Chapter VIII

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) after the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 was a historic event which had far reaching impact on international politics. Central Asia is sandwiched among major powers namely China, Russia and regional powers namely Iran and Turkey and it is characterized as an arena of ‘new great game’.

Even though it is considered as a region with common history and religion, the ethnic diversity and overlap of ethnic identities across nations such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan create the problem of ethnic harmony in the region. Political assertion in religious terms also generated conflict in certain Republics. A civil war was fought in Tajikistan where political movements supported by Islamic militants tried to capture power. Such a move was defeated by the forces of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under the leadership of Russia.

The Soviet legacy with regard to ethnic nationality and language still has its impact on the political and social order of CARs. The region was having Russian language as official language and link language during the period of the Soviet Union. At present, the titular languages is taking the place of Russian causing many problems.

Authoritarianism by the ruling elite is the hallmark of CARs as far as the political system is concerned. Political power of the incumbent presidents is kept intact by subverting democratic system and suppressing political and human rights of the people. The efforts of civil society movements
initiated by various sections of the people and that of Western-sponsored NGOs to reform the political system were not completely successful.

Various colour revolutions engineered by the civil society groups raised the issue of democracy in a big way, but authoritarian tendencies of Central Asian politics are still a reality. Even the market economy is not devoid of the implications of authoritarian politics. Top political figures control various sectors of the economy and corruption is very rampant.

There were efforts to have regional cooperation immediately after independence. Uzbekistan was in the forefront of regional cooperation inspired by the example of European Union. Due to common historical, linguistic, religious, ethnic and cultural ties with the CARs, some political analysts thought that Iran and Turkey have the potential to play leading roles in the region. These nations were quite excited about the independence of CARs and worked hard to bring them under their influence. With this intention, the CARs were brought into regional organization like ECO and CASCO. But rivalry between Iran and Turkey has been adversely affecting the functioning of ECO. Similarly CASCO has failed to achieve the desired economic cooperation between Iran and CARs due to reasons such as the hostile US attitude towards Iran.

Through intense campaign and financial assistance, Turkey had an upper hand in the region in the beginning because of the region’s Turkic legacy. But Iran has the advantage of common borders, common history under the Persian civilization, linguistic affinity with the people of Tajik origin. Iran can provide the landlocked CARs access to the sea for developing international trade by exporting oil and natural gas through Iranian territory. Rail and road transport communications are developed for this purpose. Security, economic stability and territorial connection to the CARs are the basis of Iran’s foreign policy towards Central Asia and geographical location makes Iran a natural player in the region.

The US rivalry with Iran is a road block to Iran’s efforts in everything connected with Central Asia. The US imposed sanction against Iran in the name of non-proliferation hurt Iran’s relations with countries all over
the world including those in Central Asia. CARs are not in a position to utilize the export route through Iran to world market due to the pressure exerted by US Policy. Russia has in many ways supported Iran’s aspiration in various matters and has been cooperating with Iran’s efforts with an intention to limit the influence of USA in Central Asia. Iran has been trying to focus on developing bilateral relations with CARs and these efforts are showing results. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have increased their trade turnover with Iran and are engaged in various projects through Iran. The so-called ‘smile offensive’ is the new Iranian strategy to develop trade, transportation and energy deals in Central Asia and Caucasus.

The United States and NATO projected Turkey as a role model for CARs to emulate. Democracy and market economy type of development was placed as targets to be achieved by the CARs. Turkey has made several moves to bring the people of Turkic origin in the region under the banner of Pan-Turkism. Turkish Government agencies such as TDRA, TDV etc. have been taking leadership in strengthening the relations between Turkic Republics of Central Asia and Turkey which enjoy the support of USA and the West. The CARs initially showed inclination towards Turkey on the hope that US aid will be forthcoming through its influence. Turkey makes all out efforts to develop all type of cooperation with CARs.

