



Construction of Dominant Geopolitical Discourse in the U.S. Foreign Policy in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Taking Central Asia as a case study, this article examines how dominant geopolitical discourse on Central Asia is constructed in the U.S. foreign policy against the backdrop of competing geopolitical visions of its leading institutions and intellectuals of the statecraft. After the September 2001 attacks on the U.S., the geopolitical reasoning changed with the emergence of non-state actors like - the Taliban, Al Qaida, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These developments make the location of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) dangerous. One may argue that the U.S. foreign policy was re-engineered post-2001, especially during the Bush regime. The article highlights the salient features of the geopolitical discourses on Central Asia produced around different approaches influencing the U.S. statecraft, for instance, in Mackinder's 'heartland' theory; visions enshrined in the Bush doctrine; resource geopolitics; imaginations of the intellectuals of the Project for New American Century (PNAC); and, emerging equations and alignments in Central Asia and neighbourhood in respect to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The article deconstructs the popular constructs of Central Asia by the leading institutions and intellectuals of the U.S. statecraft, especially post-2001 era. It concludes with how geopolitical discourses are constructed and what makes a geopolitical discourse dominant among other discourses.

Key Words: Central Asia, U.S. Foreign Policy, Geopolitics, Bush Doctrine, War on Terror

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I. INTRODUCTION

Comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the strategic location of Central Asia makes it geopolitically significant on the world map. Central Asia has been perceived differently at different times, seen and understood from different lenses. The social and representational construction of Central Asia has varied according to the dominant geopolitical imagination of the respective era. Central Asia has been framed and flagged differently by different scholars and institutions in their narratives. Although it remained marginalized in U.S. foreign policy, it has seen shifts and turns that have significantly shaped the region's geopolitics.

In his opinion on the neglect of Central Asia, Andre Gunder Frank (2007) stated that Central Asia is the most important yet most neglected part of the world and its history. He opined that as the histories were written to legitimize victors' actions, Central Asia lost out to 'outsiders' and could not find the place it deserved in the written world history. Moreover, their writings were inspired by the concept of 'Euro-centrism', which blinded people to Central Asia. Besides this, political circumstances in Soviet and Chinese Central Asia virtually closed the region for foreign researchers for a long time. Despite being an important economic crossroad, it remained 'undiscovered' by the 'outside' world until it surfaced as the site of the Great Game in the 19th century.

The term 'Great Game', coined during the age of imperialism and colonialism, had brought Anglo-Russian rivalry in the region to its peak. It referred to the 19th-century clash of imperial ambitions of Great Britain and Tsarist Russia (probably in 1893-1898) to gain control of the heart of the Eurasian landmass. After the end of World War II, the region gained importance not only due to its strategic position but also due to its rich energy resources. The post-Cold War scenario witnessed a new variant of the 'Great Game', i.e., the struggle to control the untapped energy reserves, risks of religious fundamentalism, and terrorism. Central Asia also holds significance due to its linkages to the traditional Silk Road.

Central Asia appeared on the world geopolitical map at least on three major occasions: during the Russo-British 'Great Game' (1830-1895), after Soviet disintegration in 1991, and after September 11, 2001. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, many scholars as well as policymakers, especially the U.S. in the 'West', believed that the newly independent countries would be ideologically and politically Islamic. Unfortunately, their hopes diminished when the five Central Asian states appeared reminiscent of the Soviet political system in miniature form.

1.1 American Geopolitical Imagination on Central Asia

During the Cold War, the central element of the American geopolitical imagination remained on how to best market the 'Soviet threat' in different forms: 'aggressive', 'militaristic', 'expansionist' and implacably hostile to the United States. This image exercised a powerful influence on American security policy and military statecraft throughout the Cold War. "Its representation crafted the doctrinal and organizational development of American military forces besides enhancing diplomatic relations" (Latham, 1999:222). Its nuclear arsenals and worldwide ambitions added to its ability to project power worldwide. Besides this, doctrines such as containment, deterrence and limited war also proved artifacts. The American geopolitical imagination understood the world primarily as comprising the 'West', the 'Communist East', and the 'Third World'. The end of the Cold War marked a partial break to the discourses attached to it.

