maintenance and repair of roads, etc. Another pipeline is Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline, which would transport Turkmen gas to Indian territories. But, the security instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan has obstructed this project. In the present circumstances, transporting Central Asian energy resources and other goods via Iran appears to be the best option. It could provide India some leverage in an area that is fast crucial for the
international community. Besides, India’s expertise in the infrastructure requirements of the energy sector of Central Asia could be made available. Indian cooperation in other areas such as industrial development, food packaging, and management of hydel power in Kyrgyzstan, defence industries in Uzbekistan would promote India and Central Asia cooperation in future.

India’s policy towards Central Asia does not intend to thwart the influence of China, Iran, Russia and America in vast post Soviet space. India has always maintained cordial relations with all these powers. On the issue of terrorism, New Delhi has differences with America and Pakistan. Because, it does not want any external interference in Kashmir issue. On the other hand, it has always cooperated with Russia, China and Central Asian republics to tackle terrorism. Their convergence of interests has brought them under SCO to challenge the influence of US in Central Asian region. Additionally, the regrouping of Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan has expanded India’s responsibility in South Asia and Central Asia.

Turkey

Like other regional powers, Turkey can be considered as an important state in “new great game” phase. It has stakes in the vast natural resources of this region. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Turkey’s role was predicted as an emerging power in Central Asia, which would serve the interests of West, because of its democratic government, liberal culture and market economy. It has shared economic, cultural, historical relations with Central Asian region.

Additionally, Turkey was an ally of the US during the period of the Cold War and is a member of NATO. Thus, Turkey is used as a power against Iran in the post-Soviet space. In this regard, the new “Turkish Model” was presented to the Central Asian states. A fact was that under the then Turkish President Turgut Ozal, Ankara’s foreign policy had established political and economic relations with the Central Asian Republics. The
West also offered Turkey a new Western identity in order to enhance its importance in this region. But, the economic crisis in Turkey between 1990s and 2001 prevented Ankara to maintain economic relations with the newly independent states of the Central Asian region. Turkic influence in this region started declining in the second half of 1990s. The only successful initiatives launched in these years were made by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and civil society organizations (ARAS 2008). Thus, the role designed for Turkey as a model and bridge country ended in failure.

Under its new foreign policy, Turkey has paid serious attention to preserve good neighborhood policies with Iran and Russia, while attempting to prevent their policies that may harm the peace and stability in the region. Turkey’s other priority in its policy on Central Asia is to make sure that these new states acquire the necessary abilities to establish stability and security at home. In this regard, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency has played a crucial role and provided loans to the Central Asian Republics since their independence. Turkey’s new policy is also backed by civil society and their activities in the Central Asian region. Turkish businessman, contractors and civil society organizations have launched considerable number of initiatives and projects in Central Asian states in order to maintain stability and welfare of this region. For an instance, Turkic President Abdullah Gul visited to Central Asia along with the Turkic Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges and high number of businessmen (ibid).

Turkey’s new policy towards Central Asia has aimed at developing a more durable and constructive policy towards Central Asia. It has also aimed at maintaining a balanced approach towards other actors such as Russia, China and India in this region in order to achieve strategic depth in Central Asia. It is also pursuing a multi-dimensional policy line to become a key political and economic partner in Central Asian region. Even, Turkey is regarded as a stepping stone in Eurasian region due to the factors such as culture, tradition, language and religion. Additionally, there are pipeline and railway transportation routes existed between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, which can be
considered as a proper corridor for energy transportation of Caspian and Central Asia to the world market (Invest in Eurasia: Use Turkey as a Stepping Stone 2008: 2-3).

**Turkey’s Energy Policy**

Turkey has maintained strategic relations with regional and external powers to gain strategic depth in Central Asia. Turkey’s policy makers have aimed at making Ankara an energy hub to transport the rich energy resources in the neighboring regions to world market. This new policy aims to secure and diversify oil and gas transportation of Europe. Turkey can serve the interests of US and West for materializing the “East-West Energy Corridor”, which would bypass Iran and Russia. On the other hand, the US supported the alternate route to support Azerbaijan and Georgia for economic development in this project has been the 1768 km long Baku-Tblisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which was signed after long years of negotiations and rivalry between Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey and multi-national companies. Besides, this project, Turkey has other gas pipeline projects, such as Nabucco and Trans-Adriatic pipeline, for transporting Caspian and other gas reserves around the country to European markets. For an instance, in February 2008, the Turkish foreign minister Ali Babacan offered a project of transporting oil from Turkey to India via Israel. There are also agreements and ongoing feasibility studies for transportation of oil and gas reserves of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to world markets have been signed (Barysh 2007: 2-3).