In the field of education and culture, Turkey has made advancement through official and non-official agencies by spreading Turkic language and culture in the region. A large number of public and private companies of Turkey had made considerable investments through FDI partnership in the region. The Turkish Agency for Technical and Economic Cooperation is taking leadership in cultural and linguistic cooperation. TURSKOY, an association for promoting cultural interaction among Turkic states formed in 1992 has been active in the region. USA is supporting pipeline projects through Turkey and favours Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project in spite of opposition from Russia. Turkey has made large scale investments in Central Asia. The adoption of Latin alphabets in Turkish language spoken in Central Asia is a major victory for Turkey.
towards bringing the spirit of Pan-Turkism in Central Asia. Turkey has openly voiced its concern about Chinese oppression of Uighurs in Xinjiang because the people affected by the riots are of Turkic origin.

Russia is the most important country in the region due to historical and geopolitical reasons. The stability and security of CARs are mainly dependent on the attitude of Russia. In the early 1990s, Russia did not give attention to CARs. Developments in Afghanistan and its impact in Central Asia necessitated a more pragmatic policy on the part of Russia towards Central Asia. As American interests in Central Asia increased, Russia sensed danger to its hegemony in the region and Russian President announced the ‘near abroad policy’ which can be compared to the ‘Munroe Doctrine’ of USA. Russia started strengthening security and economic cooperation with CARs. As a result, a good number of multilateral and bilateral treaties were signed between Russia and CARs.

People of Russian origin are spread across Central Asia and constitute the bulk of technical intelligence, skilled labour force and officer corps in the army. The ruling elite of the state of Kazakhstan takes a realistic view of the question of Russian diaspora and consider them as people belonging to Kazakhstan. The civil war in Tajikistan caused out-migration of Russian and other diasporas from Tajikistan. Russia intervened in the civil war with a view to protect the Russian population in Tajikistan, even though the Russian population in Tajikistan was not harmed in the conflict. Having affected by Islamic militancy in Chechnya, the spread of Islamism in Central Asia is a cause of concern to the security of Russia. After 9/11, the US efforts to contain the Islamic militancy in Afghanistan and Central Asia are getting support from Russia and the governments in Central Asia.

The abundance of energy resources and other raw materials in Central Asia makes the region very important as far as Russia is concerned. Influential industrial groups in Russia favour restoration of the ‘special relationship’ with Central Asia. There are several influential groups in Russia who favour Eurasian unity by the cooperation of Russia and
Central Asia. They argue that if Russia leaves its legitimate space in Central Asia, the vacuum will be filled by the West and other major players in world politics. Vladimir Putin was responsible for the proactive changes in the foreign policy of Russia towards Central Asia.

There is a conflict of interests between Russia on the one side and the states of Central Asia on the other on the question of trade in central Asian energy resources. While Russia wants to become an energy super power by routing Central Asian energy resources through Russian pipeline to the world market, energy rich CARs namely Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan want to get more profit by selling natural gas and oil resources to Europe and the world market through pipeline projects outside Russian territory like TAPI, Nabucco, BTC etc. to earn more profits from export. The European Union also favour a deal outside Russia because Russia makes huge margin money by re-exporting energy resources from Central Asia.

Russia has signed several multilateral and bilateral treaties with CARs in a variety of fields. The CSTO is being strengthened in the name of countering terrorism after the September 11, 2001 incidents to keep the region under the security cover of forces under the leadership of Russia. Russia is hostile to the continuance of the forces of USA and the West in Central Asia. Russia wants to dominate the space vacated by the former Soviet Union and is actively intervening in issues connected with security of states once part of the former Soviet Union as happened in the case of Georgia, civil war in Tajikistan and in the overthrow of Bakiyev in Kyrgyzstan. Russia is the most important neighbour of CARs and also the best guarantor of regional stability.

China and USA are in competition with Russia in developing trade with CARs in energy resources. Russia and China are the leading nations in the regional security organization named Shanghai Cooperation Organization along with the Central Asian Republics as members and Iran, Pakistan and India as observers. It is not possible for Russia and China to
antagonize each other’s interests. So, the two nations are tolerating each other’s transgression in energy trade in the region.

India and Central Asia had long standing cultural, political and commercial relationship. The ancient Silk route trade played an important role in connecting Central Asia with South Asia. Commercial interaction between the regions was quite common during the Mughal period and North-West caravan route connecting North India to Central Asia continued to the modern period as well. A number of products such as silk, textiles, velvets, carpets, bronze, copper, sabres etc were among the export from Central Asia to India.

