

India's Geo-Strategic Interests in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract

Central Asia is a region of geo-political, strategic and economic significance owing to its location and hydrocarbon resources. As a consumer market it still remains to be exploited. This has led to increasing interest in Central Asian Republics by various countries. India as an extended neighbour of CARs has major strategic and economic interests in this region. The future prospects for cooperation between Central Asia and India in the field of energy security seem to be very important. Peace and stability in CARs and Afghanistan seems to be the most crucial factor for India's security. There is already a realisation by the world powers of the danger posed by religious extremism and terrorism. Therefore India should take advantage of the situation and cooperate with other world powers to overcome this rising menace of religious extremism.

After the disintegration of Soviet Union, Central Asia has become a theatre of a new 'Great Game' not only because of its strategic location but also due to its natural resources, notably oil and natural gas. The geostrategic location of the Central Asian states has made this region extremely pivotal. Central Asian Republics (CARs) lie at the crossroads of Russia, the

Middle East, South Asia and the Far East. Any geopolitical changes in the region inevitably extend their impact on several states in the neighbourhood. Since 9/11, it has also acquired a new layer of strategic interest because of its vantage point vis-à-vis the central security-concern of the region, namely terrorism in its local, regional and global aspects. The new Central Asia, which found itself in the midst of these competing influences on the one hand and in its own concerns for security and internal political stability on the other, naturally looked for support and constructive cooperation from wherever possible. It is in this context that the present article identifies the evolving Indian security interests in Central Asian Republics.

The subject of Indo-Central Asian relations is not a new one. Central Asia has been India's door to the outside world and has deeply influenced India's history, culture and polity. While the region south of the Himalayas has largely determined the mainstream features of Indian civilization, Central Asia has continued to exert influence on India in many an important way.¹ New Delhi has often described this region as its "extended neighborhood".² It has always been closely connected with Central Asia and the close contacts continued during the Soviet period. Remnants of Buddhist monasteries have been found in many towns of Central Asia. During the medieval period, travelers and merchants further consolidated the bonds of relationship between the peoples of the two regions.³ The region provided the link in the shape of the fabled silk route between china and India and Europe till the discovery of sea routes in the fifteenth century.

Economic cooperation is major pillar of establishing strategic depth in Central Asia. As Indian economy grow, there would be ever increasing requirement of energy and natural resources to fuel and maintain the momentum of our growth. Discovery of large reserves of hydrocarbon deposits and other resources needed for sustaining economic growth also make the

region immensely attractive for forging a mutually beneficial cooperative relationship.⁴ In the first half of the twenty first century, it is estimated that Indian will become one of the top five consumers of energy. In order to fulfill the growing demands of its burgeoning population and expanding economy, India needs to look for alternative sources of energy, to augment those which it is presently acquiring from the Persian Gulf region.⁵ India's growing need for energy coupled with its aspirations of becoming a regional power. The region has more than 6 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and almost 40 percent of its gas reserves. According to US department of energy estimates in June 2000, even if one did not count Russia's and Iran's regional assets, the rest of the Caspian region (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) has about 16-32 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, and another 206 billion barrels of possible oil reserves. The energy resources of the Caspian Sea region (which includes two Central Asian states – Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan) and rest of Central Asia is least unexplored and unexploited at present. The Caspian region's proven oil reserves (16-32 billion barrels) compared with 22 bb for the US and 17 bb for the North Sea. A proven gas reserve in the region was estimated at 23 -337 trillion cubic feet (tcf.), compared to reserves of 300 tcf in the USA.⁶ The opening –up of these resources to the outside world generated huge expectations among international oil companies.

Although Central and South Asia have been geographically more connected through the ancient “Silk Road,” the analogy has not been observed in practice during the past two decades. India, particularly, has displayed limited engagement with the Central Asian Republics. India lags significantly behind all the major players in the region (Russia, China, Iran, US and Turkey) in trading volumes with the Central Asian countries and has failed to exploit the vibrant consumer market. India has a distinct, geographic disadvantage in Central Asia compared to

China. While China shares borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as Russia, India does not share a land border with any of the Central Asian states.⁷ However, the presence of two unfriendly regimes of Pakistan and Afghanistan between India and Central Asia has slowed the progress of Indo-Central Asian cooperation in the economic, transportation and energy spheres.

