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## **Afghanistan and US Interests in Central Asia**

In late 1990s, the Taliban moved away from the American orbit of influence, US policies based on democracy and human rights towards Central Asia failed and numerous and diffused threats emerged as primary geopolitical challenges. As a consequence, the US interests and role in Central Asia received a blow. The US looked for an overriding global threat around which it could organize its geopolitical interests. The al Qaeda's attack on twin towers in the US on September 11, 2001 transformed terrorism into a threat with such global significance and the US' militaristic approach culminated in the War on Terror. The US' interest in Afghanistan was partly driven by the fact that it provided the long-term justification for the former's stay in the region with its problem of terrorism and drug-trafficking. However, the geopolitical significance of Afghanistan remained in the interconnectivity that it provides to various important regions and between the Indian Ocean and the Eurasian landmass. The Lisbon Summit of November 2010 between NATO and Afghanistan and the Strategic Partnership Agreement of May 2012 between US and Afghanistan foreground the long-term American interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

During the Cold War period, West Asia and South Asia were seen as the key areas of geopolitical concern to the US. South Asia's importance was derived from the fact that it was the site of Cold War rivalry involving the US, the USSR and China. These rivalries were partly mediated through the India-Pakistan face off. The end of the Cold War fundamentally eroded Sino-Russian and US-Russian rivalry in South Asia. The American attention shifted from South Asia to Central Asia where huge power vacuum erupted after the disintegration of the USSR. The US wanted to reach out to the former Soviet Republics to prevent Russia from consolidating its control in the Eurasian heartland once again. Secondly, the resource potential of the Central Asian states which was much publicised in the 1990s attracted the American attention to exert control over these natural resources and come out with a plan to multiply the pipeline system to rid them of both Russian and Iranian control. The Clinton Administration fostered regional cooperation with Central Asia relying on multilateral institutions such as NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative and the Central Asian Economic Community. PfP allowed the partner Central Asian countries to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation. Starting from late 1990s, the US Congress passed bills that called for diversification of energy supplies from the Central Asia and Caspian region (Chi-Lin, 2008, p. 338). The Bush Administration after assuming office released an energy policy report indicating that the exploitation of Caspian energy resources could not only benefit the economies of the region, but also help mitigate possible world supply disruptions, a major US security goal.

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Both the Clinton and Bush Administration considered Afghanistan vital for the American Central Asian strategy for variety of reasons. First, it is geographically contiguous with most of the Central Asia states. It is natural that an increasing role in Afghanistan would facilitate a greater American role in Central Asia. Secondly, it provides an alternative route to transfer Central Asian energy resources to the world market bypassing Russia and Iran. Thirdly, influence in Afghanistan is vital to realise the American plan of a 'Greater Central Asia' to move Central Asia out of Russia's orbit of influence towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. Fourthly, military bases in Afghanistan and in the surrounding region are considered important by the US foreign policy makers to check the moves of Russia, China and Iran, the primary conventional threats in the post-Cold War era as Afghanistan is situated in the middle of various continents and provide inter-linking routes. Fifthly, it is believed that the geo-strategic situation of Afghanistan would allow the US to develop multidimensional strategies based on ocean and land as well. Historically, all the great powers wanted to master both naval and continental strategies but could develop only one and therefore their power was challenged at one time or the other.

It is noteworthy that in the 1990s it was through Afghanistan that the US sought to spread its influence towards Central Asia. There were signs of American support for the Taliban as a counterweight to Iranian influence in Afghanistan and further its influence in Central Asia undercutting both Iranian and Russian influence there. Achin Vanaik says, "Even after the accession of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan in 1996, the US was by no means averse to improving relations with a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, including giving formal diplomatic recognition. It came close to doing so on a number of occasions between 1996 and the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in East Africa" (Vanaik, 2004, p. 112). Ahmed Rashid observed, "The Clinton Administration was clearly sympathetic to the Taliban, as they were in line with Washington's anti-Iran policy and were important for the success of any southern pipeline from Central Asia that would avoid Iran. The US Congress had authorised a covert \$20 million budget for the CIA to destabilise Iran, and Tehran had accused Washington of funneling some of these funds to the Taliban – a charge that was always denied by Washington" (Koshy, 2003, pp.63-64).

