

Introduction

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One of the distinct trends that emerged after the end of the Cold War was the strategic shift from Europe to Asia. The significant event that ushered in these radical changes at the global level was the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, leading to the emergence of fifteen new independent entities in the post Soviet space. This event fundamentally altered the geopolitical map of Europe and Asia. Coinciding with the breakup of the Soviet Union was the growing significance of natural resources, particularly energy sources. Both the developed and developing countries searched for secure sources of energy and other vital minerals. The Eurasian region, including Central Asia, was a vast storehouse of natural resources. This attracted the attention of the international community and efforts to procure and control followed. Another significant development was the changing nature of security. New sources of threats and challenges were regional/local conflicts. Such conflicts were fuelled by religious extremism, terrorism and aggressive nationalism and were the chief sources of instability. Consequently, the global community was forced to face both traditional as well as non-traditional threats. Non-traditional threats and challenges necessitated collective and collaborative effort. In addition, the potential rise of China, India and the fastest growing economies of South East Asia, Japan's growing economic clout, as well as poverty alleviation and health hazards were some of the issues confronting Asia.

The new world order that arose on the debris of the Cold War had two clear tendencies; cooperation and competition. The framework for understanding and analyzing a country's interest has changed in the globalized politics of today. It is primarily a change from the previous way of thinking to a new attitude of cooperation. A parallel trend that has existed and continues to exist is that of competition among powers for influence and control. In this

context old rivalries, the significance of geopolitics are areas that are part of the competitive politics: cooperation and competition co-exist.

Central Asia's strategic location in the centre of Eurasia is of immense geopolitical significance. It flanks the perceived powers of the future, namely Russia and China. Although the US is not located in the region, its global reach and the pursuance of the concept 'geopolitical pluralism and multiculturalism' by US policy makers indicates its interests in the region and Eurasia as a whole. Adjoining the Persian Gulf and Turkey, Central Asia could assume critical importance if the present interests of the major and regional powers become unbalanced. The entire construct of the Central Asian future has to be seen from the perspective of an evolving regional balance of power.

In the southern direction of Central Asia, three countries, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, border Afghanistan. The war on terror led by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has entered its eighth year. There is no doubt that NATO is playing a crucial role in this conflict by defeating the Taliban and preventing their return. The worsening situation in Pakistan often complicates the logistical and supply routes of NATO forces. Central Asia's proximity has assumed importance as it has emerged as an alternate supply route to NATO forces and the US. The escalating insurgency and turbulence in Pakistan and unstable conditions in Afghanistan highlight the significance of Central Asia in the fight against extremism and terrorism.

Central Asia has always held a high strategic value for India and Indian interests call for the two regions to reconnect by reviving its rich legacy of historical and cultural contacts. This past affinity is the bridge to develop a close and a meaningful engagement with Central Asia. Before proceeding further, a brief historical perspective on Indian interaction with Central Asia is in order.

Historical Contacts and Cultural Affinity

For several millennia India has interacted with the Central Asian region; Afghanistan, Central Asia and Xinjiang. Trade was the motivating factor throughout history and with trade came cultural interaction. Central Asia's location at the juncture of two great civilizations – India and China – was a

favorable factor that promoted cultural interaction. Central Asia also played a role in enriching the cultures with which it came in contact. In the words of Academician Babajan Gafurov of Tajikistan “It was not a mechanical transmission of cultural values from one people to another, it was a creative process in which cultural achievements were further refined before they were passed on”.¹

A vigorous interaction ensued between the people of the Indus Valley Civilization and those settled in the region since the Bronze Age. A major development in the life of the people many millennia ago was the horse. “It was the horse”, writes Ahmad Hasan Dani of Pakistan, “brought by the Aryans that changed the whole perspective of life in South Asia including political, social, economic and cultural aspects”.² Subsequently, the horse became an integral part of an Emperor’s fighting force – the cavalry. New research shows that the Indus Valley Civilization had trade and cultural contacts with Altyn Depe, an ancient civilization of Turkmenistan.

A milestone in the development of contacts was the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and thence to China. A Buddhist scholar from Kashmir, Vairochana, was the first missionary to introduce Buddhism into Central Asia. In due course, Central Asia served as a transit route for Buddhism to China. According to Chinese sources, Buddhism came to China around 217 B.C. Indian emperor Ashoka in 203 B.C. and King Kanishka of the Kushan Empire of Central Asian origin whose empire included Kashmir are mainly credited for spreading the Buddhist tenets in the region. Indeed the spread of Buddhism was so wide and deep that it exercised a strong influence in the Central Asian region.