The Blue Stream Gas pipeline from Russia passes along the bottom of the Black Sea and resurfaces in the Turkish port of Samsun. Opened in 2003, Blue Stream was due to deliver 10 billion cubic units of gas in 2007, with its full capacity of 16 billion cubic metres scheduled to be reached in 2010. Russia has been exploring the option of doubling Blue Stream’s capacity, to 32 billion cubic meters a year, with the aim of selling the gas on to Europe and perhaps forestalling the Nabucco pipeline through which the Europeans want to import Caspian, Central Asia-and perhaps one day Iranian gas without crossing Russian territory (ibid).
Turkey’s recent policy towards Central Asia is more pragmatic and has reachable goals, which have aimed at creating an environment of cooperation between the two regions. Under its new foreign policy, Turkey prioritizes economic development and political stability in the Central Asian region. Because, the Central Asian region is marred by many factors of instability such as international terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration as well as international competition for domination. In this context, Turkey’s policy towards Central Asia seeks to contribute to peace and stability. Additionally, the growing number of visits and the diversity of activities designed for the region are the strong signs of Turkey’s contributions to the region, which will continue. In this regard, Turkey should follow some policies in its new policy towards the Central Asia such as:

Turkey is an important player in Central Asian region. It is rather regarded as a small power among the regional actors, those who are present in the Central Asian region, after the disintegration of Soviet Union. It was also a Cold War ally of the US and presently a member of NATO. Additionally, its liberal political tradition and market economy has made the West led by the US to take special interest.

The BTC pipeline which is in operation is a clear example of the US motive to bypass Russia and Iran. On the other hand, Turkey needs the support of bigger powers in order to exploit the natural resources of Central Asian and Caspian region due to its own economic constraints. Ankara is in need of energy in this region’s geopolitical set up. Thus, Turkey can be regarded as a viable option for the Central Asian Republics in order to diversify their trade routes. Unlike, Iran and Pakistan, Turkey is also a safer space to invest, because of its liberal political tradition and market economy. So, Turkey has better option in Central Asia in order to revive its economy. Rather it can play an important role in the Central Asian geopolitics by involving the US, Russia, Iran and India. Because, Turkey is considered as a bridge country, that can connect the East with the West. It is the provider of further routes for exporting Central Asian pipelines to the world market, which is the requirement of the powers, those who are engaged in this region as well as the Central Asian Republics. Thus, Turkey should play a positive role in Central Asian geopolitics. Like, Turkey, Iran is also an important power in the Central Asian region,
which has provided alternative pipeline routes for the vast natural resources of this region. Additionally, Turkey has been supported by the US in Central Asian region in order to check the influence of Tehran in the matter of Caspian geopolitics. In this context, the role of Iran in “new great game” phase has to be analyzed.

**Iran**

Central Asia has shared a long history of cultural and linguistic affinities with Iran. In ancient time, the unified Iranian culture and civilization had its impact on Central Asian region. The process of Islamic civilization had its positive impact on Central Asia’s Muslim population. Though, the cultural affinity had suffered a setback during the periods of Czar and Communist eras under Soviet rule, it has not lost the past glory. The cultural dimension of cooperation between Iran-Central Asian relations consists of assistance in the recovery and growth of forgotten cultural roots and creation of an environment in which they can rejoin the mainstream of world culture and civilization.

In this regard, Iran has emphasized the exchanges of scholars and students in order to reintegrate the culture. Many festivals are held which emphasized on areas such as folklore including music and common traditions. Additionally, international resources such as activities within the framework of the Silk Road project, which is known as the “conservative road” and is pursued by the UNESCO. These initiatives are utilized to introduce the role and importance of Central Asia in the expanse of human civilization.