In contrast, India's regional rivals China and Russia possess vast economic resources and more efficient state machinery that they can galvanize to project their economic power and access the region's energy market. Beijing's capacity to rapidly mobilize resources in developing communication, transport and pipeline infrastructure in Central Asia is unrivalled in scope, scale and speed. It is often said that whereas India spends millions, China spends billions. But in crucial cases, ONGC Videsh, the Indian public sector company that made the effort, was unable to match up to completion from china.⁸ A standard round of international companies, together with Russian and Chinese players, dominated the output of the Kazakh oil and natural gas sector, under the watchful eye of privatized state corporations.

However, India has made some important strides in the right direction recently. The Third Connect Central Asia Dialogue successfully organized on 10 October, 2014 in Dushnbe, Tajikistan, which was yet another step towards building a long-term partnership with this region. The objective behind this regional conference is to have a regular annual dialogue forum among academics, scholars, government officials and business representatives from India and the CARs, with the aim of providing inputs to governments on both sides. In the First India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative organized on 12-13 June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, E. Ahmad, then Minister of State for External Affairs in India, pronounced India's new "Connect Central Asia" Policy. He said: "India is now looking intently at the region through the framework of its

‘Connect Central Asia’ policy, which is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian Countries, both individually and collectively.”⁹ The “Connect Central Asia” policy is a broad-based approach, which encompasses political, economic and cultural connections between India and the CARs. To improve connectivity to the region, India is working on the International North- South Transport Corridor (INSTC) among other options

The greater Central Asia strategy also finds resonance with India because of the potential of realizing Turkmenistan-Afghanistan- Pakistan – India (TAPI) gas pipelines. Integrating Central and south Asia are part and parcel of India’s long term strategic perspective. Fructifying of this concept would result in vast economic benefits to all the stake holders leading to a positive outcome for stability and security in the region. Implementation of TAPI pipeline project is likely to create mutual interdependency and help attenuate India- Pakistan peace process.¹⁰ However, there are clear barriers to the fulfillment of this project, including India’s turbulent relationship with Pakistan, with both countries restricting transit across their border. Then there is the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, which may well worsen following the NATO military pullout in near future, something that would rule out a transit route through its territory. Despite the political roadblocks the impair central Asian oil and gas flowing to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan, India still enjoys other optional routes, should it decide to shed political misgivings and join China, Russia and the Central Asian counties in a long term energy strategic policy. In fact, considering the degree to which India enjoys political good will among these states, New Delhi’s initiatives for embarking on new ventures, especially in long –term projects, have been limited, India needs to draw up a long-term strategy, similar to that of China if it wants to secure energy supplies to sustain economic growth.

The pipeline route through Xinjiang is potentially the most viable and the shortest route between India and Central Asia. The “Silk Route Extension” (SRE), origination from Xinjiang, could come through the undisputed parts of Sino-Indian border along the Karakorm pass at Daulat Beg-Ulde into Nubra Valley. In the past, British India used the SRE to serve its political and economic interests in the region vis-a vis tsarist Russia and China.¹¹ Although China is developing infrastructure not for profit but rather to provide energy to the country, it does not have enough resources to develop the infrastructure alone. Therefore, China’s pipeline development projects fit very well as a viable energy supply route for India to get Central Asian oil. Not only are discovered oil fields at a very short distance from Ladakh border but also a small land –portion of south west Xinjiang separates the link between Ladakh and the Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The emergence of predominantly Muslim but, in fact, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Central Asian Republics has added a new strategic dimension to the geopolitics of the whole of Asia and more so, for the countries located in its immediate neighbourhood. Central Asia lies at the strategic junction between two nuclear powers, Russia and China, and at the interface between Russia and the Islamic world. India has a vital interest in the security and political stability of this region. Obviously given the Kashmir angle, India cannot be walled off from the political developments which take place in the Central Asian region. Any advance by Islamic extremist¹t groups in the CARs could invigorate similar elements active in Kashmir. For reasons dictated by geography, India's strategic concerns are tied up with the regions bordering its north and northwest. Pakistan in its northwest continues to be antagonistic towards India. Pakistan is already sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Kashmir.¹² The forces of extremism and terrorism

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has ensconced themselves in the borderlands of Pakistan and has started gathering momentum in Afghanistan as these states of Central Asia, mainly Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan shared a common boundary with Afghanistan in the north. Consequently, developments in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of NATO forces would be central to Indian attempts to re-connect with Central Asia. Presently India has increased its collaboration with Afghanistan.¹³ It is the fourth largest contributor of assistance to Afghanistan. Its involvement in the reconstruction effort is tremendous. Besides, from the strategic point of view, the stability of the anti-Taliban set up in Afghanistan might ensure the de-linking of Central Asia from Indo-Pak zero sum game.¹⁴ Understandably, such perceived commonalities have opened avenues for increased cooperation between Central Asian republics and India. The support and assistance provided in the past by the Central Asian countries as well as India to the anti-Taliban northern alliance in Afghanistan was an indicator of such a common endeavor to oust the Taliban's from power.