Among his various achievements, Kanishka’s most outstanding contribution was the convening of the Fourth Buddhist Council in Kashmir where open debates and discussion on various schools of thought on Buddhism took place. The open-mindedness of those days was reflected when the Council accepted and acknowledged that the diverse views expressed were all part of

¹ Babajan Gafurov, “Kushan Civilization and World and Culture” in *Central Asia in the Kushan Period* (Nauka, Moscow, 1974), p. 74, in Russian.

² Ahmad Hasan Dani, “Buddhism to Islam: Cultural Links between Central Asia and South Asia” in N.N. Vohra, ed., *Culture, Society and Politics in Central Asia and India* (Delhi, 1999), p. 6.

Buddhism. An outcome of these deliberations was that two major strands in Buddhism appeared; the *Mahayana* which stressed selfless service to the poor, tolerance etc. and *Hinayan* which emphasized only the monastic order. It was the Mahayana strand that had wider acceptability and became immensely popular in Central Asia. Buddhist monks were indefatigable missionaries who traversed the Central Asian region to propagate the ideals. In the process, several *viharas* or monasteries were built prominently along the towns and cities that sprang along the silk route. Buddhist texts were translated into local languages, including the Uyghur language.

Under the cultural impact of Buddhism, the Gandhara School of Art was born. The School excelled in architecture and the numerous *viharas* are a testimony to this fact. Archeological finds across the region reveal the deep influence of Buddhism as well as the fine craftsmanship that existed in the ancient past. A twelve-meter long sleeping statute of Buddha in Tajikistan or the massive statues in Bamiyan in Central Afghanistan (destroyed by the Taliban in 2000) or the various historical sites discovered in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan (particularly the Swat Valley) are part of the priceless heritage of mankind. Hiuen Tsang, a famous Chinese pilgrim, came to India in 631 A.D. via the Central Asian route and stayed in Kashmir for fifteen years studying the scriptures and other Buddhist texts.

While Buddhism was receding in the subcontinent, possibly due to lack of royal patronage and partly because Lord Buddha was accepted as part of the Hindu pantheon, it continued to flourish in Central Asia until the Arabs introduced Islam. Today Buddhism is practiced with fervor and devotion in Tibet and other areas.

An equally significant development from the perspective of religious interaction was the spread of Sufism in the subcontinent. Sufism is a strand within Islam which emphasizes benevolence and tolerance. Although Islam was introduced in the subcontinent by the Arabs in the seventh century, its large scale spread is due to the Sufi saints who popularized the religion. Many Sufi saints along with their disciples came to India from Bukhara, Samarkand and other cities of Central Asia. In this regard a major contribution was made by Sayyid Ali Hamadani, who came to Kashmir from Kulyab in Tajikistan along with his five hundred disciples in the late fourteenth century. Earlier it

was Buddhism that was introduced in Central Asia by Buddhist monks from India, later it was the Sufi saints who spread the message of Islam. In Central Asia Buddhist and Islamic ideas together produced a new, partly syncretised school of thought which perlocated back to India. The mystics, particularly the Sufis, represent the syncretic thought and ideas of a single cultural space.³ While Sufism has played a significant role in molding a tolerant attitude among the people of Central Asia, it continues to wield influence in north India, particularly Kashmir. Even today the shrines of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi and Muinuddin Chisti in Ajmer (Rajasthan) attract devotees from South Asia.

The rich cultural interaction of the ancient past impacted in diverse ways. The economic dimension has been a constant feature of this engagement. As mentioned, even during the Harappan age trading actively was important. Takshashila (now in Pakistan) was strategically located on the river Indus and the city of Puruspura (near Peshawar in Pakistan) formed major centers of Indian land routes to Central Asia and beyond. Caravan routes and camel traffic continued to traverse the region even after the silk route became operational. The silk route provided a powerful stimulus to trade. Among the prized commodities in great demand were Chinese silk, Indian ivory, Syrian glass and Roman metal ware. In due course, many branches of the silk route emerged connecting China and India with Europe in diverse ways. The oases of Central Asian Bukhara and Samarkand were, however the centers from which the feeder roads branched out. A southern branch of the silk route passed through northern India, Kashmiri shawls and woolen and silk carpets were in great demand in Central Asia. Indian merchants also traversed long distances via Turkmenistan and the Caspii region (the Caspian region) to reach Kolkheti on the Black Sea (now in Georgia). Due to its enormous length, trade passed through many hands. But for the Central Asian segment, Indians were among the traders, along with Parthians and Soghdians.

