This study “Russia-US Rivalry in Central Asia, 1991-2005” has focused on the competition over the abundant natural resources of Central Asia. Here, geopolitical factor is playing a major role in this competition. In this context, the present rivalry can be regarded as “new great game”, where many powers such as China, Iran, India, Turkey, etc. are involved along with these two major powers. Unlike, the old “great game” phase, several non-state actors such as multinational energy companies are also competing for extracting economic benefits. Thus, this study has analyzed the theoretical aspects of classical and modern geopolitics, which have relevance in this phase, where energy is an important factor.

Apart from energy issue, the policies of these two adversaries are influenced by regional security issues of Central Asia. Russia is no longer a powerful state in this region to deal with these issues due to its own economic and military limitations. Moscow is not in a position to avoid the influence of other regional and external powers in its ‘near abroad’. Thus, it supported US presence in Central Asia for combating terrorism. It has also supported China under the aegis of SCO for dealing with extremism, separatism and fundamentalism. In this context, all these powers have convergence of interests on the issue of terrorism. In this context, Russia can establish its foothold in Central Asia, because of its historical, traditional, cultural, and economic and security ties with this region. Russian language is still regarded as a major language in these republics.

On the other hand, America’s policy towards Central Asia confronts the interests of Russia, Iran and China. In this regard, Washington provided economic aid through International Monetary Fund, World Bank, USAID, etc to achieve its objectives such as the promotion of market economy and democracy in this region. In order to establish control over the vast hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia, America has promoted its private companies in Central Asia and Caspian region. Its Central Asian policy has aimed at diminishing the influence of Russia in the vast post Soviet space.
It has involved NATO in the security issues of Central Asia after September 11, 2001. All the Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace Programme to contain Islamic radicalism, organized crimes and smuggling of small arms, etc. Even, Russia is also a signatory of this programme. It was the interest of US to make this region free from any type of external and internal threats for safeguarding its geopolitical interests. In the sphere of energy transportation of Central Asia and Caspian, it has promoted its pipelines for avoiding Russia and Iran. The US presence in Central Asia compelled Moscow to reassert in its traditional sphere of influence. It started maintaining its relations with Central Asian republics in the spheres of economy, trade and security.

At multilateral level, Russia started focusing on restructuring of CSTO in matter of resolving the regional security problems such as narcotic trade, separatism, terrorism, organized crimes, etc. and anti-terrorist structure was also created. Furthermore, CSTO also showed its interest in cooperating with NATO to fight against Taliban forces in Afghanistan. It is the strategy of Moscow to check Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia with the support of NATO and US. Despite its cooperation with America, Russia has aligned with China under the umbrella of SCO to regain its influence in this region. Russia and China are cooperating with each other through SCO to contain the growing influence of US in Central Asia. SCO can be regarded as a platform for the Central Asian republics to resolve their security problems. Now, the responsibility of SCO has been expanded from resolving the border disputes to the area of energy security. Here, it is quite important to mention that SCO has started conducting its military exercises in the Eurasian region to contain the influence of America. It has given observer status to India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia, which indicates its growing influence in “new great game”. Thus, Russia has successfully maintained its strategic relations with Central Asian republics at both bilateral and multilateral levels on the advantage of US in its ‘near abroad’. In this context, Russia can be considered as a Eurasian power, which is dealing with Euro Atlantic power: America in Eurasian region. The formation of another multilateral economic organization such as Eurasian Economic Community, which includes the Central Asian republics and Russia, is an example of relevance of Eurasian idea in Central Asian geopolitics.
As a Eurasian power, Russia has always maintained its relations with China in the great rivalry. Despite the strategic relations with Russia, China can be considered as a competitor of the former in Central Asia, because China has successfully maintained its relations with all the newly independent states of Central Asian republics. China's policy towards Central Asia has emphasized energy security. All these republics have maintained their cordial relations with China for getting economic benefits from energy transportation. Thus, Beijing can be regarded as both partner and competitor of Russia and America in Central Asian geopolitics. China's growing role in Central Asian region can be regarded as a threat to both the adversaries.

