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## India-Central Asian States Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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### **Abstract**

*India's active interaction with the Central Asian States began after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the India political decision makers in abysmal position. From hence onward, one witnessed a major shift in India's foreign policy, i.e. moved away from Nehru's idealism to BJP's realism and pragmatism. These changes in the Indian security concerning Central Asian have to be examined in larger ideological and political contexts. The author has discussed in detail the India's interest in Central Asia. In discussing thus, national security, weapon proliferation drug trafficking and commercial interests become important. These problems are looked by India as major problems because still now the government lacks coherent policy towards Central Asian States*

**Keywords:** energy security, militant Islamic groups, Silk Road, ONGC, TAPI pipeline, hydro electric power, drug trafficking, commercial interests, national security.

India's active interaction with the Central Asian States began after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Since gaining independence, these Central Asian States comprising of at least 62 million people, have drawn worldwide attention due to

security and economic compulsions. So far India is concerned; there are two important reasons for improving India-Central Asian relations. First are India's needs for energy in order to sustain economic growth and second is the threat from militant Islamic groups. Besides, these reasons, the geopolitical location of Central Asia affects India's relations with Pakistan, China, the US and other powers.

### **Historical Overview:**

In the past, India was closely linked to Central Asia through trading routes as well as successive invasions of the subcontinent which swept down from the north-west.<sup>1</sup> Both India and Central Asia held good cultural relations which is evident from classical Indian literature, poetry and Sufism. But, the British rule in India affected its ties with these states. Though efforts were made to revive the relation after the British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent but they failed to acquire any depth. India's relation with Central Asian region was marked by India's closeness to the Soviet Union, particularly after the 1962-Sino-Indian War. India's involvement in the region was limited to cultural relations. Later on, when the USA, China and Pakistan came closer, India signed a Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1971. India was more concerned with the Soviet Union and hence there was lack of vision of broader engagement with the Central Asian States.

### **The End of the Cold War:**

As discussed above, the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the India political decision makers in abysmal position. From hence onward, one witnessed a major shift in India's foreign policy, i.e. moved away from Nehru's idealism to BJP's realism and pragmatism. This was quite reflected in India's policy doctrine of 1997 that referred to Central Asia as "our near abroad." The person responsible for this was the then Prime

Minister I.K. Gujral. His policy was known “Gujral doctrine” and the doctrine emphasized that India would not tolerate any foreign interference that affected India’s national interest.

These changes in the Indian security concerning Central Asian have to be examined in larger ideological and political contexts. The disintegration of the Soviet Union made the world a unipolar world which demanded the reassessment of the international actors participation in the New World Order. So far India was concerned, India re-investment with the Central Asian States have been influenced by four broad areas. Before, dwelling on this aspect, it is necessary to analyses the importance of Central Asia as a region. There are several major influential nations around Central Asia. The major countries encompassing the region are Russia-the parent state, China-another big neighbour, Iran-a state with strong cultural and ethnic ties with the region, Afghanistan-the defunct State and almost what has been known as the soft underbelly. The second order neighbourhood involves Pakistan which has historic contacts with the region, and always been the direction of movement for Central Asian tribes; India was the civilisational destination of Central Asia, and Turkey was the land of forefathers source of ancient migrant group.<sup>2</sup>

This area was a zone of triangular contest between Britain, Russia and China during the nineteenth and early twentieth century which has been romanticized as the Great game. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of newly independent and sovereign Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, besides the Caucasian state of Azerbaijan-all having predominantly Muslim population - have drastically changed the balance of power in the region. A new Great Game with Pan-Islam as its vital ingredient has started.

Whereas the Central Asian states have earnestly begun to rediscover their roots on a new basis, Iran and Pakistan have stepped in to fill the vacuum by playing the Islamic card. Turkey, on the other hand, is strengthening its linkages with these states on the basis of common historical cultural and

ethnic ties. Due to its geographical proximity to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia and India, Central Asia is going to play an important role in the geopolitics of this region.<sup>3</sup>

Central Asia has the potential to become the most significant trade route linking China, India, Middle East, Russia and the fringe of Europe. As hoped by various concerning nations through the revival of Silk Road, that was once a commercial artery between countries and linked the Ganges and the Yellow River to the river to the Near East and the Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>. Due to its strategic proximity to the Middle East and South Asia, Central Asia has emerged as a distinct geopolitical entity stimulating global attention and interest. The neighbouring countries like Turkey, Iran, Russia, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India maintain and pursue competing strategic, economic and cultural interests in Central Asia.

