CHAPTER – IV

CENTRAL ASIA: IN THE WEB OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW PARTNERS

From among the ruins of the old Soviet empire in Central Asia, following the sudden and dramatic collapse of communism, there sprang up, almost overnight, five entirely new countries. The five countries did not know how they would cope with the new external and internal situation. The hypothesis that a geopolitical vacuum was created and a host of new issues like the problem of defining their nationhood to dealing with the economic challenges and ecological crisis, democratization and human rights, ethno-nationalism and religious revivalism, trans-national crimes and weapon proliferation, territorial integrity and security issues emerged, is however, untenable it appeared as if a new ‘great game’ like that of the early 19th century had emerged, in which various countries would compete among themselves for influence in the region. The vulnerability of the new states and the general impression that Russia was not interested in carrying the excess baggage of these countries further strengthened this view. New dimension has been added to this ‘great game’ hypothesis in the form of discovery of vast oil and natural gas reserves in the region. Being a landlocked region further complicates the problem of these countries.

To consolidate their independence and make themselves secure in the international environment, the Central Asian states initially assigned to themselves the task for searching new international partners. These partners could be from the Western, Islamic or the Asian World. They would not only supply the reconstruction of these countries but would also help them to escape from the Russian political, economic and military hegemony. During the early stages of this process there was a certain euphoria among the Central Asian countries.³

As such many countries like Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, China, United States of America apart from Russia have shown their interest in this region. With the passage of time the clear picture of the developments in the Central Asian countries has emerged. The possibilities of involvement of these countries is extremely limited. Central Asia is much more complex than it was initially expected. Various countries have lost their influence due to various reasons, for example countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia lost much of their initial advantage because of their link with fundamental groups came under severe scrutiny of the respective states. Similarly, Iran initially promoted its brand of Islamic radicalism in the Central Asian countries. It flamed strife and civil war tendencies among the ethnic population. This development worried Russia as it threatened even Russia’s security. It intervened and ended the civil war.

The general tendency in the region is for regional co-operation and regional integration. The developments from mid-1990's till recent time (September 11, 2001) has further strengthened this tendency. On the one hand the countries are co-operating among themselves in various fields like strategic, economic, environmental and on the other hand Russia is seeking closer integration with Central Asia in anticipation of its long term security and geostrategic interests. Russia is also taking active interest to promote closer integration between some of the member states. Russia’s interest in Central Asian integration is because of some recent developments in the region, like North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) expansion making Russia’s western border vulnerable;\(^4\) destabilising forces of religious fundamentalism and terrorism; the emergence and fall of Taliban in Afghanistan and its associated issues like establishment of American military bases in some countries in Central Asia; the interest of America and other countries in this region because of its vast oil reserves.

The international politics in the region can be understood in three phases: first neighbouring countries and extra regional countries made attempts to influence Central Asia; second, the efforts of these countries did not yield the desired result; and third, the Central Asian states aided by Russia make attempt among themselves for regional integration.

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SEARCH FOR NEW PARTNERS

In the search for new partners with the outside world the options of the Central Asian countries were open. On the one hand, there were natural partners in the Islamic and Asian world, and on the other there were the wealthy states of the West. The western countries were capable of providing high levels of capital investment required for the regeneration of the region.

In the search for new partners, the primary concern was economic. This was because by restructuring the economies, the standards of living of the people would be improved and this would stave off the potential political threats. In the pursuit of this goal, the Central Asian political elites were unwilling to be tied with natural allies like Iran and Turkey. Relations with Israel was improved even if it meant straining in relations with some countries in the Muslim world.5

Some observers have compared the international politics of Central Asia of the early 1990’s with the ‘Great Game’ of the nineteenth century.

In the search for new allies, the Central Asian countries aim to bolster their independence rather than create a new dependency.

Islamic World and Ethnicity Factors

In the initial years, the Central Asian countries were looking to the neighbouring states having historical, cultural, religious and ethnic affinity with them so that they could break free from total dependence on Russia. These

states in turn hoped to take advantage of the geopolitical vacuum and spread its influence in the region. These countries include Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Islam being the common denominator among these two, the Muslim state were considered to be the natural partners of Central Asia.6

Turkey:

The emergence of independent states in Central Asia after the disintegration of the USSR gave Turkey a golden opportunity to influence these countries in political, economic and other issues. When President Gorbachev of USSR launched his radical and far reaching reforms in 1985, none expected that the political conditions in Central Asia would change so drastically so as to enable Turkey to emerge as a potential key player in the region. Within 6-7 years of Gorbachev’s historic far reaching policies the USSR disintegrated and Turkey found itself in a new set of circumstances that gave it an opportunity to reassert its importance for the West in the Post-Cold War era.

Turkey’s potential as an important player in Central Asia stemmed mainly from the common ethnic, linguistic and religious ties between the Turks in Turkey and nearly 50 million Turkic people who lived in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and constituted 85 per cent of former Soviet Union’s Muslim Population.7

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The main Turkic groups in Central Asia-Uzbeks & Kazakhs, Tartars, Azeri, Turkomans, Kyrgyz, Chivash, Bashkirs, Karakalpak, Kuryks, Uighurs, Karachins, Balkans and Nogais—speak various dialects of the Turkish language with varying degrees of similarity to the Turkish spoken in Turkey. The Turkic peoples, like Turkey’s population, are predominantly Sunni, and nearly all follow the Hanafi School of Islam. As such, Turkey became the first country to send Islamic clergy to these republics.