In the area of Caspian diplomacy, Russia followed pragmatic approach towards other littoral states for resolving the inter-state conflicts over the issue of legal status of Caspian Sea Basin (CSB). Under his leadership, Russia could revive its trade relations with other littoral states. Russia could realize that the conflicts with external actors such as US and China would affect the environment of CSB. Thus, Russia promoted its energy companies to involve in global competition over Caspian hydrocarbon resources due to Putin's initiative. In this context, Russia’s Caspian policy is an amalgam of political, economic and security interests of Russia, which has relied on peaceful competition with the West. The main aim of Russia has to avoid conflict between these states over the Caspian resources. Russia has not opposed any alternative export routes, constructed by America and China, because of its economic limitations to check the influences of these external powers in this region. Russian President expressed his concern for economic and environment of CSB. On Caspian legal status issue, he emphasized Russia’s policy on the regional level through settling territorial disputes among littoral states. Additionally, Russia stressed on bilateral sphere to achieve this goal. Though, the legal status dispute has not been solved, there is not any possibility of future conflicts between littoral states.

In this competition, the other regional powers such as India, Iran, Turkey etc, have important roles. India has shared its common concern with Russia and China on the issue of terrorism. Russia, China and India have aspired for a multipolar world order. In the future, the triangular relations can play a very constructive role in Eurasian region. India
has been maintaining its relations with Central Asian republics since their independence in 1991. New Delhi has common concern over the issue of terrorism with these republics. Thus, Russia, India and China’s strategic relations are quite important to resolve the regional security problems in South and Central Asian regions. Here, history, society, culture, tradition, religion, economy and energy can be regarded as important factors in their cordial relationships. For India, Central Asia is an important region for security and trade. India has been trying to play its part in this region, where geopolitical and geostrategic factors are very important. India has invested in tourism, food processing, basic science, pharmaceuticals, Information and Technology and energy sectors of Central Asia. India needs hydrocarbon resources of this region to satisfy its energy requirement. In this context, the international North-South transport corridor can be regarded as a means for improving trade relations among Iran, Russia, India and Central Asia. This corridor has the potential to revive the old Silk Route.

Likewise, Iran-Central Asia relations are quite important in “new great game” phase. Iran has cordial relations with Russia and Central Asia in the areas of economy and energy security. It has successfully maintained its relations with all these republics in bilateral sphere. Central Asian republics have also maintained their relations with Tehran. Despite the Iran-US conflict, Central Asian republics have maintained cordial relations with Iran. Tehran can be considered as a corridor for transporting the hydrocarbon resources to the world market. Thus, Iran is an important regional power in Central Asia, which can maintain its foothold in future. On the other hand, America never wants the growing influence of Iran in this region. Further, Russia-Iran nuclear cooperation is a matter of grave concern for Washington to maintain its status quo in a unipolar world. It wants to diminish the influence of Iran, but Russia’s repeated objections to US policy towards Iran indicate the future conflict between Russia and US. Like Iran, Turkey has maintained its relations with Central Asia in the spheres of economy and trade. As an ally of NATO, it has always served the interests of US in matters of promoting market economy and providing alternative transport routes bypassing Russia and Iran. In this regard, Washington is using the Turkey card in the Caspian oil diplomacy. The BTC pipeline is regarded as a measure of US strategy against Russia and Iran. This pipeline has provided an option for the energy rich states of Caspian region for diversifying their trade routes to the western market. It has
given them the opportunity to avoid the growing influence Russia and Iran and act as independent players in Caspian geopolitics. Turkey’s role in “new great game” is quite important because of its geostrategic location in Eurasia. It can be considered as a connection between East and West. Turkey can connect Central Asian republics with the European region, which would benefit them economically.

In this competition among the external and regional actors in Central Asian geopolitics, the Central Asian republics are playing important roles. They have started taking their own decisions to get maximum benefit from this power rivalry. In the sphere of security issues, they have cooperated with Russia, China and US for resolving their regional security problems. They have participated in the NATO’s PfP program along with SCO’s military exercises. They have got US aid for maintaining regional stability. The Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan also provided their bases for the use of allied forces during US war against the Taliban forces in Afghanistan. These instances compelled Moscow to strengthen its strategic ties with these states. Russia also deployed its forces in Kant airbase near to the Manas airbase, where US allied forces were deployed. It was a clear instance of great rivalry in Central Asia. In this situation, both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan successfully maintained their relations with both the adversaries. But, the situation was changed, when the color revolutions started in Central Asia and Caucasus. These color revolutions were supported by the US to change the regimes in these regions in the name of spreading democracy. As a result, Uzbekistan gave time limit to US for withdrawing its forces from the Karshi-Khanabad base and finally this base was closed. This move of Tashkent was supported by Russia and China. Uzbekistan came closer to Russia and China. Additionally, the future of Kant base (Kyrgyzstan) is uncertain, because of the issue of military aid for the maintenance of this base. Kyrgyzstan is demanding more economic aid for the maintenance.