Among the prominent items exported from India were sugar, cotton cloth, namda (woolen carpets), shawls and dyes, while the major items of import were horses, sheep, gold, silver, precious stones, metals and fruits, particularly dried fruits. The expansion and diversification of the caravan trade and

³ I.P. Khosla, "An Overview" in *ibid*, p. xvii.

the silk route led to the emergence of a large Indian diaspora in the Central Asian region. Bukhara, a commercial hub on the silk route, had 200 caravan-serais and Indians were allotted one such serai for their use. In 1832, Alexander Burnes noted that there are about 300 Hindus living in Bukhara. They are chiefly natives of Shikarpur in Sindh (Pakistan) and their number has of late increased (Burnes 1834, p. 286).⁴ Besides trading activity, Indians were also engaged in money lending and exchanging. Apart from Bukhara, Indian settlers were found all along the towns and cities on the silk route. Incidentally, in the ancient period the ruling dynasty of Khotan (China) claimed Indian origin.

A large number of Indians lived in Andijon, Fergana, Namangan as well as in small towns and villages of Central Asia. The "Guide Book of Turkistan" published in 1903 in St. Petersburg mentions the names of ten main trading firms of Andijon – two of which, Ramby Pasha and Ramsu Sufa – were Indian firms engaged in the silk trading. According to archival material, there were six Indians engaged in the bread and fruit business even in a small place like Hojent (Tajikistan).⁵ Near Tashkent, there were nearly forty Indians actively engaged in trading activity. In 1901, there were fifty two Indians in Kokand while in Namangan and Osh there were twenty eight and four Indians respectively. Indian settlers also built *viharas*, and left behind texts, a valuable source of information. Many of the Indians were owners of land, horses, caravans and gardens.⁶ There were masons and artisans from India who were brought by Timur to work in his capital city, Samarkand. India's trading activity with the region suffered a setback with the opening of sea commerce and the rise of British colonialism in the subcontinent. Nevertheless, it is estimated that in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were approximately eight thousand Indian settlers in the region.

There were also Central Asians also living in the subcontinent, though their exact number is not known. They lived in separate quarters, or *Mahallas*. Many of them arrived during the Mughal period and were men of letters occupying high positions in the royal courts. There were artisans and craftsmen

⁴ Radha Raina, "Pioneering Pilgrims, Artisans and Merchants", in *ibid.*, p. 76.

⁵ P.N. Rasulzade, *From the History of Central Asia – India Relations: Second Half of Nineteenth and Beginning of Twentieth Century*, in Russian Nauka, Tashkent, 1968, p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*

whose most visible contribution lay in architecture. A fine specimen of architectural skill is the Taj Mahal at Agra. It was the Central Asians living in Kashmir who introduced the art of tailoring and embroidery, which changed the economic life of Kashmir. Finely embroidered shawls from Kashmir were in great demand among the Central Asian nobility.

An important period in the historical ties between Medieval India and Central Asia began with the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030) who was in search of Indian riches and led several expeditions to India with this objective. With the beginning of “Delhi Sultanate” phase, the Muslim period of Indian history began. Members of the Khilji dynasty owed their origin to Turkmen tribes and military aristocracy comprised of Central Asian Turks at that time. They created a powerful organization, “Forty”, named so due to the number of its founder.⁷In 1526, Babur, hailing from Fergana, laid the foundation of Mughal Empire in India. It was Bairam Khan from the Turkmen region who helped Humayun (son of Babur) to regain his lost empire. Bairam Khan, however, is known as the tutor and mentor of Akbar and his son Abdurrahim Khan was a first rate soldier. Akbar unified large parts of India. Known for his humanism, sense of fairness and justice, and encouragement to art and literature, Akbar occupies a place of high honor in Indian history. The decline of the Mughal Empire began in the eighteenth century due to the absence of worthy successors to the earlier rulers. The mighty Mughal Empire was crumbling and paving the way for British colonialism in the subcontinent.

