



India and Tajikistan Relations: Strategic Dimension

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Abstract:

India and Tajikistan enjoy warm relations from last many decades. There are traces of contact between India and Tajikistan from Indus valley civilization. However, the changing dynamics of geopolitics in the region has impact the relations between two countries in different eras despite that India had legacy of robust relations with Tajikistan. However, after 9/11 US intervened in Afghanistan and started the military operation called “War on Terror” in Afghanistan has changed the geopolitics of the region and the withdrawal of USA from the Afghanistan has also brought the upheaval in the geopolitics of the region. The main objective of this research article is to study the strategic relations between India and Tajikistan after 9/11 and subsequent intervention by US and its NATO allies in the Afghanistan. This study also made humble attempt to discuss the strategic relevance of the Tajikistan for India.

Key Words: Strategic, India, Tajikistan, Geopolitics and Relations.

Introduction:

After 9/11, the United States and its NATO partners made entry in the Afghanistan and started military operation against Taliban called the “War on Terror”.ⁱ These geopolitical events have entirely changed the significance of global security and its links with politics and economics. As the geopolitical dimensions of various regions across the world have shifted, the Central Asian Region (CAR) holds immediate significance. Central Asian region has been labelled as the US’ ‘Greater Middle East’, China’s ‘Far West’, and Russia’s ‘Strategic Backyard’, is a vital for world because of huge resources oil, hydrocarbons and uranium. In addition to this, the region’s physical proximity to South Asia has made it indispensable for all major world powers, especially those in Europe and South Asia.ⁱⁱ

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the CAR’s unique geopolitical presence has become the backdrop of a ‘New Great Game’, which initially involved the US, Europe, China, and Russia as key players, in addition

to Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan as regional actors. All countries involved have their own vested interests in the CAR, since all major military and political development in the region can heavily influence the internal and regional security in neighbouring regions.

India's 2012 Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP) focuses on community, commerce, connectivity, and consular work. It consists of setting up hospitals, universities, technology and information centers, joint scientific and economic ventures, improved air and road connectivity, and fostering strategic partnerships for security and defense affairs. As India entered the Game with the CCAP, it was first seen by the US as a balancing power between China and Russia; but like all other countries involved, India has also reformed its foreign policy to increase its presence as its own power in the region.

Today, India and Tajikistan have very healthy diplomatic relations, and the incumbent heads of state of both countries — Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi — have time and again expressed their closeness and cooperation, especially in the domain of security and defence. What is the geostrategic significance of Tajikistan for India, and how has India can take benefit from this age-old relationship to increase development and defence capabilities in the Central Asian Region?

Indo-Tajik Relations: A brief historical background

India and Tajikistan have always shared an interesting tradition of economic and sociocultural ties. Through the course of history, as summarized by Kulbhushan Warikoo, these linkages have been cemented by the ideological forces of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Sufism; the migration of Turks, Aryans, Mughals, Sakas (among others); the surprisingly high frequency of travel by scholars, statesmen, artists, and traders alike. These movements of goods, services, people, and beliefs, as well as the similarities in ancient cultural practices of people in both regions, have survived despite the high physical barriers of the mountain ranges and political factors such as colonization and the Cold War.ⁱⁱⁱ

After attaining independence in 1947, India's associations with the CAR were rejuvenated under the umbrella spirit of new Indo-Soviet relations. While the rest of the world ignored the region, India remained in constant touch with its people and their developments. During the Soviet era, India had an edge over its neighbours when it came to reaching out to CAR, which made the area more accessible to Indian visitors and leaders. This relationship flowered so much in the prime of Indo-Soviet ties, that Indo-CAR connections developed rapidly and in diverse fields such as education, trade, science & technology, culture, films, music etc. which created a mutual understanding among the two parties. Till date, the use of Indian tea, spices, medicine, and a strong liking for Indian films and music are intrinsic to Tajikistan, which is reflective of its age-old connection with India. Apart from this, the Tajik's pride in their Aryan ancestry and heritage which included a common cultural pattern as India in embracing philosophy, astronomy, architecture, and literature also led to a strong development of

sociocultural and economic interaction between India and Tajikistan. It is this historical and cultural consciousness that still permeates the bilateral relationship between the two countries, which make these ties constructive and cooperative in all sectors of development.^{iv}

In former Indian PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's 2003 visit to Dushanbe, he focused on forging a closer relationship to enhance the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Both parties jointly agreed to expand defence cooperation, combat terrorism, and build highways that would link Tajikistan to Iran via Afghanistan. During this visit, two crucial agreements were signed, which established a Joint Working Group (JWG) on counterterrorism, as well as the formulation of an Extradition Treaty. For India, the importance of maintaining a spirit of enhanced cooperation with Tajikistan stems not only from the country's stable, secular, and strong nature, but more importantly its crucial geostrategic vantage point.