Because of the strong Indo-Soviet ties, India gained goodwill from most Central Asian nations even before their independence. After independence, Central Asia has become important to India and South Asia as far as security is concerned. The spread of Islamic militancy following the developments in Afghanistan has been a destabilizing factor in Central Asia. The secular orientation of regimes and most of the people of Central Asia is an important factor in furthering India-Central Asia relations.

India is in need of energy resources from energy-rich Central Asian region. Due to various national and international compulsions, India could not develop the potential in trade relations with Central Asian Republics. There are proposals for gas pipelines like TAPI (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan - India) and TICPI (Termez - Kabul -Peshawar - India). Islamic militancy in Afghanistan and hostile relations with Pakistan are among the reason for slow growth of trade with Central Asia. A ministerial level conference of the countries of Central Asia and South Asia held in 2003 under the auspices of Asian Development Bank had endorsed the establishment of Central and South Asia transport facilities. If the construction of transport facilities and gas pipelines is completed, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan would be benefited along with Central Asian Republics which would be able to diversify energy exports.
India has significant military presence in Tajikistan and is providing training to the defence personnel in Tajikistan. India had signed a memorandum of understanding with Kazakhstan in December 2002 to provide training for military officers and developing joint military-industry projects. India helped Kazakhstan to develop a naval fleet in the Caspian Sea in spite of opposition from Russia. Uzbekistan also had good trade and cultural relations with India. In 2001, the President of Uzbekistan visited India and signed 44 agreements with India for furthering relations in all fields including political, trade, economic and cultural.

At the time of independence of CARs, policy makers in Pakistan thought that Central Asia would provide an opportunity to Pakistan to become a regional power in Asia. Pakistan’s deep involvement in Afghanistan and in Islamic politics did not help in developing trust and good relations with many Central Asian Republics. Initially, Pakistan took initiative in building mosques and madrasas throughout Central Asia. After 9/11, Pakistan was compelled to cooperate with US and NATO forces to oust the Taliban Government from Afghanistan. The CARs also joined US and NATO efforts to defeat Taliban forces in Afghanistan. These developments resulted in the change of attitude of Pakistan to CARs. Now Pakistan is giving more stress on trade and commercial relationship with CARs than concentrating on Islamic matters. Pakistan is engaged in constructing gas pipelines from Iran and Turkmenistan connecting all the CARs so that the energy resources in CARs could be utilized for the benefit of Pakistan.

China is another major player in the Central Asian region. China has common borders with Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Xinjiang province of China which borders with Central Asia is affected by the secessionist aspiration of Uighur nationalists. Developments in Afghanistan and the spread of Islamic militancy in the region are seen as a threat to the territorial integrity of China which has a considerable Muslim population in its north-west. China is in need of energy resources for the ever-increasing consumption
and it has been investing the surplus capital available in aiding and developing trade with CARs. There is subtle competition between Russia and China in developing trade and economic cooperation in Central Asia.

At the same time, there is also cooperation between Russia and China in providing security and stability in the region. Shanghai Cooperation organization (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are the two important regional organizations which take care of the developments in the region. While China and Russia are jointly leading SCO, it is Russia alone who is leading CSTO. Russia wants to give more importance to CSTO than to SCO; China is spreading its influence in the region by utilizing SCO as an instrument.

China’s export policy to Central Asia is quiet aggressive and it has offered $190 million as aid to the CARs in SCO to be used to support the purchase of Chinese goods. Russia wants to develop an SCO-sponsored energy club while China is aggressively pursuing importing of oil and natural gas through various pipelines. China has been concentrating more on investing in various projects in Central Asia for processing energy resources in Central Asia. The SCO is a powerful regional organization through which China and Russia are trying to limit the influence of USA and the West in Central Asia. The Shanghai covenants adopted in the SCO meet in June 2001 included suppression of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism. Several joint military exercises have been organized under the banner of SCO in which security forces from CARs participated along with the security forces from Russia and China in 2003 and in 2005. Another exercise by name “Peace Mission 2007” was organized under the joint auspices of CSTO and SCO in Russia in which Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao were present. These exercises were considered as warnings to USA and NATO forces against their presence in the region.