On the other hand, American and other regional actors voiced strong concern that Iran would seek to pursue a subversive and adventurist policy to export its brand of Islamic government to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Due to Iran’s historical background, these actors posed Iran as an aggressive power with zeal to spread its extremist ideology in Central Asia. They might have the fear that the independence of Central Asian republics could provide opportunities for Islamic Republic of Iran to expand its ideological influence to develop cultural-linguistic cooperation. Iran developed closer relation with the leading Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan during the period of civil war in Tajikistan. Iran also criticized Russia and Uzbekistan for supporting the
communists who had returned to power and of helping the Dushanbe government (Uzbekistan) to carry out brutal repression. After the end of bloody civil war in Tajikistan and the rise of Taliban in Afghanistan, Iran started reconsidering its policy towards Central Asia (Khan 2004: 48). In this context, Iran’s policy towards Central Asia can be analyzed through different phases

In the “new great game” phase, the pragmatic concentration on economic cooperation through the establishment of road, rail and energy pipeline networks, Iran has presented the most direct non-Russian route to the market for both oil and gas and it has hoped to become a transit state for exports of these resources out of this region. Moreover, along with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Iran is a Caspian littoral state, with its own claims to energy resources of the sea bed (ibid: 48).

But, the real problem has been started due to the US engagement in this region after the September, 11, 2001. The US started its mission in Afghanistan under its Operation Enduring Freedom, which had both positive and negative impacts on Iran. On the positive side, it removed a vehemently anti-Iranian and anti-Shia government from neighboring Afghanistan. Because, the rise of the Taliban had been a cause of concern for Iranian representatives expressed their vulnerability by arguing that they were facing problems from both Saddam’s Iraq and Taliban government of Afghanistan.

Iran worried about the results of American presence near its border. Because, Iran was included in the US ‘Axis of Evil’ stated by American President. Tehran also worried about the instabilities which were created by the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, these would have spill-over effect to Iran. Additionally, Iran was encircled by the US navy in Persian Gulf, military installations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States and Afghanistan.

In this new situation, Iran’s policy towards Central Asia is described as a combination of defensive caution and limited containment of the US on its borders. It has
never launched the much feared campaign of Islamisation in Central Asia in 1991. Instead, Iran has been continuing its relations with Central Asia states in the economic, political and cultural spheres, with little major change since September, 11, 2001. Iran’s close relationship with Russia reflects the enlisting of Russian diplomatic support for Iran and crucially important nuclear technology and other weaponry.

In Afghanistan, Iran has played a much more prominent role. Like, Russia, Tehran supported the Northern Alliance power grab in Kabul, which has created a government with little legitimacy as a broad-based national government capable of reining in the provincial warlords that still wield much power in the country. It also supported the warlords and extended it military supplies and cooperated in keeping a trade flow generating over $1 million in duties levied by Ismail Khan, one of the prominent warlord. While doing this, Tehran undermined the emergence of a strong central government in Afghanistan. The main reason behind Iran’s policy in Afghanistan is to prop up the US influence in this region. Rather Tehran is in a defensive position in Afghanistan (Cornell 2003).

Iran formulated its first regional diplomacy in Central Asian region was at the Dakar summit of the Organization of Islamic Conference. Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani proposed for admitting the newly independent Central Asian republics, which resulted in the joining of these republics into this regional multilateral structure. Additionally, both Iran and Russia have promoted the economic cooperation among the Central Asian republics for removing the disagreement among these states and make this region as a safe-heaven for trade. In this context, the establishment of a joint Central Asian bank with a capital of $9 million is a land-mark event in the integration process (Alam 2005: 195).

Another, regional economic structure is Economic Cooperation Organization, which includes all the Central Asian republics along with Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan and Azerbaijan. The idea of Economic Cooperation Organization was
promoted by Iran and finalized in the third annual meeting of ECO foreign ministers in February 1992 in Pakistan. It is the largest global economic union after the European Union. The support of Iran in the establishment of such a multilateral economic structure is noteworthy, because multi-dimensional actions such as expansion and encouragement of trade relations among members as means can enhance economic and social development and growth. In this context, Iran has followed pragmatic policy in terms of economic relations with the Islamic countries in the Eurasian region. Except these economic multilateral structures, Iran has taken initiative, while participating in several regional "triangulations", such as Iran-Turkmenistan-Armenia, Iran-Greece-Armenia, Iran-Turkmenistan-India, Iran-Georgia-Armenia, Iran-Ukraine-Turkmenistan (Alam 2005: 190). Iran's initiatives to engage in the regional multilateralism can be regarded as strategic move to thwart the challenges made by the west to isolate as a radical Islamic power in this region. By following pragmatic policy, Iran has gained the confidence of the newly independent states of former Soviet space as well as the regional actors such as Russia and China.