Cultural interaction reached new strengths during the period of the Muslim rule. In this regard, mention must be made of Al Beruni and Abdurazzak Samarkandi of Khorezm (now in Uzbekistan). The latter came to India in the fifteenth century. Their quest for knowledge led the two famous scholars to India. Al Beruni stayed in India for thirteen years, studied Sanskrit and importantly translated valuable treatise on mathematics and astronomy into Arabic. Al Beruni also penned his impressions about India in a book *Tarrik-i-Hind* (India), an outstanding source of information about eleventh century

⁷ Meruert Abuseitova, “Historical and Cultural Relations between Kazakhstan, Central Asia and India from Ancient Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century” in J.N. Roy and B.B. Kumar, eds., *India and Central Asia: Classical to Contemporary Periods*, (Delhi, 2007), p. 50.

India for posterity. The Tajik poet Bedil and Turkmen poet Magtymguly Pyragy wrote very endearingly about India. Magtymguly travelled to India and described his impressions of the lengthy journeys as “Here and there, all the ways in Turkmenistan go to my Hindustan”. Poet Bedil’s final resting place was Delhi. Akbar’s court had two poets from Central Asia; Maulana Qasim Kahi and Khwaja Hassan. Mirza Ghalib and Iqbal wrote both in Farsi and Urdu and their poems written in Farsi were extremely popular in Central Asia.

Indian medical studies and research were widely known and admired in Central Asia. Indian texts on medicine by Charak and Susrat were translated into Arabic and local languages. Often travelers to India carried back medicines with them. A famous physician from Herat Abu Mansur Mawafaq confessed having adopted the Indian way of learning as they (the Indians) were more sharp sighted in medical sciences than any other people and were more accurate in their research.⁸

Other areas where cultural interaction was visible was in the field of painting, including miniatures. The Kyrgyz legendary epic *Manas* has made references to elephants. Music and musical instruments of the two regions have a striking similarity. Central Asia exerted influence on the art of gardening in India. When a mosque or a tomb was being constructed during the Mughal period, special care had to be taken to ensure that there was enough space for gardens.

This vigorous and robust interaction waned with the expansion of British rule in the subcontinent and the Russian advance into Central Asia. A view suggests that the British rulers were interested in Central Asia long before the Russians incorporated the region into their empire. In the early nineteenth century the British began collecting information about Central Asia and had even established a monitoring centre at Herat. The Great Game refers to the pursuit for territorial and imperial domination in the Afghan region, played out between the British and Russian empires in the second half of the nineteenth century.

⁸ Mansura Haidar, *Exchanges and Interactions in the Field of Fine Arts, Handicrafts and Technology* in N.N. Vohra, ed., *Culture, Society and Politics in Central Asia and India* (Delhi, 1999), p. 88.

However, the orientation of the two regions underwent radical change with the recognition of Afghan independence, the establishment of the Durand Line between Afghanistan and the British empire and the incorporation of Central Asia in the Tsarist empire.

The Russians began to reorient Central Asia towards the North as Central Asian cotton was essential for the textile factories of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Tashkent became the hub of transport routes going northern. The British in turn constructed the port cities of Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, thus orienting Indian trade by sea routes. The silk route was already on the decline and Central and South Asia had started to drift apart. Adding to this distancing was the changing language education in both the regions. While the British introduced English, the Tsarist Empire promoted education in Russian. In the process Persian, a common language, the root of centuries-old cultural links was marginalized. As a perceptive observer noted “More important was the fundamental change that they managed to mould into the minds of the people as a whole”.⁹

During the Soviet period, India was among the few countries which was able to interact with Central Asian Republics. Indian films and music were extremely popular then and even now. There were exchanges of literary people, artists and people to people contacts.

Contemporary Scenarios

A new opportunity opened up for India when the Central Asian states gained independence in 1991. During the previous decades the geopolitical situation in the two regions had undergone a fundamental change. The British had partitioned the subcontinent into two nation states – India and Pakistan. India and Pakistan have had troubled relations; the trauma of partition and a disputed legacy over the boundary issue has created considerable acrimony.