Despite the similarities in ethnic, linguistic and cultural characteristics, there have been very little contact between the Turkeys in Turkey, and their ethnic kinsmen in Central Asia in the past 7-8 decades. This was basically due to the policies adopted by Moscow and Ankara following the establishment of the Soviet Union and Turkish republic in 1917 and 1923 respectively. After the artificial division of historic Turkistan into separate republics in 1924, the Soviet leadership employed a variety of administrative, educational and cultural policies to prevent the development of a broad based Turkic ethnic identity in Central Asia. Moscow’s exaggerated fear of Pan-Turkism—the ideology that aspired to the establishment of a common homeland of all the Turks played an important role in its divide and rule tactics towards the Turkistan peoples and in its endeavor to minimize contacts between Turkey and the Turkistan Muslim republics.

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The contact between the Turks in Turkey and elsewhere in the Soviet Union also remained limited because the policies of the newly founded Turkistan republic in 1923. Kemal Attaturk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, defined the Turkish national identity only with reference to the Turks living within the national boundaries. The Turks living outside Turkey were not given much emphasis so that possible irredentist activities could be checked. Turkey has followed a foreign policy based on Kemal Ataturk simple yet powerful principles of "peace at home, peace in the world".12

The Cold war and the rise of the Soviet military power reinforced this policy till the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, with the exception of the extremist nationalist organizations and emigre groups from Central Asia, the Turks displayed little interest in developing close contacts with the Soviet Union's Turkic peoples.13

However, the collapse of Soviet Union marked a major shift in Turkey's policy towards the former Soviet muslim republics. It now began to establish contacts with the Turkish republics. Thus, for example when he went to Moscow in March 1991 to sign a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation with Gorbachev, Turkish President Turget Ozal visited Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.14

In a very short span of time, these contacts increased considerably. There were many diplomatic visits by leaders accompanied by signing of economic, commercial and cultural agreements between Turkey and the five Turkic republics.

By the end of 1991, the Turkish government had voted to recognize all the former Soviet republics that had declared their independence. When official diplomatic ties between Ankara and the newly independent republics was established, political and economic contacts received additional momentum. Between late 1991 and early 1992 the leaders of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan visited Turkey, and the high ranking Turkish delegations traveled to the capitals of Central Asian republics. These initial diplomatic interactions between the leaders of Turkey and the Turkic states were marked by emotional speeches and declarations attesting to the strength of ethnic and cultural ties among all Turks. The leaders of the Turkic republics emphasized that Turkey could assume the leadership role in the Turkic world and simultaneously serve as a role model for the former Soviet Muslim republics. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan told Turkish newspapers that “we want to implement a free market economy. The only model we have is Turkey”. Similarly President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan remarked “I announce to the world that my country will go forward by the Turkish route. We have chosen and will not turn back”.

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16 The Times of India, New Delhi, 22 December, 1992.
17 Ibid.
The Turkish officials reciprocated by declaring their willingness to assist the social and economic development of Central Asia. Even the people in Turkey were enthused by the establishment of political, economic and cultural relations between Turkey and the newly independent Turkic republics.

Both, the newly independent Soviet republics with Turkic population and Turkey were interested in constructive engagement with each other. This was basically because of commonly shared ethnic, linguistic and cultural characteristics of the Turks in Turkey and the Turkic people in the newly independent republics. The leaders of the Turkic republics sought Turkey’s support in their efforts to become integrated into the international political and economic system in the hope that through Ankara’s close ties with Washington it could receive the backing of America and the West for their entry into the international political and financial organization’s. It underlines Turkey’s status as the geopolitical centre of the reestablished world. 18

Uncomfortable with the possibility of an Islamic resurgence in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, the secular elites in the Turkic republics were attracted to Turkey’s secular state institutions and policies. 19

The Central Asian leaders were also impressed by Turkey’s market-oriented economic policies and expected to receive technical know-how, managerial expertise and financial aid from Ankara. Pragmatic policy objectives ensured change in stance of Turkey towards Central Asia. The Turkish policy makers welcomed the expansion of political, economic and

cultural relations with the Turkic republics because they believed that the emergence of the Turkic world and Turkey’s close ties with the new republics would enhance Turkey’s regional power and influence.\textsuperscript{20} At the same time, close relations with Central Asian states would prevent Iran from emerging as a dominant force in the region.\textsuperscript{21} It would also bring regional stability. The leaders in Turkey viewed its economic and business opportunities with Central Asia with great optimism. They anticipated that the Turkey’s export-oriented economic growth strategy would benefit extensively from Turkey’s regional ties and influence. Western policies also supported Turkey to become a key player in the region and if possible to become a role model for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. America’s interest in promoting ‘Turkish model’ for the new republics was based on its fear that Islamic fundamentalism propagated by Iran would make inroads into Central Asia at a time when there was growing interest in Islam in the Turkic republics and Tajikistan.\textsuperscript{22} The USA and the European countries favoured the ‘Turkistan model’ to the “Iranian model” because of its pro-western orientation in world politics, secular state institutions, democratic political process and market-based economic policies. To make this a reality, it has also played on regional rivalries. It has pursued better relations with Uzbekistan despite its

\textsuperscript{21} Comments of Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, reported in \textit{The Independent}, 3 March, 1992.
\textsuperscript{22} Frederick, S. Starr, “Making Eurasia Stable”, \textit{Foreign Affairs} January-February, 1996, p.92.
poor human rights record. The result was that Uzbekistan reciprocated positively in helping the US in Operation Enduring Freedom.

Turkey’s policies towards the new Turkic republics has gradually evolved and has now achieved a definite shape. The sudden emergence of the Central Asian states as independent countries created many new problems for them like national identity, political stability and economic recovery. Regional states like Turkey was unprepared to deal with the rise of these independent republics because it lacked the expertise and knowledge in the political economic and social conditions of these countries.

But, as Turkey’s ties with the new republics increased during early 1990’s the Turkish government and the people have developed a better understanding of Central Asia.