Iran's geostrategic location in Eurasia plays an important role for transportation of Central Asian-Caspian hydrocarbon resources. Iran's existing network of oil and gas pipelines and related infrastructure provide the lowest-cost outlet for Caspian energy resources. Additionally, a Persian Gulf port would provide the closest location for delivery to South Asia, which is one of the World's fastest growing markets. Iran has also initiated a process towards regional cooperation and development of the New Silk Route, and has already got a positive response from a larger circle of nations of the region, including Turkey, Central Asia-Caucasus Republics, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India. The growing momentum behind the New Silk Route land-bridge development policy will help in realizing the common economic interests, eliminating the potential for geopolitical manipulation, and overcoming the countless conflicts and hot spots in this part of the world. Apart from railroad projects, the most important cooperative projects are directed for actualizing the enormous resources of oil and natural gas in the Caspian Sea region.
In his remarks during the visit of the Turkish prime minister, Iranian Foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati gave several examples of cooperative projects. He mentioned, “the plan for transmission of natural gas of Turkmenistan to Europe via Iran, the plan for use of Turkmenistan natural gas in the northern part of Iran; participation of Iran in the Shah Deniz Consortium of Azerbaijan; transmission of Iranian gas to Nakhichevan and Armenia and continuing to Georgia and Ukraine and the plan for swapping Kazakhstan oil” (ibid: 191).

In 2002, after attending the Caspian Summit in Ashkhabad, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami along with Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, appeared before the Press and called on the Central Asian Republics to step up exports of their energy through Iran as the shortest route to world markets. At the same time, he sharply criticized progress by the US which seeks to isolate Iran in developing a military presence in the region for its war on terrorism. He emphasized on Tehran’s interest in Central Asian energy by calling on Kazakh President Nazarbayev to support building an oil pipeline from Kazakhstan to the Gulf via Iran. That oil pipeline would imitate a gas pipeline from western Turkmenistan to northern Iran that was inaugurated in 1997. Both, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan currently also participate in so-called “oil swap deals” by which Iran imports their oil for domestic use while selling equivalent amounts of Iranian oil to the world market on their behalf (ibid: 195).

**Iran and the North-South Transport Corridor**

The ongoing North-South transport corridor signals an attempt to link markets in South Asia with Europe via Iran and Russia and to restore the historic trade of conventional commodities between South Asia and Europe. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a multi modal transportation established in 12 September 2000 in St. Petersburg, by Iran, Russia and India for the purpose of promoting transportation cooperation among the Member States. This corridor connects India Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Islamic republic of Iran and then is connected to St. Petersburg and North European via Russia Federation. This multilateral transportation
corridor includes Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman, Syria and Bulgaria, an observer state.

This transport corridor is not free from challenges such as the regional instability in Central Asian region, dispute over Caspian legal status among the littoral states, long-distance of the transport corridor, etc. Despite these challenges, this corridor can help the energy needy countries to fulfill their energy requirements. Another important matter is it connects India with the Eurasian region, which is an obvious reason for expanding the market for Caspian’s littoral states such as Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan. Additionally, the relations between Iran, Russia and India can be improved in the future in the sphere of oil diplomacy.

Iran and Central Asia

As it has been already mentioned that Iran is one of the littoral states of CSB, it is imperative to analyze the relations between Iran and Turkmenistan in this context. Iran has maintained its relations with Turkmenistan in the spheres of energy, pipelines, and strategic transportation links. Iran is also a key corridor for the import and export of goods to and from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan via Turkmenistan’s road and railway network. Being littoral states of CSB, both have taken unified position on Russia’s growing role in this region. Both republics have also signed bilateral agreements under which Iranian specialists will help renovate the Turkmenbashi oil Refinery and the Mary Cotton Processing Plant. Iran has also agreed to build the Turkmen-Iran-Europe Gas pipeline, and the Ashkhabad-Tehran, Mary-Mashad-Turkmenbashi, and the Gudurl-Gorgan highways (Alam 2005: 191). Tejen-Serakhs-Mashhad railway line is the only rail link that connects Central Asia with the outside world. Dostluk dam, across the Iran-Turkmenistan border at Serakhs, was built jointly by Iran and Turkmenistan. It captures the excess water of Murghab-Harirud river system for year-round irrigation. Twenty-five-thousand hectares of land on each side of the border is getting benefits from this dam. Korpeje-Kurtkui gas pipeline exports Turkmen natural gas to Iran. This is the only pipe that bypasses Russia for export of Central Asian gas. Balkanabat-Aliabad grid connection helps export Turkmen electricity to Turkey through the territory of Iran. Trade turnover
between Iran and Turkmenistan was more than US $ 1.3 billion in 2006. In 2007, the mutual trade turnover was US $ 668.9 million, making Iran the second largest trade partner of Turkmenistan (News Central Asia 2007).