To justify their support for the Taliban, the US officials, on different occasions, said that the Taliban should be acknowledged as an 'indigenous movement' and that they were vital to stability in Afghanistan as they had demonstrated staying power. Robin Raphel, the in-charge of the Central Asian region in the US State Department, paid two visits to Kabul to meet the Taliban government functionaries. The US State Department spokesman Glyn Davies said that the US found 'nothing objectionable' in the steps taken by the Taliban to impose Islamic law. He described the Taliban as anti-modern rather than anti-western. By declaring its neutrality in the Afghan Civil War, the US had in effect withdrawn its recognition of the national unity government of President Rabbani, and had therefore, by implication, given recognition to the Taliban (Tarock, 1999, p. 815). However, with the Taliban turning away from the US, the American interests in Central Asia received a setback.

There were three factors that alienated the Taliban from the US. The 1998 bombings of the US embassies in East Africa, violation of human rights specifically women's rights, opposition to which found resonance in various protests in the US and unwillingness to cooperate with the US to apprehend Osama bin Laden distanced the Taliban from Washington. However, the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was reported to have said that, were the Taliban to cooperate with Washington on bin Laden, it

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would facilitate US recognition of the movement as the legitimate government of Afghanistan (Complete 9/11 timeline, 2010).

Though overt US military action against Taliban occurred only after 9/11, there are credible reports that point to the planning in the US to take military action against Afghanistan and oust Taliban months before 9/11. Once the US realised that the Taliban could not be a trusted ally to foster American interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia, it started covert military operations against the Taliban (Koshy, 2003, pp.63-64).

### **Failure of American Policies towards Central Asia**

In the 1990s, while on the one hand the US considered good relationship with the Taliban vital for its long-term interests in Central Asia, it promoted policies based on democracy and human rights in Central Asia on the other. After the disintegration of the USSR, the Clinton Administration believed that by aggressively engaging the newly independent Central Asian states, the US would be seen as taking advantage of Russian weakness and hurt bilateral relations between the two nations which were vital to contain emerging regional powers like Iran and Iraq. Narrowing the focus to the Gulf region in the post-Cold War era, Anthony Lake, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, warned that while keeping Iraq weak, the US would also have to be watchful of Iran.

The end of Cold War also reposed state actors' faith in the international laws and norms in the absence of the ideological rival. In this context, the US declared "New World Order" to ensure its primacy through pushing the ideas like democracy and human rights. The "doctrine of Enlargement" was developed by Lake to spread American influence to the areas of strategic importance (Lake, 2009). However, the ideas of democracy and market economy were to be cautiously followed in the former Soviet Republics so that Russia was not antagonised.

As America's energy politics was facilitated by the ideology of liberal democracy, the US Congress signed the "FREEDOM Support Act" in October 1992, which tied aid with promotion of liberal democracy in Central Asia (Shen, 2010, p. 102). The US in its Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999, "authorised enhanced policy and aid to support conflict amelioration, humanitarian needs, economic development, transport and communications, border controls, democracy, and the creation of civil societies in the South Caucasus and Central Asia" (Nichol, 2008).

However, the incremental approach based on democracy and human rights towards Central Asian states did not allow the US to play a major role in the Central Asian region. The Central Asian states which are dynamic actors after their independence resisted to be part of US hegemonic influence cast through the ideas of democracy and human rights. For example, throughout the 1990s, Uzbekistan was not perceived to be a cooperative partner who would buy into the US vision of bilateral relations built on shared commitment to democratic values, economic liberalisation, and a non-zero sum approach to international relations. American role in the coloured revolutions as part of its strategy to promote democracy in Central Asia was much criticized by the authoritarian rulers. The Central Asian states were also cautious not to allow an extra-regional power to play a major role in their security affairs and challenge the Russian role in a major way.

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the formation of which in 1996 was viewed by the US with indifference on the assumption that the political and military interests between Russia and China could not be reconciled stood firm against the American interests in Central Asia. Both Russia and China shared common perception on the US' grand design in the Central Asian landscape. Russia did not want the American penetration into its strategic backyard. China, which shares border with Central Asian region, did not want American influence near its border. Iran along with Russia saw in the rise of American influence in the region and policy of diversification of energy supplies a looming threat.