From 1992, this was the major shift in the Russian policy towards Central Asian states. Moscow sought to maintain regional stability in order to prevent other powers from establishing hegemony, to protect and expand its economic interests, to protect ethnic Russian living in Central Asia (and prevent their migration to economically strapped Russia), and to stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. The new Russian security policy is often termed as the Monroviski Doctrine.<sup>5</sup> Of late, an activation of the Russian policy in Central Asia can be witnessed. The setting-up in Moscow on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1993, of a regional/security system comprised of Russia and four Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while Turkmenistan joined later on.<sup>6</sup>

The USA, Western Europe, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Korea and Singapore are also active seeking to carve a niche in strategic, economic or cultural spheres and these countries are in the forefront of building new linkages with the newly independent Central Asian states.<sup>7</sup> Other powers pose their own set of problems for Central Asia. Even though the Central Asian countries, as an expression of their sovereignty and

independent identity, seek to distance themselves from Russia, they can neither ignore nor do they survive without Russia, whose clout in Central Asia remains considerable despite the growing influence of China and the US. The deepening American political, economic and military facilities in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan-after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the consequent war on the Taliban and Al Qaida in Afghanistan, have dramatically expanded American involvement in the region. The US-led war against terrorism with its focus on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia is bringing huge changes to the region and its external ties. The United States and Europe-France, Germany, and Britain-are all active in enhancing their ties with Central Asian states. Post-Soviet Central Asia has been opened up to wider international political and economic currents in which no single power dominates.<sup>8</sup>

### **India-Central Asian's Areas of Interest:**

Central Asia is important because of India's energy security needs. This has been widely visualised as national security and attempts are made to cultivate alternative sources of energy and to reduce dependence on West Asian resources. In this efforts, over the past decade, India's state owned Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation (ONGC) has sought to invest in Kazakhstan. ONGC has acquired sizeable stakes in the Alibekmola and Kurmangazy oilfields in Kazakh owned areas of the Caspian Sea.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Indian government efforts to negotiate with Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline has been estimated to cost \$ 7.6 billion to construct. The TAPI project is intended to transport 30 billion cubic meters of gas from natural gas fields in Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan to India.<sup>10</sup> But this project is facing some problems whether international companies will be willing to finance it. Moreover, with the Chinese Prime Minister, Xi Jinping's visit to

Turkmenistan in September 2013, there is further speculation that the TAPI project may be held for sometime more.

Kazakhstan also has large quantities of highly enriched uranium (between 10, 590-10,940 kgs). This has greater significance in light of the recent NSG waiver for the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation that would allow India to procure much-needed uranium for its civilian nuclear program, which in the long run could potentially help diversify the country's energy base.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Uzbekistan has modest hydrocarbon reserves but it holds the third-largest uranium deposits in the world. Tajikistan is blessed with sizeable amount of uranium ore and also has the potential for its enrichment. Thus, the Central Asian region stock of uranium can be used by India to sustain its civilian nuclear program.

Although Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are poor in hydrocarbon reserves but they hold immense potential for the generation of hydro-electric power. Tajikistan in particular has huge untapped hydro-electric potential; each sq. km. of the territory has up to 2 million K.W. hours of hydel resources.<sup>12</sup> This is very high potential for hydel power generation. What is noteworthy in this regard is that the summer season in Central Asia is characterized by surplus production, while much of South Asia reels under chronic power cuts.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the hydel power potential of these states can be seen as an investment that India has to think seriously.