Turkey has launched a number of policy initiatives to expand its political, economic and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics. It provided the newly independent republics with considerable diplomatic support in their search of membership in Western economic and political institutions. Ankara’s active diplomacy on behalf of the new republics and its close relations with Washington played a significant role in their successful bid for entry into the Conference on Security and Cooperation Europe (CSCE), the North Atlantic Co-ordination Council (NACC), the World Bank and the

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International Monetary Fund (IMF). Turkey support for the participation of the Turkic republics in these international and regional organizations was based on the strategy to end their isolation from the West and to facilitate economic recovery and political stability in Central Asia.

Ankara’s programmes regarding economic and technical aid to the Turkic republics have been largely planned and implemented by a newly established Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TICA), which is loosely based on the model of the US Agency for International Development. Many training programmes were organized with the cooperation of the TICA that proved to be beneficial to the Central Asian Countries. In 1992, Turkey granted the five Turkic republics about $1 billion in aid which was mostly allocated to loans, credits and investment guarantees out of which some was earmarked for technical aid and supplies.

In addition to loans and investment credits, the Turkish government signed a number of agreements with Turkic republics regarding large-scale projects in transport and communications, such as commercial airlines routes between Central Asia and Turkey through the Turkish airlines and international telephone links for the Turkic republics. As a participant in the newly founded Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO)- whose members include Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan-
Turkey has been actively involved in a number of schemes designed to promote economic development of the region through intergovernmental cooperation.

Despite this activism, Turkey has not so far succeeded in achieving one of its most profitable commercial objectives, namely to play a leading role in the exploration and transport of oil and natural gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Turkey's concerns have been mainly limited to the transportation of the Caspian oil to the foreign markets. 28

The Turkish backed projects for the export of Central Asian petroleum through pipelines that would reach the Turkish terminals on the Mediterranean has not materialized for various reasons like opposition from Russia and Iran, the problem of providing security for the pipelines in the Caucasus and Eastern Turkey etc. The disturbances in the Caucasus region (Georgia) has made the pipelines there vulnerable. As such the Central Asian countries are keen to enlist the support of Turkey to protect their pipelines. 29

Turkey is also interested in Central Asian Countries because of regional security issues. 30 Turkey is apprehensive about the violent conflicts and instability near its southern and western border in the conditions of the new international disorder that has replaced the relatively stable and predictable condition of the Cold War. Currently, Turkey faces many crisis situation close

30 Turkish Daily News, 17 April, 1998.
to its borders. In the south, it is confronted with an unstable situation in Iraq, where although Saddam Hussein has been deposed stability has not arrived at. The Kurds are always in a rebellious mood. Turkey’s association with North Atlantic Treaty Organization is also a concern for Moscow.31

The disintegration of former Yugoslavian state and the rise of aggressive Serbian nationalism have seriously undermined stability near Turkey’s western boundaries with the Balkans. There has been cultural relations between Turkey and the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina from historical periods. Even today there are nearly two million Bosnian immigrants in Turkey. The Turkish public has become incensed by the ‘ethnic cleansing’ policy of the Serbs and they even pressurized the government to play an active role in support of the besieged Bosnian Muslims. If Serbias aggressive nationalism in the Balkans is unchecked, it has the potential to involve other regional states like Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey in an armed confrontation.

The intensification of ethnic conflicts in close proximity to Turkey has encouraged the Kurdish minority to use violent method in their attempt to get political autonomy from Turkey.

Bloody ethnic clashes between the Armenians and Azeri has errupted over the Nogorno Karabagh disputes. The fact that Turkey shares a common border with both Armenia and Azerbaijan and is in close proximity to Nogorno Karabagh has caused fear that this conflict may spill over in Turkey. Turkey has contrasting relations with the two disputants — while it shares close

historical, linguistic and cultural ties with Azerbaijan, its relations with Armenia is characterized by hostility and enemity since the final day of the Ottoman Empire. As such, there has been overwhelming public support for the Azeri since the beginning of the conflict.

In addition to these, there have also been ethnic strife in the Caucasus. The Abkhazia issue involving the Turkic-Muslim minority is one such issue. Turkey is apprehensive of getting involved in such issues as it fears that ethnic conflicts in that region might prompt migration of some of these communities to Turkey.

Turkey's stand in the various ethnic issues in the region reflects that it is attempting to expand its role as a regional leader. There are some concerning issues for Turkey to be a regional power. Turkey’s new perspectives on regional security and its efforts to expand its role in the Central Asia have increased the likelihood of tensions with two other regional powers i.e. Russia and Iran. Moscow is uncomfortable with Ankara’s new activist foreign policy because it fears that Turkey’s regional influence after a long period of Turkish quiescence in the region may create a strong wave of Pan-Turkism.

It directly challenges the Russian supremacy in the region. Turkey’s relations with Iran have also been strained as a result of changing political map of Central Asia. Each state views the other’s effort to gain political and economic influence in Central Asia with considerable distrust.32

The competition between Tehran and Iran involves ideological elements—often expressed in terms of a dichotomy between the ‘Turkish model’ and the ‘fundamentalist Islam’—as well as pragmatic economic and commercial interests,\(^{33}\) whose economic and political system they consider are better suited to their goals.\(^{34}\)

There are many people in the political and cultural elite in these newly independent countries who favour the Turkish model. There are however many opponents also.

There are other difficulties that Turkey faces in its desire to become the regional leader. Turkey is not physically contiguous with the region. As such Turkey cannot provide the Central Asian countries access to sea. In this respect Iran has advantage over Turkey. There are also problems in the language. There are differences in the Turkish spoken in Turkey and its various dialects that are spoken in the various Central Asian republics. There are situations where the officials and businessmen have had to use translators.

The 1990’s have been critical in shaping Turkey’s relations with Central Asia. The coming few years will further indicate to what extent and in which areas engagements between these countries shall take place. During this period the Turkish leaders are likely to continue their efforts to create new networks with these Turkic republics in economic, political and cultural spheres. At present it seems that a political pan-Turkistan is not a viable alternative for the

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future. Even then Ankara will probably continue to pursue policies to forge deeper cultural unity among the Turks.

