

India's Emerging Relationship with Central Asia

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ABSTRACT: The subject of India-Central Asian relations is not a new one. Several facets of the cultures, civilizations and intellectual histories of the two regions suggest that they evolved not in isolation, but through reciprocal cultural enrichment. In modern times, however, the importance of Central Asia to India is not merely civilizational and historical, but also geopolitical and economic. The geostrategic location of the Central Asian states has made this region extremely fundamental. This has attracted the attention of various countries, including India. In fact today Central Asia is the region which is considered critical area in the foreign policy of the West, South and East Asian countries. India is making a serious bid to forge new equations with countries in Central Asia. India has major geostrategic 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. New energy sources from Central Asia will play an important role in Indian energy strategy in the coming years.

KEY WORDS: Central Asia, Soviet Union, Natural Resources, United States, China.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia has emerged as strategically important region from the Indian perspective. Central Asia is a landlocked and resource rich region. India is a democratic and secular nation with a huge market for Central Asian oil can become an important political friend and economic partner. Central Asian countries are multi-ethnic like India and in the process of nation and state building. Several facets of the cultures, civilizations and intellectual histories of the two regions suggest that they evolved not in isolation, but through reciprocal cultural enrichment. In modern times, however, the importance of Central Asia to India is not merely civilizational and historical, but also geopolitical and economic. The geostrategic location of the Central Asian states has made this region extremely fundamental. This has attracted the attention of various countries, including India. In fact today Central Asia is the region which is considered critical area in the foreign policy of the West, South and East Asian countries. India is making a serious bid to forge new equations with countries in Central Asia. India has major geostrategic 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. New energy sources from Central Asia will play an important role in Indian energy strategy in the coming years. Peace and stability in Central Asian Republics and Afghanistan seems to be the most crucial factor for India's security.

POLITICO-ECONOMIC COOPERATION

In the contemporary times the prolonged civil war in Afghanistan and the intervention by the Soviet troops had direct negative implications on India's security. Central Asian countries are Muslim by religion but not fundamentalist in character. In fact, due to the seventy years of Soviet rule they are non-religious in nature and do not want to follow a hard religious line as they are looking for the major western investment in their countries. Western countries have clearly indicated political stability and secular civil society as prerequisites for investment in the region. Therefore Central Asia is obviously more interested in economic development than in religious fundamentalism. Central Asia is therefore does not regard Pakistan as its friend but regards India as a more reliable friend in the South Asia.

On economic front, India always had prosperous trade with Central Asia in ancient, medieval as well as Soviet times. Even when the world has forgotten about Central Asia in the Soviet era, India had a thriving Rupee-Rouble trade with Central Asia, covered under the Indo-Soviet trade agreement. India's approach towards the newly independent Central Asian states is that of appropriate change with continuity. The safeguarding of economic interactions has been most important factor of India's foreign policy to Central Asia. India's concern in Central Asia also stems from the larger changing political environment around its immediate neighbourhood. Among other things, Indian apprehensions include the possibility of Pakistan taking advantage of the fluid situation in Central Asia. However, Pakistan has so far failed to evoke the religious sentiments of the Central Asians, despite its repeated efforts to gain their support on Kashmir vis-a-vis India. India has gone ahead with its own principles of democracy and secularism and firmly believes that this is the only way of promoting peace and stability in Central Asia. Pakistan on the other hand sought to promote Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia, which it thought would strengthen and rationalise Pakistan's own existence as a nation-state. But this stand of Pakistan could not attract Central Asia, as it is fully aware of Pakistan's ill motives in Central Asia. India has to take this opportunity to promote its card of secularism and democratic state building.

