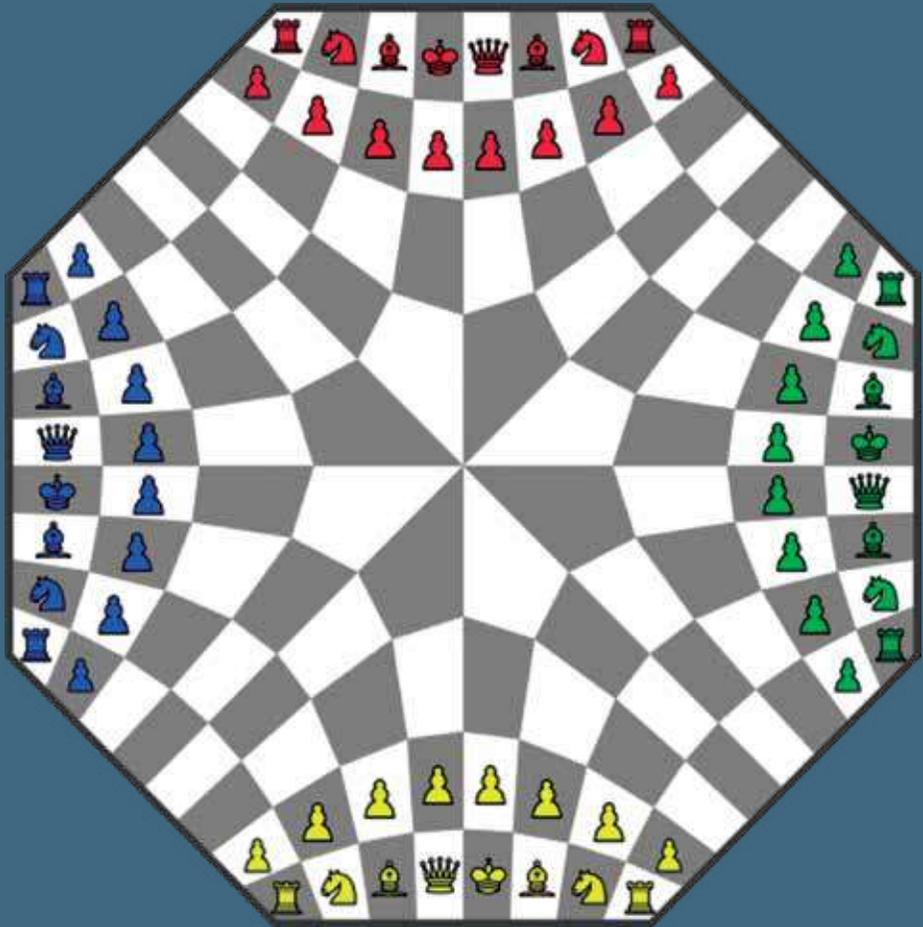


# INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

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THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION



**P. Stobdan**

INDIA  
AND  
CENTRAL ASIA

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P. Stobdan



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New Delhi



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New Delhi

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# Introduction

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The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 changed the geopolitical landscape of India's strategic neighbourhood. Not only was the Soviet Union a great superpower that provided India with strong strategic support under the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation of August 1971, its geo-strategic presence in Central Asia served as one of the most critical components for India's strategic calculus.<sup>1</sup>

Following the end of the Cold War – symbolised by the peaceful separation of Eastern and Central Europe, the Soviet empire and the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 and the final collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1990 – each of the USSR's republics including the five republics of Central Asia, declared their independence or sovereignty and created their own armed forces. Uzbekistan declared sovereignty on June 20, 1990, Turkmenistan on August 22, 1990, Tajikistan on August 25, 1990, Kazakhstan on October 25, 1990 and Kirgizia on December 12, 1990.

The Soviet Union finally ceased to exist on December 31, 1991 – the event was described by Russian President Vladimir Putin as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” For India the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new republics of Central Asia presented it with a host of geopolitical challenges.

As India re-examined Central Asia in the changed context, it had firstly found that its historical links with the region went back more than 2,500 years. Evidently, the developments in the Eurasian continent had decisively shaped much of the course of India's political history. The ancient Indian texts referred to the challenges

from nations lying beyond the Himalayas or the Hindukush as *Uttara-kuru*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are many descriptions on the region in various Hindu-Buddhist texts that showed that since the days of Sakas or the Indo-Scythian tribes, the links between India and Central Asia remained uninterrupted.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the ancient texts also mentioned that the great trade-route known as *Uttarāpatha*<sup>4</sup> had connected the Indo-Gangetic plains with the southern fringe of Eurasian continent that passed ancient Takshashila and Gandhara (present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan). In fact, this southern part of Central Asia served as the biggest artery for the spread of Indian religion, philosophy, commerce, trade and science across Europe and Asia. In reality, the fabled Silk Route phenomenon was less about silk and more about transmission of Buddhism from India to China via Central Asia. The Silk Route was both a corridor and a vehicle on which philosophies, ideas, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, artistic and architectural styles and the art of diplomacy and statecraft travelled.

Thirdly, Central Asia was perceived in India for its military context of being a staging ground for invasions into India. The ancient texts and treatises had referred to relentless threats emanating from the region Northwest of India. The great Indian epic, *Mahabharata* and ancient Pali texts give a vivid account of the dynamics of threats posed to India from the region. It seemed clear that almost every foreign invader including the Greeks, Turks and Mughals, barring the original Mongols, made their military ventures into India through the Central Asian steppes.<sup>5</sup>

Threats remained real even during the medieval times. In fact, until the Timurid period (14th century), the region was the epicenter of world's power, whose dominance and influence pervaded throughout the region including India. Genghis Khan's own descendant Tamerlane and Zahir-ud-Din Babur who emerged from the Ferghana Valley came to create havoc in India massacring thousands in Delhi alone. Babur later established the Mughal Dynasty in India in the 16th century.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, the extent of the Russian Empire had reached the northern peripheries, which led to the British Empire seeking a prolonged “Great-Game” play in Central Asia. British India’s security and frontier trade policies with East Turkistan and Afghanistan were some of the well-known strategic high-points.

It appears clearly that the origin of much of Indian strategic thought had its genesis in Eurasian dynamics and continues to remain so, albeit in different forms. However, the events of contemporary history and the intense geopolitical rivalry may have led to almost total snapping of India’s age-old contacts with Central Asia. As if this was not enough, another geopolitical catastrophe of the partition of India and subsequent Pakistani occupation of parts of Kashmir finally led to direct physical disconnect that spelt the death knell for India’s northern outreach. In fact, this snapping of ties is still a reality – reflective from the fact that the total two-way trade with the whole region is little more than a paltry \$1200 million.

However, in the 20th century, India enjoyed a sense of comfort from the USSR’s grip of power over the vast stretch of Eurasian landmass. In fact, most Indians accepted the Soviet control of Central Asia as a positive historical phenomenon with enduring impact for India. This geo-strategic reality of India’s closeness to Russia did not alter even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

For India, maintaining the longstanding time-tested partnership with Russia therefore became imperative for its foreign and security policy as it heavily depended on weapon supplies from Russia for its defence purposes. However, the bonds between the two since then have undergone a rapid change with the change in global situation. The main spirit and rhythm of old Indo-Russian ties have inevitably been watered down in more than one way. As the economies of both countries had to undergo difficult periods of structural change, the foreign policy orientations of the two have also gone through significant transformation.

Yet, the geo-strategic imperative of India’s proximity with the geographic space of Eurasia could not be pushed down beyond a

limit. In October 2000, President Vladimir Putin came down to New Delhi to sign the “Declaration on the India-Russia Strategic Partnership” (IRSP). However, the nature and structure of the IRSP did not carry the same obligatory and binding specificities as had entailed under the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty. But, the status of the IRSP had to be elevated to the level of a “Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership” (SPSP) in 2010 ostensibly to revive the old bonds and make them relevant to changing needs and aspirations. These were done while building a robust bilateral cooperation partnership in almost all areas including political, security, trade and economy, defence, science and technology and culture.

The fact that Russia still treats India as an important strategic partner and the way Moscow has relentlessly tried hard to bring it into the Eurasian fold through membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), is indicative of how the strategic engagement between India and Central Asia is critical for both regions.

Conversely, Central Asia too had a considerable impact on the polity and economy all through Indian history. The region was always a staging ground for invasions into India. Its description in the military context is amply found in the Indian history textbooks as also in the origin of Indian strategic thought which has had its genesis in Central Asian dynamics. During the “Great Game” period, India’s interest and attention was once again drawn to Central Asia. But in the twentieth century, Central Asia, under the benign control of the Soviet Union, had an enduring security implication for India. Central Asians particularly looked towards India with fondness.

Today, Central Asia is undergoing a rapid change after the world has started taking more notice of this energy-rich region. Already the flow of capital and expansion of trade is triggering large-scale infrastructure, shipment of goods and flow of people across the region – a phenomenon aptly being compared with the waves of transformation that occurred earlier in Europe and Southeast Asia.

Owing to this, great power rivalry over security and energy stakes in the region has also increased. The major powers have

responded in many ways to benefit from the region's strategic and energy resources. Russia is the traditional player and wishes to exert political influence after a short retreat from the region. Moscow has strengthened the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and now it is aggressively pushing the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to keep Central Asia under its tight economic control.

The main contestant in the region has been China, which has been waiting in the wings, since the Soviet collapse, for fully entering into the region with multiple motives. The region, for China, is a source of energy and a critical partner for stabilising its restive Xinjiang province. China has fully used its geographical proximity to the region and while pursuing an ingenious soft-power policy, it has successfully converted every challenge in Central Asia into opportunity. China has pursued its interest while using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a multilateral vehicle for promoting multiple interlocking of economic, security and even cultural ties. In fact, China has rapidly challenged the Russian monopoly over Central Asia's energy exports. Massive infrastructure development including building of pipelines, roads, and railways completed in recent years are facilitating transport of oil, gas, uranium and other minerals to Chinese towns.

In fact, China's swift forays into Central Asia invoked no fear of "Great Game", elicited no direct Russian opposition and entailed no containment from the US. Instead, China has gained an air of respectability and an image of a reliable partner of the region. Beijing's latest Silk Road Economic Belt or One-Road One-Belt (OBOR) scheme envisages a fund of \$40 billion for promoting infrastructure, industrial and financial co-operation across Asia to Europe through Central Asia. The countries in the region have quickly pledged support to the OBOR idea for deepening their ancient ties with China.

The US and its allies remained deeply engaged in the region. It has used the countries in the region as valuable supply hubs for the Afghanistan war effort. However, against the backdrop of the crisis in Ukraine, Washington, it seems, is getting concerned about

the situation in Central Asia. Russia's standoff with the West, fall in Ruble rate, declining oil prices and overall Western sanctions, is already having ripple effects on the Central Asian economies, especially on the remittances from millions of migrants from the region working in Russia.

The world is also getting worried about political uncertainty looming in Central Asia stemming from the succession issue of regional leaders. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have so far strongly resisted political change and have successfully adopted internal political mechanisms with varying style to stay in power. So far, only the Turkmen President Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov who served as President for life, died in 2006. He was the most repressive dictator in the region. His successor Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has shown some liberal tendencies and had called exiled opposition leaders to participate in the 2012 elections. But, he too has been following the course of Niyazov.

Uzbekistan has been one of the old bastions of old Soviet-style regime that continued 27 years after the Soviet collapse. Following the demise of Islam Karimov on September 2, 2016, the nature of the regional outlook is changing in favour of intra-regional cooperation. The new government in Uzbekistan, led by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, appears more open to boosting the country's relationships within and outside the region. If the trend moves ahead, it wouldn't be always easy for China to overcome the broader set of issues that come in the way for realising its BRI vision. While India enters the Eurasian integration path, it needs to factor in the changing political dynamics within Central Asia.

The transition of power in Uzbekistan has been smooth as was witnessed in Turkmenistan after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov. Most probably, Karimov's successor was decided by a small circle of clan-official elites in consultation with Karimov's family members.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the social and economic strength of the country stems from domestic production capacities; so it is assumed that the internal clan structure along with the security services

would have most probably influenced the succession scenario in that country.<sup>6</sup>

The outcome of the political succession in Tashkent will have consequences for other regimes such as for Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev who also has retained his power since independence. Like Islam Karimov who favoured not wanting to demolish the old house until he is able to build a new one, Nazarbayev too has devised internal means to stay in power. They had been seeking re-election to thwart any such possibility. Both leaders seemingly prepared no succession plans despite some surreptitious intrigues among members of the ruling elite.

However, in the case of Kazakhstan, the power will be held by the 'business elites' who have huge stakes in capturing the presidential post. The power struggle here is going to be more intense due to the high stakes for the control of energy wealth.

Tajikistan continues to remain locked in a difficult combination of poverty, authoritarianism, and Islamic extremism that keeps the country prone to instability. Kyrgyzstan has switched to a parliamentary democracy in 2010 but the country's institution of democracy and the rule of law remain underdeveloped. A shaky experiment in coalition government is in place; there are also many unresolved issues including the ethnic rifts in the south.

With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the politics in other states therefore remain unpredictable although the 2010 Kyrgyz uprising had also sufficiently indicated that the region is prone to the Arab-Spring-type political explosion. For the time being none of the ruling Presidents are likely to face any real opposition, though the basic politico-economic characteristics of these countries are no different from those in West Asia. All these leaders continue to face Western criticism including from rights watchdogs. The American officials continue to reaffirm their commitment to uphold regional security, respect for human rights and democratic governance in these states.<sup>7</sup> But so far both Russia and China have firmly insulated the Central Asian regimes from failing; viz. Uzbekistan after the 2005 Andijan crisis; Kazakhstan after the 2011 Zhanaozen events. Even the Kyrgyz

crises were contained affectively through regional interventions and were not allowed to cross a threshold. This makes Central Asia different from the West Asian case.

In the changed context, the US also seems irked by Russia's recent creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Earlier, Washington repeatedly questioned Moscow's right to enforce its agenda on governments in the region. Richard Hoagland, the then US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs recently said, "no country has the right to unilaterally determine the political and economic orientation of another country." He added that "what Russia is doing in Ukraine is cause for concern for the countries of Central Asia."<sup>8</sup>

Since Donald Trump came to power, Washington has not shown much interest in Central Asian affairs, although he did receive the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev in January 2018<sup>9</sup> and Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev in May 2018.<sup>10</sup>

Europe is also taking renewed interest in Central Asia following the crisis in Ukraine. The European Union is now trying to import energy directly from the source to offset fears of disruption by Russia. The EU is pushing for the 3,300-kilometre Nabucco pipeline project to import gas directly from Azerbaijan and other Central Asian nations to the heart of Europe. The EU has unveiled a new "Southern Corridor-New Silk Route" strategy for a multiple road, rail and pipeline link between the Caspian Sea area and Europe.<sup>11</sup>

The region is also the northern frontier of the Islamic world hitherto unaffected by the fundamentalist wave. The Soviet developmental legacy ensured that Central Asia remains a bulwark against potential extremist threats emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, behind the secular settings, a major shift to a far more religious pattern of society is underway in the region. Central Asia is now emerging as the next radical Islamic region. Islamic forces are getting stronger in Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan (Osh and Batken). The democratic upsurge in Kyrgyzstan seemed to have succeeded in channeling popular anger, but the pro-Islamic tone and language of debate in the Kyrgyz Parliament is beginning

to impact government policies. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are less affected by extremist forces. However, the unequal distribution of wealth generated from oil exports has begun to spill the public discontent and protests onto the streets. A series of serious explosions and terrorist acts by Islamists have been taking place in Kazakhstan since 2011. The fight against extremism hitherto carried out covertly by the state is now coming out in the open. Kazakhstan has moved diplomatically towards warmer ties with the Muslim world. Turkmenistan too has forged closer relations with Iran and the Gulf region. Uzbekistan has firmly resisted the extremist drive but Islam has traditionally been entrenched in society. To be sure religion is likely to be a dominant factor for polity in the country in the near future. Consequently, the area extending from Chechnya, Ferghana to Xinjiang, comprising 100 million Salafi Muslims, could form a new arc of instability. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is more entrenched not only in the Af-Pak region but in Central Asia as well. The IMU has strong links with al-Qaeda and is now expected to get stronger in Afghanistan after NATO's withdrawal. The bad news is that even the Islamic State (IS) have heavily recruited in Central Asia, as more and more Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz are joining the ranks. The security issues are likely to make more headlines. China's concerns in Xinjiang underscore the gravity of the extremist threat, including from IS.

Over the years, India has been taking renewed interest in enhancing its strategic presence in Central Asia. A six-day integrated tour of Central Asia by Prime Minister Modi in June 2015 covering all the five states – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – proved not only a symbolic feat for Indian diplomacy but also a smart strategic move that paved the way for overcoming predicaments that have so far stymied India's outreach to an important region lying in its strategic vicinity.<sup>12</sup> The visit to Central Asia was one of the key features of the Prime Minister's foreign policy outlook aimed at rebuilding India on its glorious past but with modern content. Reconnecting with Central Asia formed a critical part of this approach. The visit was also important for

widening the strategic perimeter and imagination among our own people towards the region beyond Pakistan and China.

Surely, India's ties with Central Asia remain strong, but it is yet to capitalise on the various opportunities and potentials. Prime Minister Modi has seized the opportunity to set the agenda for India's future engagement in Central Asia, particularly in the area of regional connectivity. India's full membership into the SCO has now opened a whole new chapter that will help enhance its engagement with the region.

This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the political and strategic process at work in Central Asia since its emergence in 1991. While attempting to understand the various intricate issues in Central Asia, an attempt has been made to trace the factors that impinge on India. The book mostly identifies critical points that are important for evolving a sound Central Asia policy in India.

The book does not in any sense purport to be an academic endeavour on Central Asian studies but merely a narrative, as well as an analytical account and a result of the author's own self-education and understanding gathered through extensive interactions in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, especially with the think tanks, academia, government officials and the diplomatic community. The chapters in book are capsulated to provide analyses of the impinging issues that shape the dynamics of Central Asia's internal polity and external outlook. The book contains suggestions critical for enhancing India's strategic presence in the region.

While writing the book, the author has largely relied on official sources and reports from the vernacular media of the Central Asian countries and Russia. Some of the points identified as well as analysed are a result of the author's participation in various conferences, seminars and discussions held in the region over the years. Some of the impressions gathered are based on personal visits to various places in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The author's prolonged stay in Central Asia has definitely helped in writing this book. The views expressed in the book are personal.

I wish to thank all my friends in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and who gave me valuable inputs for understanding the issues relating to Central Asia. I must thank all the research institutions, universities and think tanks which supported me in understanding the region in the last two and a half decades. These include the Kazakh Institute for Strategic Studies (KISI), the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research, the Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages, the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, M.O. Auezov South Kazakhstan State University, Auezov Museum Almaty, the Taraz State University, M.H. Dulati, the Ahmet Yesevi University, the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (ENU), Nazarbayev University (NU), Astana, the East Kazakhstan Regional University, Uskemen, the Institute of Oriental Studies, the Academy of Sciences, Kazakhstan, the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies (ISRS) Tashkent, the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, the Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Bishkek, the Kyrgyz National University named after Jusup Balasagyn, the Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University, Bishkek, the Tajik Institute for Strategic Studies, Dushanbe, and many others.

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## Notes

1. India and the Soviet Union were drawn closer to each other against the geopolitical and geo-strategic context of the US supply of military hardware and economic aid to Pakistan in 1954, after it joined the SEATO and subsequently the CENTO. The Sino-Soviet rift followed by Sino-India conflict in the 1960s provided added impetus for the Indo-Soviet strategic alignment. When the Sino-Pakistani axis became firmer in the 1960s, the context of strategic understanding between the two deepened further, culminating into signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Co-operation in 1971. Among other things, including seeking a common goal of promoting global peace and security, the 1971 Treaty underlined commitment from each other for respecting independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the two countries. The provisions under Article VIII, IX and X of the Treaty prohibited any military alliance directed against the other and providing any assistance to any third country. Importantly, in the event of either being threatened, the two were to immediately enter into mutual consultations and undertake effective measures to counter such threats. It also included a commitment not to enter into any obligation, secret or public, with one or more States, which is incompatible with the Treaty and might cause military damage to the other Party.
2. In the ancient Indian literature, the land beyond the Himalayas from Pamir up to Arctic was described as Uttar Kuru. Radha Kumud Mookerji citing Vedic literature mentions about countries *Uttara Kuru* and *Uttara-Madra*, the ruler of which was known as *Virat*. See *Fundamental Unity of India*, Hindustan Cellulose & Paper Co. Ltd. Bombay, 1954. Also see B. B. Kumar, "Central Asia: The Indian Links", *Dialogue* 3 (4), April-June 2002.
3. The Sakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Pahlavas, Paradhas, etc., are known to have come from Central Asia to India and were all absorbed into the Kshatriyas and Jat community in India.
4. Prakash Chandra Prasad, *Foreign Trade and Commerce in Ancient India*, Abhinav Publications 2003. (The ancient Transoxiana of Central Asia including the Uttarakuru, Uttaramadra, Param-Kamboja and parts of Saka-dvipa were located in the Uttarapatha.) Balram Srivastava, *Trade and Commerce in Ancient India from the Earliest Times to C.A.D 300*, Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, Varanasi, 1968.
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6. Bruce Pannier, "How to be the next Central Asian leader", *RFE/RL's Turkmen Service*, March 26, 2016.

7. Carl Schreck, “U.S. Reassesses Central Asia Strategy”, March 20, 2015 at <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-us-reassess-strategy/26911854.html>. Accessed on March 20, 2017.
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11. [http://www.noravank.am/eng/articles/security/?SHOWALL\\_1=1&SHOWALL\\_2=1](http://www.noravank.am/eng/articles/security/?SHOWALL_1=1&SHOWALL_2=1). Accessed on March 20, 2015.
12. P. Stobdan, “Modi’s Visit to Central Asia”, IDSA Comment, July 6, 2015 at [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/ModisVisittoCentralAsia\\_pstobdan\\_060715](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/ModisVisittoCentralAsia_pstobdan_060715).



# 1. New Central Asia: Period of Geopolitical Transition

---

Central Asia – an old region has re-emerged as an unexpected spin-off of the Soviet collapse.

The region is in the heart of Eurasia located at the intersection of other regions and civilisations (Persian, Indian, Chinese, European, Turkic and Arabian). Therefore, Central Asia, from an Indian perspective has deep historical and civilisational importance perhaps from ancient times.

The region obviously attracted significant international attention since 1992 from its immediate and distant powers that tried to shape Central Asia's geo-political orientation along multiple political and regional parameters.

However, even after more than a quarter-century since the Soviet Union collapsed and attempts at diluting the so-called Soviet legacy, there has been muted dissension displayed by Central Asians vis-à-vis traditional Russian domination and influence.

Clearly, the Soviet era bestowed national profiles for distinct ethnic groups – Kazakh, Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik and Kyrgyz have become an irreversible political fact, and those wishing to revive the 14 centuries old Turko-Persian Islamic culture-based political identity have failed to takeoff.

For one thing, re-identifying the Central Asian identity is a complex task, involving centuries of different historical layers – the process of their re-identification was not going to be easy.

For example, attempts at reviving its ancient Turkic nationhood have been countered by a more complex transnational religious ideology. But those who tried to evoke Islamic sentiments for political goals had to face resistance from the liberal communists who enjoyed primary control of the social, economic and security affairs of the region.

Interestingly, in spite of the outward similarities with Eastern Europe or the Caucasus region, Central Asia has not experienced the kind of popular rhetoric or type of parallel political attraction that Western Europe offered for Eastern Europe after the Soviet disintegration.

It needs to be underlined that even prior to the Soviet collapse, Western academics had been focusing on the Asiatic part of the Soviet space other than their immediate political goal of containing Communism. For example, for the maximalist school in West the regional setting of Central Asia was never confined to the five republics of the former Soviet Union, but included a wider spatial phenomenon – both lands and peoples, traditionally not part of the four major settled regions of Asia-Russia, China, India and Persia.

What they termed as “Inner Asia” included a vast nomadic civilisation lying on the fringes of the settled world.<sup>1</sup> The Western scholars used several metaphors such as Eurasia, Inner Asia, Greater Central Asia, Silk Route region, etc. that were carefully conceptualised with the goal of breaking up Eurasian space from controlling powers. From two independent states (Afghanistan and Mongolia) until 1991 – the number of states risen to seven in “Inner Asia” crucially located in the east of Moscow and the North of Beijing.

These states have become vital diplomatic, strategic and economic links for US presence in the entire Eurasian belt.<sup>2</sup> Besides, the region also formed a link between Russia, China and the Islamic world.

To be sure, the West was keenly watching the unravelling of Eurasian frontiers including the ethnic eruptions. For example, the Transcaucasus states – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia – experienced various levels of disturbances including full-scale wars

with deep interest and involvement by extra-regional powers over the last decades.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, post-Soviet ethnic conflicts have been witnessed in the North Caucasus<sup>4</sup> (Russian) republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia,<sup>5</sup> Bashkortostan, and Tatarstan, etc. which have been asserting their political identity.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Uzbek and Tajik ethnic factor in Afghanistan, the growth of Uyghur nationalism and Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir assumed renewed significance in the post-Soviet era.

The above ethnic assertions amongst several others have been viewed as part of the Western strategy to undermine Russia, China, India and even Iran which has large ethnic minorities, such as 16 million Azeris – a number more than the population of Azerbaijan itself. In fact, even the Afghan imbroglio is being viewed as the unravelling of an ancient fault line of treating Northern Afghanistan as part of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, whereas areas south of the Hindukush are reviewed as a thorn in the side of Pakistan.

## **Strategic Playground**

In the geopolitical context, Central Asia, due to its position as a link between the East and West, had become a recurring subject of geopolitical and economic interest and competition for great powers<sup>7</sup> with somewhat zero-sum contentions.

The central to this game has been to gain leverage over the region's geo-strategic centrality, enhancing military presence and economic interest<sup>8</sup> (the search for energy resources among others. For example, the US energy interests followed by military moves in Central Asia in post-9/11 were viewed in the backdrop of the US' search for a strategic space in the region. The Russian unwillingness to leave Central Asia's strategic space and part with its resources, the Chinese attempts at penetrating Central Asia without competing with Russia and the Indo-Iranian joint initiatives for closer cooperation in the region, could be cited as some components of big-power rivalry in the region.

Even Pakistan tried its strategic fortune by playing a role of a surrogate for the US to act as a gateway to Central Asia. In fact, Pakistan once claimed it was playing a role of a stabiliser in Central

Asia. The push of the Taliban and Unocal's initiative for building oil and gas pipelines through Afghanistan in the mid-1990s,<sup>9</sup> was part of that scheme.

The US interest in Central Asia has remained rather Afghanistan-centric – enticing the regional states to join the US-led global war against terror. But, its interests also preceded 9/11 while trying to help them to take reform measures necessary for long-term stability. In fact, until recently, US engagement was viewed as useful for containing the region's deteriorating economic and security situation. To a large extent the Central Asian countries benefited from the US military engagement in Afghanistan after 9/11.

The US also encouraged Uzbekistan to play a regional anchor role. In the post-9/11 counter-terrorism period, Uzbekistan tried to outpace Pakistan as a strategic partner of the US. Washington probably saw Uzbekistan potentially becoming the Turkey of Asia. But, as events unfolded, Tashkent decided to evict the American troops from its Kashi-Khanabad (K2) Airbase following the May 13, 2005 events in Andijan, when it suspected the US of interfering in the internal affairs of Uzbekistan.<sup>10</sup>

In this competitive game, the Russians, in spite of their limitations, showed their loathness to give up its traditional rights in Central Asia, whereas the Turkish ambition to forging fraternal ties with the region failed. Iran, on its part, sought to dispel its image of being a trouble shooter while only talking in an economic language with the Central Asians in the beginning. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, of course, blatantly tried to promote their narrow sectarian dominance there. Only the Chinese have been successful in making a full commercial penetration, fulfilling the immediate needs of the Central Asians in their difficult transition period.

### **Regional Aspirations**

Amidst the external competition, the newly-independent states of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – tried their own respective regional initiatives based on their potentials, national sentiments and political aspirations. Of

course, there was never a scope for democracy to play a role in the shaping of Central Asian political identities, but each state tried to evolve their own national and international outlook that essentially reflected the aspirations of their individual leadership.

For example, Kazakhstan's national concerns essentially stemmed from the large percentage of its Slavic Russian speaking population<sup>11</sup> (roughly 40 per cent in 1991), its population concentrated in its northern provinces which have geographical contiguity with Russia. This had compelled President Nursultan Nazarbayev to talk about the "*third option*"<sup>12</sup> for the region along the European model of integration. Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov on his part called for an UN-supported "*permanent seminar*" for Central Asia which was aimed ostensibly at neutralising Russian influence in the region.<sup>13</sup>

For Tajikistan the choice was either to disappear as a state or to extend its present boundaries to become the most powerful country in the region. But, the country soon got mired into internal chaos and a civil war. Turkmenistan under President Saparmurat Niyazov tried to distance itself from the rest that worried others. Its posture of "*positive neutrality*"<sup>14</sup> advocated close ties with Russia but was opposed to joining the CIS. It was getting close to Turkey but understood the importance of Iran. It sought close ties with Pakistan but remained sensitive to India's concerns.

Threatened by inter-clan rivalries and religious extremism, Kyrgyzstan under Askar Akayev had opted for an "*open society*" under the "Issykul Initiative"<sup>15</sup> that talked about bringing together diverse elements to create a balancing force to contain problems.

More than anything else, the ethnic issues presented the Central Asian states with the immediate challenge. The fact that 80 per cent of Central Asian national boundaries had been drawn arbitrarily during Stalin's era had caused most of the problems for them. The Uzbeks were everywhere – spread into Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. There are more Tajiks in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan itself. Besides, important historical and cultural Tajik centres, Samarkand and Bukhara, fall in modern Uzbekistan. Similarly, there were more Pashtuns in Pakistan than in Afghanistan.

Besides, sharing of water was another serious source of inter-state problems. All the six countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share the river water of the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya. While three republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are rich in energy resources, they rely on the upstream countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for vital crops in the downstream.<sup>16</sup> The Soviet-era system that ensured adequate water for the crops in the summer and hydropower in the winter for everyone had broken down. Both water and energy issues, therefore, constituted critical factors influencing Central Asian affairs. In fact, most analysts thought that the conflict situation in the region would move along the oil/gas pipelines.<sup>17</sup>

The power parity was another serious problem. Uzbekistan was already a full military power. Whereas hydrocarbon-rich Turkmenistan with four million people had no military power to defend itself except to depend on outside power. The countries with lesser capacity to protect their interests have opted for seeking security patronage under Russia.

The economic disparity owing to varying resource potentials was expected to widen their differences and at the same time also increase outside power for interventions. In addition, the growing ideological and spiritual disorientation among the people, increasing corruption, moral bankruptcy, problems associated with migration flow, drug trafficking and arms proliferation had posed formidable challenges to the new states of Central Asia towards the end of the 20th century.

Clearly, the internal contradictions faced by these states also manifested in their external outlooks. Their tendency to pursue a foreign and security policy, playing major powers off each other, essentially underlined the political underpinning faced by young states, and for them to build a robust political institution to deal with their problem was going to take a long time.

### **Kazakh Nationalism**

However, Uzbekistan was not alone. Even in Kazakhstan, which had enjoyed a closest affinity, because of history and geography

with Russia, resistance against Russian revivalism was growing slowly. From every angle such as its ethnic composition, economic production and spatial network, Kazakhstan was too integrated with Russia to cope with independence easily. In fact, its leadership was the last one to declare independence from the former USSR.

Kazakhstan however later emerged as a country of special strategic significance in the post-Soviet space. Not only the vast nuclear arsenal located on its soil conferred Kazakhstan with huge geopolitical significance, but its geo-strategic position between Russia and China had certainly boosted the country's international importance. Besides, the mineral riches of Kazakhstan which included its vast oil reserves had started attracting huge investments from the Western world. Unlike other Central Asia States, Kazakhstan's economic policy exhibited its willingness to cooperate in the international market. This aspect along with its decision to uphold democracy and oppose Islamic fundamentalism had further enhanced the image of Kazakhstan in the Western world.

The charismatic leadership of Nursultan Nazarbayev set Kazakhstan towards a grandiose ambition, a one-point agenda, to make Almaty the centre of an Asian Security structure modeled on the CSCE. This proposal of Nazarbayev for CBM in Asia was a well thought out move that began quite successfully in the form of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in the following years.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, despite its regional ambitions Kazakhstan too was faced with the common post-Soviet problems particularly the greater task of ensuring political stability and territorial integrity which was getting increasingly threatened by rising inter-ethnic tensions along the Kazakh-Russian border in the North. In fact, Kazakhs became vocal in championing the "Kazakhstan for Kazakhs" cause. Ethnic Kazakhs constituted 42 per cent of country's population in 1991. The ethnic Russians constituted 38 per cent. There were over a 100 other nationalities living in Kazakhstan, whose ancestors were forcefully settled there during Stalin's era.

Unlike in other Central Asian states, the Russian population in Kazakhstan has a territorial base. Russians formed the majority in north Kazakhstan and ethnic Kazakhs dominated the southern parts. While the Kazakhs living in north are rural folks, Russians live only in the urban areas in the south.

With independence, Kazakh nationalist agenda called for the de-Russification of Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs therefore focused on three major areas to include: (a) popularization of Kazakh language and culture, (b) bring changes in political elite formation and (c) population resettlement in northern Kazakhstan. The official move included, among other things, the renaming of Russian towns and streets and the promotion of Kazakh language as the state language. President Nazarbayev took steps to strengthen Kazakh influence by replacing non-Kazakhs in key positions by local Kazakh officials. The government's decision to transfer population along with building a new capital Astana in the north was underpinned by the logic of diluting Russian influence. Ethnic Russians considered these steps as suppression of Russian culture.

A large Kazakh diaspora *Uralman* from Bayiin Ulgi (Mongolia), Xinjiang (China) and Kazakhs migrating from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere, were offered incentives to resettle in the vast northern steppe of Kazakhstan. There are about one million ethnic Kazakhs in China who became potential migrants to Kazakhstan. The Kazakh government has been showing keen interest in getting the ethnic Kazakhs transferred from neighbouring Xinjiang province of China.<sup>19</sup>

Besides, this process has been accompanied by tight control over political activities of the Russian opposition in the country. Several local Russian organisations and newspapers had been banned in later 1990s due to some irredentist activities of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan's Ust-Kamenogorsk Oblast, falling in the north.

During the visit to the northern parts of Kazakhstan by this author in 1989, the ethnic Russians were getting uneasy about their future in the country. In fact, there already existed the Cossack movement which was fast gaining popularity which called for the

breakup of Kazakhstan and the merger of north Kazakhstan with Russia.

One was surprised to find other fissures growing for Kazakhstan that included a demand for creating a Trans-Irtysh republic among others. However, it was also true that many Russians did not see separation as a better option. Not only did majority ethnic Russians consider Kazakhstan as their home, they felt they may be differentiated against in Russia for being Asian Russians, should they migrate to Russia. Besides, the vast majority of them were too poor to leave. Clearly, there were those who did not wish to risk civil war and instead desired a dual citizenship of both Russia and Kazakhstan. Their demands also included declaration of Russian language as a national language alongside Kazakh (presently only a language of inter-ethnic communication); an open border with Russia and a return to the *Rouble* zone.

Certainly, ethnic issues in the “near abroad” assumed paramount importance for Moscow that had been stimulated further by the Zhirinovskiy factor in late 1990s. The Russian Foreign Ministers during their visits to Central Asian states invariably brought up the issue of protecting the Russian diaspora in these states. Except for Turkmenistan no other state has so far agreed to the dual citizenship mechanism.

In fact, at one stage, Moscow seemed wary about worsening Kazakh-Russian relations. It feared that such tension would not only become a catalyst for deterioration of Russian relations with the other Central Asian states, but the migration of Russians (about 10 million) from Central Asia would cause a host of problems inside Russia.

Of course, a majority of the Kazakhs remained committed to amicable Kazakh-Russian relations. Among other things, there was a fear of Kazakhstan losing many skilled and educated Russians in the process – which will have far-reaching implications on Kazakhstan’s already worsening economy. In fact, the percentage of Russians in Kazakhstan had fallen from 38 per cent in 1991 to 33 per cent in 1994.

Kazakhs are certainly aware that any open confrontation with Russians will have adverse effects on the overall security of the country. There is also the factor of Kazakhs' divided tribal and regional allegiances, which have differing perspectives about confrontation with Russia. President Nazarbayev continues to remain in firm control of his country but he balances the challenges posed by both ultra-nationalist Kazakhs and Russians with dexterity. With the Chinese also making economic forays into Kazakhstan, his task of curbing the rise in nationalism seems to be more challenging. So far, Kazakhstan has firmly opposed the idea but efforts for economic reunion have progressed, with Kazakhstan joining the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

### **No Stress on Islam**

At the same time, the situation in Central Asia in the 1990s certainly could not be compared with what was prevailing in other Islamic countries where the attraction to fundamentalism was being attributed to protests by the economically deprived against poverty, urbanisation and the growing moral and political bankruptcy. In Central Asia, the social structure and national psychologies differed as they were hardly any cases for urbanisation becoming the source for the Soviet collapse. Central Asian nationalism was also intense but not on a par with the Baltic urge for separatism. In fact, the countries of this region reluctantly accepted independence.<sup>20</sup> That way, West Asia, therefore, did not serve as a model for Central Asia in the same way as unifying Europe at that point of time was for the East Europeans who were breaking out of the Soviet fold. Neither did the economic standards of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan serve as an attraction for Central Asia.

There was also no apparent cause for anti-West rhetoric and complexes among Central Asians like the ones harboured by the Arabs. Instead, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, their exposure to the Western world through satellite television channels only accelerated their demand for change.

On the contrary, strong rivalries and urges among Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to introduce their brand of Islam in the new region would have deterred the Central Asians from joining the Islamic world. As a result, the popular notion of Central Asia falling prey to Iran-led Islamic fundamentalism remains unfounded. Of course, the Iranian efforts were hampered by linguistic, sectarian and inter-ethnic tensions. Similarly, the capacity of Turkey offering a countervailing model for the region remains unrealised. Even otherwise, the relationships among the Central Asian Islamic sects are complicated by different cultural and tribal backgrounds.

Take the case of Tajikistan where the underlying reason for serious confrontation between Islamists and communists was the factor of tribalism and regionalism. For Tajiks, the importance of clans and sub-clans always remained more important than politics or even religion.<sup>21</sup> Such factors proved decisive even in Afghanistan where the fundamentalist Mujahideens finally got divided into Tajik and Afghan camps.

Among the Islamists, only Wahhabi propagators gained strong ground in the region especially in Uzbekistan. Wahhabism was getting hostile not only towards the Shias but also rejected Sufism as being a Turkish conspiracy to undermine Islam, whereas others including the followers of the Hannafi sect accused the Wahhabis of introducing Arab-style sectarianism in Central Asia.

On the other hand, inter-ethnic strife in the region forced the Tajiks to leave Uzbekistan, Uzbeks to leave Tajikistan and Meshketian Turks to leave Central Asia. The Ismaeli Muslims were being victimized by both fundamentalists and communists.