Iran is one of the first countries to extend diplomatic recognition, and the first to establish an embassy in Dushanbe. In 1992, Iran provided training for a group of Tajik diplomats from Tajikistan. Iran also funded for the construction of several new mosques in Tajikistan. Despite the ideological differences between the Islamic Revolutionary regime of Iran and the secular communist regime in Tajikistan, Tajik President Nabiyev actively strengthened relations with Iran. At the beginning of civil war in Tajikistan, Nabiyev made a direct request for aid from Iranian president. But, the cultural relations between these two republics could not be established. The reason was the leaders of Islamic revival movement in Tajikistan opposed the Iranian model of Islamism, because, Iran was predominantly composed of Shia Muslim, on the other hand, Tajikistan had Sunni dominated Muslim population (Country studies of Tajikistan).

In 1992, Iran repeatedly offered to help mediate Tajikistan's civil war in cooperation with other Central Asian states. Iran had also supported the United Tajik Opposition headed by Syed Abdullo Nuri against the Dushanbe regime during the civil war. Tehran also organized the Tajik peace summits in Tehran. Although such offers produced no negotiations, Iran did send food and set up camps for refugees from Tajikistan. After the civil war, relations between Iran and the new government in Dushanbe included efforts to develop a modus Vivendi as well as periodic recriminations. Iran worked with Russia in attempting to negotiate a peace agreement between the Dushanbe government and the opposition. In July 1995, Tajikistan opened an embassy in Tehran (Alam 2005: 192).
On February 10 2008, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rakhmonov stressed the expansion of relations in all fields in a press conference, which was held in Tehran. Ahmadinejad said, “They have been determined to further promote bilateral relations.” The two sides discussed about political cooperation on the regional and international scenes as well as fighting against organized crime, terrorism, narcotics and extremism. Tajik president said, “His visit to Tehran is taking place to prepare the groundwork for boosting bilateral cooperation, which would be in line with the interests of the two countries”. Both the leaders pledged to cooperate in the fields of transportation, energy, joint venture and culture. During this meeting, the energy ministers of Iran and Tajikistan inked an agreement on the establishment of a joint venture (Xinhua News Agency 2008).

In another incident, both the leaders decided to emphasis science and culture. Tajik president Rahmonov and Iranian counterpart foreign minister Najafdari held discussion about this cooperation, which was resulted in the signing of 96 documents between the two countries’ universities and research and training centers (Farnews 2008).

This contact would facilitate the revival of cultural affiliation between the two countries in future. Both the countries have cooperated with each other in the spheres of trade and energy. Tajikistan has a high potential for producing hydroelectricity, which is an important factor for Iran, Tajikistan relations. During a visit to Tehran on January 16-17 2006, Tajik president Emomali Rakhmonov sought to reach a bilateral agreement for joint Tajik-Iranian construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydropower plant (Marat 2006).

Iran’s relation with Uzbekistan is quite important, because of latter's strategic relationship with the US. On December 25, 1991, the Islamic Republic of Iran has officially recognized the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan. On May 10, 1992, the diplomatic relations are established between the two countries. From November 1992, diplomatic mission of Iran started its activity in Tashkent and as a result, the embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Tehran opened in May, 1995.
On October 18, 1993, Intergovernmental commission on scientific and technical cooperation had been created to enhance the bilateral trade relations between Iran and Uzbekistan. As a result of the 8th session of the Intergovernmental commission on trade-economic, scientific and technical cooperation, the Protocol on the cooperation and promotion of their legal bases in the sphere of economy, trade and transport communications had been signed. As a result, commodity exchange between Uzbekistan and Iran had reached $584.1 million in 2007 (Turkish Weekly 31 July 2008).