Till now, Turkeys espousing of a Pan-Turkic common identity has not aroused enthusiasm among majority of Central Asians. Pan Turkic or Pan-Islamic ideology and movements are likely to arouse Russian and Chinese resentment as well.\(^{35}\) As much as 90 per cent of Turkey’s trade with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is with Russia: Turkey would not like to arouse the resentment of Russia as mentioned above. Turkey already has many hostile neighbours. Under these circumstances, it would not like to add Russia to its list of hostile neighbours.\(^{36}\) Turkey no longer represents Central Asia’s bridge to the west. As the Central Asian states are becoming surer of themselves and as events in the region unfold leading to greater Western engagement, the Turkish mediation has become less relevant.

**IRAN**

Right from the eighteenth century till the present times, Iran’s neighbour in the north has been a source of continuous security concern. In this period, Iran witnessed not only the ascendance of Russia as a major European power, culminating in its becoming a super power, but also saw the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990. Iran, being the weaker side, often played the classical game of power-balancing by relying on anti-Russian European states. Neither the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, nor the Islamic revolution of the 1979

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changed the nature of this asymmetry; both relations, in fact, complicated this power relationship by adding an ideological dimension to it. 37

The breakdown of the Soviet Union has brought a new phase in the relationship between the newly independent Central Asian countries and Iran. After a long time the situation has changed in favour of Iran and Iran now enjoys more power than its northern neighbours.

Iran’s policies towards the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia is largely determined by two sets of considerations. The first deals with security and political considerations while the second deals with cultural and economic considerations. As regards the security and political considerations, Iran has dealt with a volatile security environment from the north since 1991. Almost overnight, the number of its neighbours has increased from one to three on land and from one to four on the Caspian Sea, a situation experienced by no other country within the former Soviet Union. 38

Iran is closer to the trouble spots of the intense ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus than any other country. Seen in this continuum, the unstable and fluid political situation in the Central Asian States has brought the security dimension in Iran’s relationship with the newly independent Central Asian republic to the forefront. Various issues that are the source of instability in the

Central Asian countries are nation building, rapid social and economic transformation, ethnic diversity, decolonization, border disputes etc. This instability may invite foreign intervention in the region as well as an influx of new refugees into Iran, for which the country is by no means prepared.39

Iran is also concerned because of military issues. Questions regarding the borders of the new republics, future of CIS army are yet to be answered. Changing geopolitical situation after the end of Cold War in the world has also added new security issues for Iran. As the West searches for a new enemy after the Cold War, there has been much talk of Iran as a major threat to regional stability and the need for its containment.40

Iran’s policy towards the newly independent countries is also shaped by cultural and economic considerations. There are deep historical ties between Iran and Central Asia. For centuries, Central Asia, as a part of greater Khorasan, was one of the two pillars of the Islamic Civilizations, the other being Baghdad.41 Great Iranian philosophers like Farabi, Avicenna and Roudaki were born in the areas which are now part of Central Asia. Islam is a common cultural denominator between Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus. The latter region served as a training ground for many Iranian advocates of social democracy during the constitutional revolution of 1905-11.42

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Economic considerations also influence Iran's policy decisions towards Central Asia. These 5 countries are an important market for Iranian made consumer goods. Being landlocked republics, the Central Asian Countries look to Iran as a natural gateway to the seas. Iran's well developed oil industry can provide technical assistance to these republics.\textsuperscript{43}

Iran's policy with respect to the Central Asian countries is based on three pillars: the first is security in the Persian Gulf and cooperation with the northern neighbours.\textsuperscript{44} The second factor that shall determine Iran's policy is the changing domestic situation in these republics and the new international events. Thirdly, Iran gives Russia central importance in making its policy towards Central Asia. Iran is fully aware of Russia's actual and potential power in the CIS, and is careful not to pursue policies that could jeopardize its relationship with Moscow.\textsuperscript{45}

Iran, however has certain limitations because of which the Central Asian Countries do not look to Iran with complete confidence. Iran is not capable to undertake large scale investments in mega energy projects to meet the energy needs of Central Asia. Iran and Tehran are strong competitors on the basis of historical and cultural ties with Central Asia. Moreover they have different views on economic integration with Central Asia. Both Iran and Tehran are

\textsuperscript{43} Iran Business Monitor, September 1992.

\textsuperscript{44} Blauk Stephen, "Russia and Iran in the New Middle East", Mediterranean Quarterly, Vol. 3, No. 4, Fall 1992, pp-108-28.

suspicious of each others activities.\textsuperscript{46} Iran accuses Turkey of spreading its influence under the garb of “Pan-Turkism.” Turkey also views Tehran’s linkage with radical Islamic groups with suspicion. Turkey has formed the Black Sea Common market whereas Iran is promoting the Caspian Sea Council. Iran’s problems are compounded because it is isolated from the international community. United States and the non regional allies of Iran are hostile to it. Russia also gets perturbed by Iran’s moves to compete with Russia in the affairs related with Central Asia.\textsuperscript{47} Iran does so in spite of the fact that Russia is one of the main trading partners and military suppliers of Iran. Under these circumstances, it would be prudent on the part of Iran not to disturb such a relationship.

Another problem with Iran is that it has failed to formulate a long range foreign policy for Central Asia. It has so far limited itself to reacting to the world developments. If Iran formulates a pro-active foreign policy for the Central Asian countries, it will go a long way in shaping future Iranian policy in Central Asia.