In Kazakhstan, Islamisation was a late starter.<sup>22</sup> The majority nomadic population held pre-Islamic beliefs like *Tengrism*. Almost half of Kazakhstan's population remained non-Kazakh and that became the greatest impediment for Islamic propagators. Its only non-secular party confined itself to the advocacy of pan-Turkism with Islam and democracy. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan's attachment to Islam was not strong initially except in Southern parts of the country that formed a part of the Ferghana Valley. The easy-going nomadic

Kyrgyz were inclined to economic progress and were looking towards the Asian dragons as development models. In any case, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan appeared more Russified than the others and were unlikely to be attracted towards the Arab world.

Therefore, with the exception of Tajikistan, which was the odd one out, the initial phase of the Central Asian states' independence did not show any signs of Islamic fundamentalists making inroads into the region. Civil war in Tajikistan certainly remained a potential destabilising factor in the 1990s. With limited military capabilities to prevent the influx of Islamic insurgents from across the Afghan border, Central Asian states had no option but to seek Russia's help.

The much-talked about "Islamic fundamentalism" therefore had no relevance for Central Asia. "The threat of Islam", according to Ouminerik T. Kasenov, "is only a myth, and the passion along this myth can only arouse the Christian-Muslim dissension which is not desirable at least in Kazakhstan".<sup>23</sup> At the same time, he felt, that Islam as a spiritual source for Central Asian Muslims must be justified like Christian Orthodoxy for Russians. Sectarian contradictions, the regional complexities and the poly-ethnic population of Central Asia were likely to prevent Islam from gaining control in the region, he said.

### **Troubles in Tajikistan**

Of course, Tajikistan has been the odd one out in Central Asia where the outbreak of civil war marked the country as the bloodiest of all the "hot spots" in the post-Soviet space. Tajikistan's exception was attributed to "Iranian influence" by virtue of their Iranian cultural and linguistic affinity, and "Islamic fundamentalism" owing to its proximity to Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup>

The collapse of the totalitarian regime had led to the polarisation of Tajik politics along the old-traditional parameters. The clan structure being the most important factor produced social antagonisms in the country once Soviet control was lifted. Among a host of other political formations, the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), the *Rastokhets* (Rebirth), the Democratic Party of Tajikistan emerged along traditional fault lines.

Besides the dynamics of sub-nationalism, the regional divide between the prosperous Westernised Northern Tajikistan and the backward mountainous region of Badakhshan plunged the country towards an inter-ethnic conflict that claimed 30,000 lives, and half a million were homeless in the early 1990s.

Thousands of Tajik fundamentalist rebels fled across the border to northern Afghanistan which threatened the stability of neighbouring Central Asian states too. Such a fear prompted Uzbekistan to become the most active player on the scene.

In 1992, Uzbekistan along with Russia helped the pro-Communists to overthrow a coalition government of Islamic and democratic parties. Some 25,000 Russian troops comprising a contingent each from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan as CIS Peacekeepers were stationed along the Tajik-Afghan border under Russian General Boris Plankov's command.

However, Tajik opposition leaders, who earlier remained loath to talk to the pro-Communists, began to take a realistic approach. This had come in the wake of the growing realisation that the Islamic Resistance Council based in north-east Afghanistan would never be able to defeat the 25,000 CIS troops. Importantly, Russia had started asserting its national interest, particularly linking up its own stability with instabilities in the former republics. Not only did Moscow consider the Tajik-Afghan border as its own outer boundary, it had also made it clear that it would counter any "aggression against Tajikistan", even if it came from the Tajiks themselves. Eventually, the "Islamic-democrats" also realised that their chances of succeeding were remote in a situation where their Afghan hosts began fighting among themselves in 1990s, and the battle extended to North Afghanistan. Moreover, the opposition itself got too splintered to provide a united front in its fight against the government in Dushanbe.

Having had a disastrous experience in Afghanistan, the neighbouring Islamic states like Iran and Pakistan had to refrain from giving direct support to Tajik Islamists, although important leaders of the IRP including Sharif Himmatzade and Qazi Toradzhan

Zoda continued to keep their bases in Iran. It appeared that Tehran ultimately helped the Russians persuade the IRP for reconciliation talks in Moscow.

Although not shared by all the groups, the opposition slowly began to take a nationalistic view, rising above their Islamic or democratic euphoria. This got reflected in their fresh demand for replacing the people in the government by “technicians” who remained neutral in the civil war. They also stopped insisting on the Russian military pull out from Tajikistan. They however wanted the system of command under the UN auspices. In the Tajik case, Russia itself had been pressing for UN Peacekeeper status for its troops in the former republics. For Russia, the safety and security of the ethnic Russians living in the former republics was the foremost consideration. At this point of time when Russia’s own system was in shambles, Moscow still considered it as “historic duty” to bring peace in Tajikistan and not to act as a neo-imperialist.

Therefore, Moscow pushed for a political solution. Russia deployed its 201 Motorised Division not only for sustaining the peace in Tajikistan but also to control drug trafficking from across the border in Afghanistan. Similarly, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also made major policy turnarounds and called for a regional peace conference to end the Tajik civil war. The change in Uzbek policy was attributed to growing tensions in its ties with Moscow over blocking of the supply of Roubles to Uzbekistan. Uzbek fear also stemmed from the potential spread of the Uzbek-Tajik conflict into Uzbekistan.

The inter-Tajik negotiations were mediated by the UN special envoy Ramire Piriz-Ballon in September 2004 in which, apart from the five Central Asian states, representatives from Russia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran also participated.<sup>25</sup> Whatever may have been the reasons for the participation by Russia and Central Asian states and even Afghanistan in the inter-Tajik talks, they were well conceived. However, the inclusion of Iran and Pakistan only increased doubts that would have complicated the already complex issue. Both Iran and Pakistan were in the fray to organise the next round of inter-Tajik talks in their respective capitals.

Russia has the biggest stake in the Tajik settlement, for it would not only safeguard Russia's national interest but will also go along with Russia's new military doctrine that ensures irreplaceable role for it in its former republics, the "near abroad areas".

Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov for a long time opted for both a political and a military solution to stop the fundamentalist onslaught in Tajikistan. He had been doing this either through his personal diplomatic channels or through Russian military support. Karimov also realised the possible long-term implication of continuous Russian military presence in Central Asia, thus he too pushed for resolving the conflict through a regional conference.

Even though Tajik fundamentalists and democrats were desperate enough for a final settlement, it was not easy for Moscow and Tashkent to bring peace in Dushanbe without taking harsh steps in getting certain discredited Kulabis – whom they covertly supported – removed from the power. However, at the same time, any success in preventing the spread of Islamic fundamentalists was not only going to entail positive implications for Central Asian states and Russia, but the West too was more than ready to endorse such a conclusion.

Thus, there was little scope either for their moving towards a common identity or for a further balkanisation of Central Asia. Each of these states was able to carve out distinct personalities of its own, setting separate national agendas, adopting their own official languages and national currencies. In fact, the style of their regimes also differed – from a liberal president in Kyrgyzstan to an authoritarian leader in Turkmenistan. Their transition to a market economy proceeded at varying speeds. The overall trend was to retain their close bonds with Russia.

### **Geopolitics over Energy**

Energy became another key driving force for developments in Central Asia, especially for the external players, to find their stakes in the region. The world's major oil companies started investing billions of dollars on energy resources in Kazakhstan starting from early 1990s.

In fact, the region had become a new battleground for various powers to pursue their energy agendas including behind the scene struggles to choose pipeline routes from Central Asia to the world market. The Western countries were making every effort to win contracts and neutralise Russian dominance and contain Iranian influence in Central Asia. The Western companies, however, were unable to achieve major success in the early 1990s, as they had found no easy answer to deal with the region's volatile and complex political situation.<sup>26</sup>

Since 1992, major oil companies including Chevron, started investing billions in the Central Asian oilfields. Yet, the major challenge to exploit the full production capacity was posed primarily due to the lack of an export route. While insisting on upgrading its own existing routes, Russia tried to systematically block Central Asian plans to build alternative pipelines to the West through the Caspian. As a result, many of the Western companies started to bring Russian participation into their projects. Russia's Lukoil, for example, seized the lion's share both in the Tengiz-Chevroil exploration and pipeline projects in Kazakhstan. Russia had not only managed to gain entry into all major deals in the Caspian Sea, but also forced the Caspian Sea Consortium earlier, to admit it as a member.

The US and other Western countries were seeking alternative pipelines to the Mediterranean across Georgia and Turkey, bypassing Russian territory, whereas Russia wanted to build a pipeline across the Caucasus to Novorossiysk port in Chechnya.

However, both geography and history favoured Russia. For, the issue here also involved security guarantees for these pipelines. The pipelines proposed by the West were to pass through mountainous parts of the Caucasus, where over 50 local ethnic groups were warring for the control of economic installations. It is here that Russia enjoyed maximum manoeuvring power – it could moderate differences among these groups or cause further strife. After all, by encouraging internal civil wars, Russia had brought both Georgia and Azerbaijan to the brink of disintegration. The Abkhazian and Nagorno-Karabakh problems eventually compelled both Georgia and Azerbaijan to come to terms with Russia.

Similarly, Russia thwarted Turkey's effort to increase its influence in Central Asia by organising a "Turkic Summit". While Tajikistan was completely dependent on over 25,000 Russian troops for its security, Russian pressure forced Turkmenistan to rejoin the CIS economic union. Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan also had to finally yield on the issue of dual citizenship for Russians living in the two states.

For the West, options were limited. The US had vehemently opposed Iran serving as a conduit for Central Asian energy exports. The US Company, Unocal, planned to run a pipeline from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Sui in Pakistan. But this too was not devoid of potential problems. The civil war in Afghanistan and the acute lawlessness in Pakistan's Sind province limited the plan's technical feasibility, as well as prospects for international investment. Pakistan was also keen to have the proposal pushed through as it openly infringed Afghanistan's north-western provinces through the Taliban in early 1996.

Iran, on the other hand, was involved in its own diplomacy to win contracts for Central Asian oil development and have the oil exported through Iranian outlets. The Iranian manoeuvres for Caspian oil remained a nightmare for the West because the Central Asian republics realise the Iranian pipeline system offered the most convenient outlet for their exports. Despite its relative economic weakness and international isolation, Iran, like Russia, had the ability to tilt the strategic balance in its favour.

Of course, it was unrealistic to think that Russia and Iran could have neglected their vital national interests. For decades, the West monopolised oil production and transportation through similar intrigues.

Despite its unease, the US could do little to immediately alter the geo-politics of this region in the early 1990s. Pushing Russia or Iran beyond a limit would have been unproductive and even counter-productive. The American ability to generate lasting peace in the Transcaucasia appeared even less promising. Consequently, the Central Asian states succumbed to the geopolitical compulsion

of developing economic ties with Iran and maintaining non-confrontationist relations with Russia.

Therefore, after the initial euphoria of dealing with the West subsided, Central Asia once again figured in Moscow's scheme of things. But Russia's reassertion became a source of anxiety among many in Central Asian countries. According to Ouminerik T. Kasenov, "contrary to what the Russians may describe as marginal and un-demarcated territories, the Central Asian states have both the historical and geo-political basis for national independence. We have reappeared on the world arena once again after a long frozen period."

The Russian authorities even during the Yeltsin era were certainly wary of the way these states were moving out of Moscow's orbit. In fact, Russian media then painted grim scenarios of the manipulations of rival external powers in the region. But the Central Asians probably saw the opportunity to diversify their political, economic, trade and transport links.

Moscow's renewed interest in the region seemed to have developed only in the background of the events on the Tajik-Afghan border, viewed as a challenge to Russia's own security. In fact, Russia once again began to consider the Central Asian borders with Afghanistan as its own.

The inclusion of Central Asian states in the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the US Helsinki Commission was viewed by Moscow as a means to neutralize the religious and ethno-nationalist dimension of the threats from the south. In fact, many viewed that Russia's enthusiasm to join the Western community was simply a means of availing existing international help and assuming international responsibilities. The resultant privileges would have provided Russia with the right to intervene in the regional conflicts in the former republics. Russia also sought the status of UN Peacekeeper for its troops stationed in these republics.

The fate of 25 million ethnic Russians outside Russia was one of Moscow's major concerns. The nationalists favoured Russia's

sphere of influence to extend to the “near abroad” areas, and even the new Russian military doctrine supported this. This was viewed as nothing but an attempt to revive the former Soviet Union in one form or another by many Central Asians. For example, Russia played its own game in Georgia and Azerbaijan in the 1990s with differing tactics but with the same purpose of restoring Moscow’s influence by weakening its former republics. Russian troops proved instrumental in bringing Imamali Rahmonov to power in Tajikistan. In fact, the Zhirinovskiy factor had also helped in the ascendance of Russian revivalist tendencies. This had led to heightened Central Asian concern over the renewal of Russian hegemony.<sup>27</sup>

With limited military capabilities to prevent the influx of Islamic insurgents from across the Afghan border, Central Asian states however had no option but to endorse the Russian troops’ deployment along the Tajik-Afghan border. But according to Kasenov, “We know Russia has its own game plan in Tajikistan, but here we have a common interest, therefore, we support Russian involvement”. The prospect of Islamic militancy spreading into Central Asia from Afghanistan had increased due to the victory of the Afghan Mujahideens over Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum in the strategic border settlement of Sher Khan Bandar in 1994.

There were other assertions, for example, on nuclear assets on the post-Soviet space. On Kazakhstan’s nuclear issue, it had been argued that the entire issue was related to the division of Soviet nuclear weapons because those weapons were built collectively by all the republics and not Russia alone. Kazakhstan had agreed in principle to sign the NPT as a non-nuclear state in May 1992, but it laid some preconditions, particularly pertaining to the guarantee of national security, as well as ecological and financial compensation for dismantling those weapons stationed in the territory of Kazakhstan.

### **Central Asia’s Russia Dilemma**

The newly-independent states were initially confronted with a dilemma of how to assert their sovereignties and at the same time balance their national interests with those of Russia. In fact, the

political and security dynamics in Central Asia continued to remain inextricably linked to developments in Russia. In the wake of the post-Soviet Euro-Atlantic orientation of Russia, Central Asia certainly got marginalised in Moscow's eyes. In fact, during the Yeltsin era, Central Asian states went through uncertain times with Russia becoming both a guarantor and a threat to their security. In its quest for economic aid from the West, Russia under Boris Yeltsin not only put its intervention in Afghanistan behind it, but also considered Central Asia as a burden on the Russian economy.<sup>28</sup>

Yeltsin's Russia disengaged from major Central Asian life. The only engagement was through the Russian Army's involvement in various Central Asian hotspots. It was a period when Russia was neither able to control nor leave the region. Moreover, these states, through the 1990s, developed serious misgivings about Russia's ability to retain its traditional influence in the region.<sup>29</sup> Moscow's failure to gain control over Chechnya resonated throughout Central Asia.

However, the rise of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin to power marked the end of this elusiveness. A sea change occurred since early 2000s, both within Russia and Central Asia. Putin's ascendancy had reversed Russia's course to isolation and decline of power. From the ideological standpoint, Putin was said to be operating along the Eurasian paradigm based on Gumilev's concept of Russia's destiny as a Eurasian power, a shift away from pro-Westernism and Atlanticism, followed during Yeltsin's presidency.<sup>30</sup> A host of Russian ideologues and geopolitical thinkers since then provided radical support to fulfil Putin's Eurasian agenda. These thinkers, including Aleksandr Sergeevich Panarin and Aleksandr Gel'evich Dugin among many others, strongly advocated Russia's rescue from the 'New Third Force' who they thought was a secret society and particular type of fifth column, who in connivance with financial oligarchs, were working for the West and the ruin of Russia.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, Putin's domestic and external policies reflected a certain amount of dual approach, wherein Russia gradually displayed outward support for 'democratic values' and covert operations to

restore its global status and create an alternative to the ‘New World Order’ dominated by the West.

The driving force behind creating Russia’s new order according to them was not ideology or religion but ‘the unity of common goal’. Broadly, this order included Eastern Europe, the Arab World, Iran, Central Asia, the Caucasus, India and China, even though, some suspected China ultimately would become a shore base of Atlanticism.

These powerful Russian strategic thinkers talked about taking up ‘invisible fights’ through which Russia must regain its lost dignity and work for establishing specific Russian values based on community rather than market. In ideological terms, Dugin defined a never-ending struggle between Western globalism and Russian Eurasianism. In essence, Russian thinkers never perceived that the Cold War was an ideological struggle, but was “only one stage of the ‘great war of continents’”.<sup>32</sup>

Putin, while exercising his power, believed to have followed many of these nuances in his policies. Major Russian military commanders, intelligence and strategic communities at large, popularly followed such debates. Those who cherished these ideas viewed Putin as the most effective instrument and the embodiment of the ‘Eurasian capitalist’ model.<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, Central Asia had never been outside these debates in Russia. In a way, Russia under Putin has found a pragmatic escape from the ideological battle and found a way to protect its vital interests. Central Asia is one such regional security system where Russia has used tactful and sophisticated approaches. That is why Russia made incisive and immediate policy responses – insinuating that US entry in Central Asia after 9/11 enhanced rather than threatened Russian national interests. The gains in security apart, Russians perceived US engagement, especially in the energy sector, bringing dividends in the longer run, so long as Russia controls transportation routes.<sup>34</sup>

Post-9/11, Russia made a quick decision to join the anti-terrorist coalition, allowing US military bases in Central Asia and the

subsequent announcement to abandon bases in Lourdes (Cuba) and Cam Ranh Bay (Vietnam).<sup>35</sup> Such a decision enjoyed considerations at many levels, driven mostly for protecting key national security interests rather than the Russian ego. Many Russian foreign policy analysts, including Alvin Z. Rubinstein wrote: “Putin’s Russia is not bent on restoring the Empire, much less seeking domination over the Eurasian heartland. It lacks the capability, the resources, and the ideological impetus.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the perception of strengthening security rather than the strategic issue of protecting the former Soviet space guided Russia’s decision. The following points of security concerns gained consideration:

- Threat to Russia’s security and territorial integrity emanated more from internal sources and from its immediate southern borders than from NATO. The conflicts in Chechnya and Dagestan had given a new context to Russian security policy.
- The security environment within the Caucasus and Central Asia had compelled Russia to focus on non-military security threats relating to terrorism, religious fundamentalism, drug-trafficking, flow of weapons, and refugees from the South bound for Europe.
- The Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan had posed long-term political, security and economic challenges to Russia. Strong linkages between Chechen rebels and al-Qaida/Taliban forces, with motives other than religion to gain control over oil resources alarmed Russia. Terrorist training camps in Afghanistan worried Russia more than America. In fact, Russia was more consistent about opposing the Taliban than the Americans.
- Concerns about increasing possibility of nuclear, chemical and biological agents getting leaked from former Soviet research programme sites such as Stepnogorsk (Kazakhstan) and Vozroszhdenie (Rebirth) Island (Uzbekistan) in the hands of undesirable elements gained seriousness. Worse, Russia and Central Asian states had no means to stop them.
- Although Russian forces defended the borders of Tajikistan, domestic fragility within the Central Asian states was growing beyond Moscow’s capacity for moderating them. Not only did

Russia lack resources to make major investments in Central Asia and the oil and gas industries in the Caucasus but also had less confidence to think economically in the absence of a durable peace.

Against these backdrops, Russia understandably adopted a good deal of disquiet about America's enhanced military presence in Central Asia. Since Russia alone was unable to meet the above challenges, American reinforcement for stability in the region was perceived as a net gain and in the long-term interest of the former. What really the Russians lost was their ego – but many Russians were willing to live with a lesser ego under the drastically changed circumstances.

What was astonishing to see, however, was the way the Central Asian states offered bases for the US military one after another after 9/11. Some, however, argued that Russia anyway could not have prevented US entry, as Uzbekistan was already determined to go along with Washington. Nonetheless, no prior consultations had, in fact, taken place between Russia and the Central Asian states, neither under the Collective Security Treaty (CST) nor under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework, regarding the offering of military bases to the US.

What really mattered at that point was whether the US actions would bring stability in Central Asia. Certainly, Moscow, by linking itself to the war against terrorism, had partially been able to pacify the Chechen rebels through both military action and by extracting a shift in the American and Western position over this vexed issue.

Similarly, threats associated with Afghanistan had also diminished considerably. It was estimated that 70 per cent of the strength of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was destroyed during the US-led war against terror. Moreover, Central Asians themselves have reaped enormous benefits by cooperating with the US in its war on terror. Not only has US aid to them doubled, resources begotten from military cooperation helped revitalize key Central Asian military segments.

## Regional Response to US Entry

From the standpoint of the Central Asians, the events of 9/11 gave an entirely new twist to their policy thinking. Their responses were weighed to extract maximum benefit out of the situation. The Central Asians, particularly the Uzbeks, argued that existing security mechanisms, including the CST and the Shanghai-5 had failed to address impending regional security issues.

For the Central Asian states, the entry of the US military did not come as a surprise, even psychologically, as the groundwork for this was laid throughout the 1990s. The US was engaged in a host of activities in each country with a clear-cut goal of gaining influence. An entire range of economic, educational and military programmes were successfully facilitated for US military presence in the region. There were no worthwhile public protests against US entry in any of the capitals.

Even prior to 9/11, Central Asian states, except Tajikistan, somehow had been managing their security affairs with varying degrees of success. Though, there were enormous problems between the states arising out of territorial and water disputes, a major conflict was avoided and problems were locally contained. This was not to suggest that these problems have been resolved after the US military's entry into the region. In fact US presence aggravated the inter-state rivalry and competition. Nonetheless, inter-state consultations had increased and the leaders in fact started to talk to each other more after 9/11. The event led four Central Asian states – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to form a new body, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in Tashkent in December 2001 on the basis of the Central Asian Economic Community.<sup>37</sup> The leaders had met under the CACO more frequently since 2001, for they also talked about forming a consortium to deal with the economic, water, communication and other inter-state issues.

What had actually driven these states to seek Western and NATO support was the logic “if you need peace, prepare for war”. They had recognised that security was a necessary precondition

for foreign investment, desperately needed for domestic peace and economic growth. There was also a clear-cut recognition – both within Central Asia and outside – that transportation barriers were the biggest impediments for major change in the region.

In fact, Western experts had been deliberating on the need to breaking Central Asia connectivity status since the time of the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Various Western projects, including the EU's Technical Assistance to the CIS (TACIS), Food Security Programme (FSP), International Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE), Transport Corridor between Europe, Caucasus and Asia (TRACECA) and others, were launched with the aim of achieving Central Asia 's military integration with the West.

However, in the aftermath of 9/11, economic issues have taken the backseat and the focus is now shifting to terrorism and Islamic issues. The projects for developing transportation lines in Central Asia preceded 9/11 and were well-meshed with US policies. They were being implemented without taking a confrontational line with Russia.

### **Russia's Reassertion**

Certainly, there appeared no signs of an open competition between Russia and the US in Central Asia in the aftermath of the 9/11. But Russia saw the situation in the 'near abroad' changing fundamentally. Seemingly, Moscow's disputes with the West had not vanished completely, but the nature of differences and Western compliance to concede to Russia's viewpoints had altered considerably.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, Russia probably found more reasons to return to Central Asia. Putin skilfully used the American rhetoric with its own emphasis on the anti-terrorism campaign and the right of pre-emptive action. As noted earlier, Russia since Putin's ascendancy in 2002 had increasingly pushed both military and economy as key leverages to promote its interest in Central Asia. Many ambitious economic and security policies were pursued in the name of cooperation in fighting international terrorism. By mid-2000, Russia

mutely regained control over key Central Asian sectors including oil, space, minerals and the defence industry. More precisely, since 2002, Russia showed renewed interest for regaining its lost ground by expanding large-scale economic and military presence. Many security analysts had observed that Russia was returning to the region with a vengeance and with an ambitious strategic agenda. Putin himself said in November 2002 to *EkhoMoscvy* Radio, “that the era of Russian political concessions – which began with 1991 and continued through the post-September 11 appearance of US military bases in Central Asia – was coming to an end.”

### **Restoring Military Profile**

On the security front, Russia boosted the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In April 2003, the CSTO was transformed into a regional military alliance with commitment and a mandate to repulse aggression. The strengthening of the CSTO even attracted Iranian interest for cooperation with the organisation. The Iranian Ambassador to Russia, Gholam Raza Shafei met the Secretary-General of the CSTO, General Nikolay Bordyuzha in 2003.<sup>39</sup> The CSTO started holding a series of military exercises, dubbed as ‘Commonwealth Southern Shield’ beginning from July 2003.

In July 2003, Russia signed a draft agreement with Kyrgyzstan for opening a Russian military air base in Kant (45 km east of Bishkek), which was made operational by October 2003. The agreement was signed for 15 years, extendible for another five years.<sup>40</sup> Russia was reportedly spending over \$2 million for the airport’s upgradation that housed over 20 Russian aircraft and roughly 700 troops. According to news reports, Russia was deploying 5 Su-25 attack jets, 5 Su-27 fighters, 2 AN-26 transports, 2 IL-76 transports, 5 L-39 training jets and 2 Mi-8 helicopters.<sup>41</sup> Besides the air unit, Russian troops formed part of the rapid-deployment force, comprising 5,000 troops from Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, to be stationed in Kyrgyzstan under the CSTO. Reports also indicated that Kyrgyz pilots would find contract jobs in the Russian air base.<sup>42</sup>

In Tajikistan, Russia had announced transformation of the 201 Motor Rifle Division into the fourth military base. A draft agreement signed in 2003 between Tajikistan and Russia indicated that the new military base would function initially for five years.<sup>43</sup> In April 2003, Putin, during the CSTO Summit meeting, said that the new military base was necessary considering the continuity of the uncertain security situation in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> The Russian Ambassador in Dushanbe then justified the decision by saying that “though the first component of extremists was eliminated in the anti-terrorist operation, but it does not mean that the Taliban ideology and all guerrillas have been wiped out.” Russia was expecting a new spiral, if not a new war, and then a tide of terrorist attacks from across Afghanistan. Russians claimed that the 201 Rifle Division accounted for up to 60 per cent of drugs seized in Tajikistan.<sup>45</sup> Russia also had an early warning radar stationed in Tajikistan.

With Kazakhstan, Russia had a much deeper military relationship. The two countries have been working towards combined military planning and strategy, and joint use of armed forces. The two countries also extended the lease of the Baikonur space centre and ballistic missile test range in Kazakhstan to Russia for another 50 years.<sup>46</sup>

Since the 9/11 episode, Russia also strengthened its hold in the Caspian Sea region by introducing a range of new warships in its Caspian Flotilla. In August 2002, Russia conducted the biggest ever military exercise involving over 10,000 people, 60 ships of various classes and over 30 aircraft. In addition, the Azerbaijani and Kazakh armed forces also took part in the Caspian Sea war exercise. Thus, in a short span, Russia restored its military facilities in Central Asia, within the framework of developing theatre war-fighting capabilities in its periphery.

Besides, Russia also began to formulate a broader policy posture towards its ex-members. President Putin then talked about opening opportunities for the CIS citizens to serve in the Russian Armed Forces. This announcement was welcomed by the Central Asian states, particularly by Tajikistan. Millions of unemployed youth from Central Asia were leaving their countries to earn a living in Russia.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to the above, Russia has been helping the Chinese-driven Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the importance of which got rather reduced after 9/11. Creating a secretariat in Beijing and a counter-terrorism centre in Tashkent known as the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), Russia gave the SCO a permanent 'license' to deal with regional security issues in Central Asia. Since 2003, the Chinese troops have joined other forces of the SCO members (Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) in military exercises held either in Central Asia or in Xinjiang.<sup>48</sup>

### **Enhancing Economic Profile**

On the economic front, Russia had ultimately stolen the show by clinching major and long-term deals in energy cooperation with every Central Asian country, including Uzbekistan, Iran and China.

In April 2003, Russia in a dramatic move signed a strategic deal with Turkmenistan in the gas sector for a period of 25 years. Russia planned to buy 10 billion cubic metres of gas by 2005 and 100 billion cubic metres by 2010, that was to bring about \$200 billion to Turkmenistan and \$300 billion to Russia.<sup>49</sup> Of course, the tragedy has been that these plans eventually got hijacked by China which enjoys complete monopoly over Turkmen gas exports.

Again in May 2003, Russia's Gazprom signed a 25-year gas sector strategic cooperation deal with Tajikistan to explore and develop gas fields in central and southern Tajikistan. Gazprom also finalised a 25-year agreement with Kyrgyzstan for energy partnership around that time. On August 6, 2003, during President Putin's visit to Uzbekistan, Gazprom signed a major deal with Uzbek Gas Company for strategic partnership in the gas sector.<sup>50</sup>

In May 2003, Russian oil giant Yukos, signed the biggest ever deal with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to supply 5.13 billion barrels of Russian oil, worth \$150 billion to China for 25 years.<sup>51</sup> The deal covered construction of a 2,400-kilometre pipeline from Siberia to the Chinese city of Daqing. China also announced readiness to help finance the construction of the pipeline.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Russia also planned to construct a 4,000-kilometre pipeline from

Eastern Siberia along the Pacific coast to Nakhodka, on the Sea of Japan. South Korea was also looking for a deal with Russian firms to import gas from Siberia.<sup>53</sup> Russia had also offered Iran a \$1 billion investment project to develop offshore oil and gas fields in an area of the Caspian Sea claimed by both Iran and Turkmenistan.<sup>54</sup>

The above trend suggested that in spite of all odds Russia remained indispensable to Central Asians in terms of economic dependency. As Russia took up energy development as a major plank to boost its immediate economic needs and long-term national objectives, cooperation with Central Asia became the focal point in the mid-2000s.

In the past, Russia's priority had been to minimise the energy development here, essentially to block the flow of oil towards Western markets without transiting Russia and instead sought to direct foreign investment towards Siberia and other parts of Russia. This strategy seemingly changed after Putin came to power. Russia's oil giants like Lukoil and Gazprom started concentrating in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia by taking up major ventures. Russia made intense efforts to resolve the legal issues in the Caspian Sea region while engaging other members in a dialogue.<sup>55</sup>

Since gas is not as mobile and versatile as oil, Russia enjoyed the advantage over others in developing and exporting Central Asian resources to European and Asian markets.<sup>56</sup> This, in fact, compelled the West to accept Russia's legitimate and prominent role – particularly in the economic arena – in Central Asia. Similarly, without the participation of Russia, no meaningful transportation and communication links were to be worked out. Russia under Putin tried to revive several key projects to find communication links with other regions including the North-South Corridor from Astarkhan, the Caspian Sea, Iran, to India.

### **Semblance of Cooperation**

It was clear that the US and Russia were evolving an understanding through a proper legal framework to cooperate on a number of issues, including Central Asia. The May 2002 summit between Presidents

Bush and Putin in Moscow and subsequent meetings enhanced this cooperation. Important US official statements then gave reasons to believe that Washington was according a significant place to Russia in Central Asia on the basis of mutual recognition of each other's interests.<sup>57</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell told Congress in early 2002: "Russia has been a key member of the anti-terrorist coalition. It has played a crucial role in our success in Afghanistan, by providing intelligence, bolstering the Northern Alliance, and assisting our entry into Central Asia. In fact, the way we are approaching Central Asia is symbolic of the way we are approaching the relationship as a whole and of the growing trust between our two countries."<sup>58</sup>

However, there was also a growing skepticism about the US ability to sustain its interest in Central Asia in the face of Russia's dramatic successes. There were obviously no signs of a rollback in US influence in the region – Russian military advances since 2003 had decreased Central Asian appeal for intensive cooperation with NATO. While favouring the deployment of the CSTO airbase at Kant, the former Kyrgyz Defence Minister and current foreign policy adviser to the President, Muratbaek Imanaliyev, said, "Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with NATO is of provisional nature. The deployment has never been meant for strategic [purposes] in terms of expanding NATO's influence in Kyrgyzstan and in the region."<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, other Kyrgyz officials also made statements that the US military base at Manas was only meant for the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan. They pointed out that forthcoming Russian Air force deployment at Kant would be for strategic purpose of defending the region. Nikolai Bailo, Chairman of the Committee on CIS Affairs in the Kyrgyz Parliament said, "For as long as a Russian border contingent was deployed in the country, until 1999, guerillas did not try to invade Kyrgyzstan". In another statement, Kyrgyz Defence Minister Esen Topoyev said, "Cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and NATO can be called constructive. However, it should not be viewed in the light of NATO's eastward enlargement. From the point of view of today's international context, this term has become morally outdated. Kyrgyzstan's priorities in its bilateral and multilateral

cooperation are intended to ensure national and regional security. That is why the country attaches great importance to stronger ties between the member-nations of the CSTO and SCO.”<sup>60</sup>

Washington’s muted response to Russia’s announcement of its opening of the airbase in Bishkek indicated that the US no longer viewed Russian military deployment in Central Asia as a zero-sum game. The experts opined that Moscow and Washington were emerging as twin alternatives and not competitors, at least in collectively fighting the stateless foes such as al-Qaida. Both Russian and Kyrgyz diplomats downplayed the issue of US-Russia rivalry growing in Central Asia. The Kyrgyz Defence Minister rejected the notion that Kant is a Russian base and Manas is American. Kant airport, he said, will form the CSTO’s airbase and as for Manas, international anti-terrorist coalition forces – of which Russia is a part – are deployed there and not a purely US or NATO force.<sup>61</sup>

In fact, Putin has done what Yeltsin failed to do in Central Asia. As Russia’s economy was beginning to look up, Moscow, obviously, was aggressively implementing policies to safeguard its interests. Central Asian states too recognised the fact that Russia has gained a bigger leadership role after 9/11. President Karimov also acknowledged by saying that, “present-day Russia is not the Russia of the 1990s”. In fact, Karimov made several attempts to mend fences with Putin – relations which were damaged after Tashkent openly supported the US policies, including the war against Iraq. Interestingly, realignment of forces in Central Asia was taking place when the US was grappling with its military engagement in West Asia.

For the Russian advantage, the US was beginning to face confrontation on a number of accounts in Central Asia. The US advocacy for democratic change and better human rights records was not taken kindly by the ruling regimes. Russia, comparatively abstained from interfering on this account. In fact, the opposition forces, except Kazakhstan’s dissident leader, Kazhegeldin always look towards Moscow for guidance. Therefore, the challenge for the US was how far it could avoid criticism over human rights

and political abuses in the interest of fighting against terrorism. In Kyrgyzstan, US military presence had caused serious domestic concerns and instability finally leading to collapse of two regimes since 2005.

There was no doubt that Uzbekistan meanwhile became the linchpin of US policies in Central Asia. Tashkent sought a longer-term commitment from the US to remain engaged in the region even after the problems in Afghanistan got sorted out. Such a policy of Uzbekistan's expediency of cooperation with the US however created difficulties in terms of regional perspective. Regional experts felt that it would be questioned by regional states once the Afghan factor and threat of terrorism was contained.<sup>62</sup> Second, the US was to face the difficult challenge of balancing its position with Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Russia over issues involving the future of Afghanistan.

Ultimately, the US policy was to be reconciled with the interests of Islamabad, as can be seen from Washington's ardent wish to seek new relationships with Pakistan. In such a case, Uzbekistan was bound to slip out and revert back to Moscow's orbit. Most Central Asian analysts also tend to accept that the US-Pakistan relationships are much deeper to be compromised for interest in Central Asia. However well-disposed Washington might have been towards Uzbekistan, the US remained a distant partner. On the other hand, Russia, due to sheer geography and history, inevitably remained crucial for Central Asia.

### **Water: A Key Issue**

As mentioned earlier, one of the key problems in Central Asia was the deficiency of water. And here again, like in the case of gas supply, Russia had the capability of fulfilling the region's water demands. Not only Russia retained the capability to make Uzbekistan's development task difficult through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan but it could also use water as a strategic and political weapon for retaining long term influence in the region.

The region faced acute ecological crises as a result of depleting water resources. According to some experts, the existing water

resources would be sufficient only until 2025. The per capita consumption of water in Central Asia is twice that of developed nations. The Amu and Syr Darya have been shrinking every year against the background of population growth. Since 1980 the region's population has grown from 27 to over 55 million and it is expected to grow to 100 million by 2050. Moreover, China has been diverting rivers that fed Central Asia to its own water deficient areas in Xinjiang.<sup>63</sup> Uzbekistan may face further water shortage if the reconstruction programme in Afghanistan speeds up. In recent years, there have been serious conflicts between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over water flows of Syr and Amu-Daria rivers. In fact, Islam Karimov even threatened to go for war over water. Interestingly, the 32-year-old idea of diverting a part of the Ob River in Siberia to Central Asia has been talked about again. A conference on "Russia and Central Asia: Water Problem and Strategy for Cooperation", held in Moscow in April 2003 had steered new discussion that was aimed at increasing Russia's leverages in Central Asia. The conference organised by influential Russian politicians like Yuri Luzhkov suggested diverting of 5-7 per cent of the water flow of the Ob River to Central Asia by building a 2,550-kilometre long canal. Luzhkov underlined that water is a renewable resource as compared to oil.<sup>64</sup> He said, "now we are talking about water as a good, which Russia has in plenty". Of course, these events were held against the backdrop of regional geopolitical changes. Many experts commented that Uzbekistan was miscalculating by forging closer ties with the US. The Russians are talking about use of water as a political tool that can be used for keeping Central Asia under its influence forever.

### **Quick Game Reversal**

On the whole, the strategic complexion of Central Asia had undergone a sweeping change since 9/11 and in its wake the US created an unprecedented military presence in the region. In fact, China, after a decade of diplomatic success in the area, suddenly felt challenged by the growing Western presence in its backyard.

However, the notion that America's strategic engagement in Central Asia will pose a counterweight against Russia and Islamic threats, began to get discredited after 9/11. Uzbekistan witnessed a spurt of terrorist attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara in early 2004 that marked the first visible sign of an evolving counter move in the New Great Game.<sup>65</sup> Terrorist violence, though, was not new to Central Asia. Throughout the 1990s, such incidents have rocked many places, including Tashkent. They proved to be the handiwork of elements linked to al-Qaida and the Taliban. But experts estimated that over 70 per cent of Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) had been eliminated in the post- 9/11 actions. Other groups, such as the Hizbut-Tahrir (HuT), have denied involvement. Investigation and analyses indicated that a new homegrown group, in concert with external outfits, had carried out the attacks in 2004. The situation became worse in 2005, when a massive eruption took place in Andijan that killed hundreds.

A host of commentaries, including those of Human Rights Watch, blamed Islam Karimov's repressive rule for all the political, economic and social tribulations in Uzbekistan. But Karimov is not the only authoritarian leader in the region. The others with similar dispositions were managing to rule with strong legitimacy. So what went wrong with Uzbekistan?

Tashkent exceptionally chose to play an unconventional geopolitical game, starting with severing all traditional ties with Russia even though the two shared identical threat perceptions. Tashkent opted out of every mechanism controlled by Russia, including from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty (CST), and others. It snapped trade ties with Russia, thinking that the sale of its cotton in international markets would bring in better returns. Uzbekistan also adopted a go-alone approach within the region. It not only stayed away from the collective regional affairs but also had flawed relations with neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan on account of disputes over territory and water resources.