Afghanistan holds vital importance for India due to its location connecting South and West Asia to the subcontinent, as well as its shared border with Pakistan. During the Afghan civil war, India lent its support to the Afghan Northern Alliance, which was fighting the Taliban. To strengthen this, they constructed and manned a 25-bed military hospital in Tajikistan's Farkhor, which aided the ANA for more than a year. In fact, following a suicide attack by the Al Qaeda just a few days before 9/11, ANA leader Ahmed Shah Massoud was rushed by helicopter to this hospital, where he eventually succumbed to his injuries. From Farkhor, India also managed to supply the ANA with nearly \$8 million worth of high-altitude warfare equipment and defence advisors to provide operational guidance.

Ever since the fall of the Taliban, India has been trying very hard to emerge as a strategic partner to Afghanistan. For instance, it pledged \$1.3 billion to the Karzai government, and has been closely involved with humanitarian assistance, infrastructure projects, education and capacity building, and small-scale and community-based development in the country. Hence India's positioning in Tajikistan has played a crucial role in building its relationship with Afghanistan, which in contemporary times is being threatened by the reestablishment of Pakistani power in the country.

India's Strategic Presence in Tajikistan

It is important to note that Indian policymakers usually keep in mind Sino-Pak strategic relations in their decision making. India's primary interest in CAR is to prevent both China and Pakistan from increasing their clout in the region. This brings us to the most relevant leg of India's interests in Tajikistan: its military airbase in Farkhor. The Farkhor base is India's first and only foreign military base, making it the fourth country (after the US, Russia, and Germany) to have its defence stationed in CAR. The airbase, which was a dilapidated lot developed by India and is run jointly by the Indian and Tajik Air Forces, protects the country's interests in the CAR region and gives it a legitimate stronghold on energy and security.^v

The airbase also offers India a major strategic depth, giving it a convenient space to launch and transport material and men from Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. More importantly, the flying time between Farkhor and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir is very short (through the Wakhan Corridor), making Islamabad wary of New Delhi's strong military presence in such close proximity. India is also ready to set up another airbase in Ayni, towards which it has reportedly spent \$70 million in renovations and stationed over 150 personnel. The location of both of these bases is important for India, and Pakistan must keep this in mind as its leaders seem to suggest an inevitable war between the two neighbours over Kashmir.^{vi}



Original Map Sourced in Hindi from Divya Bhaskar

India's military presence in CAR also plays into a larger question regarding the security agenda and its militarization in the region. The presence of American troops in the CAR has been widespread since 9/11, and there has been an immense strategic value attached to the region ever since. Apart from the Indian Air Force, Tajikistan is also host to French Troops in Dushanbe as well as other cities. As global powers fight for dominance in the CAR, they are seriously considering India's influence in the region, which has shifted from traditional views of being only economic and cultural, to becoming a strong strategic and militaristic contender. The establishment of the Farkhor base and the renovation of the one at Ayni can be seen as the first steps towards a more hands-on approach for India. The point of contention now is whether India has the financial and strategic capabilities to expand its foreign military presence, or if Farkhor is an isolated case in the country securing its interests in the CAR.^{vii}

Trade and Trade Routes

Coupled with their military interests is India's growing curiosity in the region's natural gas reserves, which were previously inaccessible due to the absence of security and connectivity to these areas. India's investment in Tajikistan's hydroelectric energy resources has also largely contributed to the two countries constantly developing their security relations. Yet, the trade between the two countries is substantially insignificant. India's exports to Tajikistan are mainly clothing and apparel, iron and steel, pharmaceuticals, and meat and its ancillary products. Tajik exports to India include dry fruits, mineral ores, ash and slag, aluminum, cotton and medicinal oils.^{viii}