Between 1989 and 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed in at least four senses: (1) as an economy; (2) as the existing alternative to capitalism; (3) as a perceived or real threat to the Western world; and finally; and, (4) as an empire (Cox, 1994). Moreover, the consequences of its collapse resulted profoundly. After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the U.S. did not have a visible enemy which could guide its foreign policy and military planning. This resulted in a 'threat vacuum', and the anxiety it induced forced the institutions and intellectuals of the statecraft to find a 'new threat' which would provide a clear guide for her military actions. At the same time, justify them as there was no clear sign of danger similar to that during the Cold War; in the 'post-Cold War, a new world order populated the world with new kinds of 'actors' was marketed. This threat comprised 'the West' and the threatening/dangerous 'other'. In this rhetoric, the CARs were understood largely from the perspective of geopolitical codes like 'stability', 'containment', 'access' to key geopolitical products, and 'prevention' of nuclear proliferation. The U.S. continued to focus on 'maintaining stability in Central Asia and containing the Islamic threat and nuclear proliferation (Mohsenin, 1995:232). Another objective of the U.S. statecraft was to isolate the Islamic Republic of Iran from these countries.

1.2 Post-September 11, 2001 Era

In the aftermath of the Cold War and particularly after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the American national security interests towards Central Asia underwent a drastic revision and reassessment. This also guided the U.S. statecraft to opt for direct geopolitical involvement in the region. Foreign powers took a much greater interest in preventing the spread of radical Islamic terrorist organizations. During the same time, the anti-terrorism war in Afghanistan made the U.S. relationship with these countries complex. The previous attempts by the United States to use the 'colour revolution' to alter and engineer the political systems in the region caused a sense of great unease amongst the CARs. It was also perceived as a security vacuum by many in Washington.

The Central Asian Republics offered their territory and airspace for use by the U.S. and its allies in operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan. The U.S. also used the 'war on terror' discourse to advance its regional political and economic ambitions, particularly over exploiting Central Asian energy resources (Davis & Azizian, 2007:1-5). Besides, its geo-strategic location and the presence of hydrocarbons reinforce each other in determining the centrality of Central Asia (Frank, 2007).

Another significant geopolitical vision offered by an influential intellectual of state-military-craft in the United States is that of Thomas P.M. Barnett. He submitted that in the post-Cold War world, 'disconnectedness defines danger' (Barnett, 2004). Barnett divided the world map into two parts – the 'functional core', which was globalized and the 'non-integrating gap', which was not. Central Asia also falls in this gap. His major argument was that 'all the major traditional and non-traditional threats in the world, including terrorism, came from the 'non-integrating gap'. As Sanjay Chaturvedi (2007) discussed, "neo-liberalism plays an important role by pulling various elements of realism and liberalism in an extra-ordinary way". When linked to geopolitics, especially after 9/11 and particularly in and around Central Asia, it promoted a corporate style of war-making (particularly in Iraq) with a hidden realist agenda (in pursuit of primacy) with the help of liberal discourse.

Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997), in his book 'The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geo-strategic Imperatives' notes that the Taliban's and Al Qaeda's activities and war in Afghanistan attracted the world to the international significance of Central Asia. Similarly, the Caspian basin has become a region of significance in global oil supply after the risks in the Middle East have soared. After reassessing its energy strategy and Central Asia's energy potential in 1997, the U.S. officially proclaimed the Caspian region, including

some Central Asian territories, a zone of their strategic interest. Also, it is assumed that the American policymakers share certain basic geographical assumptions, representations, and designations regarding Central Asia; this constitutes a basic interpretive framework that shapes how foreign policy officials understand and thus act. It is also believed that there is a remarkable degree of consensus among the policymakers regarding the basic contour of U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia, especially if we see it from the vantage point of America's 'vital' national interests.

II. THE PRIMACY OF MACKINDER'S 'HEARTLAND' THEORY AND SALIENT FEATURES OF THE 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS

Geopolitical perceptions and imaginations on Central Asia are primarily built in two different yet interlinked traditions – 'knowledge that is produced by the intellectuals' and 'caricaturing (with shades, colours and emphasis) of that knowledge by institutions of the statecraft in their policies' – without bypassing the national interest. Western intellectuals have often portrayed Central Asia as 'complex', 'dangerous', and 'oriental' – rather difficult to understand and restless. Some have also described Central Asia as an 'explosive mix' of Islam, ethnic hatred, terrorism, drugs and poverty. Even the U.S. media, via means of films and T.V. series, would often depict Central Asia as an unexplained, 'distant' and 'unseen' place on earth. On the other hand, the U.S. institutions of statecraft have perceived the region largely from the perspectives of geopolitical codes such as – 'stability', 'containment' of radical Islam and terrorism; 'access' to key resources; 'prevention' of nuclear proliferation and region which needs 'steering' under the U.S. leadership. These perceptions about Central Asia were formed more in response to developments outside the region than within. Moreover, economic disparities among the five republics and developmental hierarchies within each republic invited rich powers to intervene in the region.