PAKISTAN

Away from the West Asian and Arab states, Pakistan sees the disintegration of Soviet Union and the creation of five new independent states as a great opportunity to become a regional leader. In Pakistan’s perception, the Muslim region has expanded and thus has offered Pakistan a strategic depth


where it can widen its economic, geographic and cultural clout to its advantage. Most Pakistani observers consider it a historic opportunity for Pakistan and are enthusiastic over the prospects of building political and economic relationship with the newly emerged Central Asian states.⁴⁸

Pakistan has embarked upon a series of modest political, economic, communications and cultural moves towards the Central Asian states with far reaching consequences. Pakistan has skilled manpower, consumer and engineering goods, scientific and technical training through which it could help the landlocked Central Asian countries in moving towards market economies. It can also provide these countries with the shortest trade routs to the outside world. Pakistan could be benefited because it would get access to gas, oil and other mineral resources that are in scarcity in Pakistan. The long term contours of Pakistan's relationship with the Central Asian states is yet to emerge and will largely depend on the nature of the future regimes in the Central Asian states and Afghanistan and the political will of the leadership in these countries.

The present engagements between Pakistan and the Central Asian countries relate to various areas like political, economic, cultural etc.

Pakistan has from the beginning emphasized on the economic aspect of its relationship with the Central Asian states. While inaugurating the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) Foreign Ministers conference in Islamabad in November 1992 the common economic objectives that both the

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Central Asian Countries and Pakistan share were identified (i) to facilitate mutual trade and economic cooperation and to develop commercial and financial institutions (ii) to develop human resources and co-operation in science, technology and communication (iii) establishment of infrastructure of road, rail, and air links to support growing economic activity within the ECO, and (iv) to intensify interaction among the ECO people through cultural and media exchange.

There are a number of complementarities between the economies of the two regions. The Central Asian republics can supply oil, gas, electricity and minerals like copper, iron, chromium to Pakistan while Pakistan, in return, can supply textiles, cement, medicines, shoes, machinery and telecommunication equipment.

Pakistan provides good connectivity and communication accessibility of the Central Asian countries to the world. A very important advantage that Pakistan offers to the land-locked Central Asian states is that it provides the shortest access to the port facilities in Karachi. It has been calculated that from Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, Vladivostok on the Pacific Coast is about 6,000 miles, Rostov on Don on the Black Sea is about 2,600 miles. Abadan and Bandar Abbas on the Gulf is 2,000 miles while Karachi on the Arabian Sea is only about 1,700 miles. There are many land routes from Pakistan to Central Asia. Some of these routes have operated from the historic times. The shortest trade route is through the Karakoram highway from Rawalpindi and Gilgit through Khunjab pass and the Chinese town of Kashgar to the former
Kazakhstan capital of Alma Ata. There are other communication routes that pass through Afghanistan. One of these routes runs from Peshawar through Khyber pass into Jalalabad and Termez on the Oxus to Tajikistan. Another route runs from Quetta and Chaman through Khojak pass to Kandhar and Herat over the Oxus into Central Asia. Another possible route run from Chital across the Wakhan corridor consider into Tajikistan.

Although Pakistan is very keen to make the Central Asian countries a natural ally, it faces many hurdles in the process. One of the foremost constraints is that of resources. Pakistan does not have adequate financial resources to act as a bridge with the Central Asian states.49

Another serious limitation of Pakistan is the unsettled political condition in Afghanistan.50 Most of the communication routes planned by Pakistan run through Afghanistan. Until and unless normalcy returns to Afghanistan, Pakistan's vision of building effective relationship with the Central Asian states shall remain unrealized. Although the Taliban regime has ended, it shall take some time before peace and stability prevails in Afghanistan.

Another hindrance to the evolution of a stable relationship is that the Central Asian Countries have transitional regimes. In most of these Countries, the ruling class is still the Communist with change of names of the political parties. A mass politics is yet to emerge that could genuinely make the people aware of the happening in the country.

50 Dawn, 1 January 1993.
The presence of Iran, Turkey, Russia, Western power, India, Israel etc. presents the Central Asian countries with multiple choices. Turkey has made many agreements with these countries in education, trade, commence etc. Similarly, Iran is also building links with Central Asia, especially focusing on constructing mosques and providing religious education, besides economic and political relations.\(^5\) Russia still holds a strong influence on the Central Asian countries. It is concerned that these countries might move out of hand of Russia's traditional sphere of influence.

In short, the Islamic neighbours of Central Asia are unlikely to be major forces that will influence the future course of Central Asia's development. All these countries have limitations that impinge upon their capacity to sustain their goals in the region. Moreover these countries have competing goals. The Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) has not so far succeeded because of differences among major partners.\(^5\) Three of the major powers viz Iran, Turkey and Pakistan view the organization as a forum to promote their own interest in Central Asia rather than seek integration among the member states. Since the fall of Taliban the Central Asian states are sceptic about those countries that have the potential to export radical influences within their borders. As such the western powers and Russia strongly influence these countries.\(^5\)

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Among the Asian players, countries like Japan, South Korea or India seemed set to fill geopolitical vacuum in the region. But in practice it is China that look likely to play a key role in the region. China’s status as a major claimant in the region is because of various factors like geographical contiguity to the Central Asian countries, its powerful military strength and its thriving economy. Apart from this, there are certain common issues like border disputes, issue of ethnicity, religious revivalism etc. China’s policy towards Central Asia is shaped by the following considerations: peaceful co-existence, good neighbourliness; cooperation on a mutually advantageous basis; promoting general welfare and prosperity; mutual respect for independence; sovereignty and promotion of regional stability.

In the recent times China’s top priority has been to stabalise its north-western frontier and create a favourable external environment. China shares 3,500 kilometers border with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China also shares border problems with Russia apart from the three above mentioned countries. In 1996, a Summit of these five countries was held which focused to establish a tension-free relationship among themselves by settling the border issue.

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China is also concerned with separatism and religious extremism in the Xinjiang-Uighur region.\(^{56}\) This problem has made Russia to adopt a dual policy of engagement and containment with the Central Asian countries. In the Almaty Summit in 1998 the member countries pledged that they would reject all manifestations of national separatism and religious extremism. It was also decided that these states would ban all such separatist activities which operated from their territories.