### **Increasing Threats to America's Geopolitical Interests and Militaristic Approach of the US**

In 1990s, the American engagement with Central Asia on the basis of democratic and human rights principles, however, did not define its role in the larger international context which was becoming more militaristic. In contrast to the Cold War era, when the US could develop a grand strategy due to the presence of clear threat and therefore could mobilise allies, there seems to be little consensus on how to prioritise the myriad national security challenges facing the United States in the post-Cold War era. In this era, threats are both numerous and diffuse. The US grand strategy has to involve more traditional concerns about rising powers, concerns about emerging non-conventional threats in the form of terrorism, global energy supply, and the spread of military technology and the enlargement of the democratic/capitalist sphere.

Unlike in the Cold War when the US was getting easy and quick support from its allies to pursue its geopolitical interests from the pro-Capitalist and anti-Communist Islamic countries, the overarching ideological threat got evaporated in the post-Cold War era and in its place arose a number of conventional and non-conventional threats. Terrorism emerged as the most dangerous non-conventional threat and geopolitical challenge to the US in the post-Cold War era. The supreme leader of the Islamist-Jihadist movement Ayman al-Zawahiri asserts in his book "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner" that the struggle ahead will be over the control of the energy-rich heart of Asia and transportation routes connecting it with the rest of the world. He says, "If the Chechens and other Caucasian mujahedeen reach the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, the only thing that will separate them from Afghanistan will be the neutral state of Turkmenistan. This will form a mujahid Islamic belt to the south of Russia that will be connected in the east to Pakistan, which is brimming with mujahedeen movements in Kashmir" (Vidino, 2005, pp. 57-66). It is noteworthy that the US has not only to deal with terrorism, it has to contain the power of Iran, China and Russia and diversify energy supplies so as to contain the dominance of these powers in energy politics.

To deal with both the conventional and non-conventional threats and pursue its geopolitical objectives, America followed a militaristic approach. To meet diversified threats, many states increasingly relied on the United States for either the actual provision of security or the training and equipment necessary to perform security functions. By 2008, the US was providing security assistance to 149 countries. To fill up the power vacuum after the Soviet Union's disintegration and to pursue its geopolitical interests in various regions, the US in addition to formal treaties, offered protection to a number of countries under its Security umbrella either by law or by policy. Another host of countries were offered special security provisions through major Non-NATO Ally status.

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The ideas of democracy and market economy which found their ultimate expressions during Bill Clinton's Presidency received setback after the Administration explicitly rejected "dovish" prescriptions to abandon "America's forward strategic presence" (McDonough, 2009, pp. 10-11). The Clinton's Presidency was engaged in military deployments with missions that varied from providing logistic support to UN peacekeeping missions to stability operations in the Balkans. Douglas Ross and Christopher Ross, two Canadian observers noted that an imperial approach to world affairs "is more likely to be created under a Democratic rather than a Republican presidency in the name of human rights and democratization" (McDonough, 2009, p. 15).

George Bush though in the initial years of his Presidency wanted to steer clear of the excessive commitments outside of the Clinton era, post-9/11 restored US' aggressive primacist vision. It is argued that President Bush's strategy did not represent a revolutionary change when compared to its predecessor, but it did represent the culmination of a strategic adjustment process that has effectively settled on primacy – in one form or another – for the post-9/11 period. According to Walter Russell Mead, the Bush Doctrine, far from being a neoconservative innovation, was in fact well within the mainstream of US foreign policy and very much in keeping with the vision of America's founding generation, as well as the practice of the Early Republic's statesmen (Owens, 2009, p. 25).