During the classical geopolitical era, the description of the 'Great Game' in Central Asia by Rudyard Kipling in 1901 and the 'Heartland' theory by Halford John Mackinder in 1904 were significant. After Second World War, 'Heartland' imagery was deployed by the USA in its foreign policy, and the Cold War saw the revival of geopolitics. The period of the Cold War witnessed the 'containment' of the USSR as an 'emerging threat' to the expansion of the United States' ideological, political and economic influence – especially in the Heartland. Another motive of the Cold War was the gradual transformation of Russia and China 'from communist rivals to capitalist competitors and potential allies' against new rivals. This competition and struggle over Mackinder's 'Heartland' remained the dominant motive of the U.S. foreign policy initiatives during the Cold War era.

In contrast to classical, neoliberal geopolitics appears to have taken the lead in Central Asia. The issues of terrorism, radical Islam and drug trafficking have become intertwined with 'globalization' and 'investments' in support of a neo-liberal approach promoting free market competition. The U.S. promoted the corporate style of war-making, which paved the way for competition for access to energy reserves of Central Asia. The presence of U.S. forces in and around Central Asia under the jurisdiction of USCentCom is positioned to serve the so-called vital interests of the U.S. and its allies. It needs to be acknowledged that as geographically vast, ethnically diverse and spatially landlocked, Central Asian economies are in transition. However, the implications of this neoliberal geopolitics for Central Asia are yet to be addressed in their totality.

Lesser known to the outside world, Central Asia successfully proved its geopolitical worth to the rest of the world much faster than any other region. It even forced the U.S. Department of State to reconfigure the geography of its South Asian Bureau in 2005-2006, within fifteen years of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Central Asian republics becoming independent. President Bush's 'war on terror' further underlined the 'Eurocentricity' of Central Asia and brought forward its 'Asian-ness' by linking 'Central Asia' to 'South Asia'. While identity building of Central Asia is still a work in progress, Central Asian geopolitics is likely to become more complex and intriguing, especially in case the regional and the world powers do not find common grounds for building an architecture of cooperation for the region as a whole. Depicted differently at different times, various geopolitical perceptions about Central Asia have emerged during the classical to neoliberal era. These perceptions were formed and reformed in conjunction with the region's geopolitics. The most salient and prominent feature of the 20th century American geopolitical vision is the idea of America in itself plus associated features of being a superpower.

The 'identity' of Central Asia has most of the time remained 'unclear' due to its 'diverse' human-cultural landscapes. The various framings of the 'territorial identities' of Central Asia – of being Islamic, Turkic, Eurasian, Asian, and Eastern – have often produced distinct identities based on the respective knowledge systems, understandings and writings. Thus varied constructions of the Central Asian identity have long inspired the political ideas and philosophy of the outside 'others'.

Ever since the 'Silk Route Era', followed by the 'Islamic Golden Age' and 'Mongol Empire', Central Asia has been discussed and designated in a variety of ways, such as: 'Land of a Thousand Cities', 'Heartland', 'Rimland', 'Pivot Area', 'Eurasian Balkans', 'Gap', 'Center of the World', 'Soviet Central Asia', 'World Region',

'Middle Asia'. Assigned with different nomenclatures - 'Inner Eurasia', 'Muslim Eurasia', 'Central Eurasia', 'Inner Asia' and 'Post Mongol Space', Central Asia was seen by many as a 'distinct geopolitical space' during the Soviet era. Based on these geographical assumptions, representations and designations, the 'West', especially the U.S., constructed its idea of Central Asia. This idea is constructed within a 'common basic framework' that shapes the way institutions and intellectuals of the U.S. statecraft understand the region. However, they depict Central Asia in different ways. This framework remains dominated by the geographical characteristic of being 'land-locked'.

In the classical geopolitical era, Central Asia was prominently placed as the epicentre of global geopolitics by Mackinder in his 'heartland' theory, which became the signature intellectual product of political geography in the earlier 20th century. The USA deployed the 'Heartland' imagery during the Cold War amid a revival of geopolitics with the emergence of 'Eurasia' as a new 'geopolitical space'; also described as a pivot area of world politics, which divided the world into two parts: 'The World Island' and 'the Island Satellites' - practiced mainly upon the context of 'space', Central Asia's dominant and static character of being 'land-locked' determined its geopolitical power in the classical geopolitical era. In the same era, land and sea power theories also gained momentum until continental power like the United States emerged, which challenged the early classical notions of power.