From strategic point of view Central Asia acts as a buffer zone to China against the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). China also feels threatened in the east because of the Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) planned by the U.S.A. China thus fears a genuine threat.

The oil resource of the Central Asian Countries has also attracted China's attention. It is taking active interest in the oil exploration of Kazakhstan. China has signed a co operation agreement with Kazakhstan through which it has promised to invest over 9.5 billion dollars in Kazakhstan’s oil refining capability.

China has invested in Aktyubinsk and Uzen fields in Western Kazakhstan. Further in February 1998, the Chinese National Oil and Gas Corporation (CNOGC) paid $320 million to Kazakhstan Aktyubinsk oil and Gas company for 60 percent of its share.\(^{57}\)


China has signed a project with Kazakhstan through which it will build a 3,580 mile long gas pipeline costing 11 billion dollar that will run between Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China. In this project, companies from various countries like Japan, USA and China are participating. Through this project, gas from the right bank of Amu-Darya will be transported to the sea. The main partners of China in areas of oil and gas are Turkmenistan and Kazakhsthan. Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Ashkabad in July, 2000 and issued a joint statement with this Turkmen counterpart in his importance was given to strengthening mutually beneficial co operation in the energy field. The Central Asian countries realize that increasing cooperation with China will link their economy with the Asia-Pacific countries. These countries also realize that as their economy shall grow, Central Asia will become high in the priority of China.58

China also has military links with Kazakhstan’s military. China has provided an aid of 11 million yuan to the Kazakhstan military in April, 2000 when the Kazakhstan defence minister visited China in 2000. It is also seeking closer military ties with other Central Asian countries.

So far China has made a cautious and steady approach in building relations with the region. One of the concrete results of the Chinese diplomatic and economic engagement with the Central Asian countries is the formation of a new regional organization called the ‘Shanghai Five’. The original signatories

of this group were Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All of these countries share a common border with each other. The main aim of this regional organization was to reduce the border tensions among the constituent countries.

Since the formation of this organization, the geographical landscape of the region has undergone a sea change in security, political and economic issues. The first important change was the rise and fall of Taliban in Afghanistan. It threatened the security situation in the entire region. During this time, the separatist Islamic movement in Chechnya raised its ugly head once again. China also faced the separatist elements in the form of the Uighurs minorities in the Xinjiang province of China. The Uighurs, who are Muslim by faith enjoyed their own separate state during the Second World War. They have their own separatist organization in the Eastern Turkistan, Movement. Its supporters operate from various Central Asian republics.

The Shanghai Five produced encouraging results. Its success attracted the attention of other neighbouring countries. Uzbekistan joined this group in June 2001. It now developed into a full fledged regional organization with a new name “Shanghai Co-operation Organisation” (SCO). The scope of this organization has been included in the political, economic and security related issues. It now aims to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism and thus safeguard the national stability and security of the region.

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United States of America

The newly emerged countries of Central Asia pose a range of opportunities and challenges for the United States.

The interest of United States of America in Central Asia and the nature of relations that it intends to develop with these countries can be analyzed over two periods of time. The first period is from the time these countries became independent till September 11, 2001 and the second period is from September 11, 2001 onwards.

In 1990’s and till the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, a joint hegemony of Russia and China dominated the Central Asian countries. But the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent US “war against terrorism” has changed the equation. Gradually the United States has attained a foothold in the region and some of the Central Asian countries are using these events to their advantage.

The US policy till September 11, 2001 was based on a policy of broader engagement with the newly independent countries. The US immediately recognized the independence of all these countries and established diplomatic relations with each of the countries by March 2001. Initially USA did not appear interested in asserting its influence in the region because it believed that the Russian influence on these countries was very strong. USA was more interested in other parts of this disintegrated USSR rather than Central Asia.

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Despite the fact that US acknowledged its limitations in the region, it had certain priorities. These include (a) preventing the danger of proliferation of the nuclear weapon to other countries, (b) promotion of democracy and human rights in these countries (c) to check the spread of radical Islam in these countries (d) to develop a mechanism whereby the US can exploit the mineral resources in the region like oil and gas (e) to bring these countries under the influence of the American economic system.62

The United States has provided significant humanitarian and technical assistance to these newly independent countries. According to the US Agency for International Development (US AID), till December 1993 the USA had provided roughly $379 million in humanitarian assistance to these five countries, $55 million to Kazakhstan, $17 million to Uzbekistan, $110 million to Turkmenistan.63 The policy under George Bush Sr. was for broader engagement with all the five countries. But under Bill Clinton the focus shifted to the Caspian region. During Clinton administration the policy was two fold, on the one hand it would provide technical and monetary assistance to these countries and on the other it would promote its democratic reforms, market liberalization, human rights etc. In the core of this policy lay US interest.

US realized the geostrategic significance of this region because of its

proximity to East Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon gave the US an opportunity to establish a strong foothold in the region. The leaders of all the five countries condemned the attack and offered their help to the US.

Among all the Central Asian Countries, Uzbekistan has been the most forthcoming. It has allowed the US to station troops and fighter planes in its airbase at Khanabad. Other countries like Tajikistan, Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan has also provided help to the U.S.

Before September 11, 2001, the Central Asian states were facing the problems caused with the religious rebel groups which received training from Taliban. But now, by supporting the US war against terrorism, such groups have ended.

A close analysis of United States policy in the post September 11 phase shows that it has both long term and short term objectives in the region. While the short term objectives aim at crushing the Islamic militants, the long term objectives are many. First and foremost, the US intends to have a strategic hold in the Central Asian countries by exploiting the fluid geopolitical situation there.

By signing the military agreements with these countries, the US will be able to maintain a strong military presence in the region. The Uzbek President Islam Karimov is in favour of increasing the number of US troops in the region. After the September 11, 2001 President Bush of America has indicated

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on numerous occasions that the US military co-operation with these countries is an established fact.

