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India and Central Asia Relation Connecting Policy through the Bilateral forum to Multilateral forum

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Abstract:

The geopolitical prominence of Central Asia for India was in no way in doubt in the past and is not in doubt at future. Indian strategic thinking towards Central Asia is considered as a part of its extended and strategic neighborhood. What is of prime importance for India is the stability and security of the region. In a way that is impossible to disentangle linked with India's concerns in Central Asia for the instability situation in Afghanistan, for the latter is part of the Central Asian geopolitical assemble as its hares boundaries with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Central Asia's rich natural resources, including significant reserves of oil, natural gas, hydrocarbon and its location in the center of Eurasia have attracted immense global attention. In the untouched strategic scenario, India seeks to reconnecting policy towards Central Asia in the twenty first century throughout the bilateral to multilateral forum and to play a constructive role in this region. Till now India has a limited presence in the region, Indian policy makers and administrator was attracted towards a cooperative strategy with the bilateral and multilateral presence through the regional and international organization. The presence of major powers in Central Asia constrains India as a latecomer to the region. It also shares the Central Asians own interest that no single power should govern role in this region. However, the interests of the major powers are balanced and Central Asia is not likely to be the show round where these reasonable relations turn in uncompromisingly. In the Indian and Russian perceptions about the future role of China in Central Asia is likely to be coinciding. Though India is highly vigilant about Chinese aims in Central Asia, its more immediate concerns are the stability and security of Central Asian region.

Key Words: Afghanistan, Geopolitics, SCO, Central Asian Connecting Policy

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the Central Asian region has emerged as a geopolitical space where numerous regional and major powers are competing to enhance their influence and control the energy resources of the Eurasian region. Given the multidimensional geopolitical interests and positioning of the various powers in the post-Soviet space, India's initiatives in the Central Asian region cannot be analyzed in isolation. In the current context, China has emerged as a major player in the region. Its economic and political relations have increased substantially in the past few years. Russia, despite its old links with the Central Asian countries, finds itself giving space to China in Central Asia without compromising on its core interest areas. Despite its lower trade and investment in Central Asia as compared to China, Russia still retains a substantial amount of influence over the regional economies with its deep-rooted security cooperation. At the same time, the US, which has a major interest in the region, is working towards remodeling and reconstructing its policy towards the Central Asian Republics (CARs) in the new geopolitical prospective.

All three players Russia, China and the US have the potential to influence developments in the Eurasian region. At the same time, regional actors like India, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan are engaging Central Asian countries by developing bilateral partnership with an aim of enhancing economic and political ties. In the four "C" Formula in the 21st century, the Central Asian countries find themselves entangled with these regional and extra regional actors, where they have been working towards striking the right balance to gain maximum political and economic gains from each actor while trying to preserve their sovereignty. In such a situation, the CARs are building bilateral strategic partnerships and cooperative arrangements at regional and global levels to address the new security and economic challenges. While countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are building partnership based on their own politico-economic strength, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are working closely with Russia while exploring their options of cooperating with other major players as well. In the context of the new geo-political realities in the Central Asian region, the current article attempts to examine and evaluate various facets of India's "Connect Central Asia" policy and explores options for India's future engagement with the region. It argues that to enhance meaningful cooperation with the CARs, India will have to first sustain its current momentum of engagement by effectively implementing the "Connect Central Asia Policy". Second, New Delhi will have to come up with an innovative regional cooperative mechanism to address challenges, which limit its engagement with the region. Most importantly, Central Asia's own security and economic concerns will need to be taken into consideration while formulating India's policy towards the region.

The administrations of India completely assessed the steps taken by the sides to put into practice the decisions taken at the 1st India-Central Asia Dialogue in Samarkand in January 2019 as well as the Second India-Central Asia Dialogue held in the virtual format in October 2020. In this prospective, they welcomed the signing of MoUs for accomplishment of "High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs)" for socio-economic

Development in Central Asian countries, it based on grant support by India. They also alarming the projects approved for accomplishment and looked forward to speedy up recognition and performance for more projects under this system. They noted the ongoing negotiations with to look upon the utilization of US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit announced last year for infrastructure development projects in Central Asian countries and to mandate their higher-ranking officials to make great efforts for early progress in this regard. Consequently, the primary assignment of Indian diplomacy has been to put up fresh dealings, and to look after and improve India's economic and commercial interests in Central Asian region. In this circumstance, so far India has been winning in building a new affiliation with this region but is still under pressure with the second task of enhancing economic and commercial ties. India's political ties can be termed as extraordinarily good as compared to its economic relations. Commonalities of benefit on regional and international issues bind both India and CARs collectively. India has paced up its commitment with the CARs in much more paying attention with a vision to build a long term supportive partnership with the Central Asian region¹.