Economic, political and ideological factors defined the geopolitical structures during the Cold War era. Centered on Mackinder's 'heartland' theory, the U.S. built a massive military and nuclear might, which helped it achieve realist orientation in the form of Cold War geopolitical discourses like – containment, deterrence and power balancing. However, the doctrine of 'mutual assured destruction (MAD) and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 ruptured the prevalent discourses, dismantled the 'block' structure and made the war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union irrational. Such representations governed the technical, doctrinal and organizational development of American military forces till the beginning of the Bush administration. At the same time, the penetration of USCentCom and NATO forces in and around Central Asia, also against the growing 'Soviet threat' –also labelled as 'aggression', 'militaristic', 'expansionist' and implacably hostile to the U.S. interest - challenged Mackinder's 'Heartland' thesis and lead to expansion of the U.S. influence in the Caucasus and Central Europe.

Steering clear of permanent alliances and keeping allies as strategic partners merely to expand its logistical reach has remained the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy since 1776. By 1948, the consolidation of the 'Western Hemisphere as an American geopolitical zone was also complete with the establishment of the Organization of the American States, and the world witnessed unquestionable U.S. hegemony from 1945 to 1970. However, despite the U.S. being a unipolar military power, the economic and political power has remained multilaterally distributed. After 1991, leaders of Central Asia confined their diplomatic engagement to regional security establishments such as Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUUAM) and SCO, indicating thereby to the U.S. that they had alternatives available.

Mackinder's thesis may coincide with the U.S.'s Cold War policies but became less significant after the end of the Cold War. During the Bush administration after 2001, Thomas P. M. Barnett's [realist] 'new map' became more relevant to the U.S. statecraft – which identified the whole globe into 'core' and 'gap' rather than a particular region – as target areas for U.S. military expansion.

III. CENTRAL ASIA IN THE GEOPOLITICAL VISIONS ENSHRINED IN THE BUSH DOCTRINE

After independence in 1991, it was in the wake of 9/11 that Central Asia again appeared on the world geopolitical map. Against the backdrop of the 'War on Terror' unfolding in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. foreign policy institutions and intellectuals failed to create a clear-cut and workable policy framework for Central Asia. In the absence of any 'genuine basis', the U.S. could not form a suitable geopolitical idea about the region, which, in turn, created further anxiety. However, it is significant to understand that despite a strong Islamic stronghold, Central Asia has produced less extremism than other Islamic states and is considered less threatening by the U.S. even until recent times, irrespective of the ongoing ISIS threat.

The Bush administration seemed inspired by the realist worldview of power struggle and military security. The U.S., under the Bush presidency, successfully conveyed its long-term empire-building strategy. This strategy was coded in various facets of Bush doctrine – 'unilateral – preventive war' [against the rogue states], 'confronting the nexus of weapons of mass destruction and catastrophic terrorism', 'regime change' [for rogue states], 'democracy promotion', 'maintenance of American primacy', 'war on terrorism', 'Distinct American Internationalism', 'coalition of the willing, and Iraq as demonstration case and part of a network of bases.

While examining the implications of the popularly perceived radical version of the emerging new realism, it was often proclaimed that the period after 9/11 was ripe for the United States to impose its power and values in world affairs, including Central Asia. The U.S. lead 'war on terror' appeared influenced by the neoconservatives of the PNAC and the Israeli lobby. Worth noting here is that during its crusade in Afghanistan

and Iraq, the U.S. even worked closely with the then 'non-democratic regimes' like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Pakistan.

Between 2001 and 2009, the Bush doctrine proclaimed 'vital security interests' in ensuring stable, modern, free trading democracies in Central Asia and the U.S. participation in moving oil and gas resources to the international market. Washington also remained concerned about the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the recruitment of Central Asian citizens by ISIS and other fundamental Islamic groups.

The realist school phenomenon [of power and military security] was intense during the Bush administration, and U.S. national security underwent a radical revision. This radical version, along with the emerging new realism embodied with neoconservative ideas of foreign policy practice, rejected international charters, institutions and mechanisms of cooperation. However, this idea failed and resulted in the failure of sympathy and goodwill generated worldwide for the U.S., as the nature of this revision remained questionable. In Bush's new-realism era, economic rather than ideological competition primarily drove the geopolitics in Central Asia. The realist school profoundly influenced the Bush regime. Strategies like 'unilateralism-preventive war' [against the rogue states], 'democracy promotion', 'coalition of the willing', 'maintenance of American Primacy', and 'distinct American Internationalism' were widely highlighted. The U.S. pursued unilateral military actions under Bush and declared military preemption legitimate when the threat is 'emerging' or 'sufficient', alone or with a coalition of the willing. His policies also included proactive regime change under the slogan of 'extending democracy'. Besides this, the war against the new 'global' enemy provided sufficient justification for a massive military build-up by the Bush administration. However, Russia and China saw Bush's move to secure forward bases around the oilfields of Central Asia as the hidden neoconservative agenda. Bush used military power to reach out to terrorist networks and 'evil' regimes but did not use it to build a more stable and peaceful world order.