In terms of US military strategy, Uzbekistan is the most important. Apart from its proximity to Afghanistan, if offers the best military and transport facilities. In fact in the war on al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Uzbekistan has offered support to the US. In return, the US promptly assisted $25 million dollar to Uzbekistan for weapon and other purchases. This aid is eventually to be extended beyond the military and security purposes of Uzbekistan to economic recovery.65

Following Uzbekistan’s lead, Kyrgyzstan became the second Central Asian Republic to grant Washington military access to its territory. The coalition forces led by the US has constructed an airbase at the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan.66 Tajikistan became the third republic to offer the US-led coalition access to military base. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been offered economic assistance.67

Secondly, the United State intends to exploit the vast oil and natural gas reserves that is found in abundance in these countries. The Central Asian countries are also being benefited because of the investments brought in by the private companies of US.

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67 Ibid. p. 15
The Caspian region has huge amount of recoverable oil resources. The present estimates indicate that Caspian holds over 60 billion barrels or recoverable oil resources which is equal to North Sea estimates. This estimate may increase to 100 to 200 billion barrels. The proven oil resources are about 15-20 billion barrels. Thus for the US, the Caspian region is like a ‘walking giant’.

In the present times, the US is the initiator of all the major oil related processes in Caucasus and Central Asia. The USA was late (1980’s) in entering the Central Asian oil market. As such it has not sufficiently developed a consistent policy towards these countries regarding oil. However since 1994, the US government has maintained a persistent regional policy on the oil issue. The US department of state in its Caspian Region Energy Development Report released in 1997, outlines certain basic principles of the US policy in the region. Washington is strongly promoting its authority and interest in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Baku Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline route is a reflection of this US interest.

Lastly and most importantly, by its presence in Central Asia, America can effectively checkmate China and Russia in there aspiration to challenge USA as a super power. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) now

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aims to touch the Russian borders. In January 1994, NATO invited all the newly independent states of Central Asia to a large scale cooperation in the framework of Partnership for Peace (PfP). Within a year, all the countries of the region, except Tajikistan, signed the framework agreements with NATO.\textsuperscript{71}

**RUSSIA**

As already mentioned, the five newly independent Turkic states find it very difficult to come to terms with the meaning of independence. After making all the efforts to establish contact with the outside world, by mid-1990’s the Central Asian countries became aware that opting out of the political, economic and military interdependence with Russia with had built over the previous century would take more time. As such these countries have opted for a paradoxical situation: continue the economic and other necessary ties with Moscow in the short term while at the same time they strive for political independence in the long term.\textsuperscript{72}

For more than a year of the U.S.S.R., Moscow did not have any coherent policy towards the newly emerged Central Asian countries as it was preoccupied with drawing the new contours of its relationship with the west. This school of thought is known as ‘Atlantist’ gained prominence in the foreign policy circles of Russia. But by 1992, Moscow suddenly realized that its passivity with regard to these countries had created a geopolitical vacuum.


which was filled by the neighbouring states of the Islamic world. Nationalistic circles in Tashkent, Dushanbe and Ashkabad began to dream of resurrecting a "Greater Turkistan", dismembering Afghanistan, creating various confederations (with the participation of Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) and forming regional economic unions. Moscow finally recognised the mounting danger of an Islamic political union on its southern borders and reacted by unleashing a flurry of activities to restore its ties with the regimes in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{73} This decision was taken under the influence of the Asiatic or Oriental school which says that Russia should opt for close ties with Asiatic countries.

Russia feels that it has inherited bulk of the responsibility in policy making for the Central Asian states because it is the natural success of the Soviet Union Referring to its particular responsibility confirmed on its by history\textsuperscript{74} Moscow has confirmed that the country 'will not cease to be a great power.'\textsuperscript{75} Such an approach of Moscow is determined by strategic dimensions of its territory, human and natural resources and its nuclear status.\textsuperscript{76}

No sooner did Moscow realize the geo-economic and geo historical significance of Central Asia, than it started making amends in its foreign policy orientation and now focused on Central Asia. Russia under Yeltsin tried to establish some sort of co-operation with these Central Asian republics.\textsuperscript{77}


\textsuperscript{74} Kozyrev, Alexander, "Russia: chance for survival", \textit{Foreign Affairs}, Vol.4, Spring 1992, p.12

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, p.10.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{The Economist}, 2 November, 1991, p.44.

There are various factors that have changed Russia's perspective towards Central Asia. First of all Andrei Kozynev, a Pro-Atlantics Foreign Minister was replaced by Y. Primakov who advocated strengthening relations with the Central Asian Countries. Primakov had anticipated that a disturbed Central Asia would threaten the security of Russia because it lay in the underbelly of Russia. Secondly, during the Soviet period, the Central Asian republics provided raw-materials to the industries that were based in Russia. But after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the supply of raw materials to Russia from the Central Asian countries stopped. So, to ensure the supply of raw materials to Russian industries some sort of co-operation with these countries was needed. Thirdly, there was a rise of ultra-nationalistic movement in Russia which demanded that Russia's superiority over the former Soviet republics should be asserted. There are many Russians who live in the Central Asian countries. Their security and well being could be assured only if Russia took active interest in these countries.

Taking civilization oriented approach that has been gaining more and more prominence in the modern Social Geography, it can easily be said of the Central Asian state that their future belongs in Asia. After gaining independence, none of the countries in Central Asia has declared its desire to become a European state. None of the states are of European origin. Islam has always been the dominant religion. During the Soviet rule, although Islam was severely suppressed by the Government, it has managed to survive. Today,
after becoming independent, the local civilization of these countries has
gradually revived.\textsuperscript{79}

Under the leadership of Putin, the Russian policy in Central Asia has
become more assertive. Soon after assuming power, he has followed a two
pronged strategy in dealing with the Central Asian Countries. (i) Putin pursued
a consistent strategy in building political and economic linkages between
Russia and Central Asia.\textsuperscript{80} Russia provided more economic aid to Central Asia.
Through this strategy, it was able to ward off the western influence in Central
Asia to a certain extent. (ii) Russia signed bilateral military agreements with
the Central Asian countries through which it would provide these countries
military equipments at a cheaper rates. Russia is also spreading its influence in
the Central Asian Countries through the multilateral forums.