Consequently, Uzbekistan lost traditional transportation links to world markets passing north via Kazakhstan. Its quest for a supply routes to the south, independent of Russia, remains a non-starter, owing to instability in Afghanistan. Other Central Asian states favoured the Eurasian Economic Community and strong ties with Russia and gave no space for Uzbekistan, which then preferred a partnership with the American-sponsored regional alliance, GUUAM – comprising of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. Tashkent was also frustrated by events in Afghanistan but sought to deal with the Taliban independent of the CIS efforts.

Clearly, Tashkent was trying hard to become America's Trojan Horse that had perplexed everyone, including China. Besides offering bases, Uzbekistan became an ardent supporter of the US policy goals, not excluding its war against Iraq. But to the dismay of Karimov, the US continued to back democracy, human rights and movements for religious rights in Uzbekistan. Interestingly, the attacks that killed nearly 50 people had come about in spite of the presence of American troops, if not because of their presence.

Uzbekistan's miscalculations have been endless. The violence was an ominous pointer to an uncertain future. In fact, nobody was wishing that Uzbekistan fall prey to fundamentalists, but no one wanted it to be an odd man out or adopt stances not commensurate with regional reality either.

Yet Karimov appeared quite different from other regional leaders who had learnt the art of living in harmony with its neighbours rather quickly. It seemed that dictatorship as such has not been rejected totally by the people. It was the mismanagement of it that had brought Uzbekistan down. In any case, US policy goals were to come into collision with Uzbekistan's aspirations, sooner or later, especially on the issue of Afghanistan's future and also due to the inherent dictatorial nature of the Uzbek regime.

Even after 9/11, the US has already favoured a Pakistani solution as indicated by its handing out the Non-NATO ally status to that nation. Karimov should have known that America would not hesitate, should its interests demand, to go along with Islamic

groups that oppose him. The trend also indicated that the longer the Americans remain engaged in Central Asia, the more pronounced the instability in the region would be.

Since July 2005, Russia together with China has been doing everything possible to blunt the US influence in the region.<sup>66</sup> Their assertion vis-à-vis US also came against the backdrop of the crises in Kyrgyzstan (March 2005) and Uzbekistan (May 2005). Moscow and Beijing supported Tashkent's accusation that the events were engineered by the US and Western NGOs. This provided the SCO an opportunity to issue a dateline in July last to quit the US airbase in the region. Tashkent especially told Washington to leave its Karshi-Khanabad (K2) air base in 180 days.<sup>67</sup>

Since then the Russian military has already returned to its old garrisons in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Following the US military withdrawal from K2, Moscow quickly secured a military agreement with Uzbekistan as a major ally. While China, by committing \$6 billion in aid, has rescued Uzbekistan from its difficulties since Western support ended after the Andijan crisis.<sup>68</sup>

The balance of power therefore quickly tilted against the US, partly due to Washington's cancellation of foreign aid on the basis of human rights violations and more fundamentally, because US investment had not come up to expectations.

The role of China and its attempts at fishing the troubled waters in Central Asia is being covered in other chapters, but Beijing has been dealing diligently with the unfolding events in Central Asia while also working extra to keep Russia on board through the SCO.

China has successfully enhanced both its economic and military postures in the region under the SCO framework. It had successfully coerced three Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) into border deals in its favour. China has lately swamped the energy deals in the region.

Other outside powers, notably Japan, the EU and the US, which lack access to the region, have been committing investment and aid for developing infrastructure, transport and energy networks in order to promote the regional integration process within Central

Asia. The idea has been to lessen dependence on exports and instead create a regional market. Japan tried to boost political and economic contacts in the region through investment and transfer of technology.

The US on the other hand, pursues a policy of disentangling Central Asia from the Russian and Chinese fold and instead works towards reviving the historic links between Central and South Asia under its New Silk Route initiative. The focal point of this was to locate Afghanistan in an enduring regional framework – also with an eye to create a constructive basis for Indo-Pak cooperation. The US officials expected India to be the linchpin of this policy and work for mitigating the SCO's influence.<sup>69</sup> Following 9/11, the US unveiled a strategic partnership with Kabul and supported Afghanistan's entry into SAARC.<sup>70</sup> All of these pointed to the beginning of a new interlocking process which was underway.<sup>71</sup> However, the critical point in this has been Washington's continued willingness to completely sever ties with Pakistan.

### **Internal Dynamics**

Certainly, Central Asian states have undergone a painful and complex nation-building process, which is far from complete. There were inherent shortcomings as the leadership and economic structures in the region for a long time remained frozen in a Soviet past. In fact, a major transition towards changing the basic nature of these regimes may take a generation.

Central Asia's main problems have been primarily within. The post-Soviet political formations, especially the loyalties of the population have rested not with national but along regional or tribal-clan identities. With the collapse of the communist structure, people not sufficiently prepared for democracy have instead returned to traditional clan-based polity. Among them, Uzbekistan relatively enjoyed a stronger national consciousness, attributed mainly to Uzbek settled lifestyle, whereas nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmens clung to tribal loyalties. President Islam Karimov has managed to co-opt regional clans in the power structure but he has been facing a stiff challenge from rising Islamic

forces. Karimov has been saying that Central Asian states could not demolish their old Soviet houses until they were able to build new democratic ones. As a result, the opposition groups and media remain suppressed.

The internal power struggles, particularly in the smaller states have therefore increasingly assumed violent forms, placing their survival in doubt. In fact, the developments in all the states over the years have shown the emergence of intricate power play among various internal and external forces challenging the central authorities, particularly, the inter- and intra-clan dynamics and the regional power brokers, including the role of the criminal network, shaping the domestic trends. The increasing tendency to use violent actions has posed a major challenge.

The initial assessment was that Central Asia was immune to revolutionary change, citing lack of democratic opposition. It was assumed that domestic dissent has not reached a level at which mass direct action against the regime seemed possible.

Kyrgyzstan has seen the worst crisis since independence. The sharp division and disparity between the “southern Kyrgyz” and “northern Kyrgyz” has posed a threat to country’s unity. Following on the heels of regime change in other CIS states like Ukraine and Georgia, Kyrgyzstan became the first in the region to witness a change in power through its own “coloured” revolution in March 2005. Earlier Kyrgyzstan was credited with the greatest progress in market reforms and democratisation. Much of the country’s economy was privatised; media was free, political parties held seats in parliament. Gradually, however, political reform got stalled, media was subjected to harassment and dissents were jailed. The ousted President, Askar Akayev tried to resist rapid change saying that democracy must be an “organic growth” from within a nation and not to be exported like the Communist revolution was exported from outside. However, public upsurge in Bishkek – which saw uncontrollable violence and looting – unexpectedly enforced the regime change resulting in Akayev fleeing the country. Among critical factors that brought down Akayev included popular

dissatisfaction and pent-up frustration, resulting from pervasive corruption, persistent poverty, and pathetic governance.

In fact, the situation in Central Asia rather resembled conditions in West Asia that eventually led to “Arab Spring” revolutions. In the case of Central Asia, there were also the hard aspects of economic weakness and security dilemma that compounded the problem. Over the years, the security situation became more complex, so also the ability of each state in handling the issues. The abilities of the regimes to play the “multidirectional foreign policy” role-playing major powers off each other (supporting the US war on terrorism, Russia’s CSTO and China’s SCO) – have come under major strain. This also essentially underlined the political underpinning faced by young states. However, it must be underlined that the Russian security umbrella under the CSTO held the Central Asian states in power and prevented them from going the Arab way.

### **Islamic Surge**

Since the Soviet collapse, Central Asia has also witnessed revival of political Islam. Although majority of the Central Asian Muslims believe in a conventional and moderate Islamic practices, many extremist religious groups such as the HuT and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have garnered a strong presence in the region and are able to create major upheavals from time to time. Both IMU and HuT suffered setbacks after 9/11, but they have been regaining strength depending on the situation in Afghanistan.

The Ferghana Valley, which is the hub of poverty and religious conservatism, has shaped many events in the region. Ethnic Uzbeks in the Ferghana Valley who are relatively more Islamic than the nomadic Kyrgyz, played a significant role in fueling domestic opposition in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, in Kyrgyzstan, the shift of power has taken place from predominantly the Russian-speaking north to the southern Kyrgyz clans that are more Islamised.

However, in general, Islamic movements in Central Asia remain externally fuelled. Many of them have received direct support from terrorist groups based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Barring minor changes in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, the political status quo has prevailed in Central Asia. As the internal democratic forces are fractious and fragile, most external powers have so far opted not to risk destabilising the regimes' run of octogenarian leaders from the Soviet period.

Any hopes of a democratic transformation are mutated into anxiety about the spread of Islamic radicalism. Most analysts believe that the experiences of other countries including Afghanistan cannot be repeated here because forces of extremism and fundamentalism could thrive in uncertain political environments. Central Asia could easily become a safe haven for terrorist operations, especially for already entranced groups like the HuT, the IMU and others, which have gained considerable strength over the years with enormous succour from outside including al-Qaida. The IMU cadres are still trained in Pakistan's NWFP and FATA regions.

Clearly, the changes in the region are awakening resentment far beyond the section of population sympathetic to Islamic groups which have gained popularity in the Ferghana Valley. In fact, some Western powers tended to view Islamic activities in the region as part of the democratic process. Moreover, organised violence in the Valley, especially inter-ethnic strife in and around the Osh region, could easily spark renewed hostility between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz, as it erupted in the 1990s and 2010.

In Uzbekistan, the popular Islamic movement led by the HuT has given birth to several militant factions that have been aggressively pushing their agendas to overthrow the regime. So far, President Islam Karimov has dealt brutally against the Islamic opposition groups such as the IMU that never gave up on attempts at stroking political crisis in Uzbekistan. There had been violent protests in Uzbekistan (the Andijan crisis) on May 13, 2005, in which hundreds were killed.

The striking potential of underground Islamic networks remains intact despite the initial defeat of the IMU cadres after 9/11. The Uzbek authorities have indicated involvement of foreign hands, including international terrorist networks and the Afghan Taliban

fomenting trouble. The Uzbek government saw such organised actions of radical forces as being meant to change the constitutional order by force.

### **External Influence**

The strategic balance of power in the region has been vacillating from time to time. The major powers have retained divided interests in the region, which tended to bring them into collaboration and conflict. With the US withdrawing its military facilities from the region, the space is mainly shared by Russia and China. The latter has already overtaken Russia in influencing the economic space of Central Asia, but Beijing has been working extra to keep Russia on the board through the SCO.

The situation in Central Asia is always linked to the political events unfolding elsewhere in the post-Soviet countries. In the past, many of the events in the region were linked to the so-called ‘Coloured Revolutions’ in Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova. In Kyrgyzstan, the West-funded NGOs had succeeded in overthrowing Akayev’s regime in 2005 and Bakiyev’s regime in 2010. Islam Karimov too has been banning various funded NGOs, especially the Soros Foundation, accusing them for infusing popular discontent into a potent movement.<sup>72</sup>

It has also been reported that political figures with known criminal connections played a key role in unleashing the upheavals especially in Kyrgyzstan. The strength of the criminal network, connected to the drug trade, had grown over the years in the region with some of them having reached a position of commanding influence. Many of these drug barons had gained immunity by being elected to parliament.

In the changed situation, especially in the post-Ukraine crisis, Central Asian regimes remain cautious about the role of Russia’s new geopolitical activism and fear of Ukraine-type implosion spreading across the region. The Crimea episode has caused a sense of insecurity if not a fear or threat to their sovereignty. At the same time, the regimes have no idea for countering the Western democracy drive except for

being tight under Russian tutelage. Certainly, both Russia and China have so far protected the regimes from falling. In fact, Russia's own interests in Central Asia outweigh its interests in Georgia or Ukraine. Similarly, China has developed a huge interest in saving the regional autocrats for its ideological and economic interests.

However, it is also true that bigger states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan seemingly feel squeezed by the recent economic and strategic closeness of Russia and China (post-Ukraine events) and wish for a more diversified space to protect their sovereign interests, therefore showing inclination for expanding contacts beyond Russia and China.

In fact, troubles in Central Asia have spurred sharp responses from all the major powers. The regional regimes for their survival have played varying games especially playing their suitors off against one another for gaining maximum political and economic mileage. While the Western powers have been pressing for international scrutiny against excessive human rights violations by the regimes, both Russia and China have placed their bets on regional leaders such as Islam Karimov, Atambayev and Nazarbayev for their actions against opposition groups.

Tashkent had steadfastly rejected an independent international investigation into Andijan that had prompted the US to steadily toughen its stance towards the Uzbek regimes. In retaliation, Tashkent even threatened to break the strategic partnership with Washington by announcing a deadline for US withdrawal from its military base in 2005.

The West has suffered from a big dilemma on Central Asia. Many had viewed that the long-term interest would be better served by severing ties with the autocratic regimes like that of Karimov's in Tashkent. In fact, many in the West viewed the current regimes of the region as regional security liabilities because their hard-line domestic policies only helped swell the ranks of the IMU, HuT and now IS.

In fact, the US in the past had propped up Uzbek opposition groups allowing them to open offices in the US and elsewhere.

However, the West also feared that withdrawing support to Karimov would inevitably give a boost to Islamic radicals somewhat similar to what happened in Iran in the late 1970s, when US support to the Shah of Iran was withdrawn. Any attempts in favour of regime change in Central Asia have been countered through measures in support of regime security by China and Russia. Both Moscow and Russia have ensured that stability of the region is managed through predictable results in presidential elections held in these countries.

On their part, Central Asian states have found their ability of handling the issues more difficult. Akayev's fall and Karimov's actions have exposed the play of a double or even triple game, involving the US, Russia and China. The "multidirectional foreign policy" could not be sustained.

The SCO's call for the US to set a date by which it will withdraw its airbase from Khanabad in 2005 had come against the backdrop of the Andijan crisis.<sup>73</sup> The Kyrgyz revolt in 2010 made the remaining regimes fearful of US presence. This was mainly because the second revolution in 2010 that led to regime change in Bishkek was brought about with the open support of the Americans. To a greater extent the Bishkek upheavals and also the Andijan episode had their origin in the belief of dislodging the American presence in the region.

It only explained that Bishkek came under pressure from Russia and China. Unlike in the case of Uzbekistan, the US managed to manoeuvre Bakiyev's and later Otunbayeva's government to stay put at Manas. However, after Atambayev came to power in 2011, the US was ultimately made to withdraw its airbase from Manas (Kyrgyzstan) in 2014 ostensibly due to pressure from Russia and China.<sup>74</sup>

The SCO's vision also extends to include China's domestic concerns – including possible US-engineered trouble in Xinjiang. China always remained cautious about the domestic situation in Central Asian countries especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which houses most of the Uyghur refugee Diaspora. Kyrgyzstan alone has 50,000 Uyghurs and the number is two or three times more in Almaty. Fearing a spillover effect, China often closed its

border trading posts at Khorog and Irkeshtam.<sup>75</sup> Beijing constantly remains concerned about a possible change in Central Asian position vis-à-vis the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang. Therefore, Beijing remained concerned about possible security threats triggered by a power vacuum or changes in the foreign policies of these countries. In fact, the West would always look for an opportunity to play up the Uyghur case on grounds of democracy and human rights. Most of the Chinese Uyghur dissidents are based in the US or Europe. Therefore, China remained extremely wary about the US-engineered role in Kyrgyz politics, suspecting the US long-term game-plan, detrimental to China's interests in Central Asia.

At the moment, Beijing has managed its Central Asia policy rather well, perhaps more due to economic inducement. All Central Asian regimes have been cooperative with Beijing on Uyghur activities. However, anti-China rhetoric runs deep both in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over the manner in which each regime in these countries has compromised its policies including bartering or ceding away their territories to China. Should there be any political change in Central Asia, the US is certainly going to play up with the local opposition forces on the issue of territorial disputes with China. Such a possible political transformation in the region would also impact the situation in Xinjiang. The Chinese are painfully aware of such a scenario.

With the SCO becoming more visible, the post-Soviet status quo might go through a change. Interestingly, China has been striving to keep SCO as an exclusive club and wanted the non-regional powers eventually to remove military bases in Central Asia. In almost all cases, the Russians and Chinese penned the SCO documents. However, in reality, the SCO declarations did not necessarily reflect the foreign policies of the Central Asian states. It didn't look like the Central Asian states actually wanted the Americans to leave the region in favour of Russia and China, for the financial benefits they were gaining from the US and NATO presence. Even though, China may wish the region to come under its sole control, Russia would actually not like that to happen.

In the current scenario, the Russian military presence in Central Asia under the aegis of CSTO fulfils and mitigates the threats emanating from within and out the region. Most Central Asian states have little option but to adjust with Russian expectations and now increasingly more with Chinese interests.

Meanwhile the US seemed to have changed its tack on Central Asia following its standoff with Russia over the Ukraine crisis. The United States and five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – have been engaging in the dialogue process under the “C5+1” format to deepen America’s economic and security ties in Central Asia. In November 2015, US Secretary of State John Kerry travelled to Samarkand and met with the Foreign Ministers and leaders of Central Asian countries under the C5+1 format.<sup>76</sup>

The C5+1 is a platform meant for discussing joint regional projects to improve security, promote economic connectivity, and trade. At the second C5+1 ministerial, held in Washington DC in August 2016, the six ministers agreed to launch five corresponding projects, which the United States plans to support with up to US\$ 15 million.<sup>77</sup>

## Political Scenario

The regime change in Kyrgyzstan and fundamentalist assertion in Uzbekistan could have become harbingers of regional change with implications for other countries. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, the regime led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev has steadfastly managed to rule the country all these years without much of a domestic opposition-led upsurge. In Kazakhstan, the political system is rather determined by power play among the major *Jhuz or* Hordes (Senior, Middle and Junior). But Nazarbayev, despite the vertically divided tribal structure, managed to launch early economic reforms and managed to contain causes for major dissent.

Nazarbayev also quickly learnt from the mistakes of Askar Akayev and Islam Karimov who had either neglected the socio-economic factors and lax security measures or used brutal force against opposition groups.

The Kazakh situation rather resembled that of Kyrgyzstan, except that Kazakh opposition remained well organised, and more united. At the same time, the Kazakh authorities too remained tough and more motivated than that of Akayev's regime in Kyrgyzstan. However, in the case of Kazakhstan, the people there remained economically more prosperous, less religion-oriented. Moreover, the absence of a large middle class made the demand for change less urgent. At the same time, the emergence of new business elite groups having stakes in oil revenue are increasingly engaging in the political power struggle as a means of protecting their interests.

Turkmenistan has been the odd one out in the region. It remained an isolated and closed country. The first President Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov had suppressed or exiled political opposition and evolved a cult of personality for himself. The politics in this gas-rich country also revolves around regional clans and tribal loyalties. Following the death of President Niyazov in December 2006, the transfer of power in Turkmenistan has been rather peaceful, but his successor Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov hasn't brought about much change in the country.

In Tajikistan, the first two presidents (Rahmon Nabiev and Akbarsho Iskandarov) were driven from power in 1992 as the country remained plagued by civil war immediately after its independence. Almost a million Tajiks seasonally travel to Russia to earn a living. The country has many shortcomings including lack of resources as compared to others. It is yet to evolve a comprehensive political or economic strategy to find long-term solutions. The power-sharing agreement of 1997 between president Rahmonov and the Islamic groups represented by the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) is working but still remains tenuous.

All in all, Central Asia's balance of power record since independence therefore could be termed as mixed. The states have largely failed to meet the challenges facing them – including political and economic transition. The internal fissures including ethnic and regional tensions, persistent squabbles amongst regional clans impeded political cohesiveness and stability. On the

other hand, they have managed to retain a degree of independence while conflicts have not been allowed to precipitate into direct confrontation. A greater awareness among the countries is growing for cooperative efforts to address the common challenges facing them.

The above regional scenario therefore indicates that Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and even gas-rich Turkmenistan are better placed to overcome these difficulties with relative success, and are likely to further strengthen their positions as leading regional powers of Central Asia, whereas the situation in poorer states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remains less hopeful. All in all, the region is likely to remain fluid in its orientation and its underlying problems would remain unaddressed for a long time.

### **Imminent Succession Scenario**

So far, in all the five Central Asian countries the regimes have managed to survive through internal manipulation including calls for snap polls, holding early referendum and making changes in the Constitution from time to time enabling them to stay in power indefinitely.

In the coming years, the region could witness political transformation. Two of the presidents are already well above the age of 75. Intense speculations have grown how the change in power might take place in the individual states, especially in four countries – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

There is no single scenario that can be built as to how the succession process might play out in each country. In the best-case scenario the status quo could be maintained with minor changes in personalities. This means that changes will not come from below or civil society – but would be decided from the top as has been the case in Turkmenistan.

Until now, the system in the region has been so opaque that no one even would have guessed prior to the demise of President Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006 that Health Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov would succeed him.

Another country that has witnessed political transitions was in Kyrgyzstan. As elaborated above, the country saw two revolutions (2005 and 2010) that ousted presidents followed by violence in each case. Kyrgyzstan now practices a parliamentary form of democracy but ironically the president still serves as head of state and holds all the state power.<sup>78</sup>

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev and Islam Karimov have been in power well before even Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991. They were former Soviet apparatchik who ruled the countries with an iron hand. The two do not have a clear successor plan after being re-elected again and again for the last 25 years with more than 90 per cent of the vote. In both the countries, there have been speculations about the members of president's family being groomed to take over the leadership. But such a possibility seems bleak due to intense internal family feuds.

The analysts generally tend to guess that in oil-rich Kazakhstan, the power will be held by the 'business elites' who have huge stakes, capturing the presidential post.

At the time of writing, Uzbek President Islam Karimov passed away due to brain hemorrhage. Karimov may have died immediately (probably on August 31, 2016), but his death was announced only on September 2, 2016.

The demise of Islam Karimov was expected to trigger a wave of change in the region. Uzbekistan has been one of the bastions of the old Soviet-style regime that continued 27 years after the Soviet Union collapsed.

The situation in Uzbekistan and the likely power vacuum in the heart of Central Asia always remains a matter of serious concern to Russia, the United States, India and China, although the transition of power has been smooth so far as was witnessed in Turkmenistan after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov.

Karimov's successor has been decided by a small elite circle of clan-officials in consultation with Karimov's family members. In 2013, the challenge for Karimov came from within his own family. It had been anticipated that Karimov would be succeeded by his

older daughter Gulnara Karimova – a businesswoman and pop star. But she fell from favour due to corruption scandals. She is under house arrest and prosecutors have since launched investigations into her links with a “criminal gangs”. His younger daughter, Lola Karimova-Tillyaeva, has never been in the political race.

To be sure, there may have been an intense power struggle among major Uzbek clans. In the case of Uzbekistan, the social and economic strength of the country stems from domestic production capacities; so it is assumed that the internal clan structure along with the security services would have probably influenced the succession scenario in that country.<sup>79</sup>

According to the Constitution, the next responsibility was to shift to the head of the Senate until elections are held within three months. But Senate leader, Nigmatulla Yuldashev did not appear to be the main contender for the presidency. The contest for succession was therefore between the Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Rustam Inoyatov, head of the powerful National Security Service. Obviously, the Uzbek clans opted for Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the candidate to succeed Karimov. Mirziyoyev also won the Presidential election held in December 2016 with absolute majority of 88.6 per cent of the vote. Clearly, the transition of power was managed possibly with Kremlin’s support, but the opacity of the country’s politics will continue.

The failure to find a peaceful transition process would have unleashed internal discord for power and the resulting instability could have been exploited by Islamist groups like the IMU, HuT and TIP that are well-entrenched in Uzbek society and who have been violently trying to overthrow Tashkent to make Uzbekistan part of an Islamic Caliphate.

The level of radicalism has always been high in Uzbekistan. Many battle-hardened Uzbek fighters have joined the ranks of the Taliban, al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Many are also fighting in Iraq and Syria. The breeding ground for these groups is the Ferghana Valley, shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Some 200-300 Uzbeks are supposed to be fighting alongside the IS

at the initial stage. News reports in 2014 quoted IS having chosen an anonymous person as “Amir” of Uzbekistan. Not just that, towards the end of September 2014, the leader of the Waziristan-based IMU Usmon Ghazi rejoiced at the astonishing success of the IS in Iraq and declared allegiance to Islamic State. The IMU sustained losses after the Pakistani military bombed hideouts following the attack on Karachi airport that killed 37 in June 2014. Ghazi was said to be raising fresh recruits and hoped to unite with Taliban and IS. The number may have gone up substantially since then. An Uzbek, Abdullah at-Toshkandi, earlier led the well-known Sabri Jamaat in Syria. Toshkandi was killed in the storming of the Aleppo Central Prison. A separate Abu Hanif Jamaat comprising Uzbek fighters was mentioned in the literature. Someone called Abu Hussein was leading the Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat, which served at the Al Nusrah Front. Abu Usman, who earlier served in the Uzbek Intelligence Agency for 20 years, appeared on video fighting in Syria. He went to Syria via Russia. Uzbekistan could face a serious threat in the immediate and medium term. The IS could reignite the weakened IMU to transplant its model in Central Asia.

An upsurge in Islamist activities in Uzbekistan would pose a threat to the entire region. The IMU has linkages in Afghanistan, with the Chechens in Russia, the IS in Syria and the Uyghurs in China.

Karimov’s death could have also sparked a fresh round of jockeying among major powers vying for influence with strategic and economic interests in their minds. In a loaded statement, US President Barack Obama while offering his condolences said his country stood with Uzbekistan as it “begins a new chapter in its history”. But a senior Russian official Alexei Pushkov, responded on Twitter that Obama was “mistaken if he thinks the new chapter is going to be written in Washington”. It only indicates that Central Asia would continue to see a period of uncertainty.

In any case, political succession in Tashkent has been keenly watched; Moscow has been especially watchful of the events unfolding in a post-Karimov scenario.

The scenario is also not good for other countries, where the Islamic forces have been asserting themselves for capturing power. For example, in the case of Tajikistan, where President Emomali Rahmonov has been in power since 1992, has enjoyed political legitimacy like that enjoyed by Karimov and Nazarbayevs “fathers of their nations”. Rahmonov played a key role in ending the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war. Obviously, none of the future leaders are likely to gain that kind of legitimacy.

As the trend now suggests, the local leaders are already looking for a new support base that would only come from the religious segments of their societies. Such a shift of seeking popular mobilisation is already seen in Kyrgyzstan and even in Kazakhstan.

Notwithstanding the efforts during the Soviet period and now under the authoritarian regimes to mute its influence, Islam remains a powerful source of popular mobilisation. To be sure, Islam will increasingly be a strong factor in politics in Central Asia in the years to come.

However, all said and done, the political changes, including the succession process, support and political legitimacy, will be decided only by Moscow. Russia enjoys considerable leverages (political, security and economic) in controlling the course of political changes in Central Asia. Certainly, the Kremlin would not refrain from interfering in these countries, like it has witnessed in Ukraine and elsewhere, if the future political scenario in Central Asia is anchored by pro-Western, pro-Chinese, or pro-Islamic forces.

Clearly, regional security concerns would be inextricably linked to the political turbulence in Central Asia. India’s efforts have been to shore up independence of the regional states and help them to develop into stable modernising countries. Of course, the US and European countries too have particularly pushed them to take the political and economic reform measures necessary for long-term prosperity and stability.

Thus far, the regimes in each Central Asian country have maintained friendly attitudes towards India. Therefore, the need to support them has been essential. However, political changes

in Central Asia are inevitable. It needs to be underlined that the Islamists or nationalists in Central Asia have so far not shown any antipathy towards India. On the contrary, the nostalgia for India among the majority of Central Asian people runs far deeper than the region's ruling class. India is not in a position to infuriate any section of the population in the region, instead meaningful contacts need to be built with all the groups.

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## 2. China's Foray into Central Asia

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China's successful and speedy foray into Central Asia has been one of the most significant developments witnessed in the post-Soviet era. China initially started on a cautious note, fearing uncertainty and a spillover effect of a wave of independence from Central Asia into its frontier provinces. But, soon, Beijing realised that the disappearance of a superpower from its north has been a net strategic gain for China, especially when the Soviet Union had been replaced with weaker states having sluggish economies, absence of a nationalistic idea, and lack of unity and almost no military strength to pose a challenge to China.

Therefore, the initial fears quickly turned into boundless opportunities for China to expand in the continental direction for the first time and something the Chinese never visualised during the Cold War era. Since then the Chinese effort to seek fortunes in Central Asia only got heightened. Today, China seems to have left every one behind in terms of economic and political influence in Central Asia.

China's assertive policy started in the early 1990s when Beijing aggressively pushed the idea of stabilising its frontiers with Russia and Central Asia. China made a diplomatic move when the newly created Shanghai-5 format signed a Treaty of April 26, 1996<sup>1</sup> for building military trust along the 4,500 km of Sino-Russian and Sino-Central Asian borders. This was diplomatic a master stroke by the Chinese leadership to address some of China's major security

concern in its northern and western frontiers. The agreement signed with China by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was described as “an epoch-making”, which was to further reinforce China’s pre-eminence in Asia.

Although the Chinese security planners had considered the end to the Soviet threat to be a positive gain for China, they remained quite apprehensive about the re-emergence of Central Asia and the possible rise of Japan as a military power.

China initially acted quite defensively in the fear of Islamic and ethnic nationalism spreading across the region to influence Chinese Muslims in Xinjiang. In 1991-92, China had to deploy 200,000 troops to suppress uprisings in various cities in Xinjiang. However, as the euphoria associated with the Soviet collapse died down, the threat of Islamic unrest started to diminish. The Chinese were happy to learn that the leaders in the Central Asian states were themselves becoming hostile to militant Islam and were exploiting all possible means to prevent such threats emanating from their southern borders. Under the same fear, the Xinjiang authorities closed the road linking Pakistan through Karakoram for several months in 1992.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to general belief, leaders of the new Muslim states in Central Asia instead found a convergence of interests while dealing with the Chinese pragmatically. In particular, they perceived that separatism in Xinjiang could have a direct negative impact on them, as their state boundaries are equally uncertain and disputed. Not only they found it sensible to ban the Uighur separatist movements in their territory as per the wishes of the Chinese, but also agreed to have close coordination against common security threats from the South. These coordinating efforts were by no means confined to security matters and separatist threats, but also included the fields of commerce, trade and investment.

Similarly, China had smartly packaged the “Silk Road” concept to promote and expand its own economic horizon to include Central Asian markets and beyond. In fact, following the Kazakh example, China too opened its Tarim Basin to foreign oil companies by mid-

1990s.<sup>3</sup> Apart from linking the railway network with them, several multinational projects were considered to construct oil pipelines linking Turkmen, Kazakh and Xinjiang oil fields to the southern coast of China for exporting oil and gas to Japan and Korea.

The Central Asians too saw the necessity of building a close relationship with China as an essential balance to offset any future pressure from Russia as well as from the Muslim neighbours. In any case, at the initial stage of their independence the Central Asian states had much to gain from being cooperative rather than being hostile with its giant eastern neighbour. As it is, the Chinese fulfilled the immediate needs of these new states by supplying consumer goods at much cheaper prices than they could find from anywhere else. While making friends with Central Asian states, China had cleverly got them to endorse its position on Tibet and Taiwan.

Surely, China's attempt at forestalling any potential problems at its northern frontiers reflected underlying domestic worries in Beijing. China was acutely concerned about the growing centrifugal forces within its own society as a result of economic upheavals. Beijing's priority to remove uncertainty in the north was also borne out of its immediate short and medium-term engagement to resolve problems with Hong Kong and Taiwan. Besides, it conveyed the strategic importance of dealing with the United States much more confidently.

For Russia too, partnership with Beijing was much more important at the point of time than playing the "card game" vis-à-vis the US.

After a long-drawn negotiation over border disputes since 1991, the two sides signed in 1994 agreement on the settlement of the Eastern Sector and in October 1995 they ratified the document to resolve 95 per cent of the border issue. The remaining 5 per cent of the border that included 50 odd km in the Western sector was also resolved towards the end of 1995. However, following Soviet disintegration, a chunk of Western sector became the Sino-Central Asian frontier, sharing some 1,700 km with Kazakhstan and remaining over 500-odd km with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Pamir ranges.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, China sought to resolve boundary disputes with the three former Soviet republics on a bilateral basis, but Russia insisted that they would be negotiated collectively through the CIS mechanism. The dispute with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan involved minor adjustments, but delineating the boundary with Tajikistan along the Pamir was difficult because of complex mountainous terrain.

The Shanghai agreement stipulated that border troops will not attack or carry out military exercises threatening the other side, restrict military exercises and prior notice of major military activity within 100 km of the border. The CBMs of this level have had positive fallout for China's plan to reduce its troop's strength and instead speed up the military modernisation programme.<sup>5</sup>

At the point and despite all the positive development, the settlement along the Sino-Russian frontiers did not indicate any final settlement. Each side was trying to make good gestures to buy peace for the time being. Beijing was also careful not to do anything to assert its claims in Siberia and Russia's Far East. But most Russians were internally aware that it would be Russia's turn once Hong Kong and Macao reverted to China. The Chinese were already making impressive commercial penetration in Russia's far-eastern region which had the potential to help fuel the growing local sentiments vis-à-vis Moscow.

## **Border Issues**

Interestingly, Central Asia became a sort of a laboratory where China could experiment with post-Cold War foreign policy, diplomacy and especially for testing its border negotiating tactics with different states. In fact, the experience of border settlement with Russia and the Central Asia states during 1996-2010 had become an instructive example of how Beijing could and might emulate settling territorial disputes with other countries.

Firstly, China clearly visualised that Central Asia could potentially pose a threat to China's territorial integrity and political stability.<sup>6</sup> It was especially so when Central Asia got exposed to

the Western powers after the Soviet disintegration. Besides, the instability in Afghanistan, the spectre of terrorism, rise in the rhetoric of Islamic freedom, i.e., crisis in Kashmir, increased anti-regime violence in Xinjiang deeply worried the Chinese. Therefore, China feared foreign interference in the peripheries. But, it was quick to grasp the cross-border ethno-religious proxies and linkages between its Western provinces and the Central Asian republics.

Therefore, China did everything possible to prevent the new Central Asian states fomenting trouble in China that would have been plausible if they had desired to forge closer political proximities with the Uighurs' cause in convenience with the West, Turkey or even Russia. The Chinese were well-aware that the Soviets in the past tried to loosen Beijing's control in border province.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese were also aware that the Americans could apply its subversive policies in Xinjiang just as they had to topple the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> However, the Russian factor seemed less problematic than the possibility of the Western world lending support to the Uighur cause.

China therefore adopted certain wise strategies to deal with the Central Asian situation. First, it realised that China stands to gain from achieving a degree of stability in Central Asia. Second, whatever China does to make a move in the region, it has to do so without eliciting opposition from Russia. As such, China adopted a strategy that gave priority to economic engagement with Central Asian countries that could serve to mitigate the prospective problems.

China quickly applied the logic of its economic ascendancy over Taiwan to create a dependency syndrome in Central Asia – a policy that underlined China's "go-west" policy at that point of time.

Therefore, China at the first stage quickly provided every incentive for closer economic ties with Central Asia. It had particularly laid emphasis on creating opportunities for trade with the new states in exchange of territorial concessions for accepting the Chinese demand of "One-China" and to accept Xinjiang as part of China.

Interestingly, Beijing showed a degree of urgency in fixing boundaries with Central Asia states for once by means of a recognised

treaty. It therefore deployed all the instruments of national power, economics, diplomacy, and military force to resolve the outstanding border issues that had been in negotiation for several years from the Soviet period.

And once China opened the way for formalising interstate trade, the process helped bind the new states economically towards China. Beijing also gave them good incentives for not risking China's anger by supporting Uighur protests. It was a tactic that blended incentives with coercion. Undoubtedly, every Central Asian state gradually started providing priority to China in their foreign policy. As for the new states, as they were confronted with a multitude of problems at the early stage of their independence, they had no reason to provoke China gratuitously.<sup>9</sup> Trade and border concessions worked in favour of seeking good behaviour from the governments of the new states on Xinjiang-related issues. Thus, China managed to forestall any possibility of the Central Asians providing support to Uighur insurgents in Xinjiang.

### **Negotiating Boundary Settlements**

China started border talks with three Central Asian countries and Russia in 1991 and pressed for a bilateral negotiation format instead of a multilateral 3+1 one – ostensibly to deny Russia taking advantage on the negotiating table.

In the first step, China pushed for disarmament and (CBMs) in the border zones under the Shanghai-5. Beijing did so to ensure that border issues with Central Asian republics do not get internationalised.

Finally, when China reached its first boundary agreement with Kazakhstan in 1994, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan had attacked national “splittists” and declared that Kazakhstan, “will never allow factions of ‘East Turkestan’”.<sup>10</sup> In the following border accords with Kazakhstan, China gained only about a third of the territories in disputes that lingered from the Soviet times. While China didn't get all the territories it claimed, it still got a chunk of land that served its symbolic purpose. Here, the Kazakhs were

made to feel happy that they haven't lost out entirely. Of course, Kazakhstan claimed it had neither lost nor gained territories, but China really gained something in the negotiations.

A similar pattern followed in China's border negotiations and subsequent agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan between 1994 and 2002.<sup>11</sup> In its first border agreement, Kyrgyzstan ceded 30,000 hectares of land to China in 1996 that was ratified in the Parliament (*Jogorku Kenesh*) in 1998. In the second agreement, signed in 1999, the Kyrgyz gave more than 90,000 hectares of land in the Uzengi-Kuush region to China. This was supposedly done in a clandestine manner by the then Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev without the knowledge of the Parliament. The secret land deal with China had a major fallout on Kyrgyz domestic politics subsequently leading to a violent protest revolution in 2005 that ousted Akayev from power.<sup>12</sup>

Lastly, in 2002, Tajikistan was induced to surrender 1100 sq miles (2000 hectares of land) in the Pamir region to China for the use of Chinese farmers. The deal on territory was re-ratified again in 2010. Tajikistan's government hailed the deal as a victory because China had actually claimed some 28,000 sq km but agreed to settle for only about 3.5 per cent of its claims. The deal on the border – according to a popular perception among Tajiks – ensured stability along the Tajikistan's border, implying that without this agreement Tajikistan's security vis-à-vis China would face risk.

The results of border negotiations only indicated that Chinese influence in Central Asia had become a fact of life in the mid-1990s – Beijing had achieved its goals while overtly using intrusive means.

It is therefore fair to say that China's interests in the SCO extended beyond the resolution of its borders, to bring the new states under its strategic fold. In fact, the trends indicate that China has been adopting a policy of replicating its Pakistan policy in Central Asia. A careful analysis indicates that Chinese policies were moving along multiple but inter-related lines of thought: (a) resolve its territorial problems with these states with best possible terms and conditions; (b) preclude any possible threat that may challenge its political control over Xinjiang; (c) recognise the region's importance

and also of various individual states for countering other powers such as Russia, India and the US.

To be sure, the Chinese applied high-handed policies including intimidation, subversions, destabilisation and allurements of individual groups and states to settle their borders. For example, China made border resolution a prerequisite for its multi-billion dollar investments in the Kazakh oil sector and a long-distance pipeline project. Finally, a vast stretch of territory was finally given to China. The issue still remains a contentious one as opposition groups vehemently oppose and question the issue of compromise on border settlement. Described as the “deal of the century” involving investments of \$3.4 billion signed in 1997 remained unfulfilled for a long time.