The strategic assessments in the U.S. administrations have only kept 'Afghanistan as a concern' in the entire Central Asian region. Although strategically significant, it may be argued that Central Asia has not attracted the U.S. interest to a larger context; except in the context of the geopolitics of connectivity in the broader region and the locational value of Central Asian republics as transit states and logistical hubs.

IV. SECURITIZATION OF CENTRAL ASIA BY THE PENTAGON

The resource geopolitics has produced new sites of conflict, especially when the world's major energy producers are not its principal consumers. On the one hand, if energy resources bring enormous wealth to their producers, the denial of energy products also increases the latter's vulnerability. According to some analysts, energy has been and would remain an effective weapon of 'war by other means' (Blackwill & Harris, 2016). Central Asia is also vulnerable to the effect of resource geopolitics.

The resource geopolitics became intensely competitive in the 'energy heartland' since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The political, strategic and commercial competition further revealed the dynamics of resource geopolitics in the 'Energy Heartland' and the 'Greater Middle East'. The resource geopolitics resulted in the expansion of diplomatic relations of the U.S. with all five Central Asian countries. Later, it was aimed at demilitarizing the former Soviet facilities. After 9/11, the U.S. re-capitalized military-to-military contacts by sending troops, military equipment and military and economic aid to these countries and availed, in turn, military bases and over-flight and re-fuelling rights.

Thomas P. M. Barnett's 'Pentagon's New World Map' prepared a case for the U.S. institutions of the statecraft to approach resource geopolitics as an integral part of the U.S. lead globalization project. This map provided a unified concept to the institutions and intellectuals of the U.S. statecraft to explain the military events in the post-1991 world. The map divides the world into a 'functioning core' and the 'non-integrating gap' and puts Central Asia in the latter. The map described Central Asia as disconnected – a principal security threat to the U.S. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were considered the strongest manifestation of this disconnectedness. Barnett's map is said to have influenced the Bush administration's effort to 'shrink the gap'. The Pentagon's Map inadvertently became a vision of a 'future worth creating' for the United States and a guiding principle for the Bush administration.

According to this map, the institutions of the U.S. statecraft, primarily the Department of State, Department of Defense, and the U.S. Central Command, successfully generated conditions of violence in the 'energy heartland' of the 'greater Middle East. The U.S. policy in the Middle Eastern region also influenced its foreign policy for Central Asia. The actions of the Pentagon and the USCentCom deter Central Asia's immediate neighbours, especially Iran, and prevent it from developing nuclear weapons, 'securing' the countries falling under its area of responsibility and curtailing ISIS later.

Post-2001, Pentagon and the USCentCom simultaneously developed a parallel system of security cooperation programs calling the existing programs run mainly by the Department of State unreliable and driven by politics. USCentCom acquired a dual role of protector of the military and economic interests of the U.S. in the Middle East and Central Asia. Geographically, Central Asia holds an important place in the USCentCom's

area of responsibility; however, it occupies a much smaller space in the broader geopolitical sphere, which drives the command's posture and mission. Overshadowed by ISIS in recent years, the U.S. military continues to maintain and build ties with Central Asia. For the U.S. to succeed, it will have to focus directly on issues indigenous to the region and not around it, especially after its exit from Afghanistan.

One could observe inter-linkages between the Pentagon's New World Map and activities of the USCentCom. While the Pentagon's map proposed integration rather than containment through a comprehensive civil-military engagement, the full extent of military aid came under the control of the Pentagon, and the USCentCom deprived the Department of State of some of its strategic geography and traditional role. However, how the USCentCom has consistently and successfully intervened in different places under its area of responsibility – supporting and promoting neoliberalism in the energy heartland, under the façade of the economic objectives of the United States, needs attention.

The location and availability of vast strategic resource reserves pulled Central Asia into the New Great Game. Keeping Central Asia under the jurisdiction of USCentCom implies the geo-strategic significance of the region for the U.S. Department of Defense. Resource geopolitics emphasizes the protection of supplies of vital resources. The economic competition intensified the energy-related competition in Central Asia, unlike the Cold War competition, which was based on ideological lines. Violent extremism remained the biggest challenge for the USCentCom, along with narcotics, arms trafficking, piracy and smuggling, giving rise to illegitimate commerce and flow of strategic resources, benefiting terrorist networks and damaging societies. Barnett's 'new map' also became relevant for the U.S. statecraft, which provided target areas for U.S. military expansion. This cartographic narrative appeared as a unified concept that explained everything to the U.S. statecraft, from Soviet disintegration to security alliances, military bases, oil fields, and financial investments. In the meantime, Barnett's new map became the guiding vision for what was seen as a 'future worth creating' for the U.S. Barnett advocated that the autocratic, unstable, underdeveloped and recently developing nations like Central Asia have employed the U.S. military. Besides this, Pentagon too played an important role in integrating, encompassing and promoting U.S. interests in Central Asia.