So as to show its military presence in the Central Asia, it conducted
Commonwealth Southern Shield in March 2000 that involved about 10,000
troops from Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.
Through this operation it demonstrated that it is still an active player in its
traditional sphere of influence. In October 2000, a Collective Security Force
Agreement was signed along with six other CIS countries that aimed in
resisting foreign military aggression with the fellow signatories and also to
carry out joint military operations.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} Umnov, Alexander, “Central Asia in Russia’s Post Soviet Policy”, \textit{Contemporary Central
\textsuperscript{80} Oktay, F. Tanrisever, “Russia and the Independent Turkic States: Discovering the Meaning
\textsuperscript{81} V.I. Slipchenko, “Russia’s Political and Military Problems in Central Asia”, \textit{European
The developments after September 11, 2001 through which America has stationed its troops in the Central Asia in the garb of anti-terrorist operations has made Moscow feel insecure. Some scholars have termed these events as the 'New Great Game' for supremacy in Central Asia. They draw analogy between the present race for supremacy in Central Asia with the nineteenth century "great game" being played between Great Britain and Russia. There are however scholars who feel that the present situation in Central Asia should not be interpreted only in terms of the continuation of the nineteenth century struggle between Britain and Tsarist Russia. The present situation is complex in many ways than the nineteenth century struggle. The newly independent republics are no longer the feudal monarchies of nineteenth century. They are independent sovereign countries.

Unlike the nineteenth century, in the present times the roles of neighbours and proximate neighbours like Iran, Turkey, China, Pakistan and India are important. Another reason of difference with the nineteenth century Great Game was that during that time Central Asia acted as a buffer zone unlike the present time when it is a hydrocarbon resource rich region like oil and natural gas.\(^2\) Initially, Russia supported the American led anti-terrorism operation, but soon it realized that the American led anti-terrorism operation was only the short term.

To increase co-operation and integration, Russia has shown its keenness to resolve the differences among the Caspian Sea littoral states over the

division of the resources. Kazakhstan and Russia has agreed to divide the Caspian Sea in such a manner that both the sides should benefit. This agreement which took place in May 2002 when the Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev visited Moscow also stipulated that Moscow and Astana divide the Kurmangazy, Tsentranlray and Khvalynekoye oil fields on an equal basis.

There may develop an intolerance towards the Russians in the future. This may strain the relations between these countries in the future. Therefore Russia regards the protection of the Russians outside the federation as a top priority.

One of the reasons why the Central Asian countries give top priority to its relations with Russia is their economic dependence on Russia. The efforts of the regional leaders led to the creation of a new Central Asian Common Market in 1993. Moscow also showed its commitment to the creation of an economic structure between Russia and the five Central Asian Countries. 83

In the late 1990’s Russia has shown a keen desire to seek closer integration with Central Asian because of certain geo-strategic development.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation’s (NATO) eastward expansion has made Russia’s western border vulnerable. As such its security depends on the strategic depth that can be provided by the “Near Abroad”. In no case can Russia afford to have a vulnerable southern and eastern border. 84

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83 Open Media Research Institute, 75, 9, August 1996.
However, the September 11 2001 terrorist attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center has given the NATO – Russia relations, a new dimension. Although the NATO – Russia relations has seen many high and lows the expectation this time is very great. NATO and Russia have been able to steadily increases the number of joint activities.\(^\text{85}\)

When Taliban became successful in Afghanistan, its destabilizing effects were felt in Central Asia and the Caucasus countries. The stability of the Central Asian countries became essential for the territorial integrity of Russia.\(^\text{86}\) As such, Russia took active interest in promoting closer integration between the Central Asian countries.

Not only security, Russia is promoting economic integration among the C.I.S. countries as well. In October 2000, in Astana in Kazakhstan, the leaders of five nations viz Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Belarus which make up the CIS Custom Union changed the name of their group to Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). The members of the EEC have pledged to form a common foreign trade border, create a unified foreign economic policy and to collectively regulate the export-import tariff.\(^\text{87}\)

On 11\(^{th}\) October, 2000, the Presidents of the six states of the CIS Collective Security Arrangement met in Kyrgyzstan’s capital Bishkek to

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discuss steps for increasing the military and political integration among them. They also discussed the possibility of formation of regional armed force.  

Under Putin, Russia is improving and consolidating its position with Central Asia. It has made its presence felt in the Central Asian Countries in a strong manner. The concept of National Security of the Russian Federation which was adopted on 19th January 2000 shows how much importance Russia attaches to Central Asia. It is noteworthy that Russia attaches importance not only to the Central Asian Countries but to all the former Soviet Republics which are referred to as ‘Near Abroad’. Russia intends to eliminate the existing problems and also prevent the emergence of new problem areas.

Under Putin, the Russian Policy with the Near Abroad Countries has become more assertive. Russia has written off the energy debts of Kyrgyzstan. The Customs Union was upgraded to European Economic Community Visa free travel was provided to those states which were reluctant to co operate. A military exercise named Commonwealth Southern Shield was conducted on a very large scale in March 20000 in the mountains of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in which the troops from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan participated. By various methods, Russia showed that it was committed to ensure stability in the Central Asian countries.

This chapter shows the interest taken by various countries in Central Asia. Out of these, as the developments have shown only few like Russia,


USA and China are able to have a direct impact on the Central Asian countries. Others like Iran and Turkey are presently playing a minor role but maybe in the future they may play a greater role in providing outlet to the pipelines.