While China is cooperating with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in processing energy resources and commissioning various pipelines to transport oil and gas, it is supporting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan
in constructing hydroelectric projects and manufacturing Aluminium. China is also having nuclear partnership with Kazakhstan and has signed agreements with Kazatoprom immediately after the fall of USSR.

USA has also taken note of the abundant energy resources available in Central Asia and started working towards opening up of a new energy sources in the region. US policy goals in Central Asia are energy cooperation, regional security and support for democratic transformation. In the beginning, US involvement in Central Asia was minimal as it was busy with helping Russia’s evolution towards the path of democracy and market economy. USA also wanted to control the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region.

The Taliban revolution in Afghanistan and the bombing of twin towers in New York made USA to take stock of the situation and found that Central Asian region is quite important as far as fighting terrorism is concerned. After September 11, USA started having deep involvement in Central Asia by bringing CARs in US war against terrorism. American policy goals on democracy and human right took a backseat when CARs showed reluctance to cooperate with US and the West on fighting terrorism form in Afghanistan. USA provided financial assistance to CARs to fight Taliban-controlled Afghanistan from the bases in CARs. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan came forward to support US war efforts in lieu of liberal financial assistance to them.

The US-led war on terror in Afghanistan and USA’s direct involvement in Central Asia strengthened the authoritarian regimes in CARs and in turn resulted in the growth of anti-Americanism and Islamic fundamentalism in these republics. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Republican Party, Hizb-ut Tahrir etc. are important outfits spreading Islamism in the region. Though America’s association with CARs brought economic prosperity to the ruling elite, majority of the common people in these states are in dire straights. Islamic organizations are spreading anti-American feelings in the minds of the common people alleging that US is responsible for the sufferings of people at the hands of authoritarian
rulers. Anti-American sentiments in Central Asia get encouragement from Russian media also as Russia wants to keep USA out of Central Asia.

The United States has economic interests in the region due to the large energy resources in the region which includes Caspian Basin. US multinationals are interested to make large scale investment in energy sector in the region. As Russia and China are in competition to appropriate trade in energy resources, USA and European Union find it difficult to enter the scene in a big way. Pipeline projects such as Nabucco and Trans-Caspian pipelines are yet to materialize even though USA and EU are making serious efforts for the same. USA and European allies are also trying to secure Kazakh participation in Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

Russia and China have been pressurizing members of SCO to keep USA out of the region. Russia also offered financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan to close down US Airbase in Manas in 2009. When USA offered better payment to Kyrgyzstan, the Manas base was allowed to continue. As a consequence, Russia manipulated internal situation in Kyrgyzstan which resulted in the ouster of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010. The US Department of State are critical of human right violation in CARs. But, the authoritarian regimes did not heed the advice or reprimands by USA and European Union. As USA and NATO need the support of these regimes in fighting Taliban forces in Afghanistan, they are now shutting their eyes towards human rights violation in Central Asia.

Poverty, corruption and authoritarianism are the three evils of Central Asian regimes which may lead to destabilize the internal situation in Central Asia. The ruling elite in all the five Central Asian Republics are more or less corrupt and amassing wealth by exploiting resources available in the country. Authoritarian regimes have banned or restricted religious activities in the name of fighting Islamic terrorism. Many elections in CARs are rigged and the same ruling elite continue to stay in
power in all CARs except in Kyrgyzstan where people revolted and changed two regimes of President Askar Akaev and his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Islamic militants are also active in Central Asia and the corruption and maladministration by the authoritarian regimes are providing fuel to the campaign of fundamentalist elements. Basically, the Islamic population of Central Asia is secular in character. But it is feared that if human rights violations by the authoritarian regimes continue in Central Asia these fundamentalist forces would get strengthened and may ultimately prove dangerous to stability of the region. Secularism would survive in Central Asia in spite of activities by militants and, given the policies of major powers, there would not be any change in the style of functioning of the authoritarian and corrupt regimes in CARs in the near future.