In the sphere of trade, the importance of littoral states of Caspian region has been increased. Kazakhstan has successfully maintained its relations with Russia, China, US, Iran and India in the area of trade, because of its huge potential of hydrocarbon resources. It has participated in oil swap deals with Iran for transporting its oil resources to the world market.
It has also become the part of “gas alliance” to get the economic benefits from this deal. Like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan has also signed a number of deals with these powers for transporting its gas resources to the world market, because it is a state with huge potential of natural gas resources. On the issue of legal status of CSB, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have raised their concerns regarding the division of Caspian Sea basin, so that, they can extract maximum benefits. In this regard, they have successfully bargained with the old littoral states: Iran and Russia for settling the disputes over the division. As a result, Russia as the powerful regional power has been compelled to maintain cordial relations.

In the area of security issues, the regional security problems could not have been resolved without the support of the states of Central Asia. They have cooperated with Russia and China under the banner of SCO and this multilateral security structure has turned into a powerful regional security organization to thwart the US influence. In the CSTO, the member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have cooperated Russia to challenge the regional security problems such as narcotic trade, Islamic fundamentalism, organized crimes, etc. In this context, both CSTO and SCO have decided to cooperate with each other for resolving the security issues, because of commonality of agenda. In both these organizations, majority of member-states are Central Asian republics. Thus, the cooperation between these organizations is quite important for future course of action for resolving regional security problems.

The Central Asian republics have maintained balanced approach towards all these external and regional actors in new great game phase in order to extract maximum benefits. In this regard, cooperation among Russia, China, India and Iran needs to be strengthened for the betterment of Central Asian states in the spheres of trade and economy. In the area of security issues, the security cooperation between India and Central Asia must be required to contain the radical Islamic groups. In this context, these republics have always shown their eagerness for cooperation, because, they all are victims of terrorism. In this regard, the role of India and Russia is quite important for tackling this problem. Both the countries have to cooperate with each other along with China and
Central Asian republics to resolve this problem. In this regard, the SCO can be regarded as a vehicle for achieving this goal in multilateral sphere.

Russia, China and America have convergence of interests in Central Asia in the sphere of energy security. These states have stakes in the abundant resources of Central Asia and Caspian region. All these states have maintained strategic relations with Central Asian republics in bilateral sphere. In the multilateral level, all these above powers have engaged with these newly independent states. On the other hand, Russia, China and America have engaged with each other in the bilateral sphere. China is America's largest trading partner. Russia has maintained its strategic relations with Washington on the issue of terrorism. But, the recent conflict between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia region has turned Russo-American relations bitter. In this context, China’s Georgia policy contravenes Russia’s policy towards Georgia in this rivalry.

In this “new great game” phase, the multilateral regional security structures such as SCO and NATO have to cooperate with each other for resolving the regional security problems, mainly inter-state conflicts in Central Asia and Caucasus. But, the competition between US-Russia has created obstacle in this cooperation. US strategy to reform the Central Asian and Caucasian states has the adverse effect on the Russia-US and US-Central Asia relations. For Central Asian republics, America is an external actor in Eurasian region. As a country along with economic and military might, Washington can help these states to overcome the economic and military limitations. America does not have historical, cultural ties with Central Asia and does not have proper knowledge about the security situation of this region as Russia has. Thus, America has to take the assistance of Russia in combating terrorism. Thus, Central Asian region has become a ground for power rivalry between Russia and US after the disintegration of Soviet Union. This competition has brought these newly independent states of Central Asia into global attention. They have got the economic and military assistance for dealing with regional security problems. But, problems such as poverty, rampant corruption, unemployment, illiteracy, repressive policies of governments, etc. have aggravated regional security problems. In order to resolve the regional security problems, the
Central Asian leaders have to take effective measures for eradicating these problems through democratization and development. They have to create job opportunities for satisfying the needs of unemployed youths. They have to reform the economies, which can benefit the masses. Corruption has to be checked and education has to be emphasized in these states for securing the aspirations of youth, those who are vulnerable to radical Islam and organized crimes.