### **The US-led War on Terror**

By the end of the 1990s and beginning of a new century, the Taliban had moved away from the American sphere of influence, its policies towards Central Asia failed and numerous and diffused threats emerged as primary geopolitical challenges. As a result, the US interests and role in Central Asia received a blow. The US looked for an overriding global threat around which it could organize its geopolitical interests. After the al Qaeda's attack on twin towers in the US in September 11, 2001, terrorism assumed such global significance and the US's militaristic approach culminated in the War on Terror. According to Barry Buzan, when the Cold War ended, Washington seemed to experience a threat deficit, and there was a string of attempts to find a replacement for the Soviet Union as the principal adversarial power to give effect to US foreign and military policies. Buzan says that the terrorists' attacks of 9/11 offered the solution as the War on Terror right from the beginning had the feel of a big idea that might provide a long-term cure for Washington's threat deficit (Buzan, 2006, p. 1101). The assertion that the War on Terror will be a long war can be compared to a similar kind of zero-sum, global-scale, generational struggle against anti-liberal ideological extremists who want to rule the world. Buzan is of the opinion that the significance of War on Terror is more political in nature than anything. It might justify and legitimise US primacy, leadership and unipolarism, both to Americans and to the rest of the world (Buzan, 2006, p. 1102). Buzan seems to be right in view of increased US access to and activities in Central Asia after the War on Terror began. The TAP pipeline project, which was put to halt after the relationship between the US and Taliban broke was again pushed forward in 2002. More importantly, the proposal to create Greater Central Asia in the first decade of 2000, to move Central Asia away from Russia's orbit towards Afghanistan and Pakistan was a clear US move to pursue its geopolitical interests in a vigorous manner. The Greater Central Asia project and the TAP pipeline project go together as they cover the same geographical areas vertically.

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Prior to September 11, though US concerns about the Taliban were widely shared in Uzbekistan, as well as rest of Central Asia, the Uzbek leaders roundly rejected US strategies for addressing the challenge posed by the Taliban, including political reform, human rights, and economic liberalisation, for fear of causing domestic destabilisation. These long-term concerns were sidelined after the 9/11 attacks. Uzbekistan became the United States' strategic ally and the frontline state in the war on terrorism overnight. Similarly, other Central Asian states also shed their long-term concerns with Washington's ideas of democracy and human rights and cooperated with it (Rumer, 2006, p. 144). The US, on the other hand, strengthened the authoritarian rulers in Central Asia putting its ideological baggage on the back-burner. The US stopped harping on these ideas and called for all sorts of assistance from the Central Asian states to meet the common enemy in order to secure a firm foothold in Central Asia. The US' interest in Afghanistan was derived from the fact that it provided the long-term justification for the former's stay in the region with its problem of terrorism and drug-trafficking.

The US-led War on Terror expanded the American presence and role in Central Asia considerably. Its military involvement in Central Asia included temporary forward basing in Uzbekistan, Kirgystan, and Tajikistan; access to airspace and restricted use of bases in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; coalition-building by high-level visits to Central Asia, intelligence sharing, improved coordination within the US Central Command, and increased assistance. Operation Enduring Freedom brought the Central Asian states to the frontlines of the campaign in the anti-terror war. According to Achin Vanaik, what the US had now achieved, which it did not possess before 11 September 2001, was a new legitimisation of its specifically military conduct abroad. Its second great and new gain was its military political entry into Central Asia on a depth and scale that it had never before had. The one weak spot in its post-Cold War effort to dominate the Eurasian landmass was Central Asia and the Caspian region. This area is not just the 'backyard' of Russia but abuts Iran and China, which along with Russia are considered by imperial America's most determined protagonists as its most serious potential rivals (Vanaik, 2004, p. 119). Central Asia was seen not only as a platform for operations in Afghanistan, but it was also significant in its own right being a potential breeding ground for terrorism given the nexus between the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Al-Qaeda. For Russia, the War on Terror was a suitable opportunity to treat the Chechenyan problem as one of terrorism and link it with the global crusade against it and for China it was to mitigate the secessionist problem in Xinxiang. The US successfully linked the War on Terror with several longstanding security concerns facing Central Asian states, Russia and China like crime and trade in drugs and the technologies for weapons of mass destruction (Buzan, 2006, pp. 1103-06).

Despite the American success in gathering the momentum for a long-term war plan, it led to a series of academic debates and discussions as to the real interests underlying US action in Afghanistan. Some commentators argued that the real motive behind the US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan is related to America's direct interest in the natural resources of Central Asia. According to Frank Viviano, "the hidden stakes in the war against terrorism can be summed up in a single word: oil. The map of terrorist sanctuaries and targets in the Middle East and Central Asia is also, to an extraordinary degree, a map of the world's energy resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> century..." (Gokay, 2002, p. 6). With the intention to revive the TAP pipeline project and exploring the potential for post-Taliban energy projects in the region, President Bush appointed a former aide to the US-based oil company UNOCAL, Afghan-born Zalmay Khalilzad,

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as special envoy to Afghanistan. As already noted the TAP pipeline project was revived in April-May 2002 once the Karzai government was installed and received international legitimacy (Gokay, 2002, p. 6).

