



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

Title: Iran's Engagement with Central Asia

Chairperson: Wg Cdr BS Nijjar, Research Fellow, CAPS

Speaker: Ms Anu Sharma, Research Associate, CAPS

Discussant: Dr Poonam Mann, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Rapporteur: Dr Puyam Rakesh Singh, Associate Fellow, CAPS

Date: August 16, 2017

Major highlights of the Fellow's Seminar held on August 16, 2017 are as follows:

- After lifting of sanctions in the wake of signing the nuclear deal in 2015, Iran is becoming the central player in the region's geo-political environment. Both the regional as well as the major powers are vying for influence in Iran and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) to build connectivity and to tap the natural resources. In fact, geographical location of Iran and natural resources of Iran as well as the CARs have enhanced the strategic importance of Iran.
- A major change in Iran's geo-political environment was brought by the collapse of the Soviet Union leading to the emergence of five new Central Asian states. In addition, Iran's geographical location, natural resources, size and economic prowess in the West Asian region have contributed in Iran playing a pivotal role not only in the Persian Gulf region but also in Central Asia and the larger Caspian Sea Basin.
- The Central Asian states occupy a strategically important location which can act as a bridge for various regional players. The region has become the 'chessboard' of the

'New Great Game' involving new global players such as the US, Russia, EU and China and other regional players such as Iran, India, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

- Due to its geographical setting and complex geopolitical environment, regionalism is an important aspect of Iran's foreign policy to institutionalise the relationships and expand cooperation and integration with the neighbouring countries. Being an emerging power in the region, Tehran also wants to exploit the opportunity provided by the lifting of sanctions to secure its interests and enhance its leverage in relations with major powers.
- Geographically and historically, Iran is an integral part of the greater Khorasan region along with Afghanistan, Pakistan and five Central Asian states. The shared history and ethnic affiliations across the borders contribute to Iran's regional ambition in Central Asia. Moreover, countries such as Russia, China, Pakistan and India have strategic interests in the region and are engaged with the five Central Asian states. Also, Iran continues to play an important role in regional organisations such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Organisation of the Caspian Sea States (CASCO).
- Construction of pipelines is at the heart of the 'New Great Game' as it affects the energy policies of the US, China, Russia and other countries. In the wake of signing the Iranian nuclear deal, Iran has great opportunity to tap the energy markets in Russia and Europe to boost its economy. For Iran, the pipelines passing through its territory can be good sources of revenue and political tools in dealing with these countries. Thus, Iran-Central Asia relations could be built on the foundation of pipeline politics and energy market as Iran provides direct access to the sea.
- Iran's influence in the Central Asian region is being challenged by Saudi Arabia as an extension of the regional rivalry in West Asia. Competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Central Asia could impact the constructive engagement of the regional actors and thus affect stability and security situation in the region. The strain in the US-Iran relations and struggle between the US and Russia also create a situation of conflict in the region. Besides, involvement of other regional players in the

geopolitics of the Central Asian region makes the situation difficult for Iran.

- Iran's relations with CARs will increase regional integration and establishment of pipeline networks traversing through Iranian territory. In addition, the region offers Iran great potential to enhance rail and land transport to integrate the regional market. Because of its strategic location, Iran could help to develop an integrative transportation system inclusive of land, air, and sea to provide connectivity with the maritime shipping routes in the Indian Ocean, the Sea of Oman and the Caspian Sea.
-