Pakistan still remains wedded to the notions of gaining strategic depth in Central Asia and has also been claiming its 'privileged interests' in Afghanistan. Policies of Pakistan in Afghanistan have been in contradiction to those of the American and NATO forces despite it being a major non-NATO ally. Bringing Taliban back to levers of power in Kabul has been Pakistan's enduring goal after the dislodgement of Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the wake of September 11 terror attacks.¹⁵ Therefore, Pakistan has been pushing for mainstreaming of Taliban in the guise of 'moderate' Taliban while at home it is now gunning for Pakistan Taliban.

Apart from the Pakistan initiative of strategic depth, there was a religious upsurge in Central Asia. There was a rapid rise in the construction of mosques, and madrassas and people began to observe religious practices with great fervor and devotion. Copies of the Koran were

distributed freely. The religious revival was most noticeable in the Fergana valley, the stronghold of Islam even in Soviet period. At the external level it was Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates that played a Central role in the spread of religion in Central Asia.¹⁶ However, a distinct feature to be noticed is that Sunni Islam as practiced in Central Asia was liberal, than that in Pakistan and later in Afghanistan. One clear signal that emanates from Central Asia is the continuing aversion of the people to religious extremism and their desire for retaining the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society that they have inherited from the erstwhile USSR.¹⁷ The threat of instability caused by the forces of religious fundamentalism and cross border terrorism has impeded the growth of democratic institutions and civil society in Central Asia. Coercive role of the state has grown, as has the authoritarian nature of the leadership, in the name of countering extremists and destabilising forces. Funds have been diverted from social programmes to purchase military hardware and strengthen the security apparatus. Even mines were laid along the borders to prevent extremist infiltration. This affected local trading across the border apart from civilian casualties.

India shares common interests with China in respect of terrorism in Central Asia. The republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share a 5,000 km long border with China. The same Turkic peoples live on both sides of the border. The emergence of independent republics in Central Asia created an apprehension in Beijing regarding the demand for independence spreading among its own disaffected Muslim minorities in the politically sensitive and geo-strategically important province of Xinjiang. China felt threatened both by the appeals of Islamic fundamentalism and Uighur nationalism. The Uighur nationalist settled in Kazakhstan have formed the Uighuristan liberation movement for gaining independence from China. The Chinese government adopted tough repressive measures to crush the latent separatist tendency in

Xinjiang. So both India and China should cooperate with each other on the platform of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and other international organizations.

In order to secure its interests, India has to play a more constructive role in Afghanistan and to adopt pro-active policy towards Central Asia. Russia, a key benefactor in Central Asia, and India can develop a complementary rather than a competitive relationship in the region through enhanced security co-operation to stabilize Afghanistan after the NATO pullout. Already India provides security personnel for relief and construction work. Both countries could [share the burden of development and humanitarian assistance](#), spreading the financial risk of such ventures and increasing the volume of aid. They could also consider jointly investing in the region's underdeveloped infrastructure and promote increased growth in trade across the Tajik-Afghan border. This co-operation could amplify its soft power further in the region, building on existing positive Afghan perceptions of its involvement, projecting its influence, and ultimately facilitating access to energy resources in the region.

The domestic political scene in India has now been electrified with the arrival of the “Modi-wave,” which swept the Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power as the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy. As yet, much remains to be known about the direction in which Modi will steer India in on the international stage, and his foreign policy posture towards Central Asia remains particularly undefined. However, the BJP government now has the opportunity to assert India's influence in Central Asia and secure greater access to the region's abundant natural resources. This would mean re-invigorating a diplomatic activism with the CARs, Pakistan and Afghanistan, which never quite got off the ground under the last government.

The omens are promising and it is in such rare windows of opportunity that India can make inroads into Central Asia. However, so long as there is no real progress in advancing intensive cooperation with Pakistan or an improvement in the security situation in Afghanistan, Central Asia will remain an elusive backyard: near but just beyond reach and positioned firmly in the orbit of its powerful neighbours, Russia and China.

End Notes

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