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian states to respect the important role of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme in capacity building and human resource development of their countries, especially in Information Technology and Communication Skills in the English language. The External Affairs Minister of India obtainable to increase the number of ITEC slots as per the necessities of the Central Asian countries and also to put in order to modified the training programmes in India for the professionals from the Central Asian countries in the fields of counter-terrorism, cyber security, space, energy and militaryexercisetc.²

The Complication of Afghanistan Factor for India

The neighbouring Afghanistan, with its ten-year NATO-led war just winding down, could be a potential factor in the region's destabilization, as it is the source of most Islamic radicalism movements in Uzbekistan that have flare up in Central Asia as well as in Pakistan since the 2000 a grave concern for both India and Russia. Another concern is the destructive drug trade that, dating from the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979-89), has made Russia the number one user of heroin, derivative of opium. The heroin use has in turns parked HIV/AIDS epidemic, both grivet threats to a country already in the grip of a depopulation curved. It is thus equally in India's and in Russia's interest to keep Afghanistan as stable as possible to eradicate it as a potential source of instability in their immediate neighborhoods. Both countries have already been active on Afghan territory in a military as well as a civilian capacity, and it is reasonable to construe that the two will stay there for some time to come. Afghanistan thus forms a necessary venue of cooperation between Russia and India in the greater Central Asian region, especially after the prospective NATO pullout when neither country will be able to ensure Afghan stability by itself³. The two powers benefit from their respective strengths in Afghanistan. India's influence in the country has been growing partly because it has been trying to counteract Pakistan's growing commercial clout there. In 2001, India set up a hospital at Farkhor in Tajikistan, near the

Afghan border, where injured Northern Alliance fighters were treated, and from there channeled equipment to the Northern Alliance. The site is now considered to be the Ayni Air Base in Tajikistan, it was the India's first only airbase outside the Indian map. In total, since the beginning of the war, India has offered a \$1.3 billion package for Afghanistan's reconstruction, making it the largest regional donor to the country. In 2009, Indian officials stated there were close to four thousand Indian workers and security personnel (including 500 paramilitary police) engaged in relief and reconstruction work in such areas as a steel communication infrastructure, education sponsorship, food aid, and solar electrification. One of the most substantial recent projects has involved the building of hydropower dams on Afghan rivers to provide the war-ravaged nation with consistent electricity⁴.

The larger theme under deliberation was the powers support in Afghanistan during the coming years. The four pledged to control terrorism and drug trafficking, as well as to develop the country's hydroelectric capacity, building on its already existing hydropower plants. India's not invited status to the abovementioned four-way presidential meeting (due in part, no doubt, to its strained relations with Pakistan) suggests that its administration should put more thoughtful presence into the ways in which it could be a successful partner for Russia in the postwar Afghanistan. For example, a logical place for Russia and India to begin their mutual assistance while waiting for Afghanistan's hoped-for stabilization is Tajikistan, where Russia has in anticipation of recently maintained a strong position and India has engaged in several infrastructure projects in hydroelectricity in this region⁵.

The sides discussed the current situation in Afghanistan and its impact on the region. The Ministers reiterated strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan while emphasizing the respect for sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and non-interference in its internal affairs. They also discussed the current humanitarian situation and decided to continue to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. The Ministers reaffirmed the importance of UNSCR resolution 2593(2021) which unequivocally demands that Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts and called for concerted action against all terrorist groups. The Ministers also agreed to continue close consultations on the situation in Afghanistan⁶.

While a delightful note of the outcome document of the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue of 10 November 2021, Ministers noted that there is a broad "Regional Consensus" on the issues connected to Afghanistan, which includes configuration of a truthfully diplomat and comprehensive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, central role of the UN, as long as immediate compassionate assistance for the Afghan people and preserving the rights of women, children and other national ethnic groups⁷.

India's Geo-Strategic Advantages from Central Asia

The materialization condition of the Central Asian region is the main problem is religion but, intact, multi ethnic and multi-religious CARs have added a new strategic dimension to the geopolitics of the whole of Asia and Europe so, for the countries located in its instant neighborhood. However, Central Asian manufacture at the strategic junction between the two nuclear powers, Russia and China, and at the

crossing point between Russia and the Islamic world. It shares borders with Afghanistan, which same or cause of spreading religious extremism in the region. India has a vital interest in the security and political stability of this region. Obviously given the Kashmir range, India cannot be walled off from the political developments which take place in the Central Asian region. Any advance by Islamic extremist groups in the CARs could revitalize similar elements actively in Kashmir. For these reasons dictated by geography, India's strategic concerns are made up with the regions bordering its north and northwest region. Pakistan in its northwest continues to be aggressive towards India. Pakistan is by now sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. For India, the Kashmir issue pertains not to four million Muslims living in Kashmir Valley alone, but to the peace and security around 130 million Muslims elsewhere in India.