Bush's realist agenda amid resource geopolitics resulted in the deployment of thousands of U.S. troops in the region to support the 'war on terror'. The U.S. Department of Defense became a common production site of discourses, with other institutions of the statecraft like the U.S. Department of State, Pentagon and the USCentCom generating conditions of violence and conflict throughout the 'energy heartland'. The perception of the U.S. Department of Defense as autocratic in general public opinion was formed largely due to the actions of the Pentagon and the USCentCom. The U.S. could ensure the expansion of diplomatic relations, military-to-military contacts, and military and economic aid to Central Asian countries and, in turn, availed military bases, over-flight and re-fuelling rights. This was when 'resource geopolitics' started dominating the 'energy heartland', including Central Asia.

Resource geopolitics has produced new sites of conflict, especially when the world's major energy producers are not its principal consumers, including Central Asian countries. Also, the 'Arc of Energy' holds nearly 80 per cent of the world's oil and gas, significantly increasing the importance of the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb for transporting these resources to the world markets.

V. 'THREATS' AND 'OPPORTUNITIES' IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE NEOCONSERVATIVE IDEOLOGY OF THE PNAC INTELLECTUALS UNDER THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION

The PNAC, a Washington-based public policy think tank, was established to promote American global leadership and exert influence on the high-level U.S. government officials in the Bush administration. It articulated a strong commitment to the notion of American global responsibilities through an increase in defence spending, challenging regimes hostile to U.S. interests, and promote political and economic liberalism, and strengthening ties with like-minded democratic allies. The key positions in the Bush administration came to be occupied by the carried forward team of neo-conservatives, who had earlier served with Bush Sr. during the Gulf War. The neocons in the PNAC called for a unilateralist U.S. foreign policy and blamed Bush Sr. for not annexing Baghdad in 1991. It looks like for the neo-cons, 9/11 came as god-sent to spread their worldview and restore American honour in global affairs. Before this, and against the backdrop of a lack of any historical, geographical, cultural and economic relations with Central Asian states, the feeling prevalent among the neo-cons was that the United States of America had lost its leadership role to other major players. According to PNAC, it was not only Iraq and Afghanistan but also North Korea, Syria and Iran that were dangerous regimes – similar to the states mentioned by Bush in his 'axis of evil'.

While PNAC's most prominent document 'Rebuilding America's Defences, published in 2000, tremendously influenced the U.S. foreign policy during the Bush administration, it failed to specify Central Asia in it, except underlining the need to secure the region's geopolitical vision economically. Central Asia was naturally, rather coincidentally, added into its plans for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iraq. PNAC's larger

goal was to establish a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf, 'secure' energy supplies and prevent other powers from dominating the vital oil regions of the Middle East. Central Asia in the 'Project for New American Century' (PNAC) may also be linked to the U.S. war on terror, which was accompanied by the construction of new American bases in Central Asia as 'temporary access arrangements'. It gave the U.S. a 'military footprint' in this strategically vital region for the first time. The consolidation of U.S. global hegemony through the establishment of U.S. forward bases around the oil fields of Central Asia was also among the neoconic objectives which were imposed on American foreign policy.

Neo-conservatives have also influenced the approach of the US Department of State (USDoS) and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs towards Central Asia in a rather profound manner. Maintaining the status of the most powerful country in the world, which is a kind of conservatism, while promoting a free and open market along with military might, makes it 'new' or 'neoconservatism'. Neoconic effort was institutionalized with their inclusion in the USDoS, which gave it a new 'imperial' outlook without the burden of any accountability. The Pentagon was quite reluctant to let neocons rule over itself. The 'essentiality' of Central Asia for the U.S. in fighting the 'war on terror' happens to be the central element while defining the 'centrality' of Central Asia. Central Asia was engaged by the U.S. to merely implement PNACs geopolitical vision into reality. The United States is 'too distant to dominate' yet 'too powerful to engage' Central Asian states and regional and global players. Thus, a catastrophic event of the scale of 'Pearl Harbor' and '9/11' may only bring a chance for America to achieve hegemony in Central Asia. The present situation of the economic interdependence of these states among themselves and their neighbours makes the situation difficult for American conservative, imperialist, and hegemonic ambitions.