A similar tactic was applied by China on the river water disputes. For example, on the Irtysh river dispute, the Kazakhs had to make two concessions before even a framework for negotiations had started. Kazakhstan had to cede some 500 sq km of territory to China and even dropped its earlier insistence that Russia should also be a party to the negotiations. (The river flows from China via Kazakhstan into the Russian Federation.) By managing to solve problems with the Central Asian states, China by implication wanted to single out India on the border issue.

Certainly, Chinese interests in the region had become deeply entrenched. In late 2009, the Chinese were seeking about a million hectares of land for soya and rape seed farming in Kazakhstan's Alakol region that borders the Ili region of Xinjiang. More than 3,000 Chinese farmers were growing soya beans and wheat in Kazakh land. This was true in other fields as well, especially in energy investments and commerce.<sup>13</sup>

While pursuing its goals – both economic and security in the region – Beijing had made sure that its actions do not elicit negative Russian reactions. This has assured that other key players such as America and Turkey are kept off Central Asia's reach.

Beijing also adopted a policy of securing regime stability in the region. It supported the Uzbek regime during the 2005

Andijan unrest, Kyrgyzstan during 2010 Osh ethnic unrest and the Kazakh government's action against unrest in Zhanaozen in 2011.<sup>14</sup>

All in all, China made a “peaceful” invasion of Central Asia rather quickly in the last two decades or so. It quickly opened the old Silk Road artery with Kazakhstan<sup>15</sup> through which Chinese traders carried countless lorries transporting Chinese goods to the region which just collapsed from the Soviet system. Suddenly, Chinese wholesale markets such as Barakolka, Dordoi, Murghab, etc. sprung up in various major cities of Central Asia in the 1990s itself. These markets fulfilled all the essential requirements of Central Asia that were urgently needed following the Soviet economic collapse. Beijing tried to breakdown all trade barriers with the region with the aim to integrate Central Asia economically with Xinjiang. The trade ties were followed by emphasis on developing infrastructure (railways and pipelines) and energy imports.

### **China's Strategic Moves**

The ties between China and the Central Asian states have now been promoted to include military and financial cooperation. Today, China and the Central Asian states share intelligence and conduct joint military exercises. In the recent years, China's excessive financial support to these states has raised some eyebrows. In 2010, there were rumours about China offering Kyrgyzstan \$3 billion in exchange for closing down the US airbase opened in Manas after 9/11.<sup>16</sup>

Central Asia is a critical frontier for China's energy security, trade expansion, ethnic stability and military defence. While energy security has been the prime motivator behind Beijing's offensive in Central Asia, its interests have become more complex year by year. The Chinese state enterprises have reached deep into the region with energy pipelines, railroads and highways communication. No wonder in the words of a PLA officer Gen. Liu Yazhou, “Central Asia is the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens.”<sup>17</sup>

President Xi Jinping's trip to four countries in 2014 was testimony to the importance of Central Asia to China. Xi announced the historic Silk Road project worth \$40 billion to build a Pan-Asian connectivity regime through Central Asia.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, all these years, Chinese activities in the region have not invoked a "Great Game" idea, though Beijing has gradually laid an infrastructure that would eventually help fully gravitate Central Asia into China's political and economic orbit. While doing so, China has been able to break the Russian monopoly for the control of Central Asian energy fields by using skilful diplomacy and generous financial incentives that have already resulted in oil and gas pipelines heading towards the east rather than the north. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are more than willing to export their energy reserves to China than to Russia.<sup>19</sup>

Turkmenistan today exports more gas to China than it sells to Russian Gazprom. Despite all the skepticism about the Turkmenistan-China pipeline a couple of years ago, China imports 21.3 bcm of Turkmen gas and by 2020 the figure is going to go up to 65 bcm.<sup>20</sup> Xi inaugurated the world's second-biggest gasfield, Galkynysh, in 2014 and has committed more Chinese investments in Turkmenistan's gas sector.

Similarly, Chinese imports of oil from Kazakhstan have reached 1.5 million barrels per day. President Xi's visit to Kazakhstan included signing of energy agreements worth a staggering \$30 billion in the country's offshore Kashagan gas fields. These included soft loans of US\$ 9 billion by the China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank. It seems that Chinese companies have gained 50 per cent stakes in the Kazakh energy sector. In 2006 a deal to build a 3,000-km pipeline was signed between China and Kazakhstan.<sup>21</sup>

For Uzbekistan, China is now its second-largest trade partner. China has agreed to import up to 10 bcm gas from Uzbekistan. During his visit to Tashkent in 2014, Xi Jinping signed deals for oil, gas and uranium worth \$15 billion. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which do not have sufficient energy reserves have been brought into the energy transportation loop by China. Two

energy pipelines are being planned to traverse through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that would originate from Turkmenistan to head towards China.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are important because their territory borders the restive Chinese province of Xinjiang. In the past, separatists have attacked Chinese businesses in Kyrgyzstan and organised anti-China activities from these countries. By bringing Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan into a Sino-centric world, Beijing hopes to stabilise these poor countries, and in the process stabilize its western border. During his stopover in Bishkek, Xi's offered a \$3 billion loan to Kyrgyzstan to facilitate the country's integration into the Chinese market.

Along with these, the Chinese are tying up oil and metals projects worth \$3 billion in Afghanistan. Of course, the Chinese projects also include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) worth \$46 billion. Certainly, China's grand "One Road One Belt" or OBOR transport corridor to access West Asia, South Asia and Europe could stimulate its regional economic integration plan. From India's perspective, China's railways from Kashgar, Osh and Tashkent would have implications for the situation in Afghanistan.

President Xi in 2014 offered 30,000 scholarships for SCO students over the next ten years to China. In addition, he offered free study tours for 10,000 students and teachers from the Confucius Institutes throughout Central Asia to China. Such gigantic moves by China would certainly have a far reaching impact on the Asian balance of power. China has even started opening primary schools for Chinese language in Kyrgyzstan to ensure that the next generation of Kyrgyz are fully China-oriented.

For a strange tactical reason, Moscow seemed eager to benefit from China's influence in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia was seeking speedy creation of a Eurasian Union of its own. However, Beijing considers Russia as a critical ally on the world stage. It co-operates as much as completely with Moscow so as to get best deals in the process in Central Asia.

A strong factor that has seemingly gone in favour of China is the lack of unity among the regional states. As of now the lack

of inter-regional trade, transportation and market integration compel them to trade with non-Central Asian neighbours, especially China.

It is not just economic reasons that may have solely pushed the Central Asians towards China. There have been serious geopolitical repercussions of Russia's actions in Crimea, the Ukraine crisis and Putin's desire to create a "Russian world", or *Russkiy Mir*<sup>22</sup> along with economic and military pressures. These have had a strong impact in Central Asia too. Russia's decision to have a right to intervene in countries that have a Russian-speaking population now frighten countries such as Kazakhstan that has a large Russian Diaspora.<sup>23</sup> A possible cessation by the Russian population in Kazakhstan could further push the country towards China. Of course, such a situation is unlikely to arise in the near future.

### **Distrustful of China's Long-term Intentions**

To be sure, the Chinese seem to have achieved in Central Asia what they wanted. Notwithstanding all the achievements, apprehensions about growing Chinese influence in the region run deep in most Central Asian minds. It needs to be underscored that the Chinese are far more hated and disdained than loved by Central Asians. The fact is that they too had a bad historical experience of vassalage under China from which they were free only recently. That is why, deep inside, they fear China would once again try to force them back into bondage.

In fact, outside the government, debates continue whether China is an ally or a competitor. The Central Asians have historical reasons to be worried about China. The Chinese word *Xi Yu* remains a historical title for China's Western Provinces that includes much of Central Asia.<sup>24</sup> The Chinese Ambassador to Kazakhstan reminded them of this in 1992. An old local saying "the Russian bridle is of leather but the Chinese is of iron" and "when a black Chinese comes, a yellow Russian would seem appear father." Another aphorism in Ablai Khan's words, 'when China spits, we drown' is popularly remembered by people in the region.

Central Asians are keen to cooperate in the new realities but wish to be vigilant about China's long-term goals. They fully suspect that China is in search of *lebensraum*. For example, the SCO could not be helpful in removing the historically decomposed negative images of China that run deep in most Russian and Central Asian minds. A contrast is generally being made between China's new peaceful rise theory and its past war-like behaviour.

Already, the ethnic Chinese are making forays into most industrial towns in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. A western Kazakh city like Aktybinsk has already become a 'Chinese' town. Besides, The Chinese have been encouraging the ethnic Uighurs and Kazakhs to migrate from Xinjiang to Kazakhstan. The seriousness of this problem led the Kazakh authorities to shift the capital of Almaty Oblast to Taldykorgan, closer to China's border, in order to offset the imbalance being created by Chinese migration.

### **The Uighur Tangle**

In the future the Central Asians would get entangled with the Uighur issue. There could be a limit to what Central Asians could do to prevent the Uighur movement from gaining more momentum. In Kazakhstan, several Uighur separatist outfits are operating legally.<sup>25</sup> Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are home for a large Uighur Diaspora. Many of these outfits, including the United National Revolutionary Front of Eastern Turkistan (UNRFET), led by Yusupbek Mukhlisi, have been very vocal. Mukhlisi is dead now, but Kazakhstan's over 200,000 Uighur population who are relatively more prosperous could become assertive. The Uighur activities could turn into an armed conflict involving China and Central Asian states and if not handled carefully, the Uighur issue may re-bound on Central Asian states.

China has evidently gained in the short term in its fight against Islamic extremists in Xinjiang. However, the West's entry into Central Asia with enhanced political interest could inexorably pose long-term difficulties for China in the longer run. In fact, Uighurs living outside China are beginning to foresee better times ahead.

Beijing now tries to revive the SCO's spirit and regain leverages while: (a) massing troops along the Central Asian frontier; (b) providing military assistance to the states and (c) reviving interest in Central Asian oil. Beijing did gain success by resolving territorial disputes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in its favour. Yet, these settlements could also become a source for future troubles.

It is also true that the Central Asian states cannot expect economic stability without closer economic ties with China. While the Central Asians love the Russians and Indians, they can live without them. They certainly do not like the Chinese, but they have to work closely with China.

### **China's Eurasian March**

The new Indian strategic discourse has been to exult in the high-profile US 'Asia Pivot' strategy as a means to containing China. But, the Indian strategic community missed the point that China had long 'Pivoted West' and sought back door entry into India's other strategic Eurasian neighbourhood.<sup>26</sup> As mentioned above, China has scored many strategic points including securing energy interests in Eurasia while the West and Russia have been engaged in their mutual standoff in Europe or they are pre-occupied with the war on terror. One does not hear much these days about the American strategic advocacy '*The Grand Chessboard*' theory of promoting containment and balance of power in Eurasia. In fact, none of the daunting US pronouncements: to wipe out the Taliban, to curb opium production, to control Central Asian resources, to thwart the rise of Russia or China – and so on, are brought to fruition. Not a single US company is involved in mining in Afghanistan. The sole US policy goal appears is to exit as quickly as possible albeit with a degree of hesitation.

Nothing is heard about the US 'New Silk Route' plans launched essentially for revitalising and embedding Afghanistan as the link between Central and South Asia. Its key elements among others included implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, the Central Asia-South Asia

(CASA-100) hydropower line and the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) plan to connect existing regional roads and railways to Afghanistan. None of these – initiated to bring tangible results in Afghanistan – have been realised to date.

Interestingly, what the Americans failed to gain control over (Central Asian resources) by pursuing a grand strategy, China is achieving them by pursuing a capital markets strategy. China's trade already eclipsed that of Russia's in the region. The Chinese have found development partners in their connectivity projects across the continent. The business and security analysts are now trying to fathom the impact of China's new 'Silk Route' gambit – commitment of tens of billions of dollars as investment in energy deals and the promise of creating a web of overland continental transport and logistics linkages to reach out to Europe under its One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. Obviously, the strategy is to embed China's western regions into a growth corridor and link them to the European market. Washington has recently admitted that China's plans "mirrored the US's own thinking on the New Silk Route."

Meanwhile, China sent no troops to fight global terror outside. It only had to devise an Anti-Terror Structure under the SCO in Tashkent with the help of which the Central Asian states affectively desisted from encouraging extremism. China might expand the SCO's ambit to bring Afghanistan into it. In fact, when the US moved out of Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan in July, it was viewed as a major victory for China's policy in Central Asia.

In its westward march, after purchasing the European treasury bonds, China's new pattern of strategic infiltration is to control European rural and urban assets. China seeks new access points in Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and other countries where it not only plans to build cities and manufacturing hubs, but also intends to go for large-scale commercial farming. Western analysts may surely get concerned about the political impact of China's speedy foray. In West Asia and Africa, the areas where traditionally India has influence, Chinese interests appear focused on trading minerals, oil, and gas. China also plans to pour more money into Latin America.

Within the context of economic benefits of China's engagements world over, the cynics still view China scavenging around for materials. Sceptics are anxious about the trend creating a strategic imbalance and loss of influence by other powers. But China's strategy does not seem to be limited to resource exploitation. It has a much bigger vision than simply copy-cat Western-style imperialism. In all these places, China has made smart benign forward moves and already earned an affable global image. This is especially so in Central Asia where the countries treat China now with respect, although grudgingly.

## Notes

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### 3. America's Strategic Tryst with Central Asia

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In the summer of 2014, when this author landed in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek, the Manas International Airport had a deserted look with only a few local aircrafts parked at bay. In comparison, when I left for home from Manas in October 2012, at least two dozen US C-17 transports and KC-135 aerial refuelling tanker aircrafts were actively stationed there. I recall participating at the events at the US Transit Centre, a tent city located next to Manas. It was the hub for onward movement of about 15,000 troops and 500 tonnes of cargo a month to and from Afghanistan. In fact, the closure of the US Transit Centre after more than 12 years occurred on June 3, though the last date for eviction was July 11, 2014.

I remember over 1,000 US servicemen at Manas were engaged in aerial refuelling, cargo airlift, as well in humanitarian programmes with Kyrgyzstan. The Commander and other officials of the US Air Force were always enthusiastic to invite the Bishkek-based Japanese, Indian and Korean diplomats for entertainment at the sprawling military installation comprising air-conditioned tents and makeshift houses that boasts recreational facilities, movie theatres, gymnasiums, internet cafes, field canteens and duty-free shop. My children liked to visit the Transit Centre for having pure American hamburgers. I recall how the American troops complained about being in Bishkek – an obscure destination and perhaps the end point of the world for them. They always expressed the desire to visit India (two-and-a-half hour's flight

from Manas) like the US diplomats in Bishkek also did at every opportune moment.

According to the US Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, the Transit Centre, during more than 12 years of operations, handled more than “33,000 refuelling missions, moved more than 5.3 million servicemen in and out of Afghanistan and served 42,000 cargo missions.” The official data says that a total of 1 billion litres of fuel had been bought on the local Kyrgyz market. The Transit Centre provided humanitarian assistance under 37 projects, with \$4.7 million given to schools, hospitals, etc.

Manas, named after a Kyrgyz epic hero, formed a critical military staging ground for the Soviet Army for their operation against enemies to the East. This was also called Ganci and the Frunze airport where many of our Indian pilots were trained in the past. Another airport, Kant, now a Russian military base under the CSTO, is just 40 km away from Manas. The US Air Force leased Manas from Kyrgyzstan three months after 9/11. Putin had then agreed to Bush's plan and offered to support deployment and transit of troops and cargo to neighbouring Afghanistan via Kyrgyzstan. In 2001, Putin had to agree because it was not the NATO forces but the Chechen separatists, trained in Afghanistan by al-Qaida that threatened Russia's territorial integrity.

The US also opened another base at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in Uzbekistan. But the US urge to promote democracy in Central Asia had annoyed the Uzbek leader Islam Karimov who eventually ordered US eviction from K2 in 2005. Years later, Putin also sought to pressurise the Kyrgyz government to shut down the Manas base but the Kyrgyz leaders opted for financial benefits from the US, and instead used Russian pressure only as a bargaining chip. The US had to simply raise the rent for Manas from \$2 to \$17 million – peanuts for the Americans but a big fortune for the Kyrgyz elite which anyway siphoned off the regular rent.

When Russia was pressed by the Kyrgyz government to shut down Manas, Obama, during a meeting with Medvedev in April 2009, is believed to have said: “... in Kyrgyzstan we spend about

\$60 million there, to use the facility for flying in women and men from the United States military to get a good night's sleep, something hot to eat, to take a shower, and then we're sending them to forward operating bases. The people they're killing, if we weren't fighting them, would be fighting you. And by the way, they are fighting you, as you know dramatically from your experiences in Chechnya. So help me understand why the base is not in Russia's national interest."<sup>1</sup>

For over a decade, the US presence at Manas marked the ultimate geopolitical reach for Washington to be positioned at a critical location bordering on Russia, China, Iran, India and Afghanistan. But during this period, the threat of terrorism launched by al-Qaida had made both Russia and the US abandon their old-fashioned zero-sum game. But, it was not so much the geopolitics but the role of money that allowed the US to retain Manas for over 12 years. However, the presence was not without controversies and eruption of several thorny issues – a female American soldier went missing from Manas in 2006; a US soldier shot dead a Kyrgyz citizen working on the base; Kyrgyz nationalists accused US jets of polluting the air of the Chui Valley, and many more.

Moscow remained wary of an American base at its Asian backyard and so did Beijing. Political controversies relating to the base abound and had, in fact, begun to mould the political course of Kyrgyzstan. The cases of families of the ruling elite receiving huge amounts in rent and supplying of fuel to Manas from the US, lead to two Tulip Revolutions that ousted two Presidents since 2005. In fact, the 2010 Kyrgyz uprising resembled the recent turmoil in Ukraine, where a popular uprising took root against a pro-Russian President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his clan coterie who were indulging in money-making from the NATO fuel supplies contract for Manas. People believed that the President's son Maxim Bakiyev was involved in racketeering and estimated to have earned about \$170 million a year.

It was only after the new leadership of Almazbek Atambayev in 2010-11 that Moscow managed to nudge the Kyrgyz and urge for further negotiations for rent with the US. But for the US, clinging to Manas became more important owing to Pakistan's decision to shut

NATO's supply line through the Khyber Pass in the post-Bin Laden US-Pak squabble. For the Kyrgyz, Manas towards the end earned them \$60 million a year, besides other earnings from sale of fuel, employment and other financial aid from the US. The media reports suggest that the US military left behind property worth about \$30 million including "buildings and facilities at the base itself, such as soldier's barracks, sports halls, and also tents, and about 60 vehicles, mainly excavators and other equipments."

Things for the US changed after 2010, when the new President Almazbek Atambayev, who came to power through a revolution in which Bakiyev was ousted. Atambayev, a pro-Russian leader from the outset (2011) remained dead against renewing the lease agreement. He, however, allowed the facility to continue until the agreement period was to expire by July 2014.

Atambayev preferred a closer political tilt towards Russia and sought economic help from Russia, Turkey and China instead. He took several steps since then to strengthen Moscow's position including his agreement to extend the lease of the Russian military base located at Kant (50 km from Manas) for 15 years from January 2017, in exchange for Moscow agreeing to write off some \$500 million of Kyrgyz debts. Since then, Moscow has been strengthening its four military installations in Kyrgyzstan, including the Kant air base and a naval test site at Lake Issyk Kul. The air base at Kant hosts several modernised versions of Su-25SM fighter-bombers and transport helicopters.

Atambayev remained opposed to his country turning into a military springboard for any country. He found it absurd to have a foreign military base located at the civilian Manas airport and also raised the spectre of Kyrgyz capital becoming a target for the enemies of the US, for example, Iran. But in reality, he had been saying this under duress from Moscow.

Kyrgyzstan seems destined to come back into the Russian orbit, but many feel that the country will have to compromise of its sovereignty. Already, as an alternative to the US military presence and to maintain the cash flow, Atambayev has been dreaming about

converting the Manas International Airport into an international transport hub between East and West. He has been asking the Russians and the Turks to invest in the venture but so far without any success. Some reports suggest that Russia's oil giant Rosneft and another Russian firm, Novoport as well as three Chinese bidders have shown interest. It seems that the International Financial Corporation and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development have also shown their keenness for participation, but ultimately the transport-hub project will only go to a Russian firm, if at all the Russians are interested. Atambayev seems keener on Turkish participation.

But, soon after the Americans left Manas, Rosneft has secured 50 per cent stake in the Kyrgyz fuel company Intek that operates in the southern city of Osh. Russia's state-run oil firm also acquired the Bishkek Fuel Company which owns a chain of gasoline stations. Not just that, Kyrgyzstan agreed this year to transfer its critical energy sector KyrgyzGaz to Russia's Gazprom for a symbolic amount just \$1. This is a major boost for Russian advance into Central Asia. Gazprom promised to invest over \$600 million and also pay off the company's \$40 million debt. Also in return, Russia has agreed to assist Kyrgyzstan build its hydropower projects, but that would risk the ire of Uzbekistan. But for Kyrgyzstan playing with Moscow is essential to counterbalance assertions by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan over the issue of water. In 2012, Islam Karimov had threatened to go to war if such hydro plants are built along the Naryn River and other streams of Syr-Darya that would kill Uzbek agriculture life.<sup>2</sup> However, for Moscow, the main goal was to bring Kyrgyzstan into the Custom Union (CU) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) by 2015.

The US military has left Kyrgyzstan on June 3, 2014 after a handing over ceremony of the closure of the US Transit Centre by Col. John Millard, Commander of the 376th Air Expeditionary Wing. While Moscow might be feeling happy about US departure from Manas, many Kyrgyz seem to have second thoughts whether the decision to evict the US from Manas was a correct one. They fear that hosting of multiple bases was a better policy after witnessing the recent fate of Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan's situation resembles Ukraine.

Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians live in Kyrgyzstan and still harbour pro-Russian sentiments. In fact, some reports suggest that ethnic Russians from Central Asia are recruited to fight in eastern Ukraine. It is here that the Kyrgyz now fear that the Ukraine story might get repeated in their country, for Russia would take the slightest opportunity to intervene in Kyrgyzstan to protect the ethnic Russians. Given the presence of several Russian military facilities all around Kyrgyzstan, the fear among the people grows further. In fact, Moscow has recently sent reinforcements to its air base in Kant. Many say that the call for retaining the US base grew during the post-Crimea events. Resentment is also growing over the sale of Kyrgyz Gas to Russian Gazprom. People doubt whether the Russian Company would deliver gas to all areas of Kyrgyzstan.

The US cargo airlift missions were shifted to the Forward Operating Site Mihail Kogalniceanu near the Black Sea port of Constanta in Romania, known as “Transit Center M.K.” which is not so far away from Sevastopol, where the Russians have a base.

For some years, Kyrgyzstan had the distinction of being a unique and only country for having simultaneously hosted military forces of two rival powers. Many thought that the Kyrgyz policy amounted to sale of sovereignty. However, by hosting multiple foreign military bases, the Kyrgyz made the country a place of major strategic importance. But, now with the folding of the US base, the US-Central Asia saga has ended. The US overseas military presence is now retracted to the line of its power limits in Europe. When the last C-17 transporter left Manas on June 3, another episode of expansion and contraction of empires began to be written in Central Asian history.

## Notes

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## 4. Russia's Rebound in Central Asia

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Few have paid attention to the frequently held huge military “snap inspection” drills by Russia in its Central Military District (CMD) that usually involved 65,000 troops – including Russian troops – stationed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. For example, in the drill held on June 21-28, 2014, more than 180 aircrafts and 60 helicopters took part in the war game. According to media reports, President Vladimir Putin had ordered the drill to keep the armed forces on constant alert.<sup>1</sup> In fact, when this author was on a visit to Central Asia in June 2014, the “snap inspection” had begun at the Russian Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan and the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan.<sup>2</sup> Media had quoted Yaroslav Roshchupkin, District Assistant Commander of CMD that a comprehensive inspection was taking place simultaneously in all military units of CMD's 29 regions.

According to *Eurasia Daily Monitor* quoting Russian news agency Interfax (June 20-29) and *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (June 29), the exercise involved forces from all the four Military Districts, which included “the 57th, 59th and Motorised Rifle Brigades and the 8th Surface-to-Air (SAM) Brigade of the Eastern Military District's 5th Combined Arms Army (CAA). The 27th Motorized Rifle Brigade in addition to the elements of the Northern Fleet and the 790th Fighter Aviation Regiment (providing MiG-31, MiG-31BM, and Su-27) represented the Western Military District. The Airborne Forces (VDV) 7th Air Assault Division

(Novorossiysk) represented the Southern Military District. However, the Central Military District deployed the bulk of the forces. These included the 2nd Air Forces and Air Defense Forces Command (562nd Base) Tolmachevo (Mi-8 and Mi-24); VDV 31st Air Assault Brigade (Ulyanovsk), 3rd Spetsnaz Brigade, the 28th, 23rd (Medium) and 21st (Heavy) Motorized Rifle Brigades, the 15th Motorised Rifle Peacekeeping Brigade, 385th Artillery Brigade and the 297th SAM Brigade.”<sup>3</sup>

Coming on the heels of Russia's face-off with Ukraine, such snap drills conducted in Central Asia surprised many. Western analysts including the NATO officials viewed this as a gambit to wield additional pressure on Ukraine and further escalation of the crisis. The Russian Defence Ministry website gave no details but the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported that the drill evaluated the operational readiness for any possible intervention in Central Asia in the near future. The snap inspection in June was supposedly the largest operational-strategic exercise since *Zapad 2013*. The Central Military District played the role of strategic reserve for other three military theatres in addition to forces deployed in Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

At the end of the inspection, Russia's Defence Ministry officials had announced that it had achieved the goal of creating a self-sustaining strategic operational force and strategic mobility capabilities.<sup>4</sup> Strategic mobility over the swath of territory has been an issue of concern for the Russian army. Traditionally, the Russian military depended heavily on railway transportation, but the exercises conducted over the years are believed to have paid extra attention to using airlift to enhance mobility. Russian An-124-100 Ruslan heavy-lift transporters airlifted Mi-24 helicopters from Tolmachevo Airbase (Novosibirsk Region) to Koltsovo airfield (Sverdlovsk Region). Russian media mentioned that the drill tested out the mobility range covering a strategic depth of 3,000 km (1,864 miles) within a three days period.

Quite clearly, the “snap inspection” was Russia's own drill, separate from the annually conducted manoeuvre by the Collective

Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) under the *Rubezh* (“Frontier”) exercise. This meant that Russia was building its own capability either to act along with the CSTO’s Rapid Reaction Forces or to intervene unilaterally in the Central Asian Theatre if required. However, the force structure comprising all forms of Motorised Rifle Brigades was different from the formation Russia used for annexing Crimea early this year. Clearly, the snap inspection in June was a preparation for meeting the threats emanating from the southern frontiers or perhaps a rehearsal for supporting a crisis in Central Asia. As the CMD representative said, the main target was to neutralize international terrorists.<sup>5</sup>

Soon after another command-and-staff drill codenamed “*Rubezh* (Frontier) 2014” followed the “snap inspection” drill in Chelyabinsk region on July 15-18, 2014 under the aegis of CSTO with the participation of armed forces of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan, as well as the joint staff and secretariat of the CSTO.<sup>6</sup> *Rubezh* is an annual drill mainly to display the joint operational capabilities of CSTO’s Collective Rapid Reaction Forces under a single command. It is also a platform for interactions and exchanging experiences. The drill also aimed at neutralising extremist threats emanating from the south – the primary source of concern for the Central Asian states for two decades.

A series of CSTO war games conducted annually included the *Vostok* series. In 2014, the *Vostok* exercise was held in the Far East. Not only did this cover the challenges emanating from the Chinese flank but also countered the threats posed to Russian interests by the US in the Asia-Pacific. Interestingly, all these military manoeuvres were being planned against the backdrop of the US and NATO troops pulling out from Afghanistan and Central Asia. Moscow probably felt pressed to do something to defend the Central Asian flank where Russian interests are mostly concentrated. Although the scope of these manoeuvres are wider to tackle conflicts erupting in any direction from Russia’s near-aboard, considerations seem more to do with the scenario in Afghanistan. To be sure, the larger context of the shift of focus on Central Asia could be for the following reasons:

- To deal with the eventual Afghan fallouts after the impending withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force this year;
- To prepare for any eventualities especially the possibility of the West propping up Ukraine-type regime change in Central Asia that would threaten the existing regimes and the Russian interests in Asia;
- To consolidate support for ethnic Russians living near-abroad especially in Central Asia;
- To assess the possibility of sectarian and extremist forces spreading into the Caucasus and Central Asian regions;
- To signal the Chinese of their limits of influence in Eurasia hitherto increased unchecked.

But, Putin's action in Ukraine scared the Central Asians as they seemed confronted with a strange dilemma of how to deal with multiple challenges looming before them in the wake of Russia's reassertion. Obviously, no Central Asian state would welcome the extremists trained in Afghanistan walking into their doors. Here, they are with the Russians. However, many Central Asians started to worry after the success of anti-government street-protests in Kiev, that the same could be replicated on their streets as well. Such a thing had happened twice in Kyrgyzstan before. As most of the leaders in Central Asia are ageing, they fear the inevitable change of regimes either through internally or externally induced pressures.

However, the most critical issue that emerged in Central Asia was the fear of Putin wielding the same stick on them as he did on Ukraine. There had been a growing sense in 2014 that Putin, after what he did to Crimea, has prepared a fine blueprint for similar intervention in Central Asian states should it become a necessary case for protecting Russian interests in these countries.<sup>7</sup> During a discussion in Dushanbe in May 2014 in which this author also participated, the regional experts felt that supporting separatism could become a dangerous and unimaginable proposition for the entire region. However, the governments and the public at large in

the region remained indifferent on the issue in Crimea. Nevertheless, deep inside they fear they could be next.

In fact, after the US military vacated Manas base on June 3, 2014, many Kyrgyz were beginning to have second thoughts on whether the decision to evict the US from Manas was a correct one. They feared that hosting of multiple bases was a better policy after seeing the recent fate of Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan's situation also resembles Ukraine's. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russian live in Kyrgyzstan and they harboured pro-Russian sentiments. The Kyrgyz feared the possibility of the Ukraine story repeating itself in their country; for Russia would take the slightest opportunity to intervene in Kyrgyzstan to protect the ethnic Russians. Already, Kyrgyzstan complained that its military cooperation with the US began declining after the closure of the air base in June 2014.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, all five Central Asian states have large ethnic Russian populations. Some 10.3 million ethnic Russians lived in Central Asia in the early 1990s. However, there has been a large-scale exodus of Russians especially from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan due to assertions by Islamists. Today, the Russians number about 7 million in the region, a majority of them in Kazakhstan. In fact, there has been pent-up anger among the ethnic Russians for gradual marginalisation of their social and economic life at every level. Putin has not been happy about treatment of ethnic Russians in all Central Asian states including in Turkmenistan. Of course, hundreds of thousands left for settlement in Russia.<sup>9</sup> There had been cases of Russia being assertive especially in Kazakhstan, where Russians still constituted over 23.7 per cent of the country's population in 2016. Of late, the percentage has shrunk considerably from the past.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the situation in Kazakhstan still remains identical to Ukraine. In northern and eastern Kazakhstan, ethnic Russians live in large numbers. The provinces like Pavlodar, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Kostanai are contiguous to Russia in terms of demography and culture. Ethnic distinction remains extremely slender along the almost 7,000-km Kazakh-Russian border. The pro-Russian nationalists in Uskemen have been murmuring about re-joining Russia or seeking to

create autonomous republic. A senior Kazakh diplomat in New Delhi told this author that Russia poses threats to his country. That is why Nazarbayev had been resorting to varied diplomatic and economic manoeuvres to safeguard Kazakhstan's interests. Many believed that the underlying fear of Russian infringement had affected his decision to shift the country's capital from Almaty to Astana. The Kazakhs have been encouraging transfer of ethnic Kazakhs to the north since 1990s. The government has encouraged some 3.5 million ethnic Kazakhs living outside the country also termed as *Uralmans* who inhabited Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Mongolia, to return to the land and resettle in northern Kazakhstan. In the wake of events in Crimea, Astana is perhaps planning to shift 300,000 ethnic Kazakhs to the Russian-dominated north. There are about one million ethnic Kazakhs in China who became potential migrants to Kazakhstan. The Kazakh government has been contemplating getting the ethnic Kazakhs transferred from the neighbouring Chinese province of Xinjiang.<sup>11</sup>

Today, the Kazakhs worry the most and fear that they could be the next after Ukraine. The media reports suggest that ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan tend to be supportive of Putin's actions in Ukraine. The Crimean case may have augmented the morale of Russians living all over Central Asia. Media reports suggest that pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine have been looking for experienced ethnic Russian fighters in Central Asia for potential recruitment in the Donetsk People's Republic.

Putin's actions in Crimea could have also sent alarm bells throughout Central Asia. The scenario here is quite similar to those in Central Europe. Russian military presence in Central Asia is large enough and it will not be difficult for them to intervene in any ethnic crisis. Of course, such a situation remains only an academic question. For years, Putin has been trying to build a common economic space under Moscow's orbit. Kazakhstan is a part of Customs Union or Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Kyrgyzstan has also lately joined the EAEU and efforts are on to get Tajikistan to join the EAEU. However, the issue here is more complex. Already, some Kazakh

activists have started to launch an anti-Eurasian Forum with an aim to get out of the EAEU.

Even if Russia does not resort to replicating its Ukraine-style action over Central Asian states, Moscow's behaviour could potentially pave the way if not be a pretext for other bigger states like Uzbekistan to annex parts of southern Kyrgyzstan that it claims to be part of Uzbekistan. The city of Osh has a large Uzbek population and there have been widespread irredentist movements and ethnic riots threatening Kyrgyz territorial integrity. Similarly, Kazakhstan has some historical claims over Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory. Some of the eastern parts of Uzbekistan like Samarkand and Bukhara are old Tajik-populated areas. Afghanistan has more Tajiks than Tajikistan itself. Ironically, vast territory of Afghanistan (Pakhtunkhwa) is still under Pakistan's control. Little wonder then, why Afghanistan was one of the few to support Putin's annexation of Crimea.

The economic control apart, Russian control over Central Asian media is the key to Moscow's hold over the region. In case of any intervention, resistance in Central Asia is likely to be scanty. For now, Russian interests are not threatened that would justify military intervention. However, if these states undergo a chaotic political transition in the next five to ten years' time and if the ethnic fault lines open up, Russia will find enough pretexts to intervene, specially to protect the rights and privileges of ethnic Russians living in the region.

However, in the immediate term, given the Afghan complexity and the political fragility in Central Asian states, Russia could do little but to cooperate with the US. The Americans are likely to stay put in Afghanistan beyond 2014 and it would be hard to think that the Afghans will play ball with the Russians.

What does this scenario of Russian reassertion in Central Asia mean for India?<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, Russia's benign or strong presence in Eurasia entailed good for India, for Russia was able to deal with the negative forces that are also inimical to Indian interests. Russia's strategic retreat from Central Asia as also Afghanistan in the last decade has had an adverse impact on India. As a result, and India's own limitation to reach out to the region, has allowed speedy forays

of both the Chinese and the extremists in Central Asia. Indian foreign policy makers need to closely watch and re-evaluate the process of Russia's increasing grip over the region.

## Notes

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## 5. The Rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) led by China has lately enhanced its profile, affirming itself as a robust multilateral forum in Eurasia. The grouping comprises China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as full members. India along with Afghanistan, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan has been holding Observer Status since 2005. Belarus, Turkey and Sri Lanka are Dialogue Partners. The SCO has picked up its propulsion in recent years against the backdrop of: (a) Russia's resurgence and destiny as a Eurasian power and (b) China's rise and expansion in Eurasia. The spectacular rise of this Asian coalition led to scores of Western analysts retorting in ominous tones, suggesting it was pursuing a perilous path to offset the US-led world order.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese motivation for setting up such a body probably stemmed from multiple but inter-related lines of thought: (a) to resolve boundary disputes with the former Soviet republics on best possible terms, (b) to preclude any threat to its vulnerable Xinjiang and (c) to exploit the crumbling economies of the post-Soviet space.

A defensive China initially favoured building a steel wall to shield itself from the impact of the crumbling Soviet Iron Curtain.<sup>2</sup> The post-Cold war syndromes then besieged China – international isolation in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident; military tension in the Taiwan Strait; Russia's deviation towards the West; Islamic threat; and so on. However, as the dust settled, China found the environment changing in its favour. With the fading

away of its principal ideological competitor (the Soviet Union), an evolving asymmetrical situation could only be a strategic boom for China.<sup>3</sup> Since then, China's interest in Eurasia has grown beyond the requirement of resolving borders to perspicaciously bringing the region into its strategic fold. China's expectations and its idea to play a leadership role have only increased.<sup>4</sup> It was quick to reap advantage from the crumbling Soviet-built economies and went ahead with implementing a number of ambitious projects, under 'Silk Road' diplomacy, to bolster influence in the region.<sup>5</sup> It treaded carefully in Central Asia in the initial stages of the region's independence, so as not to arouse any Russian misgivings, and stuck to economic pursuits and avoided political friction. Only after tying the military knot with Russia did China seek direct technical and military cooperation with Central Asian firms. Only after the Western giants stepped onto the Kazakh oilfields, did China jump into the region's energy geopolitics in 1997.

Similarly, Russia's disenchantment with the West broadly linked to NATO's eastward expansion, and Western pressure over Human Rights, especially in Chechnya, resulted in Moscow's search for an alliance with China.<sup>6</sup> This apart, Russia feared the Southern Threat – the Taliban/al-Qaeda eyeing the Chechen nexus to gain control over hydrocarbon resources and access to weapons of mass destruction. In fact, Russia was in a paradox – neither able to control nor able to retreat from the Eurasian space. The pull of the Asian growth centres also compelled Russia to reorient its policy towards the East. In fact, many Russian thinkers during the Putin era advocated abandoning of the geopolitical struggle in favour of achieving the 'unity of common goal' while working with Asian neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

The SCO emerged on the scene when the Central Asian states were confronted with severe political and security dilemma. On the one hand, they went through a spell of uncertain times during Yeltsin's period, when Russia was viewed both as a guarantor as well as a threat to their independence. For example, they took to serious misgivings about Russia's ability to control its own territory (Chechnya).<sup>8</sup> As such, they were seeking diversification away from

Russia. On the other hand, they were not confident about dealing with the giant China, with which three of them have large borders. Besides the looming Afghan conflict and rising Islamic upsurge, they also suffered intra-regional disputes and lack of regional cohesion. The SCO, therefore, has helped the Central Asians ensure a higher degree of independence, obviously by playing off Chinese and Russian influence against each other. The most notable success for the SCO included the boundary resolution between China and the former republics entailing substantive peace and tranquility in Eurasia.

There are, of course, several dimensions of China's Central Asia policy; the limited point here is to focus the critical aspect of the SCO becoming the linchpin of China's longer-term strategy towards the region.