Iran is Uzbekistan's closest access to International waters for exporting its goods. It serves as a transit corridor for Iranian trucks bound for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Iran has already upgraded its railway and port facilities in anticipation of becoming a transit corridor for the landlocked nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. As a result, the Mashhad-Bafq-Bandar Abbas Railway, completed with the assistance of Economic Cooperation Organization in 2004, which facilitated the transportation route by shortening the distance for exporting the Central Asian goods to the Persian Gulf by 500 miles (Eurasia Daily Monitor June 20, 2008).

Another fact is that Tehran and Iran have weekly direct flights. Additionally, Iran-Uzbekistan relations can be strengthened under the multilateral economic structure, ECO, whose objective is to establish a single unified market for goods and services. In this context, Iran has the leading role to reintegrate the Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan under the aegis of ECO.

After getting independence in 1991, Uzbekistan was cautious about Iran's potential religious influence. But, Tashkent started maintaining relation with Tehran. Uzbek President Islam Karimov paid official visits to Iran in 1993 and 2000. After the September 11 incident, Uzbekistan became very close to the US, which made this Central Asian republic to follow its policy towards Iran cautiously. In May 2003, Deputy Minister of Commerce and Iran Export Promotion Centre head Mojtaba Khosrotaj said during a
session of the fifth Iran-Uzbekistan Economic Commission in Tashkent that during the period from 1992-2002 the two countries signed more than 36 cooperation documents "which is a token of the two countries' official determination for closer ties" (Eurasia Daily Monitor June 20 2008).

Like, Iran, Uzbekistan also suffered international isolation after the May 2005 incident in Andijan. In October 2005, EU imposed an arms embargo on Uzbekistan and an entry ban on top Uzbek security officials. On the other hand, Uzbekistan started strengthening its relations with Iran. At a meeting of the eighth Iran-Uzbekistan Economic Commission in Tehran in 2007, Uzbek Deputy Prime Minister Nodir Khanov noted that in 2006 bilateral trade increased 42 per cent from its 2005 level, adding that 89 firms with Iranian investment now operated in Uzbekistan, three of which were owned by Iranians (ibid).

Iran-Uzbekistan bilateral cooperation in the spheres of energy and trade is quite important in the "new great game" phase. Because, the US was a strategic partner of Uzbekistan after the September 11, 2001 and Tashkent also supported the US war against Taliban forces in Afghanistan by providing its base for stationing of the allied forces. On the other hand, the US also imposed sanctions on Iran for harboring Islamic terrorism. In this context, the US never wanted the growing role of Iran in Central Asia. But, as a regional power along with traditional ties with this region, Iran's influence would not be diminished in Central Asia's geopolitics. After the Andijan incident, both Iran and Uzbekistan strengthened their relations and Uzbekistan openly criticized the US mode of engagement in the vast space of former Soviet Union through the process of democratization, which was resulted in "color revolution" in Central Asia and Caucasus. Thus, the role of Iran is growing in this region, despite the presence of the US.

In 1992, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev went to Iran on an official visit and Iranian President A. Hashemi Rafsanjani of Iran returned the visit. During these visits, a number of treaties were signed by the two governments, which laid the ground
for the development of cooperation between the two republics. As a result, more than 40 documents regarding bilateral relations in the trade and economic, industrial, scientific and technical, transport, transit and customs have already been drafted and signed (Auelbayev 2004).

In November 1992, following a summit meeting in Tehran, an agreement on Kazakh oil supplies on a swap basis was signed. However, this contract was finalized in February 2002 and the first tanker of the national shipping company KazMorTransFlot with oil for Tehran and North Iranian oil refineries set out from the port of Aktau to the Iranian port of Neka. An equivalent volume of Iranian oil was also shipped to Kazakh importers to Khark Island, a port in the south of Iran. In 2003, Kazakhstan exported approximately 1 million tonnes of oil on a swap basis and in 2004, the volume was expected to be doubled (ibid).