However, reducing everything to oil does not allow one to understand the larger geopolitical interests the US has in Afghanistan and through it in Central Asia. The US has enough of oil beneath its own soil and it also easily secures oil from the Latin American countries. From a military and strategic perspective, Afghanistan provided the US accessibility to a large continental expanse to operate against both conventional and non-conventional threats. Apart from the economic value and utility of natural resources, its production and supply carry a geopolitical significance. In this context, Afghanistan's importance as an alternative route to transfer Central Asian resources needs to be underlined. First, multiplying the pipelines would end the hegemony of a few particular powers. Secondly, controlling the production and supply of natural resources would require military projection of power and that would go a long way in securing supply of these resources to regional allies and denying the same to countries adopting adversarial foreign policies. Therefore, natural resources can be used as an instrument to control and shape foreign policies of state actors. Thirdly, the supply routes for their safety would require military presence and thereby would contribute to development of military strategies of the controlling power. Finally, the ports and routes for the transfer and trade of natural resources can have dual use: commercial and military. Therefore, despite the commercial non-viability of the alternative pipeline projects, they were given utmost importance by the US. Williams and others argue that the US went to the extent of invading and destroying Iraqi oil resources to shoot up the price of oil to give effect to its financially nonviable projects (Williams, Tekin, Ali, 2008, p. 383).

### **America's Conduct of 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan**

The disproportionate response to the 9/11 terrorist attack by waging a war against Afghanistan instead of applying legitimate methods to capture a group of individuals who masterminded the act points to America's larger interests in the region. According to Gerard Toal "One can find evidence of a counter-modern tendency in certain geopolitical crises where global threats are territorialised as threats from 'rogue states'. The problem of weapons of mass destruction, for example, becomes the problem of Saddam Hussein and what to do about Iraq...Terrorism becomes the problems of 'rogue states' like Sudan and Afghanistan" (Toal, 1998, p. 24). The War on Terror aimed at toppling the Afghan regime led by the Taliban which refused to hand over Osama bin Laden, the culprit of 9/11 terrorist attack to the US. However, the UN Charter prohibits change of regime in a country by external actors as that defies sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. The article 2 of the UN Charter prohibits the use of or threatened use of force against another state (UN Charter, Article 2). It is argued that the Taliban refused to turn over bin Laden because there was no extradition treaty existing between the US and Afghanistan. Secondly, there is a long tradition in Muslim countries to treat foreign visitors as guests. Nevertheless, the Taliban expressed its willingness to deliver bin Laden over to the US or to a third country if US officials provided convincing evidence that bin Laden had, in fact, been complicit in the 9/11 attacks. The US President George Bush's response was that the US officials would not furnish any such evidence to the Taliban government (Hornberger, 2011). After the 9/11 attack, the US received sympathy from almost all countries of the world. However, instead of capitalising on those positive feelings to isolate bin Laden and his aides, the US reacted to the occasion in a knee-jerk military fashion. According to Arturo Munoz,

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the US opposed to reconcile with the Taliban in early December 2001. "A peace process among the Afghans was discussed at the time, only to be repudiated by the Americans" (Munoz, 2011, p. 12). The US quickly divided the world into two categories of nations, American allies who supported the War on Terror and enemies who opposed or even maintained neutrality. Soon, Iran was included as part of the latter category in Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech (Bush 'Axis of Evil' Speech, 2002). The American President Barack Obama replicated his predecessor's military and security centric strategies. According to M. J. Williams, "the US has and remains overly inclined to use military power to fix a problem, even when that problem ultimately defies the ability of the military to provide a solution. While the new Obama Administration has a more evolved view of the Afghan issue, the continued US over-investment in defence illustrates the preference of tools in the American psyche" (Williams, 2011, p. 124).