While the Central Asian states offer vast economic opportunities – a hub for energy distribution and new regional cooperation schemes – the region is still rife with enormous challenges to China. The nuances attached to political, economic, and cultural complexities of Eurasia are likely to make the SCO less effective as a multilateral organisation and in spite of the laud projection, the SCO will still remain as an ambiguous organisation in the short and medium term.

## **The Evolution**

The Shanghai Five initially dealt with border issues and threats from the 'three forces' (separatism, terrorism, and religious fundamentalism). The 'Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions' (1996) ostensibly served to address the borders.<sup>9</sup> China preferred to deal individually as against Russian and Central Asian insistence to represent as a 3 + 1 joint delegation. China signed an agreement to resolve border issues with Kyrgyzstan in 1996. The second summit (1997) focused on disarmament and reduction of forces along borders. The third summit (1998) laid stress on respecting national sovereignty and territorial integrity, fights against separatists and religious extremists and signed a treaty with Kazakhstan to resolve the territorial dispute. The fourth summit (1999) was declarative – it reaffirmed commitment for non-interference and not to allow their

territories to be used against others' interests and China signed a supplementary agreement with Kyrgyzstan on the boundary issue. The fifth summit (2000) dealt with post-Yeltsin Russia and admitted Uzbekistan as an observer. Hopes were raised to respond to rising Islamic extremism from the South (Afghanistan). The forum became 'anti-US' in rhetoric, opposing the US decision to cancel the 1972 ABM Treaty and developing its missile shield. The organisation was renamed as 'Shanghai Forum'. China signed an agreement with Tajikistan to settle the border. The sixth summit (2001) admitted Uzbekistan as a full member; Russia and the Central Asian states insisted that the grouping be morphed as the SCO;<sup>10</sup> China initially opposed it, but agreed after the election of George W. Bush as the US President.<sup>11</sup> Regional security against the backdrop of Islamic incursions, the threat of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), etc. dominated the agenda. Problems in Chechnya, Xinjiang, Batken, Osh, Farghana, etc. heightened their anxieties. The idea of expanding the grouping was discussed.

The SCO appeared redundant in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Despite earlier commitment to stand up against US unilateralism, Central Asian states rushed to cooperate with the United States – offering military bases and facilities to fight against terrorism. Moscow may have even suggested to the member states that they cooperate with the United States to promote stability in Afghanistan. However, the seventh summit in St. Petersburg (2002) called for a unifying operational framework; it approved a 26-point charter to create an SCO secretariat and an anti-terrorism centre. It called for setting up 'mechanisms of collective decision-making and democratisation of international relations'.<sup>12</sup> Foreign Minister Tang Jianxuan wanted the SCO to gain international significance. On the SCO's failure to respond to the 9/11 situation, the Chinese cited the lack of institutional mechanisms, meagre resources, weak Central Asian Governments, and Russia lacking experience in multilateral diplomacy.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, Beijing was worried about the growing interests of the United States in Eurasia at the expense of the SCO.

But, a series of events since 2005 have fundamentally altered the regional security landscape that brought the SCO into sharp focus. Beginning with the crisis in Kyrgyzstan (March 2005) that led to the fall of Askar Akayev's regime followed by Andijan events in Uzbekistan (May 2005) threatened Central Asian regimes' stability. Both Moscow and Beijing supported the view that attempts for igniting 'colour revolutions', and opposition movements were engineered by the United States and the Western-sponsored NGOs. President Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao met four times in 2005 and issued a joint statement on 'the international order in the 21st century' that talked against any country monopolising and dominating international affairs. Since then, the SCO is being viewed as a constructive trend in multilateral diplomacy, protecting the legitimate interest of member states, irrespective of their sizes and interests. The group held a slew of high-profile annual summits, stepped-up cooperation to fight against terrorism through intelligence consultations and large-scale military exercises.<sup>14</sup> An effort was initiated to push economic cooperation and transportation links (roads, railways) between Central Asia and China closer. Several important institutions such as the SCO Secretariat in Beijing, Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), the SCO Business Council, and the Interbank Association were established. The idea of creating an Energy Club was considered insinuation. More notably, it acquired an air of respectability – with an array of others such as India, Pakistan, and Iran joining as observers in 2005. It has established a Contact Group with Afghanistan and official ties with the United Nations, the ASEAN, and the CIS.

Interestingly, the term, 'Shanghai Spirit' was coined to infuse new norms of international relations and global security.<sup>15</sup> It essentially meant strengthening security, peace, and harmony in Eurasia.<sup>16</sup> It professed to uphold the diversity of civilisations and development patterns. A great sense of optimism, therefore, exists about the SCO; there is also a stronger commitment by China to provide a leadership role, a vision, resources, and diplomatic skills to mobilise and sustain the group.

## Counterpoising American Hegemony

Many analysts viewed the SCO's high visibility becoming an embryonic counterpoise to the US interest in Asia, or put it more bluntly a forum bent on salvaging an assortment of Central Asian autocrats being ostracised by the West. Although it may also have been true that the SCO's rise had corresponding relations to the declining US interests in Central Asia. Definitely, the local Central Asia regimes harboured resentments against the American failure to live up to their expectations (political and economic benefits) of supporting the war against terror, compared to the gains made by others such as Afghanistan or Pakistan.

China and Russia were quick to exploit Central Asia's new-found distrust for the US 'hegemony' and adopted a scale of measures – providing multi-million dollar aid and military commitment to indulge the local regimes under fire from the West. The weakening of the US position became clearer following the SCO's call on the United States to set a withdrawal date for its military forces in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> The United States, subsequently, had to quit from the Uzbek airbase in November 2005.<sup>18</sup> It became clear that the curbing of American influence was one of SCO's central objectives.<sup>19</sup> A Russian expert, Leonid Ivashov of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, wrote that the SCO should resist the US attempts to replace the Russian military forces in the region “... we should not have left Central Asian countries face to face with the United States in this issue”.

For Beijing, the fall of pro-China Akayev's regime in Kyrgyzstan in May 2005 was disquieting.<sup>20</sup> What followed subsequently were anti-US proclivities – its declarative communiqué reiterating rejection to 'interference in other countries' internal affairs' and 'export of models of social development', a euphemism for increasing American intervention in Central Asia.<sup>21</sup> The SCO, even though, may not have succeeded fully in impeding the members from the US bilateral enticements, but the Astana Declaration (2005) changed the Western perception about its anti-West agenda. Moreover, the denial of an observer seat to the United States, but admission to Iran in SCO, may have reinforced that perception.

The SCO's phenomenal growth was also not entirely unrelated to the international rivalry over energy resources. It was suggested that Washington's covert support for 'colour revolutions' in the former republics were said to be energy-driven. The Western spat over the issue took an effusive overtone after Vice-President Dick Cheney accused Russia of practicing energy 'intimidation and blackmail' and Secretary Condoleezza Rice called China a 'negative force' in Asia – blaming Beijing of 'not playing by the rules' in oil politics and seeking to control energy at the source. As early as January 2008, Secretary Rice urged Moscow to contribute to a 'transparent and open global energy economy'.<sup>22</sup> However, what the West feared the most was Iran joining the SCO (thereby controlling majority of world's natural gas and oil reserves). *Inter alias*, who sensitised this apprehension included Robert Kagan, a leading neo-conservative ideologue, who wrote in *Washington Post* '... until now the liberal West's strategy has been to try to integrate Russia & China into the international liberal order, to tame them and make them safe for liberalism'. 'If, instead, they are going to be sturdy pillars of autocracy over the coming decades, enduring and perhaps even prospering, then they cannot be expected to embrace the West's vision of humanity's inexorable evolution toward democracy and the end of autocratic rule.'<sup>23</sup> Kagan charged that China and Russia have emerged as the protectors of 'an informal league of dictators' and said further that 'unfortunately, al-Qaida may not be the only challenge liberalism faces today, or even the greatest'. The 2006 report of the Council on Foreign Relations task force similarly echoed 'dangerous potential' of the growing axis in Asia. The West was developing a fear that the SCO with an Iranian adjunct would entail dangerous consequences for the world, as David Wall of the University of Cambridge commented 'an expanded SCO would control a large part of the world's oil and gas reserves and nuclear arsenal – it would essentially be an OPEC with bombs ...'.<sup>24</sup>

Much has been tried for the SCO gaining a military orientation, perhaps an equivalent of NATO in Asia – committing to come to the aid of each other in case of a threat. Large-scale military exercises

under the SCO auspices, i.e., the Sino-Russian Peace Mission 2005, were viewed as directed against US policy in Asia.<sup>25</sup> The largest, Peace Mission 2007, was meant for fighting major local wars or putting down large armed rebellions in Eurasia. Most Chinese military watchers noted that China, on the template of the SCO, has been undertaking unprecedented strategic preparation in the Eurasian borderlands. These included long-term power projections and broader capabilities to secure its vital interests including energy pipelines and railway lines extending into Eurasia.<sup>26</sup> For China, terrorism means putting together every non-traditional threat, including rogue elements (Tibetans and Uyghurs) enjoying external support. Therefore, China would like to see the SCO emerging as a model of what the security structure in Asia ought to be.

### **Challenges for SCO**

These achievements notwithstanding, the SCO inevitably suffered from some nebulous constraints and contradictions. For example, the SCO could not be helpful in removing the historically decomposed negative images of China that run deep in most Russian and Central Asian minds.<sup>27</sup> The signs of sudden Chinese influx in search of jobs and businesses worried the Central Asians. The same was true for Russia as well, especially in the Far East where the population is falling or stagnant at seven million. Already the presence of half a million Chinese immigrants using up and plundering the region's oil and timber was becoming an emotive issue. The fear of Chinese peril or Yellow Threat colonising the Far Eastern and Siberian empty spaces, even outnumbering the Russians, evoked critical Russian responses. Putin himself commented in 2000 that "if in the near future we do not make real efforts, even the indigenous Russian population in few decades will speak Chinese".<sup>28</sup> A good example was how in 2007 the Russians reacted so strongly to the Chinese plan for building a 2.08-km<sup>2</sup> Baltic Sea Pearl community project in St. Petersburg calling it 'selling out' of national territory. Similarly, an alleged Chinese plan to lease a million hectares of Russian forest sparked off hysterical debate: 'the Chinese are coming to the Urals

... chopsticks have replaced knives and forks in the eating habits ... sooner or later, Russians will be forced into migration from their own homeland'.<sup>29</sup> Several writings, in the past, talked about a military stand-off between China and Russia in the Far East. A worst-case scenario was that the Russian Army, financially dependent on the Chinese business, would be incapable of driving out two million ethnic Chinese engaged in exploiting Russian natural resources.<sup>30</sup> Such perceptions about China made the SCO's growth problematic.

Skeptics also remained wary about China's Central Asia plan, especially about its coercive diplomacy in Central Asia. The perceptions remained that the weak states were falling victim to China's high-handedness, including intimidation, subversions, destabilisation, and allurements.<sup>31</sup> Apprehensions were raised whether China has applied pressure tactics to resolve its boundary and water disputes with the smaller neighbours.<sup>32</sup> Some of the issues, like river-water diversion remain poignant and may even flare up depending on the future political trend. The trouble in Kyrgyzstan actually began following a clandestine transfer of territory to China by the Akayev regime.<sup>33</sup> As in poor African countries, the Chinese firms and middlemen had begun buying resource mines by befriending corrupt Central Asian regimes entailing a trail of corruption and exploitation, and undermining a host of environmental and labour standards. Inevitably, China's advance in Central Asia remaining a benign phenomenon, was doubtful.

### **Cooperation and Coercion**

The SCO laid more emphasis on economic cooperation. A multitude of bilateral and multilateral agreements including the formation of Business Councils, InterBank Associations and forums on transport and energy cooperation were meant to steer a common economic agenda while taking advantage of the geographical proximity and economic complementariness. In 2007, over 127 joint economic projects were underway, mostly in Central Asia. China alone had invested \$1.6 billion in 2003, besides committing \$900 million as a subsidised commodity loan to member-countries. However, there

have been strong disappointments; because none of these projects reached the implementation stage. Second, most statistics roughly show \$46 billion worth of inter-state trade, which is actually bilateral in nature and exists irrespective of the SCO.<sup>34</sup>

Perceptions were also built that the Chinese have pursued a rather 'aggressive' and 'selfish' policy to uphold its economic interests while using the SCO as a template. Chinese officials working in the SCO were accused of promoting China's exports.<sup>35</sup> Such measures have gradually led to de-industrialised and weakened Central Asian markets. For example, Kyrgyzstan's free trade arrangement with China has been frequently cited for causing regional market problems. Ironically, China's \$900 million loan, tied to the purchase of Chinese goods, has been resented by other members. Such perceptions have made the Chinese proposal for a free-trade zone in the Eurasia less attractive for others.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, China's idea for generating a 20-year Development Fund for the SCO's multilateral economic programmes was thwarted by Russia.

Another critical point for the SCO progress has been nature of Russia-China relations. The Chinese industrial exports had gradually threatened Russian domestic market and heavy industries. The two-way trade was targeted to reach \$40 billion by 2007 end. However, for the first time, Russia got into trade deficit with China running into \$4 billion. A July 2007 study report of Russia's Natural Monopolies Institute (IPEM) had warned of substantial economic and social risks from increased trade with China.<sup>37</sup> That is why Russia had been opposing China's aggressive mercantile practices and unfair trade practices such as dumping, subsidy policies, and other technical regulations which hurt Russia's export. Russian authorities wanted to stem the flooding of Chinese goods they receive in exchange of raw materials. But this has never been easy because the structure of Russian and Central Asian exports to China has been dominated mainly by their natural resources. The component of Russian machinery and high-tech items exports to China had steadily dropped to 1.2 per cent in 2006, as compared to 30 per cent in 2000.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Russian weapon sales to China have also declined from 40 per cent in 2006

to less than 20 per cent in 2007.<sup>39</sup> A more recent report suggests that export to China dropped to zero.<sup>40</sup> Many such problems have naturally led Russia to drag its feet from concluding a formal agreement on the energy pipeline, unless China opened up greater market access for the Russian machinery and import of equipments. Russia also tried to ratchet up restrictions on raw timber so that the Chinese companies set up sawmills in Siberia itself. The unfavourable treatment by China for Russian companies and products as compared to the Western competitors was well known. Though some fresh commitments were being made during Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Moscow in 2007 – greater concessions to Russian enterprises are due.<sup>41</sup> All in all, as China's burgeoning appetite for natural resources becomes perilous, access to Russian resources became the key object.<sup>42</sup> That is why, the alarmists remained wary about Russia becoming a raw-material appendage to China.

Of course, there was a lack of mutual trust which was not one-sided. Russians too were not sticking to their commitments; the delay in supplies and frequent change in prices even on high items like passenger planes and nuclear technology were among China's complaints. For example, a contract was signed for the purchase of five Tu-204 passenger planes in 1999, but was not delivered until 2006. Problems also exist in nuclear projects, i.e. equipment failures and performance breakdowns caused massive commercial loss to China. Many such incidents obviously made the Chinese rethink the granting of consideration contracts to the Russian firms.<sup>43</sup> The Chinese cited other thorny issues such as the Russian restrictive trade measures, grey custom clearing, prohibiting the Chinese in retail sales, confiscation of goods by law enforcement agencies, and indiscriminate deportation of the Chinese immigrants.<sup>44</sup>

### **Struggle for Supremacy**

Though Beijing always remained careful not to tread on Russian sensitivities, a strong undercurrent of rivalry between Russia and China in Central Asia – especially over energy – was beginning to float up. Russia, in fact, seems worried about the SCO possibly

outshining its own guided Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). Therefore, what was being played out in the SCO until recently was that they both used the forum as a facade, behind which they competed and networked for bilateral deals with Central Asian states.<sup>45</sup>

On the one hand, Beijing, over the years, has been aggressively moving into Central Asia by developing infrastructural projects and by gaining independent access to energy resources.<sup>46</sup> China formally opened the 998-km-long Atasu-Alashankou pipeline with Kazakhstan in 2006. It has approached Turkmenistan about a possible pipeline venture and intends to invest in Uzbekistan's energy deposits.<sup>47</sup> Russia, on the other hand, wanted to retain its Soviet-built infrastructure intact and have Central Asia linked to its own interests. As Russia's economy has started to look up after 2006, Moscow was able to regain control over region's key sectors, including oil, space, minerals, and the defence industry. This inevitably obstructs Beijing's unilateral approach with Central Asia. Not only was Moscow denying China its own energy resources by blocking the sale of Slavneft, as well as by breaking up Yukos, which could have favoured Angara-Daqing pipeline, but also diligently tightened its control over Central Asian export routes. Significantly, Russian Gazprom reached a deal with KazMunaiGaz to transit Turkmen and Uzbek gas via Kazakhstan to Russian pipeline. In a landmark agreement in November 2007, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan agreed with Russia to build a pipeline along the Caspian Sea coast that would strengthen Russia's monopoly over Central Asian resources.<sup>48</sup> As Moscow constricted China's options in the Central Asia, Beijing tried to set up a SCO energy working group. Such quest for bilateralism and competitiveness for regional diplomacy unquestionably eroded the foundations of the SCO framework and make the cooperation efforts problematic.

### **No Strategic Incongruity**

For a long time, there existed no longer-term strategic incompatibility. While Russia viewed the SCO useful only to enhance its economic

integration with Asia, China wanted to see it developing into a nascent Asian trading bloc along the EU model.<sup>49</sup> If Russia wanted the SCO to deal with regional security issues,<sup>50</sup> China saw it as a template for building a China-centric architecture of relations in Asia vis-à-vis the United States. In fact, much of it stemmed from strategic competition between the United States and China. Both have been circling each other, especially vying various Asian countries for influence in the regional groupings. As Zhang Yebai of the government-sponsored Chinese Academy Social Sciences said, ‘The US seems to want to isolate us in the world and we must combat this ... so we need to foster relations with our friends to break the plan,’ ‘Their intention to encircle us is obvious. It is natural for us to oppose encirclement and containment.’<sup>51</sup> China therefore strived hard through the SCO to buy peace with Russia, enhance influence in Mongolia and Central Asia, maintain strategic proximity with Pakistan, and friendly relations with India and Iran. Most alarmists, therefore, viewed the SCO phenomenon as an emergence of a *Pax Sinica* instead of multilateralism in Asia.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, there also remained an ostensible mismatch between Russia’s liberal approach and China’s expansionist approach. Some Russians remained sceptical whether the Chinese territorial claims are final or will not alter once China attains the superpower status.<sup>53</sup> China’s per-capita GNP, PPP has been on an upward trajectory from \$990 in 1990 to \$16,760 in 2017.<sup>54</sup> Such phenomenal rise in China’s national strength (economic and military) may not come about without causing friction with states around it.

The Russian observers also opined that 21 per cent of world’s population will live within the area of the Chinese civilisation and as such there will be obvious attempts by China to create an economic space, i.e. free economic, custom union, and common currency. Similarly, China’s military may accelerate modernisation, technological capabilities, upgradation of conventional and nuclear forces, and ostensibly to protect its interests in Eurasia.<sup>55</sup> Such a scenario would inevitably narrow down the present comfort zone between China and Russia. This would lead to Russia seeking a path

divergent from China. Moscow's concession to China in Eurasia – whether it is tactical or strategic – was remained unclear until serious standoff broke between Russia and West over the 2014 Ukrainian crisis.

Moreover, Russia desired improvement in its relationship with Japan; resolution of the Northern Territories issue and promotion of its energy interest were never discounted. Moscow understood that Japan is sensitive to the Russian nationalist sentiment, and until such time the atmospherics with Japan change, Russia could play along with China on the Asian scene.

As mentioned elsewhere, the Russian arms exports to China, estimated around \$1.5 billion in 2006, had dropped down considerably in 2008. This could, perhaps, be due to the rising opposition in the Russians strategic community against the large-scale arms sale to China. A mindset was growing in Russia that the Chinese will someday use Russian weapons to attack the Russians. Doctrinally too, the Russo-Chinese military cooperation is certainly not at par with Russia's ties with the CIS and the NATO members. In substance, China's military cooperation with Russia is also weaker as compared to one it maintains with the United States.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Russia has been strengthening its own Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) that excludes China, which has been conducting a series of large-scale military manoeuvres, 'Southern Shield' focusing on countering crimes and drug-trafficking.<sup>57</sup> The CSTO's war games *Vostok* series are meant to counter the challenges emanating from the Chinese Flank.<sup>58</sup> This, in a way, bears the sign of an incipient Sino-Russian rivalry which would only grow as Russia regains its comprehensive strength.

Clearly, transforming the SCO into a NATO-like organisation may remain a misnomer, given the Asian complexities. Despite frequent attempts at showcasing military strengths, the degree of each others commitment to act collectively or take open hostility against the West seems low. Moreover, the military component of the SCO is still weak. Notwithstanding their common desire to limit the US presence, the Central Asian states are unable to avoid

bilateralism. The difficulty is that they cannot build security on an exclusively anti-democratic or anti-US forum. Therefore, for quite a foreseeable future, they will seek varied security goals and play on the intermittent rivalry among the major powers. The 'SCO spirit' has not prevented them from seeking the NATO's cooperation under its Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.<sup>59</sup>

It was also presumed during 2005-2006 that SCO would shield Iran, the way it shielded Uzbekistan in 2005. Instead, Tehran's plan to end its isolation vis-à-vis the West was skillfully nixed by Chinese and Central Asian mandarins. For them, there was a bitter lesson in faux pas when the SCO, spurred on by Russia, ardently rallied behind Uzbekistan to demand removal of US military bases from Central Asia. But, to the SCO's disappointment, some members continued to support the US.

Therefore, Central Asians remained circumspect about Iran's entry, hinting at technical hitches and political implications. The fear of US wrath was also a deterrent as they enjoyed substantive energy and military cooperation with it. In fact, Kazakhstan had contributed troops to Iraq and sought closer partnership with NATO. US officials including Vice-President Dick Cheney and President Bush had visited Kazakhstan in 2005. Rumsfeld's remark about against the SCO for inviting 'the leading terrorist nation (Iran) in the world into a professedly anti-terror organization' was aimed at forewarning the Central Asian states served its purpose.<sup>60</sup>

On the regional security front, there have been little achievements on the part of SCO for countering the 'three evils' except through diplomatic means. Its RATS was unable to act when the Hizb ut-Tahrir and IMU struck in Andijan in May 2005. Similarly, the SCO shows no sign of military activism on countering the threats emanating from Afghanistan. Whatever is being done along the Afghan-Tajik border owes much to the Russian-led CSTO's preventive measures. It would not be unrealistic to say that, but for the US/NATO intervention, the Taliban and al-Qaeda-backed Islamists would have already been ruling the roost in Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Bishkek.

The future developments in China were another critical point. The political uncertainty, particularly the impact of China's gradual fading as a centralized system, a possible democratization process, surge of nationalism, etc., would pose a chain of impacts on the neighbours. Events in Tibet in 2008 had exposed China's vulnerabilities and its limitation to contain them. A possible implosion of the unemployed millions making forays into the Central Asian and Russian space was viewed as a possible threat.<sup>61</sup> The rate of unemployment in China has been hovering over 4 per cent<sup>62</sup> which is rather huge in comparison to population of Russia. China's Labour Ministry feared the daunting challenge of unemployment rising by 5.5 per cent, in urban areas.<sup>63</sup> That number seemed to have grown to 9.72 million in 2017.<sup>64</sup>

Upholding diverse civilisations, religions, political, and economic realities is another argument. The Chinese scholars argued that a cultural diversity (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Orthodoxy) provides a humanistic dimension to create a platform for dialogues among peoples and cultures.<sup>65</sup>

But, the reality explains the opposite. The Eurasian region represents complete cultural contradictions, mistrust among societies and nations. Russia, for example, is fundamentally a part of the Christian Civilisation – a reality that cannot be wished away. It would be fair to foresee a slow but steady impact of the European dynamism on Russia in the years ahead. It is also a fact that the Russians and the Chinese no longer show interest in the language and culture of the other. The number of Chinese learning Russian language is said to be on the decline. A gradual shift is taking place among the younger population both in Russia and in China to learn English. This is true in Central Asia as well. This makes the SCO's task to inculcate mutual trust and cultural affinity difficult. To build an institutional mechanism (educational grants and programmes) or to promote the integration process, equivalent to those existing in the West, would not be easy either. There are other inherent cultural contradictions. The destruction of the Bamiyans by the Taliban exposed the irreconcilable aspect

of the Asian cultural paradox. Look at China itself. Thousands of people pursuing various faiths are subjected to the worst kind of harassment, and if the recent plight of the Tibetans and Uyghurs are to prove anything, the SCO would take centuries to accomplish its cherished goals.

The talk about expanding the SCO has been also a problem. First, the dynamics of the relations between India and China operate at a different level and the SCO is unlikely to change the trend. Pakistan's desire for full membership is being supported by China and now by Russia. However, without the entry of India, it would cause tremendous problem to maintain a balance of interest. Moreover, India and Pakistan staying in the same securitised grouping seems incomprehensible to many. The fervent anti-US stance also appears to be a problem. Mongolia's non-committal approach to joining the SCO is still linked to its close relationships with the United States and Japan. Membership for Iran so far remained controversial, but should it happen in the years to come, the complexities of the SCO will undergo serious change.

Finally, Central Asia, the SCO's focal point, remained stuck in the Soviet past. The prolonged authoritarian control has impeded the integration process. The lack of democratic and liberal values made them prone to internal and external fissures. They face myriad internal problems – the intrinsic clan-based power play and the personality-driven politics hampering the growth. Decline in social welfare schemes and educational standards exacerbate tensions and spark off conflicts. In the years ahead, stronger domestic opposition movements would pose a credible challenge to the ruling elites. Various strands of regionalism, Islam, and ethnicity could assume violent expressions in future. The radical elements, undergoing training in Pakistan's tribal areas under Taliban patronage, are waiting to strike at any moment. The latest challenge comes from IS – the influence of which is growing all over Central Asia. Whether the SCO will be able to contain these regional dilemmas is yet to be seen. Collaborative efforts to fight against terrorism have so far served to mitigate only the internal dissents.

Interestingly, in 2014, the Secretary General of the SCO, Dmitry Mezentsev concluded that SCO attained the stage of maturity in 2013 (Bishkek Summit) when the member-states reconciled all their differing positions for strengthening the organisation. In 2014, SCO for the first time laid emphasis on the need to engage the Observer states on issues that previously had not included in the format of interaction “6 + 2”. This at least made the status of Observer states clearer. Since then, the atmosphere for cooperation among regional countries in multi-faceted areas became clearer. The “Good neighbourliness” Document: 2013-2017, envisaged a series of mechanisms for the implementations of SCO projects such as Transport, Communication, Intellectual Property, Business Council, Inter-State Banking, University Networking, Educational projects, Regional Security (Afghanistan), Military Cooperation, Inter-State Border Disputes, Enhancing Friendship and Prosperity, Enhancing Global Prestige of SCO etc were viewed as positive steps in the right direction.<sup>66</sup> The scope of SCO got widened to include the interests of countries beyond the Eurasian space. Countries like Belarus, Turkey and Sri Lanka were dialogue partners. To be sure, political and not regional consideration may have underscored to include them. Again and to be sure, such decisions and improvements in the organisational texture had made the SCO internationally more attractive. But, what was also true was that the SCO had little to show on the ground in terms of implementing regional economic schemes. In fact, member-states themselves remained critical of the lack of progress at all levels.

Evidently, Eurasia’s economic dynamism has picked up over the decades, but this has been more a product of inter-state initiatives and agreements than due to any collective regional efforts. For example, China has been successfully implementing a series of transportation and infrastructure projects initially with Kazakhstan. China is now actively engaging Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in enhancing infrastructure projects. Similarly, Russia has taken many initiatives on the regional front. But essentially, they remain bilateral in nature.

While the need for accelerating regional integration and cooperation kept the spirit of the SCO going, a serious apprehension grew in 2013 regarding rising undercurrents of competition rather than cooperation between the two key players – Russia and China – in Eurasia. Both were leveraging the SCO as a tool to strengthen their position in Central Asia. As the issues shifted away from regional security to economic cooperation, some impending questions seemed to have risen in critical areas of financing and investments.

Serious contradictions if not clash of interests seemed on the rise between the Russia-supported Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU ) and Chinese OBOR projects. Russians started to develop mistrust over the Chinese projects and doubted whether the Silk Route idea was not merely intended to target the post-Soviet space. Therefore, serious differences between China and Russia were to impede SCO's growth.

There were other reasons as well. For example, as the US Air Force had finally vacated its Manas Transit Centre on June 3 2014, the region started to get less rhetorical against the West. Unlike in the past, when the SCO accused the West for working against Russia's traditional and China's growing influence in Central Asia, the new perception was that the US was focusing less on "Central Asia and the Caucasus" issues and instead it was laying more emphasis on "Central and South Asia". The SCO also began to realise that the US interests in Eurasia were only terrorism-specific – centring around Afghanistan rather than on promoting human rights and democracy issues.

### **New Imperatives**

By 2014, there had been an increasing urge among the member-states to strengthen the SCO, but a lack of clarity as to how the SCO can be more than a paper tiger, remained. As the dateline for NATO troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan approached in 2014, the SCO states worried about the possible fallouts of the situation in Central Asia; they had begun discussing the idea of the role, function and the prospect of SCO's expansion, more seriously.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, the SCO had no clear idea as to how the organisation would deal with the challenges if the chaos there flared up to engulf the region. Even the Russian leaders had expressed concerns about NATO's hasty withdrawal, leaving behind colossal regional security issues that would threaten Russia's interests. In 2014, the Deputy Defence Minister, Anatoly Antonov had said that ISAF "has been too hasty about making the final decision to pull out."<sup>68</sup>

The SCO's main concerns remained focus on the growing influence of the Taliban and Al-Qaida affiliates such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that were aggressively pursuing their agenda beyond Afghanistan into Central Asia. Interestingly, Xinjiang too became more volatile with the introduction of Jihadi elements and "suicide bombers" never faced by the Chinese authorities before. To be sure, the fear of the spread of terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and instability throughout Central Asia – growing after the US withdrawal – got heightened. As stated elsewhere, the Central Asian states despite common bonds under SCO always showed their strong inclinations for cooperating with the West on a broad set of issues. To that extent, SCO solidarity remained fragile.

But, multiple security threats, the cast of international players and their implications for the SCO countries were compelling the need for closer coordination between the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the SCO. Yet, confronting NATO was not the preferred choice for many. They wished the SCO to be a regional body.

To be sure, some rang the alarm bell of the possible chaos in the region, a la Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine-type implosion spreading across Eurasia. Yet the drive for the idea of countering Western democracy was lacking. Some saw potential in the Indian model, but it was not clearly accepted by the majority.

However, the SCO drew satisfaction over the way it prevented crises like Osh from flaring up. The agreements that have been made robust since 2010, they believed could fully meet the future crises. The confidence also lay in SCO's RATS ability to counter the Afghan fallout. However, for the Uzbeks, the primary concerns emanated

from within the region such as from the conflict over water and resources.

In spite of its high visibility, the SCO has found real progress elusive. In fact, only Chinese funding had kept the outfit alive, for Beijing was keen to keep it active for the purpose of enlarging its own footprints in Central Asia.

Besides, the tricky aspects of 'regime security' have also impeded the SCO's growth. In fact, the frequently held anti-terror drills under SCO auspices were tied to curbing potential domestic upsurge as much as to guarding against external threats. The internal differences and cold relations between the regional states also adversely affected the SCO's growth. Conflict over water resources and land border continued to underscore the gravity of internal differences. The Uzbeks remained especially concerned about any mega hydro-projects being undertaken under the SCO auspices.

Another key imperative that had hit Central Asian states lately related to crisis in Russia. Their key mentor, Russia, has been facing financial crisis. Sanctions apart, the whopping fall in oil prices and the value of the Rouble were having ripple effects on Central Asian states as well. At the same time, they also feared Russia's renewed nationalistic and economic assertion. Then there was the impact of growing Sino-Russian proximity, which probably compelled Kazakhstan and even Uzbekistan to seek diversification beyond the immediate region. Security challenges also loomed large. The Afghan fallout apart, the IS heavily recruiting in Central Asia became an additional cause of concern.

In the light of all this, bringing India, Iran and others into the SCO would mean gaining greater voice and cachet for the SCO. Some also feared that not doing so would make Iran and India slip out and join the US regional game.

### **New Strategic Axis**

Nevertheless, the prospects at SCO have been linked to the new rebalancing games that have been underway in the global arena since the standoff between Russia and the West began after the

Ukrainian crisis. Clearly, the Sino-Russian strategic propinquity in Eurasia and elsewhere became explicit by 2015.<sup>69</sup> Despite talk about the undercurrents of Sino-Russian competition in Eurasia, Putin had made it clear that the SCO will operate “actively on convergence between two big projects” – the China-led Belt and Road, and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).<sup>70</sup> This reflected strategic clarity and the two projects becoming the main driving force for Euro-Asian connectivity and integration – a top strategic priority for dealing with regional security threats.<sup>71</sup>

But, it was the Afghan challenges that worried SCO the most, especially the Tajiks who see the Islamists spreading across Afghanistan into Central Asia using better technologies. The critical points of infiltration remained Badakhshan and the Khorog region. However, there was little effort by the SCO Contact Group on Afghanistan to think about solution.

Besides, the member-states became cautious about the role of Russia post the Ukrainian crisis. Russia’s new geopolitical activism caused a sense of insecurity if not a fear or threat to their sovereignty. Russia on its part would never give up its traditional hold in Central Asia as its stakes in the region had been even bigger than the interests it has in Georgia and Ukraine. Central Asia has been much closer to Russia than any other region in terms of politics, culture and values.

Similarly, China’s growing influence including the cultural influence through the promotion of Chinese language remained a matter of concern. China’s economic assertion under the OBOR initially caused some unease in the region. In fact, as the Russians remained pre-occupied with the West, China found it easy to expand its influence in Eurasia.<sup>72</sup>

However, China had been viewed as posing both a threat and as a source of development for Central Asia. While some SCO members pushed the idea of creating a uniform financial term, others favoured the Chinese idea of establishing the SCO Development Bank. While the economic projects were not affecting the sovereignty issue, the idea of “Chinese language integration” became a matter of serious concern to the Russians and others.

The smaller countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan started to view China as a factor of stability for the immediate financial benefits they gained from Beijing. Kyrgyzstan, in fact, might seek a relationship with China beyond the economic and trade relations, to expand the cultural including the promotion of Chinese language along the Silk Route. China sponsors hundreds of scholarships to Kyrgyz nationals every year. Besides, China has already opened secondary schools in Kyrgyzstan with Chinese language as the medium of instruction. Similarly, Tajikistan appreciates China's contribution for stabilising the Tajik economy and building its infrastructure.

On the other hand however, Uzbekistan remains a bit sceptical about the SCO's achievements. Tashkent has been taking strong interest in the SCO albeit with an aim to pursue its own agenda. The Uzbeks wanted the regional body to adopt a more practical approach and lay emphasis on undertaking transport and infrastructure projects. For Tashkent, the completion of China- Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and road construction remained critical. The Uzbeks appeared less enthusiastic about SCO activities focusing only on exploiting the region's hydrocarbon resources; instead, they laid more emphasis on boosting technological capabilities, job availability and growth of the social sector. To be sure, for Tashkent, the internal issues of the region such as the impact of climate change, illegal migration, threat from Afghanistan, water disputes and nuclear security aspects remained more important.

### **The Expansion Issue**

On the expansion issue, the SCO has been keen to bring in Mongolia as a member of the organisation. But Ulaanbaatar's reluctance to join the regional outfit puzzled the SCO members. Instead, Mongolia has been vocal about its ineffectiveness. It remained sceptical about SCO's lack of progress on any front. Instead, Mongolia viewed the SCO as a problematic organisation – member-states pursuing different interests; locked in regional rivalries and disputes over borders, water and resources. For Mongolia, the regional security situation

i.e., Afghanistan, is mostly dealt by the West and international organizations and not by the SCO.

Mongolia itself has a serious existential identity problem of being associated with a Muslim-populated problematic region and as such preferred to refrain from getting involved in regional issues. Instead, it looked towards being part of the East Asian dynamics. Nevertheless, Mongolia still retains its observer status in the SCO and its interests are unlikely to grow except in a few specific infrastructure projects such as railways and roads. It remains non-committal to the political aspects of the SCO. Mongolia's commitment to its relations with the US, Japan and India could be one of the reasons for staying away from the Chinese-led SCO grouping.

Afghanistan, as an observer, has not shown much interest in the SCO. Obviously, its internal situation and preparation for change of regime may have kept Kabul less enthusiastic about developments in its northern neighbours. However, given the current situation of the American hold over the country, Afghanistan like Mongolia seems reluctant to join the SCO. It sees the SCO as a forum for high-voltage politics.<sup>73</sup> This was perhaps based on the understanding that US-China-Russia competitions are unlikely to change and Afghanistan would stay away from such competition. Engaging in soft areas like the Silk Route projects would be another matter. On the security front, the Afghans have been articulating that the source of trouble for Afghanistan emanated less from internal and more from external sources mainly from the FATA (Pakistan), Ferghana (Central Asia), and Chechnya (Russia).

Among the SCO Partners, Belarusian interest in the SCO has been restricted to supplementing the Russian-led Customs Union. But Sri Lanka's Partner status drew curious attention. For Colombo, the idea of the SCO is to seek diplomatic shelter under a bigger organisation. The country has experienced isolation in the recent past over issues relating to its long and difficult civil war that was fought without outside organisational support.<sup>74</sup>

Turkey – recently drawn into the SCO as a Partner, probably with Kyrgyz support – would be keen to replicate its policy of

playing the balancing role like the one it pursues with Europe, Asia and the Islamic world. Essentially, Turkey would like to play on three principles: mutual security, mutual economic opportunity and mutual respect for cultures (universal culture). To be sure, Turkey, with its historical, linguistic and religious affinity with the populations of Central Asia, occupies an important position in the region. Turkey has also invested in infrastructure, education and health as well as developed cultural links with Central Asia. Turkey has the potential to add value to the SCO but China will remain sceptical about Ankara's role especially relating to its affinity with China's Uyghur population. The role of Turkey in the SCO could prove to be an interesting space to watch.

In the past, the members have been advocating the idea of SCO as an open forum, but in practice, they remained cautious about expanding the organisation to even include the observer states. The need for preparing a draft document and rule procedures for expansion has been under discussion since 2010, but the issue remained unimplemented due to serious differences and apprehensions among members. In recent years, the process of new membership to the SCO was made more difficult due to the inclusion of a new clause that required all heads of the member-states to sign the membership document. In 2010, Iran was about to be made a member but UN sanctions on it prevented China and Russia from signing the document. To be a member, the state, among other things, has to be located in Eurasia; it must have an observer or partner status within the SCO; it must maintain diplomatic relations and active economic and humanitarian ties with all existing SCO members; it should not be subject to UN sanctions or be in a state of armed conflict with another country.

At the political level, Russia has been pushing for India's membership but China remained less enthusiastic about India's entry. Instead, Beijing pushed for Pakistan's entry into the grouping. Of course, the Central Asian states also remained sceptical about India and Pakistan joining the organisation fearing that their entry could potentially drag the SCO into South Asian geopolitical controversy.