Experts and leaders from India and Tajikistan believe that the true potential of trade can be achieved once they develop a solution to the absence of direct connectivity. Since the CAR is landlocked, India has to look to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran for connectivity and push for the speeding up of the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. Currently, trade between India and the CAR faces a roadblock as Pakistan has consistently blocked the Central Asia-Afghanistan-Pakistan trade corridor for the import and export of goods to and from India. There is ban on trucks carrying back Indian goods from Wagah, much to the detriment of the economies of both Tajikistan and Afghanistan. India allows Afghanistan duty-free market access, but it has been unable to extend this to other CAR Republics due to this barring. Until operations from the INSTC, TAPI, and the Chabahar Port (Iran) begin in full swing, India has to continue trading with the region only by air cargos. This, too, has become increasingly difficult, as India grapples with its position on Iran and continues to have sour tensions with Pakistan, which has blocked its airspace to Indian carriers.

India, Tajikistan and Afghanistan must work towards securing the right of transit of goods through Iran as this would be very beneficial for the region and also create a market for Indian products, especially food crops and pharmaceuticals. Alternatively, both India and Tajikistan must actively work towards convincing Pakistan to relax its bans, although this seems unlikely given the recent escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan.

Conclusion

Tajikistan and other Republics in the CAR are wary and cautious of the dominating influence of China, Russia and their current regimes. They also seem to be irritated by the US' constant initiatives under the garb of promoting human rights and democracy and their rather wishy-washy attempts to talk 'peace' with the Taliban. At this point, they look at India as a partner and a friend since it does not have any explicit territorial or political agenda in the region, and expect the emerging power to play a role in balancing the power games in CAR.

However, compared to the other players in the CAR, India is not militarily or financially positioned to be able to take sides or play an active role in the balancing of powers. Tajikistan is just the beginning of its strategic foothold in the area, and India has to keep its focus on Tajikistan intact due to the high stakes it has in the CAR.

At this point in Indian international relations, its image as an emerging power seems to be of utmost importance. Therefore, it is to be expected that this government and the ones to follow will continue to employ neo-imperialist strategies in the CAR to secure this image. Keeping this inevitable goal in mind, India must be skillful in utilizing its diplomatic and strategic means to create a dependence on itself for the Republics in the region, and this includes trade, soft power, and continued joint military exercises with relevant state actors.

Currently, very little is known in the Indian public sphere regarding the economic, strategic, or sociocultural involvements of the country in Tajikistan or the rest of the CAR. Since Tajikistan and India have an age-old relationship as mentioned earlier, doubled with Tajikistan's military importance especially with respect to Pakistan, the disclosure of such information would fit well within the hyper-nationalistic rhetoric currently employed by the incumbent government. The narrative seems to be so perfect; one wonders why these movements have been kept so confidential. Perhaps New Delhi is fearful of a possible security dilemma in the region.

The Indian media seems to be more focused on highlighting enmities with Pakistan and China and India's internal 'development'. As Pakistan closes more and more of its economy, trade routes, and airspace to India, it is of utmost importance that the Modi government get over its rigid position of avoiding bilateral talks with Pakistan, if it wishes to secure its interests in the CAR. Simultaneously, India must solidify its stance on Iran, so that it can move ahead with the development of connectivity through Chabahar as well. Once this is achieved, Tajikistan will be able to import and export easily with India, thereby reducing its dependence on China and creating a ripple effect for the other Republics in the region. However, these are idealistic expectations that may not reach any fruition, at least in the near future. New Delhi must decide whether it wishes to continue prioritizing this never-ending saga of Indo-Pak enmity over the potential of creating something truly big in Tajikistan and the rest of the CAR.

The failure of creating a significant mark for itself in the CAR would tie India's 'big brother' status only to South Asia, and create a vacuum that the Sino-Pak alliance is more than ready to fill, especially in Tajikistan. India needs to acknowledge that the rivalry of the New Great Game does not necessarily guarantee its stability in the region. In the larger picture, if India wishes to secure an official spot as a world power in the global playground that is the CAR, it is imperative that it continues to be proactive as an economic partner to the region. In Tajikistan, it must fulfil the implementation of existing agreements to serve as an example of positive Indo-Central Asian relations.

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