The two countries have not been able to establish good neighborly relations despite periodic efforts to restore normalcy in their relationship. The deteriorating situation on the borders and support to the insurgency in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir has often dampened the peace process. For the

⁹ Dani, *Buddhism to Islam*, (n. 2), p. 6.

present it is inconceivable that the stalled 'composite dialogue' in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks (November 2008) could be resumed in near future.

Afghanistan has also had a troubled relationship with Pakistan. Afghanistan was the only country to oppose Pakistan's entry into the United Nations. A highly contentious boundary issue or the Durand Line is the crux of Afghanistan-Pakistan estrangement. Tensions between the two countries have further escalated due to Pakistan's support and encouragement to extremist forces and Al Qaeda elements who wish to see an unsettled situation in Afghanistan. On the other hand, India has consistently enjoyed close and cordial ties with Afghanistan much to the annoyance of Pakistan. India and Afghanistan face threats and challenges from extremist forces and Al Qaeda elements originating from a common source. Undoubtedly, India's neighborhood is not as peaceful as in the past.

Similarly, the Central Asian region has also undergone radical changes. The Central Asian states gained independence in a vastly changed regional environment. Domestically, the challenge for the young states was to overcome the Soviet legacy and replace it with a new system. Dismantling the old system and replacing it with a new one in the absence of adequate experience and expertise was a monumental task. Their immediate concern was to prevent an economic collapse and ensure security in an increasingly volatile region. Geopolitics and energy security pushed the Central Asian states into the vortex of international politics. The beginning of the war on terror and the military presence of Western forces led by the US further enhanced their geopolitical significance.

The US, Russia and China have established their presence in Central Asia at the strategic level. A subtle attempt to secure and control the natural resources of Central Asia and enhance ones own influence is already underway. Whether this is the new version of the "Great Game" is a debatable point, but there is no denying that a competition among the powers is already on. The Caspian region adjoins Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are littoral states) and the strategic value of the Caspian region is perhaps higher than that of Central Asia. The Central Asian states have ensured their security by joining regional groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Or-

ganization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). These groupings are however, inadequate when viewed against the nature of threats and challenges faced by Central Asia. Steps have yet to be taken to deal with the question of better border management, training of personnel and creation of paramilitary forces in an efficient manner. Mention must be made of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), a Kazakh initiative that seeks to broaden the parameters of security in the region by involving other Asian countries. India is a member of CICA but not of the other regional groupings. Non-traditional threats are insidious and all-pervasive in nature and therefore require a collective and a collaborative effort. Challenges such as narcotics-trafficking, proliferation of small arms and organized crimes are activities of non-state actors. These activities sustain religious extremism and terrorism, and also impact negatively at the societal level. It is perhaps necessary to consider a new security architecture for the region that holds high strategic significance for regional and major powers. Such an architecture should offer equal security and be mutually beneficial to all.

Despite India's assertion that Central Asia is part of its strategic neighborhood, its policies were not as robust as they ought to have been. India has perhaps been unable to match their expectations in economic terms, but nonetheless, Central Asian stability is in India's interest. The fledgling Central Asian states were vulnerable to non-traditional threats and challenges. These destabilizing impulses emanated from the common neighborhood. The current deteriorating situation in Pakistan has grave implications for the Fergana Valley. The risk of militants shifting base to Tajikistan is real and not enough attention is being paid to this in the strategic thinking of the international community. Within the Central Asian region inter-ethnic rivalry, illegal migration arising from poor economic conditions are potential sources of destabilization. At the strategic level, Indian interests are to see that the region is not dominated by one single power.

The turning point in India's engagement with the Central Asian states came at the turn of the century. India's growing national strength – economic development, military and strategic consolidation, its knowledge industries all added to its rising international profile. In foreign policy terms India was

willing to intensify its engagement not only with South Asia, but with Asia as a whole. It implied that India's security parameters had broadened considerably, transcending its traditional South Asia-centric concerns. Its stakes in the extended neighborhood have risen considerably. This gave India's "Look Central Asia" policy a fresh impetus. As mentioned, the watchword in India's policy was the stability of its extended neighborhood. Parallel to its proactive role in Central Asia was also the issue of energy security. The need to procure Central Asian energy and also to play a role in their energy strategy became an additional factor in India's strategic thinking. The Central Asian economies are showing positive growth. Indian engagement in trade, investments and the promotion of regional cooperation are all being pursued. With Afghanistan as a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the possibility of associating Central Asian States with the grouping would provide an impetus to South and Central Asian cooperation.