### **National Security:**

Central Asia is of vital importance to India not just in terms of energy security but also for reasons of national security. India sees the region as a source of religious extremism and is concerned to check the rise of radical Islamist groups which may present a terrorist threat.<sup>14</sup> Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has become a fertile recruiting ground for such groups<sup>15</sup> and there are reportedly scores of jihadist groups based in the region.<sup>16</sup> The transnational nature of these groups, including links with the Taliban and other militant groups in

neighbouring countries has generated a high degree of insecurity for India. The fear is that if the emergence of jihadist groups are not checked, they will eventually pose a serious threat to India's security, especially in the state of Kashmir.<sup>17</sup>

India is much concerned by the situation in Afghanistan. There is prospect of increasing insecurity in Afghanistan following NATO withdrawal in 2014, which may spread over and destabilise fragile Central Asian states. Furthermore, India's fears that a resurgent Taliban integrated into Afghan power structures post-withdrawal will be to counter India's interests.<sup>18</sup> These security concerns are compounded by the proliferation of drug-trafficking in Central Asia. Weak border management and high levels of corruption, coupled with the failure to stem opium production in Afghanistan, have made drug-trafficking an extremely lucrative industry. Much of the money generated provides a vital source of funding for jihadist groups.

For these reasons, India is eager to play assertive role in Central Asia security matrix and to prevent real and perceived threats to its national security. Over the past decade, India has sought to enhance its security assets in the region, notable through the acquisition of a first foreign military outpost in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is important for India since only a narrow 20 km stretch of Afghan territory separates it from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. India began to refurbish the airbase Ayni in 2004. It has been reportedly spending \$70 million as part of its aid to Tajikistan. Although India has never publicly announced its intentions, there was speculation in the media that a squadron of MiG 29 bombers would be stationed at the airbase.<sup>19</sup> Not only would it enable India to respond to situations in the region that threatened its security, it also increased India's options in the event of heightened tensions with Pakistan, since it would enable India to strike at Pakistan from the rear.<sup>20</sup>

However, Russia still regarded as the dominant security actor in Central Asia. It appears to have been unwilling to sanction India's attempt to establish a military foothold in

Tajikistan. Perhaps, fearful that this would open the door to US and NATO influence, it has reportedly used its leverage over the Tajik Government to ensure that India did not deploy fighter aircraft at the base.<sup>21</sup> After a decade of negotiations between New Delhi and Dushanbe, in 2011 the Tajik Foreign Minister launched negotiations with Russia to discuss possible deployment of the Russian military at Ayni, while also ruling out the deployment of Indian or American forces at the airbase.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this setback, India efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation on security relations with Central Asian states have not stopped. In July, 2011, the Indian Defence Minister visited Kyrgyzstan and announced plans to open a joint military research centre there, as well as an initiative to train Kyrgyz soldiers to serve in UN peacekeeping missions. It was considered that lower-profile initiatives like military hospitals and research centers may allows Indian military officers to build relationships with their Central Asian counterparts in a manner less threatening to Russia.

When India's Vice-President visited Tajikistan in April 2013, both governments stressed the importance of cooperation in dealing with anticipated security threats from Afghanistan<sup>23</sup> and India has established Joint Working Groups on Terrorism with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. However, despite shared concerns over security, there is not much security ties between India and Central Asian states. Whereas Russia conducts numerous joint military exercises with these states under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organization, and China does to some degree thorough the SCO, there is limited direct collaboration with India's armed forces.<sup>24</sup>

India did join the multilateral SCO as an Observer in 2005, and it aspires to become a full member. The SCO is one of the most prominent multilateral bodies with regard to Central Asia, and the issue of counter-terrorism regularly features on the agenda of SCO summits. However, it is doubtful that India will be able to utilize the SCO platform to advance its own

security interests, given the predominant Chinese influence within the organization and Beijing's sensitivity towards Pakistan, which is also an observer in the SCO.

### **Weapons Proliferation:**

The strategic location of the Central Asian regions is unique. It is situated between two nuclear superpowers, Russia and China. Then, there are other nuclear powers-Pakistan and India. Earlier, Central Asia was an important instrument of raw materials base for the Soviet weapons programs. Kazakhstan held the largest reserves of highly enriched uranium and Kyrgyzstan has substantial amounts of nuclear waste scattered around. Similarly, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have sizeable uranium reserves. In the absence of special-detection equipment at border and customs, checkpoints corruption is on high. There is also lack of political will, and the region has become a lucrative route for smuggling fissile material. The security implication is grave as there is potential danger of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction into the hands of not just states hostile to India, but also non-states actors like the Taliban, al-Qaeda and groups like the IMU linked to them. Taliban can also make use of these weapons to its advantage along the porous Tajik-Afghan border.