The standard foreign policy of the U.S. was suddenly shifted to an action-oriented policy with the ascension of the PNAC members in the Bush administration. It was during this time that the term imperialism was rediscovered. Neocons were at the center of the Bush administration's imperial practice that led to tax cuts and downsizing of social welfare provisions for the citizens; while sustaining troop commitments. Militarism came to be identified as the neo-conservative version of imperialism. Generating a threat and later defeating the same, frequent movement of troops, and frequent fighting with the enemies appear to be a continuous practice in U.S. foreign policy. The Bush administration could successfully float the idea that the U.S. military fights against imperialists [state or non-state actors], thus justifying its anti-imperial rationalizations. After the Cold War ideological confrontations, the geopolitics under the Bush administration created a divide between the 'West' and the 'inferior periphery'. It invoked 'superiority' by employing a 'war on terror'.

Pentagon's strategists in the Bush administration were much inspired by the ideas of neocons in ensuring U.S. primacy in the resources struggle and successfully spreading the 'creative destruction and chaos' to reshape the Energy Heartland/Middle East region. In this 'new great game,' the U.S. failed to focus on problems indigenous to Central Asia directly. It focused instead on the geopolitical and strategic developments in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. The U.S. also securitized Central Asia by deploying resource geopolitics discourse and generating threats like Islamic radicalization and terrorism. They did so by enhancing diplomatic and security-based cooperation programs. The security-based cooperation, however, failed in Central Asia due to the dominance of external actors pursuing their 'own' geopolitical ambitions that were largely divorced from the ground realities and trends. Even Central Asian countries failed to compete with their neighbours and address emerging conflicts about land and water issues and ethnic minorities tensions. A 'readymade income' from exploiting natural resources resulted in the inability to institute structural reforms.

After 9/11, the U.S. foreign policy shifted from ideological considerations to security-related policies due to the fear that Central Asians could be indoctrinated by revolutionary ideas of terrorist organizations in the Middle East (such as Syria, Iraq and Libya). However, the U.S. statecraft's failure to distinguish 'Islam as a culture' from 'Islam as an ideology' refrained them from formulating profound counterterrorism policies. Even in the U.N. counterterrorism framework, Central Asia has been identified as a region fast becoming the main front of the global war against terror. By and large, the perceptions and policies of the Bush doctrine remained aimless. After the U.S. withdrew from Central Asia, her efforts to form strategic partnerships and re-engineer Central Asian politics reached a standstill.

The worldview of the neo-conservatives in the Bush administration is most visibly reflected in the lobbying tactics and geopolitical narratives of the PNAC. The neocons-inspired 'war on terror' rhetoric made the U.S. launch offensive against Afghanistan and Iraq with the establishment of forward bases around the oil fields of Central Asia. At the same time, they also worked closely with the 'non-democratic regimes' of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Pakistan. Neocons favoured increased defence spending, strengthening ties with democratic allies, promoting global political and economic freedom and challenging regimes hostile to her interests and values.

The PNAC advocated economic securing of Central Asia but nowhere mentioned it in its geopolitical world vision. They saw 9/11 as god-sent to restore 'America's lost honour' during Bush Sr. in the 1991 Gulf War. Neocons dominated the Bush administration and his National Security Strategy to a great extent through positioning PNAC members in the relevant institutions of the statecraft, giving neocons a new 'imperial'

outlook. The geopolitical vision of the neoconservatives may be described as a mixture of liberal [the idea of free markets] and traditionalist ideology [the fundamental-conservative principles such as private property, religion, tradition, balanced budget and a limited welfare state] along with the association of multilateral corporations, the military and prominent politicians. They also influenced the structures of the existing institutions of the statecraft, reshaping and reorganizing them - the Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs and the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. This re-engineering also became the basis for implementing PNAC's geopolitical vision into reality.

VI. S.C.O. AND THE U.S. RESPONSE TO EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL EQUATIONS AND ALIGNMENTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

In April 1996, five states of the region, namely: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, signed a multilateral agreement called Shanghai Five mechanism – to generate better conditions for broader regional cooperation. By 1999, the Shanghai Five group countries successfully resolved their border disputes and established peace and stability in Central Asia.

After the disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union, the U.S. remained engaged in the geopolitical quagmire in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. Since 9/11, bilateral assistance in the 'war on terrorism' provided to the U.S. by member states of the SCO led to the formation of a distinct SCO's position on the U.S. presence in Central Asia. However, efforts by the U.S. to destabilize Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan made the SCO suspicious of the U.S. presence in the region. America's indifference toward Central Asian countries sent signals to Russia and China and provided them with the opportunity to capitalize on Washington's disregard for the region. Although Pentagon collaborated with the armies of Central Asia through its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, that was not politically sufficient. The 'Shanghai Five' transformed into the 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization' on June 15, 2001, with the inclusion of Uzbekistan. Presently, SCO has Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, India and Pakistan as 'full members'.

