

India Beefs up Outreach to Central Asia

K. N. Pandita

Associate Professor, Kashmir University

Introduction

Owing to some explicit concerns, India has been beefing up outreach to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) with greater vigour and focussed vision through bilateral exchanges and regional interactions, especially in the last few years. Is it her reaction to the widening influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or China's lengthening shadow over the region through B&RI and CPEC or the lurking threat of the resurgence of *jihadism*? With many menacing activities taking place in her proximity, India has the compulsion of revisiting and streamlining her regional security, upgrading and expanding connectivity and ensuring economic stability. India is faced with hostility by her two neighbours, Pakistan and China. Is she capable of meeting the two-pronged challenge and how? This is what we shall examine in this article.

Background

The appearance of the Sunni radical Taliban during their first regime in Kabul in (1996-2001), and the horrendous inhumanities that flowed from it, alerted India to the dangers inherent in the upsurge of fundamentalism in the AF-Pak region. Its ramifications eastward could portend disaster to the South Asian democracies.

Pakistan and China, both inveterately hostile towards India could take it a rare opportunity of planting footprints in a geo-strategic and mineral-rich region. From the Afghan base, Pakistan, in tandem with China, could manoeuvre a subversive agenda not only in the Central Asian region as well. India, a major player in the Asian Continent, cannot be sidelined to let her adversaries have a free hand in the region.

9/11 exposed the brutal face of Theo-fascism. Working in unison with *Al Qaeda*, the Taliban invited the wrath of the US and NATO. Af-Pak became the hub of forces determined to destabilize peace in Central and South Asia.

The two decades of fierce fighting and bloodshed in Afghanistan proved ineffective. In mid-August 2021, the US and NATO troops abandoned the war-torn land and its people to the Taliban who declared Afghanistan an Islamic Emirate with *sharia* law. No country, not even Pakistan, has officially recognized it so far.

The withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 sounded the first alert to the Indian policy planners to mount attention to the geostrategic importance of Central Asia. Indian universities and research institutes opened doors for Central Asian Studies. Protocols for the exchange of specialists and scholars between India and the Central Asian Republics were signed.

Securing the CARS

Keeping in mind the sensitivity and historicity of the vast Central Asian Steppes, the Soviet Union was apprehensive of external interference in Turkestan. It could hamper or even sabotage the Central Communist Party's promises of modernization, development and growth enunciated in Lenin's famous speech called "Address to the Peoples of the East."¹ Soviet Central Asia virtually remained a region behind the iron curtain.

During the cold war period, no foreign country, including India, was allowed easy access to the CARs. It was only in April 1987 that India opened its Consulate General in Tashkent which was upgraded to Embassy on 18 March 1992. Till then, by and large, Indian political class and academic circles had remained almost unacquainted with the vast region of Central Asia,² not to speak of its geo-strategic importance.

India's Threat Perceptions

A: Pakistan

Pakistan and China are the prime actors on the Af-Pak chessboard. Pakistan pursues two-fold objectives; ouster of India from Afghanistan and acquiring strategic depth westward. Claiming to be a partner of the US in the fight against terrorism, Pakistan shielded Osama bin Laden, the chief of *Al Qaeda*. The US Navy Seals exposed the lie in a blitzkrieg of 22 May 2011 in which they shot Osama dead in his bedroom at a stone's throw from Pakistan Army headquarter in Rawalpindi.

Taliban is the creation of Pakistan. Its founder Mulla Omar, and hundreds of his followers have been the alumni of *Jama'at-i-Islami* seminaries (*madrasahs*) in Pakistan. These are hate-generating machines against India. Some Taliban networks in Afghanistan, the proxies of ISI such as the Haqqani network, are blatantly anti-India and anti-Hindu. They have owned attacks on Indian assets in Afghanistan. The Haqqani network representative in the Taliban Cabinet, holding home portfolio had no qualms of conscience in declaring that after Kabul, Kashmir is their agenda. Leftover American sophisticated weaponry items have recently found their way to the hands of Kashmir terrorists.³

B: China

China in CA is the next compulsion for India. India identifies three areas, of concern; security, connectivity and energy. The launching of One Belt One Road or the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will enhance China's influence in Central Asia because it provides her overland connectivity to Europe and the Middle East

Passing through the part of the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, illegally occupied by Pakistan and illegally ceded to China, the CPEC has become a source of threat to India's security. Growing domestic energy demand has increased China's presence in the region. Its daily consumption of oil has risen from 4.2 million barrels in 1998 to 13.5 million in 2018. Its consumption of natural gas is projected to increase by nearly 190 percent from 2020 to 2050.⁴ China is eyeing Central Asia's oil reserves estimated at 40 billion barrels and natural gas reserves more than 500 trillion cubic feet. The last few years have seen highways and railroads traversing from the East in China through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Europe, Russia, Iran, and the Middle East

India's Reach

On January 27, 2022, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a virtual Summit with the Heads of the five Central Asian countries to mark 30 years of the establishment of diplomatic relations with the CARS. It discussed steps to take bilateral relations forward significantly and exchange views on the evolving regional security situation.