India and Central Asian relationship has economic dimensions, which are even more significant to India's long-term strategic interests. However, a big hurdle in the development of these relations is landlocked status of Central Asia. India does not have direct access to Central Asia and this problem has hampered India's investment in the region, but India has recently signed trade and transit agreements with Iran, which will help India to have access to Central Asia. Central Asia holds some of the world's largest gas and oil fields. Kazakstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan for example, possess more than 25 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and at least seven trillion cubic meters of natural gas reserves. As the petroleum resources of Central Asia came into international attention, the region has become the new destination for international oil companies and the great powers, Tajikistan holds large deposits of silver, gold and aluminium. Given the enormous natural resources, Central Asia holds the key that will shape the strategic environment of the entire Asia in the decades to come.

From India's point of view, the fundamental challenges and objectives of its policy will remain focused on exploiting and creating India's own economic stakes in the resource rich region, India should actively look forward for framing large-scale strategies and signing deals to export minerals and oil from Central Asia. Emergence of Central Asia presents both challenges and opportunities for India's foreign and security policies. Due to the reduction of Russia's strategic position the relatively benign environment in Central Asia has been transferred into a field of active strategic dynamism. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asia have directly altered the regional strategic balance against India. For decades the Soviet Union was patronizing not only Central Asia but also acted as a geo-political counterweight against forces antagonistic towards India. The Soviet retreat has resurfaced the local conflicts based on ethnic tensions, resurgent nationalism and religious fundamentalism. The vacuum created by the Soviet retreat has given way to a host of other extra-regional powers with varying ideological and political interests to sway influence in the region. The process of political transition and the final orientation of these new states in any direction will have an inevitable impact on the strategic environment of India. In comparison to Afghanistan and other Islamic states, the Central Asian states have gone through a divergent path of political and social development. Market oriented economy, with a curiosity for democracy has become the characteristic of Central Asia. India being a liberal democrat neighbour can become an important partner for Central Asian countries.

GEOPOLITICAL IMPORTANCE AND CHALLENGES

Geo-politically also it is India and not Pakistan which has potential to play an important role in the Central Asia. Apart from United States and Russia, China is another powerful actor on the scene of Central Asia. Due to its economic progress based on market economy it has influenced the Central Asia and had made impressive commercial penetration in the region. In the long run China is likely to clash with US and others in Central Asia on various strategic matters, including the flow of oil from the region. Given this background the Central Asian states are in the process of transition with different problems but positive in their attitudes and not confined to any single ideology or country. They want to build their nations with separate identity and make their respective countries as truly independent nations. The process may be difficult but not impossible as Central Asian Republics have the potential for becoming important Asian countries. These Central Asian states should not be seen as quasi-soviet adjuncts, Uzbekistan, Kazakastan and the other Central Asian states will become ever more significant elements in the balance of power at the centre of the Eurasian landmass, affecting the direct interest of Russia, China, Iran, Afghanistan and impinging on the security interests of countries like India & Pakistan. Therefore the Central Asian states demand more attention by the world in general and Asia in particular.

Despite having historical geo-cultural and geo-economic relations, the current engagements in these respects have not been fructified. Energy pipelines are still in limbo and connectivity projects are also moving at the snail's speed. The bilateral relations have been further weakening with the fragile effect of major and regional powers. Regardless of

these hiccups and inhibitions, there is a positive perspective as well. The surging economy, population, adequate amount of exchange rates at disposal, development in various socio-economic sectors in both the regions gives the hope that there would be an enormous potential for economic cooperation regarding trade, investment, and energy in the Central Asian Republics, along with socio-cultural and economic collaboration.

CONCLUSION

India's attempts to intensify ties with Central Asia can be understood from the standpoint of securing access to valuable energy resources as well as getting a grip in an emerging market for export. Given India's rising foreign policy interests in Central Asia, Indian development cooperation with Central Asia is likely to grow. Faster development collaboration between India and Central Asian countries would prove beneficial to both, since Central Asia could access appropriate technologies and knowledge from India and India could access the rich natural resources and upcoming markets in the region. Therefore, strengthening of relations between India and Central Asia is a win-win proposition as it would benefit all countries involved, including Afghanistan.

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