In fact, for quite a long time, the SCO members had not shown eagerness for expansion and neither the criteria nor a timetable for expansion was pushed seriously. By and large, no SCO member wants to prevent Mongolia's entry except the Mongols themselves. Iran could not be accepted as long as sanctions are in place. Pakistan had lobbied hard for full membership, especially given increasing Indo-US intimacy. But Pakistan's record of sponsoring terrorism and nuclear proliferation worried SCO members.

It was against this backdrop that the case of SCO's enlargement became serious in 2014, although the draft document and rules for expansion were ready since 2010. But the new clause adopted required all heads of the member-states to sign the membership document.

The question of expansion nonetheless always remained hotly debated. More positive views have evolved in favour of inclusion of the observer states so that they would provide a greater voice to the SCO. The statutory documents, including the procedures for expansion were finalized during the SCO Summit meeting in Dushanbe in September 2014.

In 2015, Russia was upbeat about its diplomacy at Ufa when Putin was able to showcase its diplomatic strength by inviting leaders of 12 nations at the 'BRICS Outreach Session', comprising SCO members and observers, members of the Eurasian Economic Union, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. For its part, China was upbeat about the way in which its blueprint for Eurasia, the OBOR, was progressing.

More importantly, Beijing and Moscow had finally achieved complete entente after a prolonged and tenuous balance, if not an undercurrent of competition, within the SCO. The May 2015 Putin-Xi joint statement on the amalgamation of China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) initiatives within the SCO framework had altered the game. A plan to set up a dialogue mechanism to bring synergy between the two big projects formed the "SCO Development Strategy Towards 2015" document. Clearly, the aim was to establish a common

economic space equivalent to the Asia-Pacific. The two were certainly trying to make the SCO as their counterpoise to the US “Pivot to Asia”. The synergy was to cover every aspect, including connectivity, trade, energy, agriculture and raw material production in the Eurasian region.

Expansion was expected at its Ufa Summit on July 9-10, 2015. Prime Minister Modi attended the Ufa Summit of the six-nation SCO, after the BRICS Summit. But a statement came from Moscow prior to the Ufa Summit that accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO was still being examined. It was clear there was a new hitch.<sup>75</sup>

The Tashkent Summit held on June 23-24, 2016 finally gave a go-ahead for initiating the process of India and Pakistan’s accession to the SCO. This was done after both the South Asian countries agreed to sign the base document called the ‘Memorandum of Obligations’ at the Tashkent Summit. With this, the cases of India and Pakistan’s membership were sent to the respective Parliaments of each member-state for ratification.

Finally, it was at the Astana summit in June 2017 that India and Pakistan were formally inducted as members of the SCO. The SCO adopted an “anti-extremism treaty” document and drew up measures to prevent youth from turning to extremism deepen exchanges, hold joint exercises, foster military culture, education and the training of security agencies.

The Summit declaration pledged strict adherence to the SCO charter on “Long-Term Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation” which would aim to bind the two new members – India and Pakistan – to the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ through a five-year action plan that runs till 2022. Both South Asian countries will commit to “strictly follow” the spirit of “good-neighbourliness” prescribed in Article 1 of the SCO’s charter.

Amidst Western sanctions, Moscow was less reluctant to resist the idea of the SCO Development Bank. Instead, it sought more banking business from China. The SREB-EAEU convergence brought greater synergy between the Russian-Kazakh Eurasian Bank, the SCO Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment

Bank (AIIB). To be sure, China has been aware of the challenges ahead but it also knew that the priority of the West was to corner Russia rather than to counter China's grand chess move in Eurasia.

For China, the biggest strategic challenge until now has been to replace the Soviet-built standardised railway tracks in Eurasia. Moscow has been resisting China's offer of its narrow gauge tracks for security reasons. But Uzbekistan and even Kyrgyzstan seem to be willing to change the rail gauge to meet the Chinese standard. Moscow's resistance becomes meaningless, when a common gauge system would bring more Chinese investment, development opportunities and economic benefits to Russia. Does Russia have a choice now?

On the whole, the SCO's identity and purpose still remains ill-defined and there exist lot of ambiguities about its future. Its growth is related to the current unprecedented changes in the world order, partly due to the geopolitical crisis in Central Asia and partly due to the US' unilateralist approach.

China is putting up an accommodating stance on the Eurasian front aiming at transforming the future rules of the international system without causing friction in Asia. However, in reality, the adroit Chinese are exploiting every possible manifestation of the Russian and the Central Asian dissatisfaction vis-à-vis the West, and now from the rising dissatisfaction among Central Asians vis-à-vis Russia. Similarly, major strategic differences between Russia and the West in Eurasia also served the Chinese interests. Like in Myanmar and Sudan, Beijing has enticed the Central Asian rulers who are ostracised by the West, on account of suppressing democracy and human rights. China wants to cast a friendly, non-interfering alternative; but should the region's political outlook undergo a radical change, the nationalists and the democrats may hold a different view about China. The Central Asian states cannot sustain the 'One-China' policy if the demand for East Turkistan liberation gains momentum. As of now, the initiative is a thinly veiled attempt to blunt the Americans gaining footholds in Asia. But it remains to be seen how the SCO's exclusiveness and collective security approach

would pose a challenge to its own growth. One thing is clear; the SCO would only prevent or delay Central Asian integration into the international system further.

The SCO's future also hinges on the future course of relationship between Russia and the NATO. The existing level of confrontation between the two has served the interests of both Russia and China. The current standoff between Russia and the West after the Crimea event has certainly strengthened the SCO.

Despite all the differences, Washington is unlikely to view the Russian military deployment in Central Asia as a zero-sum game in the longer run.<sup>76</sup> Strategically, Russia is an alternative to the Chinese hegemony in Central Asia and also a counterpoise to stateless foes such as al-Qaida and IS.

Alas, the international and regional environment, especially the crises in Syria, rise of IS and future of Afghan conflict, and the changed US Iran's policy may have a direct impact on the SCO. Also, one cannot discount the US 'transformational diplomacy' in Eurasia. The West could potentially stifle the SCO process. The United States retains several key levers for restoring its influence in Central Asia, especially for steering democracy, which has become the modified agenda for countering terrorism. Countries like Uzbekistan and even Kyrgyzstan could change their strategic tracks once again in favour of the US.

The Chinese always remain suspicious about the US possibly pushing India to be the linchpin of transformational policy and work for mitigating the SCO's influence.<sup>77</sup> The same assessment also remains true for the role that may be played by Afghanistan for the US in the region. In the past, Chinese media commented that the US is determined to break the SCO and establish its dominance on a new plate of Central and South Asia.<sup>78</sup> A fundamental point for India is that it must be able to differentiate between Islamic fundamentalism and Turkic nationalism emerging in the Eurasian space.

The SCO provided China a perfect political and economic means for both containing the destabilising effects as well as enhancing the economic benefits in Central Asia. For Russia, the SCO emerged as

a forum that never discounted its interests in Central Asia. Instead, Russia intended to use SCO for promoting economic engagement with China. From the Central Asian perspective, the organisation provided a higher degree of independence for them to play off the Chinese and Russian influence against each other. Therefore, the SCO essentially provided a delicate equilibrium for the members to navigate the post-Cold War geopolitical disorder.

## Notes

1. P. Stobdan, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Challenges to China's Leadership" *Strategic Analysis*, 32 (4), July 2008, pp. 527-547.
2. P. Stobdan, "China's Central Asia Dilemma", *Strategic Analysis*, 22(3), 1998, pp. 399-408. Also see John W. Garver, "The Chinese Communist Party and the Collapse of Soviet Union", *The China Quarterly*, 133, 1993, pp. 96-110. China viewed Yeltsin as anti-Communist, hostile to the leadership in Beijing. On several occasions, the Chinese humiliated Yeltsin and supported Gorbachev with regard to changes in the former Soviet Union. In 1989, Chinese Communist Party General Secretary, Jiang Zemin, refused to meet Yeltsin in Moscow.
3. Guocang Huan, "The New Relationship with the Former Soviet Union", *Current History*, September 1992, p. 254. Reduction in Russia's armed forces, the strategic nuclear weapons, and the Pacific fleet by 40 per cent, as well as Kazakhstan's commitment to eliminate nuclear weapons has tilted the military balance in China's favour.
4. J. Richard Walsh, "China and the New Geopolitics of Central Asia", *Asian Survey*, 33(3), 1993, pp. 272-284.
5. Ross H. Monro, "China's Waxing Spheres of Influence", *Orbis*, Fall 1994, pp. 590-605. Li Peng's triumphal 1994 tour to the region was to give an impetus to this programme.
6. Boris Yeltsin during his visit to China in December 1999 warned, "He, (Clinton) must have forgotten for a moment what Russia is. It has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons." While responding to Clinton's tough remarks on Chechnya, Yeltsin said, "Everything will be as I agreed with Chinese President, Jiang Zemin and we will dictate how to live", Reuters, Moscow, December 9, 1999.
7. Andrei Levkin, "*Chto takoe Evraziya, kazhdyy (poka?) ponimaet po svoemu*", cited in *ITAR-TASS*, April 21, 2001; A.S. Panarin, "*Global'noe politicheskoe prognozirovanie v usloviyakh strategicheskoy nestabil'nosti*" (A Global Political Forecast under Conditions of Strategic Instability), Moscow, Editorial URSS, 1999. Also see Nikolai Bindyukov and Petr Lopata, "Obsobaya tre'ya sila: Novyy politicheskii fenomen" ("A Special

- Third Force: A New Political Phenomenon”), *OTRK Moscow*, 1999.
8. Ariel Cohen, “Uncertainty Still Defines Russia’s Role in Central Eurasia”, *EurasiaNet*, September 19, 2002. The proceedings of the conference organized by the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) highlight the misgivings about Russian’s policy. See <http://www.eliamep.gr/main.asp?cat+1&scat=1&cobj=true>. Accessed on May 30, 2008.
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  12. Sergei Blagov, “SCO Continues to Search for Operational Framework”, *EurasiaNet*, June 11, 2002.
  13. Ji Zhiye, “China Russia Bond”, *Contemporary International Relations (CIR)*, CICIR, Beijing, 17(1), 2007, p. 13.
  14. John W. Garver, “China’s Influence in Central and South Asia: Is it Interesting?”, in David Shambaugh (ed.), *Power Shift and Asia’s New Dynamics*, University of California, Berkeley, 2005, p. 213.
  15. “Declaration on the Establishment of the SCO” at <http://www.sectSCO.org/html/00088>. Accessed on August 15, 2006.
  16. Sun Zhuangzhi, Secretary General of the SCO Research Centre of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), “SCO Outlines New Norm of International Relations”, *Xinhua*, June 16, 2006.
  17. On July 5, the SCO issued a declaration calling for the United States to set a timeline for its withdrawal of military forces from the region. See *Kommersant-Daily*, July 5, 2005. “As the active military phase in the anti-terror operation in Afghanistan is nearing completion, the SCO would like the coalition’s members to decide on the deadline for the use of the temporary infrastructure and for their military contingents’ presence in those countries” the organization says in its declaration, *Associated Press*, July 5, 2005; *Pravda*, July 22, 2005.
  18. On July 29, Uzbek President Islam Karimov informed the United States that it has 180 days to vacate the K2 air base.
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  20. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Beijing’s Alarm Over New US Encirclement Conspiracy”, *China Brief*, 5(8), 2005, pp. 1-3 at [http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb\\_005\\_008.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb_005_008.pdf). Accessed on January 8, 2008.

21. *People's Daily*, June 15, 2005.
22. Condoleezza Rice spoke at World Economic Summit in Davos on January 23, 2008.
23. Read F. William Engdahl, 'USA out-flanked in Eurasia Energy Politics?', *Global Research*, June 3, 2006 at <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=ENG20060603&articleId=2571>. Accessed on April 20, 2008.
24. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/10883/rise\\_of\\_the\\_shanghai\\_cooperationorganization.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/10883/rise_of_the_shanghai_cooperationorganization.html). Accessed on December 20, 2007.
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26. Martin Andrew, "PLA Doctrine on Securing Energy in Central Asia", *China Brief*, 6(11), 2006, pp. 5-7 at [http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb\\_006\\_011.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb_006_011.pdf). Accessed on January 15, 2008; Martin Andrew, "Beijing's Growing Security Dilemma in Xinjiang", *Global Research*, 5(13), 2005, pp. 5-8. Also see Stephen Blank, "The Central Asian Dimension of Chinese Military Strategy", *China Brief*, 4(10), 2004, pp. 4-6 at [http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb\\_004\\_010.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb_004_010.pdf). Accessed on January 15, 2008.
27. China had a territorial dispute with Russia since late 17th century. During the period of rift between China and the Soviet Union, Chinese maps showed parts of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan as far as Lake Balkash, as well as the Pamirs, within the borders of China. China claimed that Tsarist Russia had annexed thousands of square miles from China in 1880s. See Michael Freeberne, *Essays in Political Geography*, 1965, p. 203.
28. "Engaging with Russia: The Next Phase", *A Report of the Trilateral Commission*, The Triangle Paper No. 59, Washington, DC, 2006, p. 124.
29. See Ji Zhiye, note 13.
30. *Newsweek* 1997 report as quoted in A.K. Mohanty, "A Russian Understanding of China's SCO Policy", *China Report*, 43(2), 2007, pp. 245-257.
31. Impression gathered after talking to well-informed people in Central Asia.
32. Central Asian states reached border delimitation and water sharing agreements with China without ever consulting Moscow. Kyrgyzstan's ceding to China about 125,000 hectares of territory has led to large-scale public violence, resulting in the killing of a Chinese diplomat in Bishkek. The border issue is emotional and cause for internal instability. The Emel River that flowed into Kazakhstan has already dried up. China is said to

- be using 'divisive' tactic even on the Black Irtysh issue between China-Kazakhstan and Russia.
33. P. Stobdan, *Central Asia: Democracy, Instability and Strategic Game in Kyrgyzstan*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2014.
  34. Alexander Lukin, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: What Next?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, 5(3), 2007, pp. 140-156.
  35. Ibid.
  36. Ji Zhiye, note 13.
  37. *Xinhua*, August 1, 2007.
  38. Sergei Blagov, "Arms, Energy and Commerce in Sino-Russian Relations", *Global Terrorism Analysis*, 7(16), 2007 at <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373607>. Accessed on January 7, 2008.
  39. <http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2006-08/07/content-4930900.htm>. Accessed on December 23, 2007.
  40. Russian arms exports to China in collapse: newspaper, Defncetalk.com, January 31, 2008.
  41. Marcin Kaczmarek, *CACI Analyst*, November 14, 2007 at <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4734>. Accessed on December 20, 2007.
  42. D. Trenin, *Russia's China Problem*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 1999.
  43. Ji Zhiye, note 13.
  44. <http://www3.xinhuanet.com/xhft/20060714/wzsl.htm>. Accessed on January 2, 2008. Also see *People's Daily*, February 8, 2006.
  45. John C. K. Daly, "Premier Wen's Eurasia Tour: Beijing and Moscow's Divergent Views on Central Asia", *China Brief*, 7(21), 2007 at [http://www.jamestown.org/china\\_brief/analysts.php?authorid=119](http://www.jamestown.org/china_brief/analysts.php?authorid=119). Accessed on December 25, 2007.
  46. Philip Andrews-Speed, Xuanli Liao, and Roland Dannreuther, "The Strategic Implications of China's Energy Needs", Adelphi Paper No. 346, IISS, London, 2002, pp. 24, 32.
  47. Pan Guang, 'China and Central Asia: Charting a New Course for Regional Development', *China Brief*, 7(3), 2007 at [http://www.jamestown.org/china\\_brief/article.php?articleid=2373267](http://www.jamestown.org/china_brief/article.php?articleid=2373267). Accessed on December 12, 2007.
  48. Sergei Blagov, "Russia Renews Interests in CIS, Agrees to New Price Deal for Turkmen Gas", *Eurasianet.org*, November 27, 2007.
  49. Han Feng of the Asia-Pacific Studies Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) said that "By promoting an Asian development model of its own, and different from the US, China is becoming a more and more attractive leader to other countries."
  50. Alexander Lukin, note 34.

51. James Kynge and Amy Kazim, "A tussle for Asia", *Financial Times*, June 26, 2001 at <http://www.financialtimes.com/http://burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/200106/msg00114.html>. Accessed on June 22, 2008.
52. D. Trenin, note 42.
53. Ibid.
54. The World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GNP.PCAP.PP.CD>.
55. The PLA has been taking a number of operational measures, including battle management C41 exercises along Xinjiang-Central Asia frontiers to protect its energy supply lines. Wu Lei and Shen Qiniu, "Will China Go to War Over Oil?", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 169 (3), April 2006, pp. 38-40; Sun Xuefu, "Forge a Military Force Commensurate with China's International Status", *PLA Daily Online*, April 28, 2006; Wang Jianmin, "Footprints of the Forerunner", *Zhanqi Bao*, February 16, 2006; Martin Andrew, "PLA Doctrine on Securing Energy in Central Asia", *China Brief*, 6 (11), 2006, pp. 5-7, at [http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb\\_006\\_011.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/images/pdf/cb_006_011.pdf). Accessed on January 15, 2008.
56. As quoted by A.K. Mohanty, note 30.
57. Russia retains its 201st Motorized Rifle Division based in Tajikistan, an airbase at Kant, near Bishkek, ostensibly to provide air support for CSTO ground units.
58. P. Stobdan, "Is Putin Gearing Up for Intervening in Asia Next?" IDSA Comment, August 1, 2014 at [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/IsPutinGearingUpforInterveninginAsiaNext\\_pstobdan\\_010814](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/IsPutinGearingUpforInterveninginAsiaNext_pstobdan_010814).
59. Taliban's resurgence prevented Kyrgyzstan from submitting to Sino-Russian pressure to force Washington out of its base at Manas – a move that was widely expected to occur at the SCO summit. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 8, 2005.
60. P. Stobdan, "Talking Heads", *The Hindustan Times*, June 23, 2006.
61. D. Trenin, no. 42; also see V.G. Gilbras, *Kitaiskaya Problema Rossii*, Carnegie Centre, Moscow, 1998.
62. China: Unemployment rate from 2010 to 2021 at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/270320/unemployment-rate-in-china/>.
63. "China to Face Severe Unemployment, says Minister", *The Times of India*, March 10, 2008.
64. "Number of unemployed people in urban China from 2007 to 2017 (in millions)" at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278344/number-of-unemployed-people-in-china/>.
65. Sun Zhuangzhi, Secretary General of the SCO Research Centre of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) said "SCO Outlines New Norm of International Relations", *Xinhua*, June 16, 2006.

66. P. Stobdan, "The SCO and India", IDSA Comment, July 14, 2014 at [https://idsa.in/system/files/strategicanalysis\\_stobdan\\_0304.pdf](https://idsa.in/system/files/strategicanalysis_stobdan_0304.pdf).
67. P. Stobdan, "Little Hope for Entry into the SCO", IDSA Comment, May 26, 2014 at [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/LittleHopeforEntryintotheSCO\\_pstobdan\\_260514](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/LittleHopeforEntryintotheSCO_pstobdan_260514).
68. "NATO Pullout from Afghanistan Too Hasty" at <http://sputniknews.com/world/20130814/182761135/NATO-Pullout-from-Afghanistan-Too-Hasty--Russian-Defense-Official.html>. Accessed on October 10, 2014.
69. "Russia and China: the world's new superpower axis" at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/china-russia-superpower-axis>. Accessed on July 7, 2015.
70. P. Stobdan, "India's Stakes and Dilemma in SCO", IDSA Comment, June 8, 2015 at [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IndiasStakesandDilemmaSCO\\_pstobdan\\_080615](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IndiasStakesandDilemmaSCO_pstobdan_080615).
71. From India's perspective, such a vision for Eurasia was at odds with Prime Minister Modi's foreign policy texture, especially his shared vision with President Obama for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region that have been ostensibly meant to contain China.
72. P. Stobdan, *Central Asia: Democracy, Instability and Strategic Game in Kyrgyzstan*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2014.
73. Impression gathered by this author during the SCO Forum meeting held in Dushanbe in June 2015.
74. P. Stobdan, note 66.
75. P. Stobdan, "Talking Heads: Modi in Ufa", IDSA Comment, July 7, 2015 at [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/TalkingHeadsModiinUfa\\_pstobdan\\_070715](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/TalkingHeadsModiinUfa_pstobdan_070715).
76. "US Policy shifts in Central Asia", *International Herald Tribune*, February 3, 2008.
77. "India has important role in Central Asia" at <http://specials.rediff.com/news/2006/mar/29sld1.htm>. Accessed on December 20, 2007. Ambassador Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, said the expanded bureau with the addition of Central Asia, has opened up new opportunities and that India has a "very important role to play" in this region.
78. As quoted by Alexander Lukin, note 34.

## 6. Regional Security Challenges in Central Asia

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Central Asia is imperilled by a host of security crises driven mostly by internal factors but no less accentuated by external reasons.

Internally, there have been prolonged unresolved issues, pertaining to inter-state disputes over water and land resources. There have been lingering inter-ethnic discords, political mobilisations around religious nationalism resulting in the emergence of extremism and terrorism, etc. In this sense, Central Asia is a regional tinderbox.

Such conflicts along the borders have often turned violent. For example, border stand-offs between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan at mount Ungar-Tepa-Unkur-Too in early 2016 had prompted the Russian-led security bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) hold an “extraordinary session” in Moscow.<sup>1</sup>

Internal conflicts were further exasperated by externally-driven threats in the 1990s – ranging from drug-trafficking, arms-proliferation and religious terrorism from across the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Besides, the evolving spectre of threats posed by the Islamic State (IS), has added a fresh dimension to mounting security challenges in Central Asia. All of these are becoming a deadly combination that may explode sooner or later to bring the region into chaos.

The outside powers keenly observe the trends in the region with a deep sense of concern. In fact, external powers have been seeking engagement with the regional governments in security domain with an apparent sense of competition. But the region is still solely under the Russian security umbrella and the CSTO mechanism.

## Security Scenario

Central Asia's security stakes have largely remained contested. They are defined, understood and experienced in varying ways by different stakeholders.

First, a variant form of political Islam emerged on the surface immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These included groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT), and even Hizb-ut-Tehrir (HuT) that have been active since the 1990s and attempted to overthrow local regimes. They still aim to establish the *Caliphate-i-Rashida* in the entire Central Asian space. So far, none of these groups have succeeded in achieving their goals despite decades of sustained support they received even from the Taliban and al-Qaida. Nonetheless, the states have experienced a spate of terrorist incidents with varying intensity carried out by groups such as the IMU, Jund al-Khilafah, Takfirwal-Hijra and many others.

Second, Central Asia, located at the epicentre of terrorism, constantly lived under the pervasive shadow of terror threats emanating from the neighbouring Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Yet, ironically, the fact that elements of al-Qaida could travel up to Northern Africa but fail to enter the next-door Ferghana Valley – speaks volumes of the CSTO's efficacy and its military robustness that continue to guard the Tajik-Afghan frontiers.<sup>2</sup>

The Afghan instability is still a strong factor. For example, the Taliban's resilience to bounce back in Afghanistan was demonstrated by the Kundus episode in the autumn of 2015 that followed the US drawdown.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the emergence of IS and its stronghold especially in eastern Afghanistan, purportedly to recreate *Wilayat Khorasan* in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, has hastened the regional security threat perceptions.<sup>4</sup> The IS fighters are mostly concentrated in the Achin district of Nangarhar province which is considered as the headquarters of *Wilayat Khorasan*.<sup>5</sup>

## Extremism in Kyrgyzstan/Ferghana Valley

An Islamic model for Central Asia so far remains unfounded because of multiple polarisations built upon historical points of conflict among ethnic and tribal groups that persist in a muted form. However, Central Asia as a potential fertile ground for extremist growth is being strongly projected.

There is no doubt that Islamic revivalism is on the rise, but none of the essential features for an Islamic upsurge are visible yet at least in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. At best, Islam is viewed as a cultural manifestation. However, Islam remains a strong factor in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; perhaps growing as a by-product of events in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Until lately, religion had little or no role to play both at the level of state and civic society. This was mainly due to the Soviet background wherein the elite and the mainstream population preferred to continue the Western-orientated lifestyle and policy goals; therefore, the dynamics here could not be compared with situations existing in West Asia or in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

The people having theological interests, including within the academic circles have been on the fringes of mainstream society. The religious affairs in fact still remain under State control; and even the *Muftis*, who are generally modern scholars or diplomats, are appointed by the State. People at large, Muslims particularly, do not visit religious places. There has been a general interest however, since independence to revive their cultural past that is confined mainly to practicing traditional customs, folk rituals and ethos rooted in Central Asian civilisation.

The scenarios in Central Asia now appear to be changing with many mosques emerging with financial support received from outside. The spectre of Islamic extremism in Central Asia, especially in the Ferghana Valley, had been part of the discourse for over a decade now. Scores of books on the subject have been written on the issue since the early 1990s, mainly around the discourse on the radicalisation of the region by the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT).<sup>6</sup> The HuT has been advocating the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in Central

Asia. Literature in the past has suggested that Ferghana had turned into a key sanctuary for extremists fleeing from the Pakistani tribal belt and Afghanistan.

So far, Islamic parties have gained power-sharing stakes in the government of Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, Islam is so far only a source for political mobilisation but not in a position of capturing political power.

The Ferghana Valley spanning borders of several countries is especially critical to regional security.<sup>7</sup> Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that share the Valley are unable to contain militant infiltrations due to growing internal discord and ineffective border management systems. The growth of HuT and IMU is also attributed to growing economic crisis, poverty, and unemployment after the Soviet collapse. As a result, these groups have been using the public discontent to strengthen their cadres. Analysts have also underlined that growing loss of faith in the regimes have forced people to look towards political Islam as an alternative source of justice, well-being, and internationalism. A UN envoy to the region, Miroslav Jenca had once said that extremists were rushing into Central Asia to exploit social and economic problems there.<sup>8</sup>

The analysts have long argued that growing authoritarianism of the government would ultimately result in the spurt of radical groups opposing the ruling regimes like what has been happening in the Arab world in the recent years.<sup>9</sup>

Even prior to the Soviet disintegration Islam had a traditionally strong presence in Southern Central Asia. In Tajikistan, Islamic parties shared power since the civil war broke there in mid-1990s. The bombings in Tashkent in 1999 and the incursions of the IMU into the Batken region in southern Kyrgyzstan heightened the fears. Since 2005, there have been a series of anti-government violent protests in Uzbekistan and also several such attempts in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere. These protests were fuelled by HuT and IMU cadres, especially by exploiting the anti-government sentiments of people living in Uzbekistan's eastern regions of Ferghana, Namangan,

Andijan and Kokand. These groups were also known to have a close nexus with the drug syndicates. Since 2010, even Kazakhstan has been witnessing terrorist incidents of.

In Kyrgyzstan, the perpetual internal instability always allowed Islamic groups to thrive. It is also because Kyrgyzstan has been practicing a relatively liberal polity, openness and free press. Yet, even here the traditional nomadic Kyrgyz in the south remain secular and those devout Muslims typically follow a more moderate and ritualistic Muslim practices rather than the extremist form followed in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Kyrgyzstan does not have a proper database on religious organisations. But the Religious Studies Centre quoted eight terrorist organisations which are banned in the country since 2005. They include; Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT), Turkistan Liberation Organisation (TLO), Islamic Party of East Pakistan, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Al-Qaida, Taliban, Kurdish Labour Party, and Jihad Group.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, the number of terrorist outfits banned in the country remained the same, but the blacklist of the Kyrgyz State Committee for National Security (GKNB) contained other organisations like the Unification Church, Islamic Jihad Union, Tabliqi Jamaat as well.<sup>11</sup> According to the former GKNB Chairman Shamil Atakhanov, the most dangerous outfit was the HuT and other groups that advocated *Jihadism* in Kyrgyzstan. The Tabliqi Jamaat, which was most widespread in the country, posed no extremist threat. According some statistics, over 10,000 Kyrgyz were registered as members of the banned extremist groups. The officials admitted that these groups continue to operate under the cover of different social funds. During 2010-2012, endless names of *Jihadi* outfits kept coming up in the media but verification of their existence remained difficult in the absence of proper information.

What was different in the case of Kyrgyzstan was that the repeated political uprisings and the so-called revolutions meant that the Islamists came out in open. Their activities were more visible because of lesser restriction and state control, which still does not exist in the neighbouring Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The bogey of Islamic threat had also been raised by various interest groups for different political reasons. For example, Russian media had been regularly putting up a view that political Islam would bring Kyrgyzstan to the brink of a civil war and in the process the whole region will be affected. An Osh-based independent political analyst GanijonKholmatov, was quoted by RFE/RL in 2005 as saying that Russian media articulations were politically motivated especially after Moscow's failed game in Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>12</sup> Russian commentators also contended that Islam and drug mafias were being patronised by the Americans to destabilise the region.

In the Central Asian context, the HuT unusually drew great interest among the intellectuals and media.<sup>13</sup> There has also been a lot of academic research on HuT in the regional academia including the interest among the general public as well.

In Kyrgyzstan, the problem seemed less to do with extremism and more to do with ethnicity, especially the ethnic Uzbeks living in Osh and Jalalabad regions bordering Uzbekistan. Attribution here was that Islam was more embedded among the ethnic Uzbeks as compared to the Kyrgyz people who traditionally followed a mix of Shamanism with Islamic tenets. That is why, every time a crisis emerged in Kyrgyzstan, apprehensions were raised about the large-scale disorder by ethnic Uzbeks. But, so far, there have been no indications of the Islamic extremist forces actually playing a substantial political role in Kyrgyzstan. As this author could assess, political Islam of the HuT was unlikely to become a reality at least in the near term. Many experts also believed that even if Kyrgyzstan collapses as a State, the Islamists will not become a unifying force. This was true even for southern Kyrgyzstan where despite the rampant ethnic and political crisis in the wake of revolutions, the role of Islamic groups was rarely noticed. It was a different matter that the chaotic political and economic situation had allowed HuT to attract more supporters for the organisation.

More importantly, it was the early experiment with liberal democracy that resulted in Kyrgyzstan becoming a fragile if not failed state in the region. If the democratic system had induced rampant

corruption, the so-called revolutions had added to its failure. The two revolutions were, in fact, being described as coup of sorts; the same old officials coming back to power in a different format with different slogan.

As a young state Kyrgyzstan anyway was unable to deal with complexities of religion, state and societies. The state had been taking steps from one extreme to the other. The trends indicated that the regimes had shown a tendency to either flirt with religious groups or comedown heavily on their activities depending on the political exigency. This is like in any democracy where the political groups rally support from any source to gain political power. While doing so, the leadership has been gaining political dividends but they have been losing strategically to the extremists. In 2005, Bakiyev came to power on the plank of nationalism while using the Islamic card – hobnobbing with the extremists and drug mafia when they suited him. But, when the criminal gangs and extremists went beyond control and threatened his power, he came down heavily on them. Hundreds of extremist elements were in jail when Bakiyev was thrown out in April 2010.<sup>14</sup>

The increasing nexus between the enforcement agencies and organised criminal groups also added to the state's failures. A report by Chatham House noted the drug factor having exacerbated the Osh events.<sup>15</sup> The International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) published on the site of the US Department of State in 2011 had illustrated that the drug and crime situation if continues will destabilise the new regime in Kyrgyzstan, which was facing depleted financial resources and political turmoil.<sup>16</sup> The report had said that 30 percent of Kyrgyzstan – which is a key transit country to transport Afghan opiates to Europe, Russia and China – remained virtually uncontrolled.<sup>17</sup> Besides, cannabis was grown in almost one hundred thousand hectares of land in Kyrgyzstan. It said that in 2010 no measures were taken to curb narcotics trafficking. In 2009, the authorities seized nearly eight tons of drugs and precursors but the figure declined by 41 per cent in 2010. Apart from the rise in drug baron-politician nexus, the problem was also accentuated

by underfunding, understaffing and underpayment of the Kyrgyz security agencies. Kyrgyzstan has 9,000 officers for a population of 5.5 million.

### **Extremism and Politics**

As mentioned above, the threat of extremism had always been deliberately ratcheted up by the authorities for political exigency. In fact, all regimes in the region are notoriously known for conveniently playing up and even fabricating the threat of terrorism.

In the aftermath of the June 2010 riots in Osh, the Kyrgyz authorities at one stage blamed the Islamists and the Uzbek irredentists for initiating the violence. Of course the main needle of suspicion was pointed at the former President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev and his son Maxim Bakiyev who were accused for spending \$10 million for instigating the riot with the help of the Islamic extremists.<sup>18</sup> Both IMU and HuT were separately blamed for creating instability to pursue their radical agenda. The officials cited initially agent provocateurs with sniper-shooter infiltrating from Badakhshan across the border with Tajikistan. However, this could not be confirmed by the Kyrgyz security agencies due to lack of credible evidence.<sup>19</sup> Besides, no other country, including Uzbekistan, Russia, Kazakhstan and US had supported the view of the IMU and United Islamic Jihad (UIJ) having instigated the violence. No comments came from the Afghan officials, NATO and others about terrorist movement around Badakhshan during that time. However, Uzbekistan did mention the role of a third force but stopped short of citing the role of IMU.<sup>20</sup>

Several inquiry reports including the one conducted by an international investigation committee had ruled out the role of Islamic extremists and instead pinned on local reasons that flared up due to the absence of law and order. The national commission in Kyrgyzstan that had investigated the events in Osh held the Uzbek minority responsible for the ensuing tragedy. The Commission listed Bakiyev's associates, religious extremists, criminal groups, inept officials of the interim government and 'unknown forces'

(intelligence services of third countries) which played a major role in inflaming the violence. This aspect is being elaborated in a separate chapter.

As expected and also in a significant way, Kyrgyzstan had witnessed a spate of terrorist incidents soon after the new government assumed power in 2010. This had raised the spectre of a possible Islamic threat with wide ranging implications. While the overall political stability seemingly had been restored, security officials cited a new *Jihadi* group Jaysh al-Mahdi (JaM) that has emerged on the scene to challenge the State with armed resistance. The crackdown followed the killing of three policemen on January 4, 2011, a bomb blast on November 30, 2010, an armed assault on the American citizen and an attempt to blast a city police station on December 25.<sup>21</sup> In Bishkek a blast took place outside the sports complex, the venue of a high-profile trial against 26 top officials of the former government accused of killing dozens of people during a popular uprising in April. According to reports, the improvised explosive device without shrapnel had exploded in Bishkek. The state's National Security Service Chief had then linked the Bishkek blast to the event in Osh and the detention of Islamic groups.

Several terrorist attacks were also witnessed in southern Kyrgyzstan. In fact, the security situation got heightened after a clash broke out on November 29, 2010 in Osh between security forces and Islamic militants. Three insurgents belonging to different ethnic groups: Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and one Russian were shot in an operation while another militant blew himself up. Officials said the militants were believed to be members of the Islamic Movement of Turkestan. Two policemen were injured in a gun battle during the raid.

The Kyrgyz State National Security Service Chief revealed that sub-machine guns, grenades and other improvised explosive devices were found at the scene of the shootout in Osh. The Security Service also revealed that a terrorist group comprising of about 40 men had planned more than 30 acts in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>22</sup> They had planned to hit eight places in Bishkek, 14 places in Osh city and 11 places in Osh oblast. Eight people were detained, three of them in Bishkek.

Three terrorists were killed in Osh including the Imam of the Farkhat Nurmatov mosque.<sup>23</sup> A part of the group had fled to Russia. The group comprising ethnic Russians, Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationals belonged to the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and IMU. The authorities however maintained some secrecy and never divulged the full details. But, many suspected that there was possible involvement of former officials in organizing the incidents. It was mentioned that some of the extremists had undergone training in Tajikistan's Tavildarinskiy region. The security agencies had averted other terror attacks in Osh and Bishkek. Obviously, there was no report about any ethnic angle, but events that occurred in a sequence did suggest that extremist groups were gaining strong ground in Southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JaM) "the Army of the Righteous Ruler" that was found to have links with Chechen and Ingushetia extremists, inspired by the ideas of Alexander Tikhomirov, a Russian convert to Islam who was born in Buryatia – a home to majority Buddhists. Alexander Tikhomirov was also known as SayyidBuryatsky who headed a radical movement in North Caucasus. Tikhomirov was killed in Ingushetia in March 2010. The JaM consisted only of ethnic Kyrgyz and the weapons used by them were those lost by the authorities during the April 2010 revolution. The National Security Chief said, "a war has been declared on all of us" and that "evil is wearing the mask of a believer."<sup>25</sup> The JaM had planned to hit even foreign embassies in Bishkek. (In end-November, the diplomatic missions had received a Note Verbale with the warning of growing terrorist threat and necessity to take precautionary measures).