The US was more interested in waging a war to eliminate the enemy and spread its influence in the region than building a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. To conduct the war in Afghanistan, the US resorted predominantly to air power and limited its ground-troops presence. And for ground operations, it depended on Afghan warlords. While, on the one hand, the US wanted to limit the casualties on its army, the increasing use of air power led to the growth of death of Afghan civilians. Moreover, the US dependence on Afghan warlords militated against the idea of peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. The warlords practiced no less violence than the Taliban. They used the American military and economic assistance for consolidating their role in different pockets of Afghanistan. The intelligence provided by the warlords to the US was based more on their desire to sort out personal feuds with other warlords than to give authentic information about al Qaeda and Taliban hideouts. Instead of creating an independent Afghan National Army, it was suggested at the Bonn conference that the ANA be recruited from these militias (Zia-Zarifi, 2004). The American military-driven foreign policy was explicit in the reports pointing to Afghan detainees being tortured in Bagram and other US detainment centres. An article in the *Guardian* (UK) stated that in Bagram and eighteen other US detention centres and firebases around Afghanistan, Afghan detainees were regularly tortured (Campbell and Goldberg, 2004). Patience, which is required for successful nation-building process is found to be lacking among US troops. Copies of Koran have been found to be burned by US troops and a US soldier opened fire and killed 16 people in a village near Kandahar (Swami, 2012).

Williams argues that Afghanistan poses virtually no threat to the US and its NATO allies in the way that Nazi Germany threatened Europe or that Soviet Russia threatened NATO. It is the absence of power in Afghanistan - the ability of the government to hold a monopoly on the use of force, to curb narcotics production, to root out warlordism and to defeat an insurgency - that causes problems for NATO allies (Williams, 2011, p. 26). Nation-building, which requires continued engagement in social, economic and political restructuring of a society after a war was not part of the American Afghan War plan. The various peacekeeping operations in the 1990s of which the US had been a part - in the former Yugoslavia and Haiti, for example - were held up by key administration figures like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld as proof of strategic vacuity of the Clinton administration. They, instead, believed that the military was to be fundamentally transformed and should not to be used for 'policing' or for open-ended peace-keeping missions linked to the notions of nation-building. The transformation of the military was to be essentially based on high-technology, rapidly deployed, short-duration combat missions, in which victory could be achieved quickly and forces speedily withdrawn. To conduct the Afghan War, the



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American forces confined their activity to a high-technologically driven military role while the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission was portrayed as post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction. Between 2001 and 2005, the US spent eleven times more on military operations in Afghanistan than it did on reconstruction, humanitarian aid, economic assistance and the training of Afghan security forces combined (Bird and Marshall, 2011, p. 134). According to Dobbins, the inadequate resources especially in Afghanistan “represented both an exaggerated confidence in the efficacy of high-tech warfare” and “an aversion to the whole concept of nation-building” (Dobbins, 2011, p. 17).

Munoz argues that the paltry investment of the US resources in Afghanistan was only one reason for the mission there stalling. Another reason was the way those resources were applied. “Instead of honouring Afghan terms of peace, utilising village institutions to maintain security, and training Afghans to do most of their own fighting and rebuilding..., the US and NATO tried to impose Western ways of doing things” (Munoz, 2011, pp. 23-24). The US applied a top down approach to ensure security and socio-economic development in Afghanistan. On the security front, this has meant building the Afghan National Security Forces – consisting of the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Army Air Corps, Afghan National Police, and Afghan Border Police – as the bulwarks against the Taliban and other insurgent groups. On the economic and development fronts, this has meant improving the central government's ability to deliver services to the population. But “there were few efforts to engage Afghanistan's tribes, sub-tribes, clans, and other local institutions,” laments Seth Jones, who worked closely with US Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan (Jones, 2011, pp. 37-45).

While to get a foothold in Central Asia, the US strengthened the hands of the authoritarian rulers in the name of creating a common front against terrorism, the same country followed the ideology of “liberal democracy” to keep the war-ravaged Afghanistan weak by not allowing the state to consolidate power. According to Tim Bird and Alex Marshall “Warlordism and the absence of an effective bureaucracy were the absolute natural by-products of an externally dictated and implicitly decentralising economic agenda in Afghanistan” (Bird and Marshall, 2011, p. 131). The agenda was based on the principle that the state should be the enabler rather than the provider of economic growth. International aid was tied to the global private sector which was entrusted with the task of reconstruction and as a result Afghanistan remained as a weak and rentier state. Furthermore, these two scholars also point to the problem of tying aid to the purchase of America-sourced products and services. According to them, a full 70 per cent of US aid was made conditional upon US goods and services being purchased or employed (Bird and Marshall, 2011, p. 135).