Due to the cooperation between Iran and Kazakhstan, an oil loading rack was modernized in Aktau port and could make it possible to ship oil from the Kumkol oil fields. Additionally, a Tengiz-Uzen-Belek-Tehran-Qom-Isfahan-Khark pipeline project is under renovation, which has a length of 1,440 Kilometres, about 500 Kilometres of it running across Iranian territory. Another project is developed by Transneft and KazTransOil companies with an extension to the north of Iran. In this case, the Iranian section of the pipeline will be joined and accessed by Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (ibid).

At the same time, Kazakh-Iranian experience in oil swap operations is increasingly attracting a number of national and multinational companies. Additionally, Iran makes profit from oil swap operations, resulting from the difference in the price of oil bought in the north and that provided in the south, as well as from transit charges. Because, Iran's route to Kazakhstan is the shortest and therefore more profitable than the existing Russian or prospective Chinese routes (ibid).
While strengthening its relation with Iran, Kazakhstan has successfully diversified its energy supply routes in order to avoid monopoly of Russia or Chinese routes. As a littoral state of Caspian, it can formulate an independent energy policy for maximum profit in the oil diplomacy of Caspian Sea Basin. Iran has also formulated its pragmatic energy policy to create the pipelines, which would benefit other littoral states of this region due to the reasons of cost-effectiveness.

But, Kazakhstan’s growing relation with Iran is not free from challenge due to the cause of “American” factor. During the period of American war against Taliban forces in Afghanistan, Kazakhstan supported the stance of the US for the cause of threat from the Islamic terrorism. But, Washington’s sanction against Iran as a “rogue state” created a question mark on Kazakhstan’s policy towards Iran. Despite the US presence in Central Asia, Kazakhstan never neglected Iran as a trade partner.

On April 24 2002, the two countries signed a Protocol of Commission for Commercial and Technical and Cultural Cooperation and declaration of friendly relations. On this occasion, President Nazarbayev praised the Iran-Kazakh cooperation for the building of trade routes to flourish the bilateral trade between the two republics (Alibekov 2002).

The strengthening of bilateral relations between Iran and Kazakhstan is the result of pragmatic foreign policies of both the countries despite the adverse situation due to presence of China and the US in the Central Asian region. Kazakhstan has successfully followed its multi-vector foreign policy to maintain cordial relations with all the external actors, those who are present in this region. On the other hand, all these external actors have stakes in the natural resources of Kazakhstan. In this context, Kazakhstan can maintain trade relations with these powers, despite its relation with Tehran. Additionally, Iran’s influence in this region will grow in the future.
Like other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan has also maintained good relations with Iran in the spheres of trade and security. It is also a member of Economic Cooperation Organization, in which Iran is also a founding member. Kyrgyzstan is also a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in which Iran has got the observer status. Iran has successfully maintained trade relations with Kyrgyzstan.

In April 2002, Iran and Kyrgyzstan signed five MoUs in the fields of economy, policy, culture and the anti-drug campaign during Iranian President Mohammad Khatami’s visit to Kyrgyzstan. In 2003, Iran and Kyrgyzstan signed five memorandums of Understanding during an official visit to Tehran by Kyrgyz Prime Minister Nikolai Tanayev. The MoUs provide for broadening of cooperation in trade, economy, judicial affairs and telecommunications. Iran-Kyrgyzstan trade exchanges reached US $40 million in 2002 from US $13 million in 1998. Both the countries pledged to develop trade and economic cooperation between state-owned and private businesses, which was expected to boost bilateral trade from US $40 million to US $200 million annually (Mehr News June 28 2003).

In the sphere of cultural relation, both the countries have shown keenness. In 2005, both the sides started focusing on the agreements regarding cultural cooperation between Iran and Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, both the sides pledged to broaden academic cooperation, exchange cultural delegations, arrange book fairs, etc.

Iran’s engagement in Central Asian in bilateral and multilateral levels shows that it is an important power in this region, which has the potential of hydrocarbon resources along with proper infrastructure can provide opportunities to these newly independent states to fulfill their economic needs. Its transportation routes are cost-effective and shorter so that these states can flourish their trades with Iran, while maintaining their relations with Russia, China and India.
In the "new great game" phase, these regional powers have prominent roles, because of their strategic relations with Central Asian republics. The powers like Turkey has always served the interests of America since the period of Cold War, whereas, Russia and Iran have bitter relations with US in matter of nuclear proliferation. India and China have maintained strategic relations with both the adversaries. Thus, it is pertinent to analyze their role in great rivalry.