The momentum generated by the 2015 visit of Prime Minister Modi to all Central Asian countries resulted in the initiation of the India-Central Asia Dialogues -- with the

participation of Afghanistan – at the level of Foreign Ministers, and enhanced engagement in many areas. This coincides with the resurgence of Central Asia's importance in trade and transport.

India and CARs have a similarity of views on most geopolitical issues, including Afghanistan, with which three CARs share a border. Their shared interest is in ensuring that Afghan territory is not used for sheltering, training or financing terrorists. Over the past six years, they have enhanced relations in strategic areas including defence, security, counter-terrorism, and intelligence-sharing. This will further deepen as India and Central Asia seek to limit any adverse fallout of the developments in Afghanistan.

The regional security dialogue hosted by India in November 2021, with the participation of heads/secretaries of National Security Councils of the Central Asian countries along with Russia and Iran, also outlined a common regional approach to Afghanistan. They reiterated their support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan, and agreed to provide immediate humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people.

Beyond Afghanistan, is the necessity for India and Central Asia to seriously enhance the economic agenda, bilaterally and regionally, as those countries step out of their geopolitical bubble and increase in strategic importance?

Recent years have seen a growing Indian presence in Central Asia, especially in the healthcare and education sectors. Several Indian universities now have campuses in Central Asia and there are about 10,000 Indian students in Central Asia. Over the past few years, Indian states have made direct contact with their counterparts in Central Asia, particularly between Gujarat and Andijon in Uzbekistan.

In 2021, India announced a \$1 billion line of credit for infrastructure development projects in Central Asian countries, and grants for High Impact Community Development Projects for socio-economic development. Discussions on identifying and implementing specific projects are ongoing.

Trade between India and Central Asia has been languishing at \$2 billion, pegged mostly on the import of crude oil and uranium from Kazakhstan and the export of pharmaceuticals to the region. This must broaden into contemporary economic exchanges, especially as India

an established global technology and emerging e-commerce player, has much to offer. The forthcoming meeting of the India-Central Asia Business Council in Tashkent will be looking for ways to enhance and diversify trade and investment.

Some of the dormant connectivity projects are seeing signs of life. The proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project is a winning proposal for all participating countries. The Taliban government in Afghanistan and Turkmenistan have been in discussions, and on 16 January at a meeting in Turkmenistan they announced the project will recommence in Afghanistan in March 2022. The pipeline aims to bring 33 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan to India.

With TAPI back on the table, it is time to progress another connectivity initiative – the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor. India, Iran and Uzbekistan have long been discussing joint use of the Chabahar Port in Iran. Given Pakistan's intransigence, overland connectivity through Pakistan remains an unlikely possibility. The key then lies in trade through the maritime and rail routes via Iranian ports.

The trading community in India and other countries has to be convinced of the attractiveness of the INSTC compared with other available options. Dry runs along INSTC between India and Azerbaijan/Iran conducted in 2014 demonstrated cost and time savings. It may be worthwhile considering a test shipment to India from Kazakhstan, India's biggest trade partner in Central Asia. Currently, much of the bilateral trade between the two countries is via China. There is a need to complete the missing rail links on the INSTC, which will reduce costs and address the problem of congestion at road border crossing points.

Russia still retains a major influence in Central Asia, bilaterally and through regional mechanisms. India and Russia exchanged a 'non-paper' on increasing engagement in Central Asia. Defence is among the identified areas for cooperation. Russia too has an interest in ensuring the security of the Central Asian borders with Afghanistan and Tajikistan in particular and working against the possible influx of terrorism and extremism into Central Asia. Russia is also a partner country in the INSTC. As India and Russia have similar interests, a framework for cooperation among India, Russia and Central Asian countries can be

developed. Aligning with Russian engagement in Central Asia will benefit India in the long run.

In the meantime, India can press ahead with cooperation in renewable energy, including through the International Solar Alliance, and participation of the Central Asian countries in the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), is a winning proposition. Science and technology, agriculture and food processing, space applications, information technology, uranium (from Uzbekistan) – there is considerable scope for bilateral collaboration in these emerging areas.

Conclusion

The two countries that pose a real threat to the rise of India as an economic and military power in the Asian Continent with secular-democratic political dispensation, are China and Pakistan. They are working in tandem to harm the interests of India wherever they can, especially in the Central Asian region made up of five CARs and two Trans-Caspian Republics where India has significant plans of extending cooperation and collaboration in developmental endeavours. Security, connect Central Asia and she has made a sound beginning. India's purported role in CA is bound to contribute immensely to regional and global peace and development.

References

¹ 'Appeal to the Moslems of Russia and the East', COUNCIL OF PEOPLE'S COMMISSARS, APPEAL TO THE MOSLEMS OF RUSSIA AND THE EAST. DECEMBER 7, 1917, Original Source: *Izvestiia*, No. 232, 7 December 1917, pp. 1-2.

² <https://www.vifindia.org/node/595>

³ **Greater Kashmir** of 20 February 2022

⁴ *ORF* 10 March 21, 'China-Central Asia relations: An uneasy coexistence'