### **Durability of American Interest and Presence in Afghanistan**

In contrast to the arguments of many scholars that globalisation has rendered geopolitics irrelevant, the American role and interest in Afghanistan has largely been geopolitical and long-term. The US role and NATO's intervention in Afghanistan “confirms rather than undermine the value of conventional military capabilities although in the form of lighter and more flexible infantry forces supported by strategic airlift” (Hess, 2004, p. 97). Since the break-up of the Soviet Union's heartland domination, *Geopolitic* has even experienced a veritable renaissance in both academic and policy circles. 1 Qaeda-organised and sponsored terrorist attacks have only intensified an already existing belief that

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the heartland bestows a geopolitical advantage to the power that controls it. Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth argue that previous leading states in modern era were either great commercial and naval powers or great military powers on land, never both (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2002, p. 23). At the dawn of the Cold War the United States was clearly dominant economically as well as in air and naval capabilities. But the Soviet Union retained overall military parity, and thanks to geography and investment in land power it had a superior ability to seize territory in Eurasia. Thus, the US strategy in the post-Cold War has not only been to keep Russia weak to consolidate its control over the heartland, it is also keen to develop its land power capabilities. Afghanistan borders Central Asian states in the north and American ally Pakistan in the south. Therefore, control over Afghanistan was vital to acquire a line of communication between the Indian Ocean and Eurasian landmass and develop multidimensional strategies.

Being located at the centre of many regions, Afghanistan and the Central Asian region provide point of access to these regions. While Afghanistan is situated in the middle of major Asian regions like Central Asia, South Asia, West Asia and Far-East, Central Asia being part of larger Eurasia joins Europe with Asia. Therefore, both regions are important in terms of controlling various other regions. In Zbigniew Brzezinski's words both Afghanistan and the Central Asia region are geopolitical pivots. Geopolitical pivots are the states "whose importance is derived not from their power and motivation but rather from their sensitive location and from the consequences of their potential vulnerable condition for the behaviour of strategic players" (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 41). However, it needs to be underlined that neither Afghanistan nor the former Soviet Republics after their independence are completely passive actors. They constantly shape the will and capacity of the geostrategic players pursuing their geopolitical interests. According to Brzezinski, geostrategic players are the states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter the existing geopolitical state of affairs (Brzezinski, 1997, p. 41). The US, Russia, Iran, India, China and Pakistan can be considered as geostrategic players according to this definition.

The importance of the geopolitical pivots for the geostrategic players has been enormous despite the resistance from the geopolitical pivots and vulnerable conditions arising from the presence of other active geostrategic players. Saul B. Cohen has described Eurasia as a "convergence zone". According to Cohen the importance of this area is that it is "where five of the world's geopolitical power centres – Maritime Europe, Russia, China, India and Japan – converge upon it. The countries and regions within the Convergence Zone serve as land, air, and water transit-ways for flows of capital, people, technology, manufactured goods, energy, and other mineral resources. Increasingly the importance of the area to its abutting powers has been magnified by its natural resources, especially oil and natural gas, specialised agriculture, tourist services, and relatively low wages for off-shore manufacturing operations, and negatively as bases for terrorists and the smuggling of arms and drugs" (Cohen, 2005, p.1). Thus, Afghanistan and the Central Asian region are important for multiple civilian and military purposes. Being bridge to different areas the regions serve the civilian interests as they are not only emerging as the major centres of natural resources, they also provide one of the largest markets of millions of people and more importantly, they provide the transit-ways for multiple inter-continental transactions.

According to a former diplomat of India, by the end of 2008, the US taking advantages of the interconnectivity that the region provides began developing an altogether new land route through the

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southern Caucasus to Afghanistan which steers clear of Iran, Russia and China. He believed that the project, if materialised, would be a geopolitical coup – the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus (Bhadrakumar, 20 January, 2010). At one stroke, the US would be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and the US will be able to consolidate its military position in southern Caucasus. Furthermore, Washington looked for new supply routes from and military bases in Central Asia even though its close partnership with Pakistani military continued. He says, “the US has done exceedingly well in geopolitical terms, even if the war as such may have gone rather badly both for the Afghans and the Pakistanis and the European soldiers serving in Afghanistan” (Bhadrakumar, 2010).