Therefore, for India the geostrategic significance of CARs is huge natural resources and hydrocarbons. Under no incident can India close the eyes to connecting this region. On the other hand, unsteadiness situation in Afghanistan has also unfavorably subjective peace and security in this region. Most countries in the neighborhood are influenced that extremists consolidated in Afghanistan under the Taliban will undermine Central and South Asian region. India also apprehends that the Taliban's extension will boost the pressure on Kashmir and enlarge the Pakistan's strategic achievement to the gate way of Central Asian region. After the instability situation in Afghanistan, Pakistan maintains to be the key actors creating the under remaining situation in the CARs as well as in India. Taliban should be the destabilizing blueprint of local conflicts as a manifested in Afghanistan and some of the Central Asian states, especially in Tajikistan continue to unavoidable situation in the security situation on the environment prospective in Southern Asian region. In the light of the above mentioned that, India's long term intentional benefit forging the closer collaboration with the Central Asian states should be understandable.

Another point is that it needs to be highlighted here is that today the Central Asian region has become an area of enormous significance to Europe, US, China, and Iran. The US is trying to weaken the Russian and Iranian gains; China has dedicated and to invest the billions of dollars for the expansion of Central Asian oilfields to accomplish its future energy demands, and another factor is that Europe wants to enlarge its control by means of NATO's spreading out east wards throughout the Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme for the security reason. All this is likely to bring in high-stakes Great Game politics in the Central Asian region. This noticeably implications of China and Russia, India is obliged to consider these developments are attractive or not. The question is that India's concerns to expand its external influence in CARs will have severe implications, directly or indirectly for the Central Asian countries through the Great Game Politics. India's connected to the geostrategic significance of CAR's are the problem of religious extremism, terrorism or what Central Asian states call political Islam and the problem of drugs and arms trafficking and cross border terrorism in the border area. Another factor is that the financial achievement of other countries of Central Asia is a significance of their investment area which is India has not yet well thought-out sincerely. In the year 2022 onwards India interested to setup, a few major pilot projects in Central Asian countries in every year. Right now, only a tool-room axis in Turkmenistan established by

HMT has been setup and also technical cooperation programmes have begun. The idea behind this project India will be setting up a center of excellence there. They have a polytechnic where academic education is imparted. But the tool-room straight away adds a convenient boundary to the whole things in this region. Not only can the students but also to promising entrepreneurs, people who want to set up their own industry also benefited from the Indian tool-room axis. Similarly, in every year, one project in one Central Asian country will gear up the CAR's development project on the timeline. This is going to be an on-going series in the Great Game politics rivalry.

India's Relation through the Bilateral to Multilateral Strategy

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) provides the platform for unraveling the potential for the regional development. The mandate of SCO is to provide mechanism for cooperation in achieving political, economic and security coordination among Asian and Eurasian nations. The SCO has laid emphasis on broadening its consent to develop mutual trust and cooperation for regional growth and ensuring to comprehensive the impartial growth, to achieve leaders' obligation to Agenda 2030. Its focus is on creating favorable environment for many-sided cooperation on trade, infrastructure, business cooperation and innovation. The primary goals and tasks of SCO have been enshrined in its charter signed in 2002. As a result, the organization has come to have identified three evils to combat: "Religious Extremism, Separatism and Terrorism". To that effect, the SCO has established the Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) established in 2005, headquartered in Tashkent. RATS are the body that engages in counter-terrorism activities and engages in security cooperation across all member states. The primacy of the security agenda in the SCO was designed against the backdrop of instability in Central Asia during the SCO summit on 2021 through the Video conference⁸.

As a part of "Extended Neighbourhood", Central Asia commands India's acute attention. Central Asian Economies (CAEs) and India are becoming more dynamic economies in terms of their growth performance and there is every reason that both the regions should cooperate in the coming years in a more comprehensive way. However, existing structural and physical barriers are so strong that it has got reflected in the current trade engagement between India and the CAEs and there is now renewed focus to enhance trade between India and Central Asia. India as a major regional power and member of SCO has keen interest in strengthening economic ties with CAEs, particularly in the field of trade and energy. Besides, historical association of Central Asia and India provides immense scope for cooperation in social and physical infrastructure development. The strategic and economic significance of the place has always been well recognized by the Indian leadership, as evident from the visits made by Indian leadership to Central Asian countries soon after their independence. As India and central Asian countries do not share physical border, expansion of trade and strategic ties between the two countries has been difficult and expensive. Hence, the CSO is an important platform for bridging the gap between the two regions and take measures to strengthen India-Central Asia Partnership: Moving for Regional Development and Connectivity. India-Central Asia Partnership: Moving for