### **Drug-Trafficking:**

Drug trafficking is another serious security threat to the region. Poor border management and rampant corruption, along with opium production in neighboring Afghanistan indicate a dangerous trend. There is greater need to pay greater attention to drug trafficking because much of the money generated is used to fund activities of extremist Islamist terror network that possess the ability to create trouble for India in the long run. Drug trafficking is one of the most lucrative sources of financing groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan and the IMU in Uzbekistan. It is not only India affected by this. There are

three other key players in the region: US, Russia and China which are too affected by drug trafficking. India's role should be to engage in multilateral cooperation in checking drug trafficking.

### **Commercial Interests:**

Pakistan's geostrategic location, has offered port access to landlocked Central Asian through Gwadar. Coupled with Karachi, Gwadar offers the shortest route to the Arabian Sea.<sup>25</sup> Pakistan is also seeking to position itself as an important energy transit corridor that would serve as an outlet for Central Asian energy to flow into markets in South Asia. This has the potential to increase Pakistan's leverage over the CARs. Sustained and deeper engagement in the commercial sector will be an effective way to counter Pakistan's influence in Central Asia.

Central Asia has vast untapped market. India can make good use to tap consumer goods, particularly so as consumers in the region have little to choose from between exorbitantly-priced, imported Western products and cheap, but low-quality Chinese manufactured goods that have flooded the Central Asian market. In particular, Indian tea and pharmaceutical industries have acquired a strong foothold in the Central Asian market. There also exists a great degree of potential and demand for India IT, banking, services, construction, Indian expertise on small and medium-scale enterprises and food processing industries in Central Asia.<sup>26</sup>

On his April, 2013 visit to Tajikistan, India's Vice President signed deals to expand bilateral cooperation in IT, energy, health, education, trade, commerce, mining, and agriculture, while there were also plans to collaborate with Tajikistan in establishing an IT centre of excellence and a Central Asia e-network.<sup>27</sup> However, the current extent of India's actual bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan is very small, especially when compared with China's economic engagement.<sup>28</sup> China has invested large sums in Tajikistan's IT

and telecommunications industries and in mining uranium and other minerals. It has also leased large areas of land rich in minerals from the Tajik Government at low cost.<sup>29</sup> As described below, China also has far more trade and investment with the other Central Asian states than India.

Some of the other potential areas for India could be the mining sector, as the region is rich in mineral resources such as copper, uranium, gold and silver. India has great domestic demand and is a net importer. Further, given India's huge demand of electricity and ballooning rates of deficit between demand and supply, the regions untapped hydro-electric potential may prove to be another lucrative area of investment for Indian electrical and construction companies. Cotton production and textile sectors are also avenues for Indian investment, particularly in Uzbekistan which is regarded as one of the largest cotton producers in the world.

### **Challenges:**

Although Central Asia's occupies a favourable geostrategic location between Europe and Asia, the region is rich in mineral and hydrocarbon resources and offer much reason for intensive engagement with the region. But there persist numerous challenges that need to be addressed. The most obvious challenge is the geography of Central Asia. India's location in the region remains extremely vulnerable because lack of direct geographical access to the region. The challenges to India could as follow:

- Indian security interests broadly revolve around militant Islam in the region. It is reported that it has been supported by Wahhabi elements of Saudi Arabia and Islamabad.
- India needs to take more concentrate state on such forces which are primarily a product of the dictatorial and corrupt regimes. The cause of worry for India is how to engage the rise of radical Islam. The task is quite a challenging one for India to strike a balance between the pursuit of its national

interests while dealing with domestic political sensibilities, growing instability in Afghanistan potential to destabilize fragile states and insecure regimes in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. There is a greater need to concentrate more on natural resources of Central Asia states.

- Although India's goal is to achieve energy security, but many problems are involved which are to be sorted out. The Indian government has started investing in oil fields in Kazakhstan, but clear policy on has to come out from the how to transport oil to the Indian market. The Indian government problems lie in lack of independent assessment of gas reserves in Dauletabad field, prior commitment of bulk of gas reserves to Russia, the immature nature of the regime in Ashgabat, past failures of the Turkmen regime to uphold sanctity of contract. But security problems which are likely to arise, is the pipeline which will have to negotiate much of the Taliban-infested South Afghanistan and troubled Balochistan province of Pakistan. India's much needed energy requirements have also annoyed the Chinese interest because on the question of over bidding of Petro- Kazakh.
- In near future China can pose a challenge to India as it has a clear edge. Moreover, India, despite its keenness to balance Chinese influence in the region, has to be careful not to antagonize China.
- India has failed to evolve a coherent policy on how to tackle drug trafficking and the potential for weapons proliferation.