Professor S. Frederic Starr of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Hopkins University articulated the vision of Modern Silk Route seeing the enormous trade potential in the region. In the first half of 2009, the US established several new transit corridors to deliver nonlethal goods to its forces in Afghanistan. These routes, put together, are termed as Northern Distribution Network (Kuchins, 2010, p.33). Many US officials are interested to see this network being transformed into Modern Silk Route (Kuchins, 2010, p.34). However, it must be noted that many political ideas like the Greater Central Asia project are justified through this economic logic. In reality, the supply routes and ports once put in place can be used for dual purposes-both civilian and military.

The US interest to stay in Afghanistan and Central Asia for long time became clear after the Lisbon Summit between NATO and Afghanistan took place in November 2010. Both signed a declaration, the thrust of which was on affirming “their long-term partnership” and building “a robust, enduring partnership which complements the ISAF security mission and continues beyond it” (Bhadrakumar, 27 November, 2010). The Lisbon summit confirmed that the NATO military presence in Afghanistan would continue beyond 2014, the timeline suggested by President Hamid Karzai for Kabul to be completely in charge of the security of the country. Going by the spirit of the declaration, NATO will maintain its counter-terrorism capability in Afghanistan even after 2014. The declaration said that NATO would be present in Afghanistan so long as it did not have confidence that the Al-Qaeda was no longer operative and was no longer a threat. NATO may even undertake combat operations beyond 2014 if and when need arises. The US President Barack Obama said, “by 2014 the NATO footprint in Afghanistan will have been significantly reduced. But beyond that, it is hard to anticipate exactly what is going to be necessary...I will make that determination when I get there” (Bhadrakumar, 27 November, 2010). On May 2, 2012, the US and Afghanistan entered into Strategic Partnership Agreement. The countries agreed to oppose threats to the sovereignty of Afghanistan by cooperating closely on defence and security. The Agreement stipulates that even after US forces withdraw in 2014, the US would continue to support training, equipping and sustaining Afghan Security Forces “to ensure terrorists never again encroach on Afghan soil and threaten Afghanistan, the region and the world” (Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement, 2012).

## Conclusion

American interest in Afghanistan and former Soviet Republics deepened after the disintegration of the USSR. Emergence of independent states in the Eurasian Heartland led the Americans believe that it could manipulate situations there to develop continental strategies. American attention was also on the volume of natural resources hidden in the Central Asian region which was much advertised in the 1990s. In the post-Cold War period, the leadership in the US developed the doctrine of enlargement in place of the containment strategy to reach out to the former Soviet Republics. The doctrine of enlargement which was based on the principles of democracy, human rights and market economy was not successful in the authoritarian Central Asian states. The US could not also resort to coercive diplomacy as it needed Russia's support to deal with new conventional threats like Iran and Iraq. In this context, terrorism appeared to be a global-scale overriding threat around which it could organise its geopolitical interests immediately after 9/11. Afghanistan was not only the centre of terrorism, it was also vital for the US to transfer Central Asian energy resources to the world market bypassing Russia and Iran. Moreover, Afghanistan was central to the American 'Greater Central Asia' project to move the Central Asian states away from Russian and Iranian orbit of influence towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. The War on Terror in Afghanistan provided the US an entry to the Central Asian states and helped in establishing military bases and securing transit rights in Central Asia for the military and non-military supplies to the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The US' militarily driven policy in Afghanistan points to the geopolitical character of its interests. In the first place, the US resorted to pre-emptive strikes against Afghanistan to topple the Taliban regime bypassing all the legitimate methods to capture the individuals who masterminded 9/11. Secondly, it took the help of warlords of Afghanistan to fight Al Qaeda and Taliban forces and instituted them to power knowing that they were not less violent in their approach and objectives. Thirdly, it invested many times more on military than on the socio-economic development of Afghanistan. Fourthly, it applied a top-down approach to security and development without rural and tribal peoples' interests into account.

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This paper concludes the trilogy dealing with Afghanistan's recent past. The first two parts were published in the previous two issues of the Journal. — Editor