Regional Development and Connectivity along with economic, cultural and political ties with the region⁹. After India became a full member of the SCO India try to more than focus in this territory through the bilateral to multilateral forum with his neighbourhood policy strategy. Thus, the member states of SCO require mutual cooperation to facilitate integration into the global economy and minimize adverse effects of globalization. In spite of recovery from the global crises, high unemployment rate and limited demand remains a serious hindrance to sustainable development in the SCO region. Central Asia has witnessed socio-economic and environmental challenges which require immediate attention in order to guarantee the transition to a more sustainable development trajectory. In this context, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an opportunity for the countries, by facilitating in overcoming the challenges and support the countries in their transition towards an inclusive and sustainable economy. These countries are endeavoring to integrate into the world economy and reduce their exposure to external shocks. Thus, SCO member states have to emphasize on creating an ecosystem for sustainable growth of trade and investment cooperation, developing and implementing joint infrastructural projects to strengthen business cooperation along with the engagement of the SCO Business Council and SCO Interbank Association¹⁰.

The economies of Central Asia are endowed with rich natural resources and all the states are relatively harmonized in terms of resources and demography. The region has always struggled with the security challenges and conflicts. As a result, worrying environment has been created that leads to rough and unequal relation in economic exchange among the countries. The stress arises because of various development challenges these economies grapple with. Their growth process is lesser salient, lacks sustainability and inclusivity. To pursue the growth continuum, they require concerted efforts to achieve an effective development strategy. The agenda 2030 on SDGs provides the exact platform for these countries, in order to ensure inclusive planning and effective implementation of development programmes. Ultimately, India and Russia would need more than strengthen through the SCO and all the three aspects discussed here cooperation on reconstructing Afghanistan, commercial partnership, and joint economic development projects with a consumer is to point of view to achieve meaningful level of collaboration in Central Asia¹¹.

India's Implication towards the Connecting Central Asian Policy

India's new policy approach on the 21st century is an attempt to augment India's renewed linkages with the entire Eurasian region. Its various facets include enhancing India's engage maintain economic, political, strategic fields, in education, connectivity through their Policy towards this region. In the present scenario India and Central Asian connecting policy through the Political Sphere: Build strong political ties through the high-level exchange and interaction between leaders at bilateral and multilateral level. In the Economic Cooperation: Develop long term partnership in energy and natural resources ;cooperate in production of profitable crops with value addition; participation in construction sector; India to help set up several medium size industries; to help increase trade and venture with Indian banks to expand their presence in Central Asia. In the Strategic Cooperation: To make stronger strategic and security cooperation with focus on military

training, joint research and exercise, counterterrorism coordination and close consultations with the presently worst situation in Afghanistan. In the Prospective of Connectivity with the Region: To address the problem of connectivity work jointly to reactivate the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) within the focus on the bilateral to multilateral forum¹². In the sphere of Information Technology Working on setting up a Central Asia e-network linking all five Central Asian states with its hub in India to provide tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity. On the field of Cooperation in Education sector: Setting up of a Central Asian University in Bishkek to provide World-classed dictation in the areas like IT, Management, Philosophy and languages skills. In the area of People to People Contact Cooperation in Medical Area: To Exchange between youth and future leaders of India and Central Asia. In the influence of major powers, the interaction between the scholars, academician, NGOs and civil society to setting up civil hospitals and clinics in the Central Asian region. In the sphere of Cooperation in Regional groupings to boost the multilateral cooperation through regional institutions likes the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and Custom Union of the Central Asian region.

II . CONCLUSION

In the deeply illumination of India's present policy approach towards Central Asia, an Indian official stated, Our relationship with Central Asia's based on a unique model of political, economic and development partnership, not driven by an exclusive objective of access or sources". India's policy towards the region has been marked by an increasingly deeply relationship based on political and technical cooperation as a partner of the Central Asian Countries. India has mutual exploring its experiences and expertise with focus on capacity building and training through its ITEC and other assistance programmes also. India's new policy approach is an effort to enlarge the India's transformed linkages with the whole Eurasian region. Its various facets include attractive the India's commitment in economic, political, strategic fields, in education, connectivity and in the areas of culture and people to people contacts. Apart from this India's "Connecting Central Asia Policy" transformed into bilateral to multilateral segment in the sphere of contemporary world.

India's rehabilitated interest and increasing desire to play a more active role in Central Asian region through its newly pronounced "Connect Central Asian Policy" can be termed as speeding up of its engagement with the region to build a mutual partnership. However, the biggest confront for India is to exchange these proposals into dependability. The grasp of various initiatives taken by India in the past few years demand not only heavy investment but also long-term persistent to accomplish with various proposed projects in future. It is suggested that active bilateralism combined with inventive regionalism will help to India build a comprehensive partnership with the Central Asian region. It is important to take on a strategic approach surrounding with the elements of strong economic, energy and infrastructure collaboration with the Central Asian region.

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