On a serious note, President Otunbayeva had announced in 2010 that extremists may lay claims for power in the absence of a proper defence mechanism. Kyrgyz Prime Minister Atambayev too echoed a similar point when he said excessive nationalism was causing a serious threat to the country even to the point of disintegration of the state. He was referring to ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks being more loyal to the neighbouring countries. Obviously, the situation was not stable in the southern parts of the country.<sup>26</sup>

The reported terrorist attacks had led the government to embark on stronger measures including the setting up an Anti-Terror Centre. The Security Council was abolished to create the Defence Council (DC). The first meeting of the DC underscored that: (a) criminal and terrorist activities grew significantly during 2010; (b) unresolved border demarcation hampered border security; (c) drug trafficking across Afghanistan contributed towards escalation of tension.<sup>27</sup> The DC, *inter-alia*, recommended that the country's innumerable mosques be subjected to screenings and local Imams be vetted to assess their competence.<sup>28</sup> In a separate case, the governor of the Osh Region had proposed to bring mosques under the control of the government and offered to pay salaries to clergymen from the state budget as one of the measures.<sup>29</sup> Some fifty Kyrgyz Imams, mostly from the south, had either resigned or were removed by the new government.<sup>30</sup>

The explosion underscored tensions in Kyrgyzstan and possibly the events took place against the backdrop of the following:

- The possibility of pro-Bakiyev forces taking revenge after his regime was overthrown in 2010, though nothing has been proved to that effect;
- The role of Uzbeks was widely suspected for their angst against the interim-government orchestrating the June 2010 ethnic riots in Osh;
- There may have been genuine terrorist threats emanating from various sources. After all, to appease the extremists, the interim-government after assuming power in April 2010 reversed Bakiyev's harsh policies and issued blanket amnesty to those previously convicted under terror laws. To gain popularity, not only had it toned down rhetoric against Islamists but had also used them for electoral campaigns. These terrorists who were freed from jail may have decided to challenge the state. Initially, the political groups were busy squabbling for power. But when the negotiations were completed to form the government, the authorities decided to exercise the Bakiyev-style crackdown and even blamed the Islamists for country's security woes. Among others things, the screening of Imams had commenced since March 2011;

- The security crackdowns were viewed as necessary steps to exert control over the country which was yet to come to terms with several shocks faced after the political and ethnic crisis in 2010. New protest potential was growing amidst people losing confidence in their leaders;
- The incidents occurred when the country was witnessing strong undercurrents of inter and intra-party rivalries. Many suspected that it was part of the sensitive political bargaining over the formation of a new government. The power struggle among major clans had at one stage forced the President to hint at even dissolving Parliament. It only indicated that all was not well with the newly-formed parliamentary system;
- There was a possibility of the Kyrgyz ruling elite using terrorism as a selling point to get external aid.<sup>31</sup> The economy of the country was in bad shape. The violence in June had severely hurt the prospects of economic growth as foreign investors were shying away. Many investors were virtually driven away by the new regime for having links with the previous dispensation;
- Almost 50 per cent of country's national income depended on remittances from migrant workers in Russia. About a third of the population lived below the poverty level. Economic concerns anyway gain prominence during the spring sowing seasons. After the June 2010 events, though the donor countries had committed over \$1 billion in aid, but the aid was not forthcoming;
- During Secretary Clinton's visit in early March 2011, Bishkek projected itself as a front-line state for the war against terror. A section of Kyrgyz politicians was keen to retain the US Transit Centre at Manas and play it as an important Kyrgyz contribution in the fight against terror in Afghanistan. The assertion had coincided with a meeting between the Kyrgyz Prime Minister and the US Deputy Assistant Secretary, Susan Elliott. The Kyrgyz-US security consultation was resumed and Bishkek was looking for every opportunity to extract maximum concession over the Manas air base, especially over fuel tax

issues. It needed to be underscored that terrorist attacks took place weeks before US Secretary of State Clinton was to visit Bishkek.<sup>32</sup> Roza Otunbayeva also made a point during the Clinton visit that by spring (2011) the theatre of military actions in Afghanistan would be shifting to the north that would pose a greater challenge for Kyrgyzstan;

- Most analysts this author had interacted with, made the assertion that the local Jamats in Kyrgyzstan were still moderate in outlook and the deteriorating security problem, if it existed, was attributed to internal political rivalry. The new measures for curtailing religious activities was viewed as a thinly disguised attempt to silence or purge opponents – many of them Uzbeks – on the pretext of fighting against terrorism;<sup>33</sup>
- The terrorist attacks could have been also linked to an unfair trial of the accused connected to the April 2010 violence in Bishkek that killed 80 people.<sup>34</sup>The accused included more than 20 former government officials of the Bakiyev regime. The human rights activists had alleged that confessions of detainees were obtained through torture;
- A perspective also came to the fore that the authorities were simply showing enthusiasm to fight against terror for the sake of seeking funds from SCO, CSTO and other international institutions. President Roza Otunbayeva had vociferously raised the security issue at the SCO, OSCE, CIS and CSTO meetings and urged the organizations to redouble their efforts to assist Kyrgyzstan in its fight against terror and extremism.<sup>35</sup> Otunbayeva had asserted for changes in the CSTO's legal framework and sought the deployment of Collective Rapid Response Forces (CRRF) in member-states to deal with localised military conflicts.<sup>36</sup> In fact, in the CSTO Summit in December 2010, Russian Foreign Minister did state that Kyrgyzstan has become a test of the organisation's future.<sup>37</sup>
- The events took place when Kyrgyzstan and Russia had contemplated the idea of opening an anti-terrorist centre and the second Russian military base in south Kyrgyzstan. Earlier in

May 2010, the US was planning to build an anti-terror training centre in Batken. Russia also sounded that Kyrgyzstan should quickly join the Eurasian Union,<sup>38</sup> citing reasons that the country cannot bring order on its own.

Interestingly, when the Kyrgyz parliament debated the issue, the JaM operatives were termed as only “criminals” instead of “terrorists”.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly again, following a parliamentary hearing on January 12, 2011, the Security Chief claimed JaM operatives had been trained in Tajikistan and not in Pakistan and Afghanistan as claimed by him earlier. At an official reception, this author witnessed the Pakistani Ambassador in Bishkek objecting to the Kyrgyz President against naming Pakistan.

For many Kyrgyz analysts, Islamic presence was already a reality in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, any hard measures by the state would only risk inciting them to more violence, thus turning Kyrgyzstan into another Dagestan. Some observers viewed that should the new parliamentary system fail to swiftly carry out radical reforms, there could be every possibility of another revolution in Kyrgyzstan and this time it would be with an Islamic fervour.<sup>40</sup>

The US-Russia jostling for geostrategic space was another factor with numerous right-wing groups strongly opposing the American and Russian military presence in Kyrgyzstan – fearing that Kyrgyzstan would be on the way to becoming another Pakistan. As mentioned earlier, the terrorist attacks in Bishkek took place weeks before Hillary Clinton’s visit.

To be sure, Kyrgyz society was slowly getting Islamised, especially in the rural areas, where the Islamists carried out intense recruitment drives of children and women. Not only were they replacing the public and state institutions but also educational centres. The HuT recruited students of prestigious universities, including the Kyrgyz State Medical Academy and the Kyrgyz State Construction, Transport and Architecture University in Bishkek. Regular indoctrination was given on one-to-one basis through websites.<sup>41</sup> The HuT’s influence was visible within power circles all over the country. The authorities

have been revealing almost on monthly basis the emergence of new Jihadi groups all over the country.<sup>42</sup>

Kyrgyz authorities also cited the Haqqani Network penetrating Kyrgyzstan. This was revealed by Emil Zheenbekov, head of the Interior Ministry's Directorate for Counterterrorism.<sup>43</sup> The authorities revealed no specific data, but elaborated that the Pakistan-Afghanistan-based network used methods somewhat different from the rest. There was no clear indication of the Haqqani Network having actually penetrated Kyrgyzstan but the media extensively reported the terrorist outfit opening branches in Central Asia with the help of criminal networks of the local drug mafia. In 2009-2010, Dawood Ibrahim had visited Kyrgyzstan to set up business, and was apparently hosted by former President's son Maksim Bakiyev.

The Tabliqi Jamaat organisation was among the most active religious movements in Kyrgyzstan that has had a widespread network in the country,<sup>44</sup> receiving funding from abroad. However, it has not been showing any radical manifestation of late. In 2011, the activities of Tabliqi Jamaat were more open and widespread – its aim was to establish an Islamic State in Kyrgyzstan but officials admitted that in spite of having 18,000 registered members, the Tabliqi posed no terrorist threat to the country.

According to the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry, the activities of some extremist and terror organisations had increased. In July 2012, 1,473 supporters of extremist organisations were registered by the Kyrgyz Interior Ministry.<sup>45</sup> According to the Ministry the activists included youth leaving for Arab countries for religious training, especially from the rural areas. In June 2012, a video address in Russian titled: *Declaration of jihad against President Almazbek Atambaev* was posted on websites.<sup>46</sup> The activists had accused the President of violation of Sharia norms, namely worshipping of national hero Manas and erection of the monument to Manas in the country.

In 2012, the State National Security Committee had put out a figure of 200 websites as being operated by the extremist groups in the country.<sup>47</sup> The Interior Ministry had revealed that between 2005 and 2010, over 1,000 active members of radical extremist

organisations were identified and detained.<sup>48</sup> Over 700 faced criminal proceedings.

The officials revealed that 72 per cent of the Imams did not have religious education, 25 per cent had completed secondary education and only 5 per cent had higher religious education. There was no standard set for a degree, as the Imams practiced religion at will. Some imams received religious education in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Pakistan. According to official data, over 1,000 people were studying at 30 foreign theological and foreign educational institutions. Most of them went through unofficial channels. There was a widespread practice of Kyrgyz men growing beards and wearing Pakistani-style white clothes. Followers did not recognise any state institutions and refused to register their children's births or send them to school. The Prime Minister had even made a statement that Kyrgyz have a different culture and there was no need for Muslims to emulate the Pakistani dress code.

Following the incidents in Osh in June 2010, the media had begun reporting about the elements of IMU establishing links with terrorist camps in Rasht Valley (Tajikistan).<sup>49</sup> They had become a more robust outfit with broader outreach and goals.<sup>50</sup> Its foot soldiers were trained in the FATA region of Pakistan, and included recruits from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>51</sup>

The experts suggested that Jihadi culture was spreading at unprecedented rate as the level of frustration and discontent was growing higher among Tajiks and Kyrgyz, where the states had failed in carrying out political, social and economic reforms. According Kadyr Malikov, Professor of Madrid University Wahhabism could erupt in the north of Kyrgyzstan, mainly in Chui province and Bishkek, in the coming years,<sup>52</sup> gradually covering all aspects of public life from politics and culture to business.

Some recent indigenous forecast studies on the rise of political Islam entitled *Central Asia-2020: Opinions from within* released in Almaty on August 20, 2012, had suggested that an Islamic Caliphate might emerge either in the entire Central Asia or at least in some parts of the region.<sup>53</sup>

The report said a wave of Islamic opposition with support from outside is likely to emerge to challenge the ruling regimes. The document asserted that Islamists might come to power through street protests and revolutions and the probability of that scenario was no more than at the level of 5 per cent currently, but in the mid-and-long term the probability of the creation of Islamic Caliphate will grow from 5 to 30 per cent. The report noted that political Islam in Central Asia was presently in a formative stage – gradually expanding its network, resource base, viability and political demands to emerge as an alternative to the current authoritarian regimes. The experts believed that the threat from the Islamists to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is greater.

At least, in the case of Central Asia, a forecast was being made through a careful study based on the merging trends in the region. This is unlike the collapse of the Soviet Union and also the Arab Spring that took everyone by surprise. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the process of Islamisation of its polity is likely to be faster due to its democratic transition.

### **Islamisation of Kyrgyzstan**

A number of factors have contributed to the rapid growth of Islam in Kyrgyzstan. According to Constitution, the Kyrgyz Republic is independent, democratic, law-governed, secular, and unitary state. Article 7 of the Constitution says none of the religions can be designated as a state religion. Article 4 forbids formation of a political party on religious grounds.

Experts point out that over the years the number of mosques has exceeded the number of schools. It appears that the Kyrgyzstan does not have a proper database on religious organisations. According to official information Kyrgyz were Muslims and all Russians were Orthodox. As per the official statistics given by the State Commission for Religious Affairs, the country had 1,886 registered Islamic organisations.<sup>54</sup> A total of 2,270 religious organizations had registration in 2011. These included 1,881 societies, centres, foundations, 82 religious education institutions, 329 fraternities and sisterhoods.

Islamic organisations constituted 1,886 and Christian organisations 368. In 2011, according to the Chief Mufti Chubakazhy Zhalilov, the number of mosques was 2050 and over 3,000 Imams were working. The country had 3 Islamic universities, 7 institutes, 52 madrasas.<sup>55</sup> The religious teaching was regulated by the Religious Department of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. In 2012, over 3,000 registered religious organizations were operating in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>56</sup> But, Kyrgyzstan's State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA) had registration of 138 organisations which were allowed to operate legally in the country. The Law on Religion existed since 2009.

The number of mosques and religious organizations has grown rapidly in the country. Almost all the villages throughout the country have more than 4-5 mosques on average. The Kara-Suy district of Osh province alone had 136 mosques and 124 religious schools.<sup>57</sup> The maximum number of these are concentrated in the south, especially in the Osh and Jalalabad regions.

Islam has been aggressively challenging the Kyrgyz traditional pagan religious beliefs that revolved around shamanism; worshiping of *Tengir* (sky worship) as well ancestral worship of their national hero the Manas king.<sup>58</sup> In fact, there is still a legal tussle between Islamists and Tengirists, the former accusing the latter of subverting the growth of Islam.

As mentioned before, the influence of groups like the HuT and Tabliqi Jamaat was visible at every level of Kyrgyz society and power structure. Regular indoctrination was given on one-to-one basis through websites.<sup>59</sup> Often the followers gathered at city parks, cafés and public squares.

Of course, competitions among various strains of Islam exist, mostly among foreign-sponsored groups. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries were spending millions of dollars for building mosques in Kyrgyzstan. The Tabliqi Jamaat too had been receiving funding from abroad.<sup>60</sup>

The Kyrgyz imams were mostly receiving religious education in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Pakistan. Many have been visiting the Tabliqi Jamaat

Centre in Nizamuddin in Delhi in the guise of tourists. Bangladesh and Indonesia were other destinations where the young imams were getting trained. According to official data, over 1,000 people are studying at 30 foreign theological and foreign educational institutions. Most of them went through unofficial channels. The National Security Committee revealed that children aged between 10 and 15 from Naryn region (Eastern Kyrgyzstan) were transported by Tabliqi Jamaatto Bangladesh for religious training.<sup>61</sup> There was speculation about early entry of Wahhabis even in the north of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>62</sup>

Besides, other groups such as the Turkish groups Nurgus or Gulins that propagated moderate form of Islam were spreading their presence in Kyrgyzstan. In fact, the struggle for dominance within the non-Shia sects, particularly between the Arab (Salafi) and Turkish (Hanafi) missionaries had intensified. Whereas, the Shias have not shown much activism for proselytisation drive in the last two decades in the region. However, the Sunni variants were persistently aiming to fill the traditionally space of Sufism, Tengirism, and Communism practiced by people.

In the early 1990s, the Muslims in the former Soviet space (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) were lenient towards Turkish missionaries. The Turkish groups tended to check the extremist Wahhabi variant, but Turkish Islamic teachings seemed to be moving along the propagation of Turkic nationalism.

For example, the Nurjus are Turkish Muslims who follow the teachings of Said Osman Nuri or Fetullah Gulen. The Nurjus are related to the Naqshbandya Sufi brotherhood, traditionally rooted in the region. Nurjus runs the Azis Mahmud Khudai Endowment that carries out a lot of charity works in the region. In Central Asia, the Nurjus or Nurjulars function in the name of Khezemet that has a large network with wide membership. Many young Turkish Muslims who have been advocating Nurju in Central Asia since the 1990s, were active in schools, colleges and business firms. The Nurju activities are funded by Nurju business groups across Turkey.

The Khezemet aims to establish a stable, pro-Turkish environment in Central Asia. They conduct activities through clandestine operations. The membership is drawn from state institutions and business elite, who are able to lobby for promoting political and economic interests. Essentially, the Nurjulars works for countering Wahabbi and Tabliqi Jamaat activities sponsored by Saudis, Pakistanis and Egyptians in Central Asia. The group also works for anti-Chinese interests while encouraging pan-Turkic ideas amongst the Uyghur in Central Asia.

The Nurjus are fairly successful in Kazakhstan but elsewhere such as in Uzbekistan the Turkish group faced resentment from traditional Hanafi followers.<sup>63</sup> The Nurju schools are bit elitist in orientation as such less popularity among traditional Muslims. There was also resentment in Kyrgyzstan for Nurju for it practiced a stricter version of Islam than the Kyrgyz own version which was far more moderate in interpretation. The Nurjus are said to be a part of CIA operation in Central Asia.<sup>64</sup> Currently, the Tabliqis and Wahhabis and other Saudi and Pakistani sponsored groups pose greater challenge to the secular groups like the Nurjus. However, in the light of recent events in Turkey and RecepTayyip Erdoğan's call for banning Nurjus or Gulins, Central Asian states have taken measures to curb their activities.

In addition, several other cults were operating in Kyrgyzstan that included: Mormons, Krishnaite, Donald Hannong, Satanists, and Church of Moon, etc. According to Ekaterian Ozmitel, a head of Religious Studies Centre, Ozmitel relations between state and religion were getting tense due to lack of legal clarity.

Since the 2010 Bishkek and Osh incidents, the government had started screening the local Imams; many Christian and non-traditional religious groups were outlawed.<sup>65</sup> Kyrgyz civil society strongly protested against new restrictions imposed through the Parliament.<sup>66</sup>

In 2011, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community was banned from worshiping and its registration was cancelled by the Kyrgyzstan's State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA).<sup>67</sup> The National

Security Service (NSS) claimed that Ahmadiyya Muslims were a “dangerous movement and against traditional Islam.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, several other sects faced legal actions, for challenging the traditional religion of Kyrgyzstan. In 2012, Kyrgyzstan’s Prosecutor General’s Office ordered the outlawing of the Unification Church, the controversial religious movement founded by Korean leader Sun Myung Moon. The prosecutors ruled the Moon sect was “a danger to the country’s security”.<sup>69</sup> The National Security Committee stated that the non-traditional sects posed a real threat to stability and public safety of the country.<sup>70</sup>

All in all, there was a prevailing sense that the authorities were opening the door to more fundamentalist strains of the religion.<sup>71</sup> The democracy has only facilitated the growth of various sectarian groups, depending on the funding they received from outside. Unlike before, the spectacle of tens of thousands of men is seen praying on the streets and corners of cities. Interestingly, several important political and official figures were frequently seen praying alongside the crowds.

In many ways Kyrgyzstan was becoming a testing ground for Islamic missionaries of all kinds – a phenomenon primarily driven by internal economic compulsions, but mostly induced by external efforts of missionaries of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.

The liberal Russified population in Bishkek detested Kyrgyzstan adopting an open-door policy on religion, especially against the growing radicalisation of the society.<sup>72</sup> But many Kyrgyz experts like Sultanov claimed that full religious freedom was the best way to prevent the spread of radical elements. A HuT activist Kadyr Malikov was quoted in the media by saying “The results of the Arab Spring have shown that secular governments are cracking under the pressure of political Islam. Muslims are an enormous human resource. The one who knows how to manage this force will rule the streets.”<sup>73</sup>

The issue of hijab has become a huge controversy in Kyrgyzstan with lot of Muslims challenging the official restriction of wearing of the veil by women and girls in the schools and work places.<sup>74</sup>

In 2009, an education official announced that schoolgirls will no longer be allowed to wear hijab.<sup>75</sup> The media reported that many Muslim students were forced to remove their headscarf. Schools' officials cited guidelines to enforce the school dress code. But the rights activists challenged the government move by saying that headscarves do not pose a threat to national security.

An attempt to move from authoritarianism to theocracy was also seen to be underway. New Kyrgyz MPs had started debating whether the Parliament should have a *namaz* (prayer) room and Fridays be declared a day off from work. Clearly, the issue was more politics than religion. The idea of opening a prayer room in Parliament was mooted by MP Tursunbai Bakir who suggested that it would not violate any laws. Bakir added that it "would be great to have each Friday as a national day off from work so that all Muslims could go to mosques for the traditional Islamic Friday Prayers."<sup>76</sup> However, the idea was opposed by many members of parliament stating that Kyrgyzstan is a secular country and therefore there should be no prayer room in parliament.<sup>77</sup>

Dinara Oshurakhunova, the head of "For Democracy and Civil Society Coalition contended that idea of breaking for *namazin* all official institutions contradicted the principle of the separation of religion from the state. She said, "The state must not violate human rights. But religious commitments are their choice. Nobody constrain deputies to go to any mosques, we have plenty of them now. Such initiatives cause tensions in the society. It is quite dangerous."<sup>78</sup> Similarly, several MPs across the political parties sharply criticised the move to introduce religious practices in parliament. Many MPs also asked who is going to pay the deputies for these two hours of absence from work.<sup>79</sup> But, several right-wing MPs insisted for the *namaz* break.<sup>80</sup> Finally, the Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament had to announce a two-hour break for Friday *namaz* on December 24, 2011.<sup>81</sup> This resulted in the State itself initiating steps to patronise Islam by introducing laws in parliament.

## IS in Central Asia and Implications

The appearance of IS' footprints in Central Asia (first time detected in the summer of 2014) and the subsequent swelling number of recruits drawn from the region to Syria sent shock waves across the region. Like in Srinagar, it started in early September 2014 with the emergence of an IS flag on a Tashkent bridge. Western media quoted an official estimate of at least "7,000 recruits from Russia and the former Soviet Union" fighting in Syria and Iraq.<sup>82</sup> In fact, ever since IS' Chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appointed Tajik and Uzbek jihadists as *Amir* of fighting brigades in Syria, the recruits from Central Asia have only grown. Their number is said to have increased by at least 300 percent since June 2014. These recruits are drawn from the pool of Tabliqi cadres, schools, universities, madrasas, and from Central Asian migrant worker communities in Russia. The home-grown terrorist outfits in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan may also have contributed.

Some experts had quoted the estimates of regional authorities citing 1500 ethnic Uzbeks (500 from Uzbekistan and 1000 from Southern Kyrgyzstan) fighting alongside Jabhat al Nusra in Syria and Iraq.<sup>83</sup> In September 2015, the CSTO special services had identified (and blocked) more than 57 websites created to recruit Central Asian residents into the ranks of IS.<sup>84</sup> To be sure, but for the CSTO security umbrella, and for the fact that Central Asia's politico-economic settings resembled those of the Arab world, the countries would have encountered a degree of local resurgence like the "Arab Spring".

News reports in 2014 quoted the IS as having chosen an anonymous person as "Amir" of Uzbekistan. Not just that, towards the end of September 2014, the leader of the Waziristan-based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) Usmon Ghazi rejoiced the astonishing success of IS in Iraq and declared allegiance to Islamic State. The IMU faced sustained losses after the Pakistani military bombed hideouts following the Karachi airport attack that killed 37 in June 2014. Ghazi was said to be raising fresh recruits and hopes to unite with Taliban and IS.

Initially, there were no confirmed reports on how many Central Asian fighters may have gone to Syria except for scattered evidence and information from online videos available on the sites. The estimates varied from 500 to 1,000. This author, however, recalls how the phenomenon of Central Asians flocking towards Syria and Iraq began from early 2012.

To be sure, all the prerequisites – historical, political, socio-cultural – including the demand for creating the Caliphate in Central Asia existed even from Soviet times. Several outfits such as the IMU, IMT, HuT and others surfaced immediately after the Soviet collapse. They remained outlawed in the region but sustained their operation across Af-Pak throughout the 1990s backed by the Taliban and al-Qaida. Their aim was to overthrow the regimes and establish the Caliphate in Central Asia.

Even the relatively advanced and stable Kazakhstan had started experiencing serious terrorist attacks since 2011–2012. The Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) and others emerged in 2012. However, more seriously, a video showing 150 Kazakhs inside Syria with the IS banner in October 2013, had come as a surprise. Media reports claimed that some Kazakhs were even believed to be among the founders of IS. Subsequently, the media flashed that 250 people travelled to Syria via Turkey (Kazakhstan has a 30-day visa-free regime with Turkey). Some Kazakh jihadists seemed to have returned home since then but they faced serious prison sentences.

In August 2014, Abu Muaz of IS' Kazakh Jamaat gave a call to Kazakhs to join the jihad in Syria. Kazakhstan later banned Takfirwal-Hijra, a radical Islamic group linked to al-Qaida. Media also reported that the disappearance in Kazakhstan of a 50-kg container of Cesium 137 was being linked to IS. It was suggested that the ISIS was looking for nuclear material from Central Asia. Reports on various websites indicated that IS has a separate Kazakh Jamaat perhaps called Jamaat Daoud consisting not only of Kazakh fighters but also Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Nogais, Karachaevs, Russians, Ossetians, Dagestanis, Chechens, Tajiks, Arabs, and a German. Kazakhstan may face a lesser threat from IS but the country could remain a source for

new recruits, especially from Southern regions like Jambul, Chemkent and Kizil-Orda. Certainly, Kazakhstan could eventually become a source of funding for jihadi groups fighting in Syria and Af-Pak.

With regard to Tajikistan, possibly over 200 jihadists were initially reported to have been fighting along with the IS. The government figure was 110. It was reported that from a single village Chorkishlik, 20 youth had gone to Syria by 2014. The Tajik fighters are known for their brutality and ruthlessness and many of them may be battle-hardened veterans of the Tajik civil war (1990s) who later joined groups in Afghanistan. Reports suggested numerous instances of Tajik fighters being killed in Syria. But those returning from Syria are facing prison sentences. Some reports – possibly not credible – suggested that Turkish Airlines has been transporting hundreds of Tajiks from Dushanbe to Turkey and then to Iraq, and the Saudi Embassy in Dushanbe acts as the headquarters for recruiting.

Tajikistan faces the greatest threat in the medium term from IS-trained jihadists returning from Syria. Some believed Tajiks in Syria could be experiencing factional fighting and division. As for Uzbekistan, the level of radicalism has always been high. The breeding ground is the Ferghana Valley, shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Some 200-300 Uzbeks were supposed to be fighting along with the IS at the initial stages. The number may have gone up substantially since then. An Uzbek, Abdullah at-Toshkandi, earlier led the well-known Sabri Jamaat in Syria. Toshkandi was killed in the Aleppo Central Prison storming. Sabiri later became a Dagestani Jamaat led by Khalid ad-Dagestani. Reports suggested it had at least 70 militants. A separate Abu Hanif Jamaat comprising Uzbek fighters was mentioned in the literature. Someone called Abu Hussein was leading the Seyfuddin Uzbek Jamaat, which served in the Al Nusrah Front. The Front was known to have bomb-making skills like the Khorasan members. Abu Usman, who earlier served in Uzbek Intelligence for 20 years, appeared on video fighting in Syria. He went to Syria via Russia. Uzbekistan could face a serious threat in the immediate and medium term. IS could reignite the weakened IMU to transplant the IS model in Central Asia.

Not enough information is available on Turkmenistan although Radio Free Europe (RFE) estimates about 300-350 Turkmen fighters in Syria. In October 2013, the Grand Mufti of Syria suggested 360 Turkmen fighters in Syria. Turkmenistan can face threat in the longer term. Figures for Kyrgyzstan varied. As stated above, the country's economic backwardness and its remoteness, make it a fertile recruitment and training ground for IS. Provinces like Osh, Naryn, Batkent, and Jalalabad have been prone to jihadi calls. Saudi Arabia and Qatar had opened their embassies in 2012 and they were patronizing Islam in the country. Poverty is the main driver. Some reports suggest Kyrgyz members are paid approximately \$5,000, compared to about \$150 in their country or \$1500 they would be earning in Russia. The modus operandi to reach Syria is through Turkey. Many Kyrgyz have returned but many continue to fight for money.

Scores of young women from Central Asia have been recruited since 2012 mainly for employment purposes in the Middle East. It is not clear whether they have joined Jihad al-Nikah (Sexual Jihad). In the past, Chechen Ingushkia women were used for weapon smuggling and suicide bombings inside Russia. The IS' widely known fighting brigade Shishani Jamaat, commanded by a Chechen, Amir Umar Shishani has in its ranks large number of Central Asian fighters. Shishani is a Russian-speaking Jamaat designed for optimum operational effectiveness. Others groups like Jamaat Adama, Jamaat Akhmada, Abu Kamil Jamaat and Jamaat Khattaba are composed of Russian-speaking Chechens, Caucasus, Dagistanis and Central Asia jihadis. Many are said to be fighting on the forefront in Kobani.

There is no single factor cited for motivating Central Asians to join IS ranks. Some have been certainly driven by the spirit of jihad (righteous martyrdom) while others may be drawn to it due to ignorance and bigotry. However, the search for employment and earnings remain the main driver. More than 4 million migrants (Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz) engaged in low-paid jobs in Russia have been vulnerable to the jihadi network. They are tricked into the jihadi net by unscrupulous recruiters who promise them jobs in Turkey and Europe. One reason why Central Asian fighters find it

lucrative to rush to West Asia than to the Af-Pak region, is because they find IS more inspirational, prestigious, and rewarding than fighting in the Af-Pak region. Moreover, Central Asians are never empathetic towards the Af-Pak Taliban, for they pose a direct threat to the region. They perhaps find other reasons like better living standards (permission to bring family, permission to marry local women) to go to Syria. It is also less hazardous to reach Syria than Af-Pak as Turkey provides an easy gateway. All the Central Asian States have favourable visa regimes with Turkey.

Clearly, the IS has a bigger design for Central Asia, for it knows that to have a presence in the heart of Asia offers greater geopolitical stakes than in West Asia. It may be waiting for the right opportunity to concretize the plan possibly as and when a power vacuum arises out of the looming succession crisis in the region.

In fact, Central Asia does provide an identical and ideal geopolitical environment, socio-cultural conditions and the requisite economic resources for the IS to grow. The authoritarian political backdrop apart, the dynamics of power-play here is also influenced primarily by the oil/gas revenue as well as by the ethno-religious nationalism which is growing rapidly in the region. There is also drug factor that could add to the complexity, due to region's proximity to Afghanistan. Thus, collectively, they make the situation here even harder to deal with.

Appointing Central Asian jihadists as *Amir* appeared to inspire and reignite the regional Islamic cadres such as the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), IMU, Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) – previously known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) – and others. Clearly, currently the concerns in the region are less about the Taliban's infiltration and more about trained IS jihadists returning to the region. Apart from IS' strategies and tactics, the returnees would be inspired to establish *Wilayat Khorasan* State in Central Asia. In fact, IS would be seeking alliances along ethno-nationalist lines instil the cause of jihad.

The perceptions over IS' threats differ. So far, the regimes are acting tough on the returnees, imprisoning them to deter others from

flocking to Syria. However, critics believe that governments tend to exaggerate IS' threat and use it only as a pretext to rein-in domestic opposition. At the same time, no common regional strategy exists on how to deal with the growing menace. Any coordination is unlikely except under the Russian-led CSTO mechanism.

It is also a fact that financial insensitivity is one of the motivators for Central Asian youth heeding to the IS' call. In fact, this has given rise to the hope that their zeal for jihad will not remain sustainable in the longer run. The Russian-speaking fighters, barring Tajiks and Uzbeks are said to be less prone to extremism and since they come from Western-style upbringing; they are unlikely to commit for a jihadi life in the long term, a reason why many hope that they would eventually shun their support to the IS. The cases of disillusioned young returnees narrating their horror stories and expressing serious apathy for fighting jihad have been reported. That is why, even the Taliban brand of terrorism, espoused by IMU and local outfits, have so far failed to gain popular support in the region. As mentioned before, both the Taliban and al-Qaida have failed miserably to set foot in Central Asia despite proximity to Afghanistan-Pakistan in the post-9/11 scenario.

Presently, the numbers are not so significant but IS is qualitatively a different type of the threat mainly to Russia and China. The large number of Russian and Turkish-speaking jihadists from coming from the Caucasus, Central Asia and Xinjiang has been a source of serious concern for Moscow and Beijing as they fear IS-trained fighters could expand their operations along the southern-belt of the Russian Federation and China. Russia has been undertaking several military measures with the hope to counter such threats. On October 16, 2014, John Kerry cited Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov saying that over 500 Russian citizens are still fighting in Syria. Russia has since then reported to have a vast intelligence gathering system in Syria. To be sure, the US and Russia will eventually come together to fight the IS menace like they did to undermine the Taliban post-9/11.

Any scenario of the IS gaining a toe-hold in Central Asia or the creation of a *Khorasan* under the Caliphate would have grave

implications for the region and beyond. The extremists could pursue their agenda of introducing *Shariah* law, the Caliphate system and sectarian goals in respective home countries. Mullah Fazlullah of Swat considered himself as the founder of the *Khurasan* movement. The pledge of support to the IS by six-top leaders of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) indicated that efforts were underway to unite various splinter groups in FATA to coalesce under the IS banner.

The idea of situating *Wilayat Khorasan* in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as its pivot baseline was to broaden the expansion to include the Caucasus, Xinjiang, and Kashmir in the next campaign. The aim would be to tear even into non-Muslim territories. To be sure, *Khurasan* may not be able to trigger a large-scale campaign like the one seen in Syria, but the idea will continue to inspire new radical elements in the region and pose a formidable security challenge to India, China, Russia and Europe.

It would be difficult to imagine how Pakistan will avoid using the network without annoying the Saudis irrespective of what the Chinese might say to curb Uyghur fighters.

The IS' outreach in Central Asia seems closely linked to its moves in Russia and China. It has not only drawn Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Turkmen fighters but many jihadists from Russia's Caucasus region (Chechnya, Dagestan) and Uyghurs from China who are fighting in Syria and Iraq. Not only do the Russian-speaking jihadists play a major role in the IS, they have also built a community of their own in the areas they control. Mostly, they settled near the Syrian city of Raqqa. According to Western media reports, they are raising their children to be second-generation jihadists. Moreover, many young children in Central Asia are motivated to shift to Syria as a prospective plan for the future. According to a report by Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs ministry, 85 children under the age of 10 and 36 teenagers recently left Kyrgyzstan for Syria.

Similarly, the Chinese Uyghur Muslims are also based in northern Syrian towns of Idlib including the strategic town of Jisr al-Shoghur, Ariha, and Jabal al-Zawiya. Their numbers also had grown from barely hundreds a year ago to a few thousands in recent years.

They too had joined the ranks of the al-Qaida affiliate, Al-Nusra Front.<sup>85</sup> The Uyghurs were perhaps mobilized by the allied Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) previously known as the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).

The prospect of these jihadists returning home to fan out the IS' cause has become alarming. This could have been one of the reasons for Russia's intervention in Syria, which has indeed proved to be a masterstroke. In fact, there have been reports that Russian special services have controlled the flow of jihadists into Syria, possibly enabling them to join up with IS. Quite clearly, many of them may have been eliminated during its successful air campaign before they could return home to foment trouble. According to some estimates, about 2,000 jihadists from Russia and former Soviet republics may have been killed in Syria during the air raids.<sup>86</sup>

However, this may not have diminished the prospect of violent extremism growing in Russia and Central Asia. For example, the sectarian dimension of Salafi Muslims in the Caucasus and Central Asia is a complex one and it offers the IS further opportunity for tapping into such vulnerabilities.

The level of radicalism underway and the extent to which ordinary citizens had fallen prey to IS' cause could be judged from the shocking scene in February 2016 when a Central Asian female migrant named Gyulchekhra Bobokulova killed a four-year-old girl and paraded her head in Moscow.<sup>87</sup> The incident at Moscow's Oktyabrskoye Polye metro station had shaken the ordinary people to ponder how the menace of radicalism could be addressed. The incident could very well be part of a calculated game plan if not an open provocation to initiate a wave of ideological aggression to ignite conflict along ethnic and religious lines in Eurasia. Moscow would do well to prevent itself from being entangled into Islamic sectarian conflict and take necessary steps to deal with a potential backlash from the IS.

Also and to be sure, the ambition of the IS goes beyond the limits of Iraq and Syria to spread its wings into Europe, Russia, Central, South and Southeast Asia. Clearly, any attempt at enlarging

the scope of the anti-IS coalition or a serious collaboration between Russia and the West, would be thwarted by forces that stand to profit from the continuing West-Russia standoff. However, the absence of a collective effort to deal with the threat would make the situation worse. Moreover, Russia and Europe will directly bear the brunt of such a scenario.

While the Asian countries (China, India and Iran) may still remain immune to the ensuing crises in Central Asia, it is the European countries, Turkey and Russia that will face the consequences of the impending refugee crisis, drug-trafficking, social instability, threat of terror, energy and economic disruption, et al. Europe is fully aware of what it takes to handle the migrant crisis at its borders with millions of refugees fleeing war and poverty from West Asia, Africa, Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Thus, what remains to be seen is the ramifications of the political vacuum that may ensue during the imminent succession scenario. One only hopes that the scenarios of West Asia do not get repeated in Central Asia.

### **China's Opportunistic Policy**

Yet, it is not only the forces like the IS but others too which would be reaping the strategic fruit of the continuing rift between the West and Russia. As the West and Russia inflict costs at each other, they could only serve to benefit the others and this is glaring in today's scenario. Therefore, the challenge before Europe and Russia is to quickly reconcile their security discourses that resonate with the interests of the Central Asian people themselves and the threats they perceive as most dangerous in their lives.

The United States since the Kundus episode in September 2015 seemed to have realised that there is no quick solution to stabilising Afghanistan. The former Secretary of State, John Kerry's visit to Central Asia in December 2015 and the pronouncements he made in the region had indicated that the US was seeking a common platform for partnership. He had recognised that the Western policy towards Central Asia is too narrowly focused on Afghanistan. The

US seemed willing to tone down its democracy and human rights call, and instead it wishes to see Central Asia becoming an engine of growth and the connectivity of trade and commerce artery across Europe and Asia.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, every Central Asian state has been passing through a phase of anxiety since the Ukraine crisis. The developments since then adversely affected their economies. The regional economy has taken a beating since the Western sanctions against Russia and the fall in oil prices. Consequently, the regional states sought to benefit more from Chinese aspirations. However, it is clear that the current investment and infrastructure development projects pursued under China's grand plan of its \$40 billion "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative are an unlikely good portent either for the region or for the long term interest of China itself. Already, there were signs of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and its protective measures failing due to China's aggressive market push. Experts have expressed concerns over Central Asia risk falling into a 'resource curse' and being 'transit cursed' situation because of the conduit role it is seeking to serve for the Europe, and Chinese growth.<sup>89</sup>

History has evidently proved that exercising of any monopolistic approach always failed in the region. The dominance of any power which is not even a part of the region goes against the very logic of regional integration and affect its unity and prospects. For example, China's quest for an integrated China-Central Asia gas pipeline has the potential to create further mistrust among regional states which still have unsolved border and water issues besides simmering ethnic discords that created perpetual trust deficit among leaders. Therefore, creating condition for instability in region would not be in the interest of China either.

The growing Chinese economic component especially in the energy sector is already resulting Russia losing its security edge in Central Asia. China has been seeking direct security ties with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan by way of military weapon transactions with them.<sup>90</sup>

It seems that the threat of terror spilling over from Afghanistan and the putative threat of IS are providing additional incentive for China to enter into Central Asian security space.

China's proposal, made by General Fang Fenghui, Chief of General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during his visit to Kabul in February 2016, for creating a four-nation anti-terror regional alliance consisting of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan has come as a surprise move. The proposal has received support from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.<sup>91</sup> China's active commitment in Afghan security with its pledge to offer \$70 million in military aid to Afghanistan could alter the regional security alignment that would exclude Russia and India.

It will be interesting to see how it will go against the existing structures such as the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that are meant to ensure security in the region. To be sure, such a parallel security enlargement process of China will offset the Russian-led CSTO, the main agenda of which is to uphold the stability in Central Asia through military bases and infrastructures in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Barring Tajikistan, these states are also the members of EAEU.

Clearly, China, after achieving its political and economic objectives, is gradually intruding into the security domain of Eurasia. Earlier this has been pursued in the garb of security cooperation – a mechanism being pursued under the SCO idiom and charter to counter the Western influence in Eurasia.

China is definitely seizing the opportunity of taking advantage of Russia's current difficult moments i.e., standoff with the West and resultant geopolitical decline in Central Asia. The fact that the US has already endorsed China's proposed security alliance on the ground that such an effort would help bring long term stability in Afghanistan indicates that Washington too is keen to see weakening of Russian monopoly in the security affairs of Central Asia. Moreover, China and the US are already engaged with Afghan and Pakistan governments for talks with Taliban.<sup>92</sup>

The regional states would be mindful that China is creating its own security space which is primarily aimed at securing its own restive Xinjiang province from extremists rather than taking a wider security responsibility for the region.

Also, the Chinese have never liked the idea of Eurasia floated by Russia. China's own master plan the New Silk Roads or One Belt, One Road (OBOR) is meant bring the Central Asian space and beyond into its own fold.

### **Russia's Responsibility**

While China's security alliance idea will be hard to realise anytime soon, but it is a clear indication of how Russia's hold in Central Asia is weakening speedily. Russia's status as the chief security patron within Central Asia got dented when Uzbekistan received security support from the US, while NATO has also established substantial security related engagements with individual states of the region.

This is again an indication of the negative consequences of Russia's strategic detachment from Central Asia especially from the region's cultural, social, technological and developmental space. As Moscow intends to forge closer ties with Pakistan, its position would further weaken that will be difficult to reverse.