## **Conclusion:**

India's security interests are at stake in the region which make it imperative for the country to evolve a coherent policy. Is India capable of addressing the existing actual and potential challenges that may arise in the future? To overcome the geographical problem arising from to Central Asia two

propositions become important. First, is the development of \$ 2 billion “energy highway.” It could be stretched from Russia via Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan to Kashmir through the India-China Line of Actual Control. Though the Kashmir region is a disputed areas and even the materialization of such an energy initiative could proved challenging but it is not impossible. Earlier the cross-border trade has been opened up between Indian and Pakistani-held Kashmir, similar modalities for energy trade with China could also be worked out till the border dispute is not settled.

India is also working for another arrangement, i.e., alternative trade corridor via Iran. On 12 September 2000, India signed an agreement in St. Petersburg with Iran and Russia on creating an International North-South Transport Corridor. This corridor will provide the much needed movement of Indian goods from Indian ports to Bandar Abbas in Iran to Central Asia via rail and road and the Caspian Sea route, thus, not involving Pakistan. While this arrangement has been expanded to include eleven new members; the corridor is not being utilized to its potential.

Another way to revive the ancient trade routes with Central Asia, is via the Leh-Yarkand and Leh-Demchuk routes that passes through China. This will have two added advantages. First, it is generation of economically beneficial spin offs for populations in the border areas. Second, an attempt to work in this direction India will have to engage China only and thereby making this far more routes secure than others that passes through Pakistan and Afghanistan.

So far security situation is concerned one cannot ignore Pakistan’s maneuvers in the region. But this is not the only factor. India must encourage policies and outside actors that would gradually help in promoting a greater degree of political and economic liberalization in the region. The current political and economic scenario countries in Central Asia is such that it has become a fertile ground for extremism and religious fanaticism. Also, a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan, makes not only an important actor in Inde stabilizing the situation in

Afghanistan, but efforts must be made by India in evolving a strategy along with Russia, China and US on how to bring stability in the region.

This security challenge has been taken seriously by India when it established Joint Working Groups (JWG) on terrorism with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It has also joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer-is also important to counter terrorism. However, how effectively and to what extent India will utilize the SCO forum, knowing that it is dominated by China's and its sensitivity towards Pakistan which is also an observer in the SCO. Moreover, China's attempt to project its power in the region through the conduct of joint military exercises with Central Asian republics under the SCO banner, has not gone unnoticed by India.

In addition, India has also to strengthened its cooperation in the defense sector with the Central Asian States. India has taken the following measures. First is the Indian government has signed and implemented agreements on training and exchange programme of military personnel and the second is the sharing of intelligence particularly with Uzbekistan; purchase of III yushin-78 aircraft; and refurbishing of military hardware. Still Central Asia remains a relatively untapped market for the indigenous India defense industry, which could establish a niche market in small arms.

Further, any attempt to eradicate the evil of radical Islam, then the issue of rampant drug trafficking has to be addressed properly. It has become a vital source of funding for Islamist groups. India could do much in securing her interest by supporting existing EU-sponsored programs on training border forces and providing necessary technical resources. In addition, farming communities in Indian has to be strengthened so that high-value crops could be crops could cultivated as a cultivation an alternative to poppy.

In the commercial sphere, India should strength IT, banking and the small and medium-scale enterprises sectors. Indian businesses should be encouraged to work with greater

vigour in the politically unstable but economically untapped region. Lately, Indian government has been assisting Indian entrepreneurs and business chambers to organize trade fairs under its CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) programme. For example, India has set up a joint business council with Kazakhstan. But what is more needed for India to counter Pakistan's attempts to contain Indian presence, by positioning itself as a trade and energy corridor for Central Asia. Moreover, there is a need for Joint Working Group on improving transport linkages with Central Asian republics through which it can establish better links with this strategically important region.

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