Some understanding of the U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia and continuity and change in its geopolitical and geo-economic imperatives crystallized with the post-9/11 U.S. efforts in and around Central Asia, including the SCO member states. In 2002, U.S. officials expressed a strong desire to coordinate with the SCO but were refused membership in 2005. In its 2005 summit, the SCO also asked the U.S. to give a timetable for the withdrawal of its troops from Central Asia. This setback resulted in Pentagon and the USDoS responding to the emerging Geopolitical equations in Central Asia. After the U.S. exclusion from the SCO, the State Department created the Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs in 2005 to look at the issues in Afghanistan, South and Central Asia from the same lens.

Moreover, this Bureau would now have countries similar to those who are also members of the SCO in any capacity. The admission of India, Pakistan and Mongolia as observers in 2004 strengthened the U.S. perception that the SCO was evolving into an anti-Western alliance. In the same year, the strategic approach, namely the 'Great Central Asia' (GCA) project, was developed by the State Department, which recommended separating Central Asia from the Eurasian region. This separation aimed to set up a buffer zone between Central Asia and China. The GCA plan can also be perceived as a plan to counter the SCO.

From 'contestation', the U.S. policy in Central Asia appears to have shifted to a policy of 'engagement and cooperation'. Though limited, the U.S. engagement with the SCO remains focused on finding multilateral ways to address numerous regional challenges. It focused on engaging with the surrounding powers to develop the region's trade, energy, and transport infrastructure rather than engaging with the SCO as an organization. In totality, the American foreign policy towards Central Asia and SCO has fluctuated from 'indifference and hostility' to 'cooperation and limited engagement'. However, the SCO does not pose any 'serious security threat' to the U.S. interests in Central Asia, except for its economic objectives in the region.

Some understanding of the U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia and continuity and change in its geopolitical and geo-economic imperatives began with U.S. efforts to pursue 9/11 in and around Central Asia, including creating the SCO to generate a 'threatening' Russia and China rhetoric. The SCO ultimately forced the U.S. to vacate all the Central Asian bases, and the U.S. efforts to counter SCO yielded no results. Different institutions of the U.S. statecraft have responded differently to the emerging geopolitical equations in Central Asia. The U.S. Department of State quickly applied the idea of combining Central Asia with South Asia in October 2005 by reorganizing Bureaus. However, due to the 'war on terror', this re-organization demised the Euro-centricity of Central Asia and brought forward its 'Asian-ness'. Even later, the U.S. remained strict in adopting the policy of engagement and cooperation through efforts of democracy promotion and multilateral institutions. The SCO appears to have emerged as a new (geo)political counterweight to the U.S. hegemony in Central Asia.

VII. CONCLUSION

Some various factors and forces help construct a dominant geopolitical discourse out of competing narratives. A dominant geopolitical discourse has to be 'simple' and can be understood by the masses. It must be truly 'global in nature' and must mirror a 'threat to security'. One that can metamorphose itself into an action-based doctrine, this discourse is collectively produced by apparently different institutions and intellectuals of the statecraft. However, a dominant geopolitical discourse can re-engineer even the prominent institutions of its statecraft and, simultaneously, recast institutions and multinational/multilateral organizations or co-opt them. A dominant geopolitical discourse overpowers the 'economic' imperatives and their perceived implications for the future. Furthermore, more importantly, it also has to be backed up by political opposition, academicians, media and other stakeholders in the majority. Also, such a discourse 'must' be seen widely as promoting 'vital national interests' of the country concerned and offering justifications in support of the actions taken. Plus, it has to prove itself dominant even when critiqued and questioned by 'alternative perspectives' (Awasthi, 2018).

The so-called 'national interest' of the U.S. in Central Asia is, in fact, a multi-layered and complex category. There is a need to disaggregate the notion of the national interest of the United States by focusing more directly on how various institutions and intellectuals of the statecraft are located, for example, how the State Department and Department of Defense look at the Central Asian region. Thus, it may be argued that the dominant geopolitical discourse in the U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia was constructed amidst a 'plurality of visions' in the statecraft. The 'war on terror' discourse provided the 'non-Eurasian' U.S. with a larger rationale and opportunity for enlarging its geopolitical and military-strategic interests. The neo-liberal/corporate style of war-making reduced the 'gap' between realism and neo-liberalism in Central Asia. However, since the geopolitical visions of the leading institutions and intellectuals of U.S. statecraft are fluid, especially in periods of geopolitical transition, no fundamental or conclusive analysis is possible concerning what 'Central Asia' truly is or would truly become in the geopolitical vision of the United States of America and its foreign policy practices in the years and decades to come.

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