India has to depend on bilateral instruments in the pursuit of its objectives. On issues of security and economic development all the Central Asian States, except Turkmenistan, are members of regional groupings such as the SCO, the CSTO, or the EurAsEC. These are the prominent regional groupings in the region. In Afghanistan, India's involvement in its reconstruction effort is vibrant and sustained.

India's engagement with the Central Asian states is on a sound footing. Common commitment to democracy, open societies and secularism, similar perceptions of the nature of threats and challenges facing them, and the rich legacy of past contacts have augured well for India in this energized phase. More importantly, the Central Asian states are responding favorably to India's active policy. Eighteen years the multivector foreign policy of the Central Asian states often comes under strain. Central Asia's search to find the best option of cooperation with Russia, the US and China poses difficult choices at times. The Central Asian states therefore welcome India's heightened involvement in the region. In their perception, given India's rising stature - particularly in its evolving strategic ties with the US, - it (India) could play the role of a balancer in Central Asia. A milestone development was the Declaration of Strategic Partnership signed between India and Kazakhstan in

January 2009. Incidentally, President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the guest of honor at India's Republic Day function. On the energy scene of Central Asia, India has been able to establish a modest presence whilst supporting the Asian Development Bank's Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project.

Secondly, India can help with capacity building in the Central Asian states. The Central Asian economies are showing a positive growth rate and some of the states, such as Kazakhstan, favor a quicker diversification of these economies. India could contribute positively to this diversification process. This development has also opened up possibilities of trilateral cooperation. As there is a congruence of interests between India and the US on many issues of international/regional importance in Central Asia, the two countries could cooperate in economic and related areas, including security. The possibility of India, the US and Russia cooperating in Central Asia in the energy sector could be explored.

The issue of peace and stability in Afghanistan is closely intertwined with India's attempts to intensify its interaction with Central Asia. Reaching out to Central Asia is not an easy task, as the Central Asian states are landlocked and do not share a border with India. In this situation Afghanistan is the critical link in connecting India with Central Asia. Before India are two options; one is to follow the ancient transport and trade route that traversed present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, Pakistan's denial of access of its territory to India and the current low in India-Pakistan relations makes this an implausible option. The second option is via Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan/Tajikistan. This gateway needs to be energized, for India 'Look Central Asia' policy to acquire substance and content.

In this context, the concept of Greater Central Asia (henceforth GCA), which aims to bring South and Central Asia closer to each other is noteworthy. For several centuries, the two regions were linked through transport and trade, religion, culture and historical ties. Such ties augured well for the economic prosperity of the two regions. In the past scheme of things, Afghanistan was the crucial link between the two regions. The concept of GCA attempts to recreate the past scenario primarily through transport and trade in which Afghanistan would occupy a central position. As observed by Freder-

ick Starr, the architect of GCA, “the key to development in the region is trade which in turn requires improvements in transport. The economies of Afghanistan and its neighbors will never flourish in isolation; many are still dominated by subsistence agriculture and none has much industry. But their geographical position at the crossroads of the Middle East and eastern Asia, of Europe and Southern Asia would enable them to reap great benefit from increases in trade”.¹⁰ The core idea of GCA, linking South with Central Asia, is in congruence with Indian interests of enhancing economic interaction with Central Asia. At the broader level, the idea of GCA has opened up a remarkable opportunity for continental trade by overland route which would include Central Asia and extend even further to Europe. The GCA strategy, however, hinges on Pakistan’s willingness to allow access to India of its territory and also to ensure its security. Another inter-related issue is India-Pakistan and Afghanistan-Pakistan relations which impinge on the GCA strategy. For the present it seems that this option is inconceivable. India will have to pursue the next best option to reach Central Asia, via Iran. The Central Asian states also need multiple choices in the southward direction. Frederick Starr, a renowned scholar of Eurasian Affairs says “The best way forward is to pursue whatever options make the best market sense under the circumstances. If one channel is blocked let trade flow through others. This process will encourage, even force, those countries to remove political blockages and calculate opportunity costs”.¹¹ Nevertheless, while tumultuous events in the region have cast a shadow over the pursuit of the GCA idea for the present, the efficacy and validity of the idea is not in doubt.

¹⁰ S. Frederick Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2005.

¹¹ S. Frederick Starr, ed., *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia* (Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2007), p. 31.