Notwithstanding all their achievements, Central Asian states are unable to stand up on their feet fully and they would require protection and support from outside which are suited to meet their local condition and demands. In the past, Russia played bridge role for cementing civilisational contact between the Western and Eastern culture that beautifully converged in Central Asia. The region seems yearning once again to turn to Russia for salvation within the spirit of interdependence and coexistence. That opportunity seems to have arrived now. It is time for Russia to recast its foreign policy approach more innovatively at least to protect its own vital interests in Central Asia. The world outside confronted with the grave uncertainty will be too willing to recognise Russia as the sole provider of security Central Asia. Russia needs to seek a convergence of interests with powers other than China to cooperate with the West, India, Japan and others.

This is not to suggest that Russia is not prepared to deal with the situation in Central Asia. It is taking necessary measures under the CSTO mechanism to counter the threat of Islamic terror.<sup>93</sup> Russia retains its military operational and coordination capacity between the CSTO member-states to collectively take on to ISIS like threat in Eurasian theatre as being demonstrated during the joint military exercises “*Center 2015*” at the Donguz firing range.

Russia, it seems, has established contact with the Taliban to seek a common cause to diminish the IS components in eastern Afghanistan, estimated to be about 300 fighters according to the US commander told to the Congress. The Russian contacts with the Taliban seem so far confined to intelligence-sharing and information exchange only. It seems Moscow will refrain from supplying weapons to the Taliban and would uphold the sanctions regime against the Afghan militia.

But, Moscow is taking a big risk of playing ball with the Taliban and now with the Pakistani intelligence whose goals can never be deciphered by Russian by any stretch of imagination live alone serving Russian interests. But, Russia’s contact would have consequences for legitimizing the Taliban with international recognition. Whatever the Russian game plans are, to view the Taliban as a “lesser evil” could prove a folly for Russia in the longer run.

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## 7. India-Central Asia: Reflection on Ancient Linkages

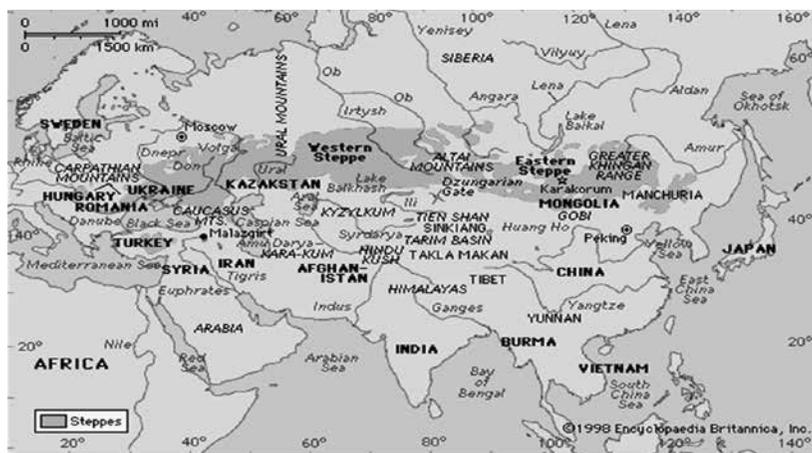
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The Soviet disintegration in the early 1990s had created fresh opportunities for India to look at Central Asia in its entirety especially when the region was known in India as the geographical pivot of history that shaped the evolution of human civilisation.

Historically, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent were closely interlinked as has been amply demonstrated by waves of cultural exchanges emanating from the steppes of Central Asia that dispersed into multiple directions to transform the human and material landscape of neighbouring regions including India.

Central Asia even today offers the best archaeological sites of early human settlements and movements. The archaeological evidences have showed that the Caucasian tribes Androne and Begazy-Dandybay inhabiting the vast Eurasian steppes had gradually moved east and southward across the Kopet Tag, Hindukush Mountains and Kashmir at the beginning of 2000 BC. One could come across innumerable sites scattered throughout the Kazakh steppes with archaeological remains of the early Caucasian people, including the burial mounds of noble warriors. They were known for their metallurgical skills.<sup>1</sup> The Kazakh State Museum in Almaty provides the most complete and systemic description of the peoples' movements on the steppes or grasslands.

**Map 7.1: Map of Eurasian steppes or grasslands Scythia occupied the Grassland of Ukraine. The Grasslands of Asia are to the north of Saka lands which are around and to the south of the Aral Sea.**



Source: <http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/saka/index.htm>.

## The Sakas and India

The Sakas who were of ancient Persian origin, known by Greeks as Scythians and the Chinese called them “Se” were among the known Central Asian tribes to have dispersed southwards up to Northern India around 1,000 BC. The historians also talk about the Yueche tribes, who were proto-Turks migrated southwards to Indian Peninsula.

Central Asia was the real home of the Sakas, who had once established a dominant state in the Semirech’e (seven rivers) region in present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during the 7th-6th centuries BC. The Sakas were known by different names such as Messagetas, the Daces, the Issedons and the Tigrhauada. The magnificent sites of the Sakas abundantly exist on the foothills of Tian Shan Mountains. For example, the Kurgan complex near Issyk town, not far from Almaty, provides the complete history of the Sakas. This early “Aryan” tribes had a well-developed “animal art” with description of struggle among steppe animals. The Sakas had their own language and mythology.

Map 7.2: Map of Saka lands



Source: <http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/saka/index.htm>.

The Kurgan complex gives an exhilarative feeling about the Central Asian pagan past. The locals called the complex *Kurgan*, which sounds more like *Spurgan* (Tibetan) or *Sapurgan* (Mongolian) for burial mounds. The complex is on flat ground housing over 40 burial mounds – each with 60 metres in diameter and 6 metres in height. The mounds are multi-layered with two burial rooms and chambers. It was here that the archaeologists found a body clad with a gold-embroidered dress a few years ago, from one of these mounds known as “Golden Man” or *Altyn Adam*. The mounds date back to 4th-3rd centuries BC unravelled the unknown treasures of human history. Though it is not easy to see the original piece of the Golden Man, the replicas kept in several local museums provides fascinating details of the Sakas whose influence spread in those times up to Rajasthan in India.

The burial mounds in Issyk area on the foot hills Tian Shan range give a complete description about the people of the pre-historic times in Central Asia.

One of the golden men probably 17-18 years old was found dressed in a golden uniform with headgear heavily decorated with

gold plates of various forms. The images included snow leopards, tau-teke, arkhars, horses and birds. The frontal side of headgear had figures of two winged horses with goat horns. He is wearing a spiral-shaped neck decoration, with images of tiger heads.<sup>2</sup>

The man is clothed with a red coloured leather Kaftan, heavily decorated with gold figures. The breasts, the bottom and collar of the jacket are decorated with square pendants in the shape of tiger heads. The jacket is covered with three thousand gold articles. The red colour leather trouser ends with leather boots with tops decorated again with gold pendants. He has a long iron sword and an iron dagger fastened on the belt. The sword and dagger scabbards are again decorated with golden images of animal figures.

The burial mounds of the Sakas and the Golden Man vividly describes the life and activities of the Aryan people, whose references are found in the Vedas, the Puranas and the Mahabharata.<sup>3</sup> The Kurgan complex of the Sakas if researched may provide more accurate historical correlations between the ancient steppe and the Indian tribes. Kazakhstan's national emblem today reflects the "imperial sign" of the Sakas represented by the Kushan Empire.

The Sakas had a deep connection with India. The history of the Kingdom of Rustam or Greater Sakastan is well known. The Saka rule prevailed over immense lands from present-day Seistan and Baluchistan in Iran, Afghanistan northern Pakistan, Kashmir and a large part of northern India.

Some historical records suggest that the Sakas first embraced Buddhism during the period of the Saka King Maues, who conquered Takshashila by the end of the 1st century BC. The Saka influence in India is evident in Mathura which has a 1st century BC inscription on the Mathura lion capital "honouring all Sakastanasa".<sup>4</sup>

The historians suggest that the second phase of contact between India and Central Asia took place during the period of the ancient Turks, dating to the middle of the first millennium AD. The Turks (Kimako and Kipchak), whose original home was Altai and the Steppes of present-day Mongolia, slowly diffused southward into China, Iran and northwest India. It is believed that the Tibetans,

Tanguts, Uyghurs, Mongols and Karakitai expanded around this period. Buddhism had already arrived in the region of Hindukush and South Tarim by 100 BC. Many of these Turks, who worshipped Tengri (sky) also tried to introduce Buddhism among the nomadic people. However, it was later in 200–400 AD, when the Kushans, whose empire included the northern frontiers of Central Asia, had begun to patronise Buddhism, gradually spreading it to Bactria, Tarim and to northern China.

### **The Silk Route Connect**

The fabled Silk Route, which came into being in the 3rd century BC to 15th century AD had a profound impact on the evolution of the cultural complex, extending from the Steppes of Central Asia to the northern parts of India. A widespread network of caravan routes made Central Asia a land bridge between the East and the West, and between the North and the South. The region since then started playing the role of a contact point between civilizations. Several empires, religions, languages, philosophies and cultures flourished here. The traders, pilgrims and travellers crossed the transcontinental trade route. They exchanged goods, culture and ideas, and created an environment of prosperity and harmony.

The southern fringe of Central Asia formed the route of the Silk Route which remained active for over ten centuries and was used by both traders and invaders. Silk from China, spices and precious stones from India and silver goods from Persian crossed the passes of Tian Shan, the Altai, the Karatau, the Pamirs, and the boundless Kara-Kum and Kyzyl-Kum deserts. The Islamic geographer Yaqut noted in the 12th century that “a prosperous merchant of Merv had one warehouse on the Volga River and another in Gujarat (India), and he owed his prosperity to his role as a middleman in an axis of trade”.<sup>5</sup>

Even today, one gets the greatest sense of history to be on the prominent Silk Route (apart from in Turfan) in the Central Asian towns of Samarkand, Bukhara, Osh, Otrar, Turkistan, Chemkent, Taraz, Chu Valley, Balasagun, Sauran, Talgar, etc.<sup>6</sup> During the 5th-

6th centuries, these towns were the busiest trade and commercial arteries, supplemented by intense diplomatic and military activities. From here lazurite from Badakhshan and nephrite from Khotan travelled to different directions. The Silk Route passing from the north in the Ili River Valley was connected in the east with Chu Valley (now in Kyrgyzstan) and then moved further east to connect, Hami, Turfan, Khotan, Yerkand, Kashgar and India. To the south and west the route was connected to Ferghana, Osh, Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv. It also branched off to the Aral region and to Persia and in fact, many of these towns had remained active until the 14th century.

This author had the opportunity to extensively travel in Semirech'e (southern Kazakhstan) which was under the Turkic Kaganat. The area was the hub of Silk Route activities with its capital in Suyab. The ancient and famous city of Taraz or Talas, situated off the Karatau Mountains on the bank of river Talas near Jambhul city were active centres used by traders, merchants and militaries for battle. They also came under strains of both internecine wars and ecological disasters. Interestingly, all along these routes, the Indian imprints are brightly visible in terms of legend, stories, artefacts, monastic sites, Buddha statues, etc.

The city of Taraz was earlier known as Djamukat, named after a Sogdian ruler Djamuk (6th century AD). The other important towns that existed in the Talas Valley were Sheldji, Sas Kul and Tekabket, which are found on the upper side of the Karatau. Taraz was connected through caravan route with Ferghana Valley. In the east, the caravan route connected Kulan, Mirki, Aspara, Kirmirau, Navaket, Pendjikent, Balasugan, Sygnak and Suyab.

The city of Suyab was the capital of western Turks, the reference of which is found in all the annals of Chinese, Arabic and Turkic origin. It is believed that Suyab was destroyed in the early 7th century and the capital was shifted to Balasagun. All these cities are located on the banks of Talas River, Chu River and Syr-Darya. Further in the east, the caravan route continued to connect through Chu-Ili Mountains via Issykul with trade centres

in Eastern Turkistan such as Kashgar, Aksu and other oasis towns of Taklamakan desert. A route continued northward along the Tian Shan foothills through the present-day towns of Kastek, Kaskelen and Almaty. One of the ancient towns on this route was Talkhiz, situated near Talgar city 35 km east of Almaty. Talgar is now a modern town with a large settlement of other nationalities like Uyghurs, Russians, Germans, etc. From Talgar, the route dissects into two directions – one moving southwards following the tail of Zai-Ilisk Alatau via Issyk, Turgen, Chilik, across Ili River into the Issy-kul Valley and then to Turkistan and the other section branching off from Talgar continuing northward passing through Ili River and Kapchigai gorge leading to Chingeldi. A section follows along the Ili River up to Lake Balkash. The main route from Chingeldi cuts across intersections of several Semirech'e Rivers like Kuk-su, Ak-su, Lipsi, Tentek flowing northward from Jungar-Altai ranges finally turning southwards from Ala-Kul Lake and through Jungar Gate into Chinese Turkistan.

At this point a corridor separates the Tian Shan ranges with Altai Mountains. But the Silk Route extends further northwards across Ala-Kul Lake crossing the Tarbagatai mountain ranges to the banks of Irtish River near Zaisan. From this point numerous trade roads connect Western Mongolia through the Altai and Khangai mountains leading to ancient Karakoram city and further down to China across the Gobi Desert.

Turning back to the starting point in South Kazakhstan, Taraz is connected westward with Ispidjab also known as Sairam. Located close to Shemkent, Sairam in ancient times was an important trade centre on the Silk Route, where traders from every direction met and exchanged goods. The town was well connected with Shash (Tashkent), Bukhara, Samarkand and Khorezm. In fact, the oldest Buddhist sites in Kazakhstan, perhaps of the Bamiyan period, are found in Sairam. Ispidjab is further connected through Arsubaniket, Otrar (Farab), Shavgar, Yangikent to Syr-Darya. Further west, the caravan route goes to Kyzl-Kum desert, Khorezm and through lower Volga to the Caucasus. The same route also turns eastward leading

across Central and Northern Kazakhstan to the Irtysh, the Altai and Mongolian steppes.

The southern complex of the Silk Route is the most fascinating one. Each city has its own legacy and historical heritage to carry. Otrar, for example is one of the most ancient cities, founded in the 2nd century by the Kangyus – descendants of the Sakas. Later in the 8th century the city fell to the Arabs. Otrar is the place where the medieval philosopher and scientist, Abu Nasra ibn Mohammed, popularly known as Al-Ferabi was born. Otrar became famous for intellectual activity during the height of the growth of Islamic thought in Central Asia. Al-Ferabi's disciples included Islamic scholars such as Avicenna, Al-Buruni, Mahmud Kashgaria, Yusuf Valasunga, Ulugbek and others.

During the time of the Mongol invasion of Central Asia, Otrar along with its vast treasure of Islamic heritage was completely destroyed. However, at the time of Timur, attempts were made to revive the city's heritage. The famous contemporary Kazakh writer, Anwar Alimzhanov wrote a book following his research in India on Mughal history. The book was titled *A Gift from Otrar*, a historical novel located in the epoch of Emperor Akbar, for which he had received the Jawaharlal Nehru Friendship Award.

Talas has a 2,000-year-old history and was known as the city of merchants. It is believed that the Huns first founded the city, known that time as Talas in the 2nd-3rd century AD. The city later came to be known as Taraz meaning perhaps Tarazu or weighing scale. The city changed hands many times including to the Chinese who invaded it twice. Taraz town gives the preclusive impression of being on the Silk Route.

Taraz city is beautifully located near the Karatau mountain range in south Kazakhstan and is the capital of Jambul Oblast. The accounts and map illustration in Turkic language "*Divan-lugiat-turi*" by Mehmood-al-Kashgaria gives a vivid account of Taraz city. The life of the city focused around its bazaar (marketplace). The paintings in the city museum provides the best amphitheatre of a Central Asian bazaar, where merchants from all over the

world met and exchanged goods, where goods loaded camel humps crossed the streets halting along the caravan sarais (resting places for caravans), cottages, and handicraft shops. The traders here exchanged Russian made fur, golden amber, mammoth tusks, precious armour with Indian textiles, Persian carpets, Kashmiri muslin. It was here that silk clothes from China were sold to merchants from the Arab lands, India and Europe. The Taraz bazaar was particularly famous for Indian indigo, corals and handicrafts made in Bengal. The Indian shops were particularly known for keeping goods of popular choice, especially garments from Bengal and Kashmir.<sup>7</sup>

It is said that the bazaar was always full of wonders, where people from cold steppes could see real tropical elephants, monkeys and rare exotic birds. The museum reflected the life of the *Taraz bazaar* revolving around animals. It sold several hundred double-humped Bactrian camels and highbred horses a day. The sheep of Karakul variety was the most popular item of the bazaar. The nomadic Turks of Central Asia was known for making Astarkhan or local lamb pelts that were sold to the Arabs. The Kazakh Astarkhans are still popular in Kashmir and other parts of Asia.

The entire ancient city of Taraz, in radial-circular shape now remains buried under the ground following its destruction due to internecine wars and plunders. The present city, built on the ancient bazaar is a modern and Soviet modelled planned city. However, one can still feel the history under the dust of Taraz. One of the most mysterious structures in and around Taraz is the Akyrtaş, which is a rectangular gigantic structure that was built with heavy stones transported from surrounding mountains. Among the beautiful and old structures that still exist in Taraz is the 12th century monument of Aisha-Bibi mausoleum built on the caravan path. The monument – not very big in size – is built with carved terracotta in memory of legendary Aisha-Bibi and her beloved. The legend goes that Aisha Bibi, the daughter of a poet Zangi-Ata, while getting impatient to receive her beloved from battle, died in his arms. Another legend says that she died of snakebite on the way to receive her fiancé.

The mausoleum is covered with ceramic-tiled walled structures and terracotta carvings. The structure is now lying half ruined. According to local guides the structure was renovated during the Soviet period on the suggestion of Indira Gandhi, who visited the mausoleum during the 1970s. Adjacent to the Aisha-Bibi mausoleum is the Babadzi-Khatun mausoleum. This is a unique structure with its tomb pointed towards the top having sixteen vertical pleats. The structure is unusual. The local guide indicated that the monument might have been a Buddhist Stupa once, but was later converted into a mausoleum. The archaeologists refer to the tomb as being dedicated to the woman from the country, Bazhin (a Chinese town). Another significant monument in Taraz is the tomb of Aulie-Ata Karakhan built during the 11th-12th centuries. It is a square hall with a portal-domed construction. Some repair work is now being undertaken. The monument is in a park located in the middle of Taraz town.

India's connection with this town perhaps goes as far back as the 4th century BC, when traders brought Chinese silk to India. The use of Chinese silk was mentioned in Chanakya's treatise, the *Arthashastra*. It said that even the Sakas or Scythians promoted the use of Chinese silk. The city of Taraz appeared to have been dominated once by the Sogdians, who were trading with East Turkistan and India. The Sogdians were particularly attracted to Buddhism and introduced ideas, philosophies and arts of India to Central Asian societies. One of the most prominent pieces of art from India that was found in Taraz presently kept in the archaeological museum, is a dancing woman clad in a sari. On the Kyrgyz side of Talas city, this author had met individuals holding a collection of ancient Buddhist antiques which could be not less than 200 years old.

Taraz is now striving to identify itself with the legend Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati who became the Governor of Kashmir during the 16th century. The city has recently built a large monument of Haidar Dulati in front of the university building, symbolising that the region is the home of Daughlat tribe, to which the great medieval Kazakh hero belonged.

Turkistan is another prominent site on the Silk Route. In earlier times, it was called Shavgar, but later, in the 10th-11th centuries, it became Yessy. The word Yessy resembled Mongolian *Jassa* for state law. The Kazakhs later changed it to a shorter version – *Yasa*. The city has a long history going back to the 5th-6th centuries, when it was a meeting point for Turkic-speaking people. During the 7th century, it was a flourishing town with a crowded bazaar and endless caravans passing by from Europe to China. Turkistan later got associated with the great 12th century Sufi poet and philosopher, Khodja Ahmed Yassawi. Yassawi studied in Bukhara and was a student of Sheikh Khodja Yusuf Hamadani. He later founded a Sufi philosophical school at *Yasa* which came to be known as *Yassawi* School. *Yassawi* is a one of the main spiritual orders among the Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia. His main verses *Diwan-i-Khikmet* became very popular within Central Asia and outside. Yassawi rejuvenated the Turkistan city with thousands thronging to the Sufi town for pilgrimage from as far away as the Kashmir Valley. Turkistan was even adopted by Tamerlane as the centre of his political authority. Tamerlane not only patronised and glorified the teachings of Khodja Ahmed Yassawi but also erected several important mausoleums that are compared with the mosque of Bibikhanum in Samarkand, the Palace of Ak-Saray, and the burial vault of Dorusaddat in Shakhrisabz. The blue-domed mausoleum is simply magnificent. The walls are made of turquoise-coloured brunt bricks with calligraphy of Quranic scripts all over the building. As an important place for pilgrimage, Turkistan was considered as the second Mecca for Muslims in the region. It is still believed that a three-time visit to Turkistan is equivalent to a Haj in Mecca. Following Kazakhstan's independence, the government has paid considerable degree of attention to this historical site. The site and the monuments around the old city have been restored and renovated with the help of the UNESCO and Turkey. The latter has rendered assistance worth US\$ 20 million for the project to restore the mausoleum. It seems the Kazakh government is trying to popularise the *Yassawi* Order as an alternative religious narrative

against the growing popularity of other sectarian groups such as Wahhabism.

Interestingly, the Indians too have begun to seek relationship with Turkistan city. Since 2000, a group pilgrimage belonging to the *Yassawi* Sufi Order from Kashmir Valley has been visiting Turkistan to lay a Kashmiri *chaddar* (chain-stitched rug) at the Yassawi tomb. The tradition of celebrating a day in “Shaval” of Yassawi continues in Kashmir. Efforts are also being made in India to translate the *Diwan-i-Khikmet* and another rare manuscript, *Nasab-Nama* into Urdu.

Other important cities with a rich historical heritage include Kulan, Mirki and Aspara, which reflect the cross-cultural confluence of Indian, Persian, Turkic, and Chinese cultures. In fact, this syncretism continues to manifest in the contemporary beliefs and cultures of the people of Central Asia.

The imprint of Indian culture here seemed far deeper. This is notwithstanding the fact that direct contacts between India and Central Asia ceased during the last several centuries. The people of the region today practice Islamic culture, yet their philosophical outlook and approach to the world is still dominated by Buddhist thoughts and ideas. A famous Sufi poet, Jalalludin Rumi (1207-1273) once wrote about the tolerant culture of the Central Asians:

It happens very often that a Turk and an Indian understand each other at once. It is often that two Turks can't find a common language. So, language of concord is quite another thing – mutual understanding is dearer than mere language.

This is certainly true even now when one sees the receptivity among the Central Asian folk for Indian culture. The popularity of Bollywood is a reality that cannot be removed from the life of ordinary people.

The positive influence of Indian thoughts on the evolution of the Central Asian Silk Route culture is yet to be explored and understood thoroughly. The experience of interactions with the common folk in

Central Asia gives the impression that there exists enormous scope and potential for Indian culture to flourish in the region again.

### Notes

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6. The author has travelled extensively in this area.
7. Based on author’s discussion with academic experts of Taraz University in 2010 and 2011.

## 8. Rebooting the Civilisational Connect

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Central Asia had been one of the pivot points for the Indic-civilisation to grow. The region finds description in Indian ancient history as *Uttara-Kuru*.

The spread of Buddhism, as an organised form of knowledge, in Asia is known to have been the result of two-way recurring historical interface between the Southward moves of nomadic tribes from steppes of Central Asia and the Northward moves of traders and merchants from India. This interplay between the two continued until the Arabs arrived in Central Asia in the mid-seventh century.<sup>1</sup> Initially, Buddhism travelled along the ancient *Uttara-Path* and picked up momentum on the Silk Route. At one point of time, the spread and diffusion of Indic culture stretched across the Eurasian world.

### **Buddhist Globalisation**

The initial process of Buddhist globalisation started during the Greek period when it had spread beyond northern India to Gandhara and Central Asia. It was during the reign of Alexander the Great (250-125 BC) that the first interface between Western Greek philosophy and Indic philosophy took place. Buddhism continued to flourish during the Indo-Greek Kingdom (180-10 BC)<sup>2</sup> which gave birth to Greco-Buddhism. The epicentre of Buddhism was then confined to Gandhara and Bactria (the land that today straddles Afghanistan and Tajikistan).

Besides the Greeks, other Eurasian tribes such as the Sakas and proto-Turkic Yuezhi-Kushan – to which Kanishka belonged – also

became the protectors of *Dharma* and contributed to the evolution of the northern school of Buddhism during the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD.

The Sakas, who had conquered western India in the 1st century, promoted Buddhism to the Hindu Kush and the Tarim Basin. In the same period, Buddhism travelled from Kashmir to Khotan-Cherchen and Kashgar via Gilgit. It expanded further along the southern rim of the Tarim Basin to the kingdom of Kroriana at Niya. In the west, it traveled towards Sindh, Baluchistan, and eastern Iran and on to Parthia.

The Yuezhi-Kushans, who succeeded the Sakas and the Palahavas (Partian), built a big Greco-Bactrian empire with its centre in Gandhara and Takshashila. By the 2nd century, the Kushans were able to spread Buddhism to cover the entire Central Asia up to Amu and Syr Darya to cover the area of Termez, Bamiyan (Afghanistan), Penjikent, Adzhina-tepe (Tajikistan), Varaksha, Balalyk-tepe, Kara-tepe, Fayaz-epe, Zar-tepe, Afrasiab, Airtam, Dalverzin-tepe, Kuva, Khalchayan, Bhukara, Samarkand (Uzbekistan). These centres formed the biggest Buddhist complexes of Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> Other important Buddhist archaeological remnants include Gyaur-Kala, Merv and other places of Turkmenistan.

Nava Vihara (Nawbahar) in Balk was Central Asia's greatest monastery. Kapisha was another big monastery situated near Kabul. In 591 AD, Nagara Vihara was among the well-known main monastery near the Khyber Pass. The Vihara, located south of present-day Jalalabad, had housed the skull relic of the Buddha and was considered as the holiest pilgrimage site.

Later during the reign of the White Hun ruler Mihirakula, Buddhism had suffered neglect. In 515 AD Mihirakula had destroyed fourteen hundred monasteries in Gandhara, Kashmir and other places, ostensibly under the influence of jealous Manichaean and Nestorian Christians.

## **Towards the East**

Later, the Sogdians (Uzbek) merchants became the zealous promoter of Buddhism who introduced Indic philosophy all along the trade

route up to Amu-Darya, south Tarim Basin, Kucha and Turfan. By the 3rd-4th centuries, the Tokharian people of Kucha further spread Buddhism to China proper through the Gansu corridor (Dunhuang). It was the Sogdians who first introduced Buddhism to the nomadic Mongols.

The Sogdians may have helped translate several Sanskrit and Gandhari Prakrit texts into Chinese during Sui and also later during the time of the Tang dynasty. After emperor Wendi, who founded the Sui Dynasty (589-618 AD), had declared himself as a Buddhist universal emperor (Skt. *Chakravartin*), the transmission of the entire Indic philosophy to the rest of Asia finally got completed.

All in all, Buddhism patronized by the Turkic Shahis, Sogdians, Tibetans and Tang Chinese remained strong in Gandhara, Bactria, Sogdiana (Uzbekistan), Kashmir, Gilgit and Kashgar until the Arabs arrived in Central Asia in the middle of 6th-7th century.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, by 8th century, Central Asia had its own variant of Buddhist tradition that had a variant of Zoroastrian, Nestorian and Islamic features. This tradition remains visible today in the form of Bactrian, Sogdian, Khotani, and Turfan Buddhism.<sup>5</sup> The Chinese traveler Faxian (Fa-hsien) who travelled through Central Asia between 399 and 415 AD, and another traveler Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang) in 630 AD had witnessed hundreds of active monasteries in Central Asia that practiced a blend of Sogdian and Kashgari forms of Buddhism. Hsüan-tsang also noted about the predominance of the *Mahasanghika* and *Sarvastivada* traditions in Central Asia which belonged to the *Theravada* School of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

Gandhara-Greco-Buddhism begun to wane in the face of growing Arab onslaughts. The Arabs first attacked Bactria in 663 AD and captured Balkh, including Nava Vihara Monastery from the Turki Shahis – following which thousands of monks from Nava Vihara had fled to Kashmir and Khotan. It was then King Lalitaditya (701-738 AD) who had facilitated the influx of monks from Bactria to Kashmir. He built several new monasteries in Kashmir to shelter them.

Around the time when Xuanzang was passing through Central Asia, he had found the declining state of Buddhist monasteries along the south of Indus in Punjab and also in the Swat Valley (Oddiyana). He noted that the monasteries were losing their institutional drives and the monks were performing only rituals. Xuanzang had found the monasteries of Samarkand closed in 630 AD. But earlier when the Chinese traveler, Songyun (Sung-yün) had visited Swat in 520 AD, Buddhism was still flourishing.

### **The Fall of Buddhism in Central Asia**

After the Arabs captured Sogdia by snatching Bukhara from the Western Turks, Buddhism in Central Asia came under attack. The Umayyads gradually conquered other Buddhist areas of the Ferghana Valley and Kashgar. By 9th-10th centuries, Buddhism finally had begun to wane in Bactria, Sogdiana and other parts of Central Asia. The Muslim historian, al-Biruni had noted in the 11th century that Buddhism once held sway up to Syria, had been destroyed by the Sassanids.<sup>7</sup>

The Arab invasion would have further spread towards the East if the Tang Chinese and Eastern Turks from Mongolia had not put up a strong resistance. Many would believe that but for Genghis Khan's rule in the 12th century, Islam would have spread even up to Japan. By the 11th-12th centuries, only the Turkic Uyghurs, the Mongol Karakitai and the Tibetans in the Gansu-Ordos (Tanguts) region were embracing Buddhism.

While Buddhism in Central Asia was dying, a variant of Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism was spreading towards the west of the Tian Shan Mountains (present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) under the influence of the Kalmyk Mongols led by of Zaya Pandita who was a Mongol Buddhist trained in Tibet. In fact, in the post-13th century, Buddhism was travelling in reverse from Mongolia, China and Xinjiang, westward into the Chu and Ili valleys through Zungar desert (Kayilik) and across the Torgot pass of the Tian Shan range. In 1617, the Oirat tribes (Torgut-Kalmyk) moved further west and took Buddhism up to the banks of the Volga and Black Sea.<sup>8</sup>

In the West, the Umayyads had managed to wrest Sindh and Baluchistan from of the Turki Shahis in 711 AD. Sindh at that time was populated by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains. Xuanzang had noted that Sindh had over four hundred Buddhist monasteries with over twenty-six thousand monks. Saurashtra too was a major hub of Buddhism and had over a hundred monasteries with six thousand monks. Valabhi, for example, was one of the largest centres of Buddhist activity in Western India then. It received refugee monks displaced from Sindh due to Arab persecution. Probably, many new monasteries were added later at Valabhi to accommodate the influx. The entire coastal belt, stretching from Kutch to Saurashtra and up to Bharuch, was dotted with magnificent Buddhist caves – which were perhaps built for the fleeing monks.

The Dudda Vihara Complex was greatest among all the Buddhist institutions where thousands of monks studied. Xuanzang noted over 200 monasteries existed at Bharuch, Atali, Kheta, Valabhi, Anandapura and Saurashtra and they housed 10,000 monks. Another Chinese scholar I-tsing noted the primacy of the Sāmmitiya school of Hināyana tradition in Valabhi University. Whereas, the Taranga hill site always remained a prominent Tantrik Buddhist centre even till the 9th century.

While Buddhism in the rest of Asia had survived due to the localization factor,<sup>9</sup> elsewhere such as in Central Asia, Bactria, Sindh, Kutch, Saurashtra, monastic destruction was accompanied by slaughtering and beheading of monks.

It is important to underline here that trade and commerce played a big role in the propagation of Indian philosophy in the rest of Asia. In fact, prior to the arrival of Islam (7th century), the entire region was dotted with magnificent Buddhist monasteries which had served as both cultural and commercial outposts for the Indian merchants and travelers. From China to the ports in Sindh they served as resting facilities for monks, traders, travellers and pilgrims. Monasteries provided capital loans to traders, patronised artisans to carry out their commerce. They were the main contact points for movement of people, goods and ideas, including spiritual interfaces that took

place between India, Central Asia and China, and they were not without advantage to the common heritage shared by Asian societies today.

The destruction of these monasteries entailed an inevitable disconnect between India with rest of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Even prior to the Arab invasion, Buddhist monasteries were facing severe persecution under the Iranian Sassanids and Zoroastrians who imposed heavy taxes on any Indian goods traded by Byzantium through the region. Vivid accounts are available on the demise of Buddhism and the subsequent fading of the Silk Route that runs from China to Europe, passing through Turkistan, Sogdian, Iran to Byzantium. As a consequence, Indian and Chinese goods had to be shifted to pass through more stable routes via Sindh to Ethiopia and then on by land.

The Arab campaigns later further curtailed overland trade and commerce. Ultimately, the movement of goods and pilgrims from India to East Asia had to be shifted via the maritime route through the Strait of Malacca and Sri Lanka.

The Arabs also adopted social and economic measures to undermine Buddhism. They protected those who paid tribute but those who resisted conversion to Islam faced persecution. Not only did the Arabs levy tax on land and trade but also on pilgrimage, on those visiting holy Buddhist and Hindu shrines in Sindh, Baluchistan and Gandhara.

The conversion to Islam was carried out mostly through violent means. But possibly, the success of the spread of Islam became a reality because the Arabs made it impossible for each new generation to continue to follow the path of *Dhamma*.

But, it is also true that a long-drawn interface between Buddhism and Islam had given birth to a unique synthesized tradition of *Sufism* in Central Asia. The *Sufi Silsilahs* are still popularly practiced both in India, Central Asia and China's Xinjiang province.

At the same time, Central Asia still houses remnants of hundreds of Buddhist shrines, *stupas* and monasteries, as well as texts in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts. Sanskrit texts on

medicine, astronomy and astrology written in Brahmi are found in the region. Similarly, hundreds of administrative, commercial, legal and miscellaneous documents, written in Sanskrit, Prakrit and Brahmi script have been discovered from Central Asian sites. Numerous records of Indians having settled along the cities on the Silk Route are being unearthed. More than 750 Kharosthi documents in Prakrit language on wooden tablets, leather pieces and silk fragments are found in the region. Aurel Stein's collection from Xinjiang included Buddhist art objects including paintings from the 'Thousand Buddha' Temple in Tun-Huang. As noted by Uzbek historian Azad Shamatov, "Indian influence in pre-Islamic Central Asia cannot be underestimated."<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly, the propagation of Buddhism from India to China through Central Asia was the greatest cultural movement in history. In fact, even after its obliteration, the psychic nature and philosophical outlook of Central Asian people still remained rooted in past Buddhist legacy. This is especially true in Kyrgyzstan where people still identify with the practice of rituals that are identical to dogmatic rituals of Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> In fact, many Buddhist ideas and thoughts still find reflection in popular Central Asian epics, folklore and fairy tales.

### **Buddhism in Semirech'e**

In the post-6th-7th century AD, the second wave of the spread of Buddhism covered the Semirech'e region (present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) along the Syr Darya, Talas River Valley and Chu Valley (Suyab and Navaket). The archaeological findings suggest that Buddhism reached its height in Semirech'e region during the 7th- 8th century AD and continued to flourish in different forms up to the 18th century.

Several research works on Semirech'e Buddhism was carried out by Russian scholars such as B. A. Litvinski and B. Y. Staviski. The central feature here is that Semirech'e did play the role of a bridge for the spread of Buddhism in China. Some good research on Semirech'e had been done in the late 1990s by scholars sponsored

by the European Union under the International Scientific Projects (ISP).<sup>13</sup> This author had undertaken joint research investigation with the European scientists in Semirech'e area in 2000.<sup>14</sup>

Some of archaeological findings – monuments, cult objects, inscriptions – found in Southern Kazakhstan and in the Chu Valley of Kyrgyzstan, have signs of early Mahayana Buddhism introduced by the Chinese monks and merchants. These include ancient towns of Suyab and Navaket located at the key trading points on the Silk Route.

Four major Buddhist sites are located on the Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border. Two of them (Ak-Beshim and Krasnaya Rechka) are located near Tokmak and other two (Novopakrovka and Novopavlovka) are found in the vicinity of Bishkek. Altogether, four monasteries and three temples are found in the Chu Valley complex. But a Buddhist site might as well have been in South Kazakhstan, near Chimkent's Sairam region (ancient Ispidjab), where underground cells of a Buddhist monastery are found.

### **Ak-Beshim or Red River (Ancient Suyab)**

Ak-Beshim has one monastery and two temples. It was the capital of the Western Turks. Archaeologists have found so far three Buddhist monuments in this town.

The monastery was first excavated by A. N. Bernshtam in 1940 with the main sculptor of Buddha Sakyamuni in preaching position sitting on a lotus throne with two disciples standing on the sides. The images found here resembled those found in Western China dated 9th-10th century AD.

Temple -1 excavated by L. R. Kyzlasov in 1953–54 had 14 pieces of bronze statues mostly of Buddha and a star-like image depicting a Turko-Sogdian couple with a camel. Kyzlasov dated the temple construction to the period between 679 and 751 AD. The style and materials have similarities with those found in East Turkestan.

The Chinese traveller Du Huan who crossed the city around 750 thought the monastery to be a part of “Big Cloud Monasteries” built on the order of Empress Wu Hou (Wu Zitian) after she adopted

a Buddhist messianic policy on the bases of *Big Cloud Sutra* (Da Yunjing) in 1692.

Temple-2 at Ak-Beshim was excavated by L. P Zyablin in 1955-58 and had a square-shaped hall with a double ambulatory corridor and four entrances.

### **Krasnaya Rechka (Ancient Navikat)**

The site, located 40 km from Bishkek may have been the capital of Turk Turghesh (699-751 AD). It was excavated by A. N. Bernstam in 1940 and later by L. P. Kozhemiako in 1961-63. They found fragments of Buddha's heads and Chinese bronze mirrors dating to the Tang dynasty.

A temple had clay sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas. The walls were painted with frescoes and murals. Among others, they found Indian-style statuettes in gilded bronze and fragments of letters written in Brahmi-Sanskrit on birch bark.

### **Novopakrovka (Ancient Pakap)**

The monastery site located 10 km south of Bishkek was excavated in 1953. The excavators found 20 bronze gilded Buddhist statuettes including a 'Kashmir- style' bronze statuette of Buddha under an arch with Sanskrit inscriptions and three 'Topa-Wei style' bronze statuettes at the site.

### **Novopavlovka (Ancient Dzhul)**

Novopalovka or Kliuchevskoe is located 10 km west of Bishkek. A rectangle-shaped monastery along with small cells had a figure of Vajrapani.

### **Sairam (Ancient Ispidjab, South Kazakhstan)**

It is the oldest among Buddhist sites found in Kazakhstan located 15 km from Chimkent. Kazakh archeologists Karl Baipakov and A. N. Grishenko found an underground complex in the 1980s, which hasn't been explored fully. The complex belonged to the Bamiyan period, testifying to early spread of Buddhism in the region under

the Hephtalites (5th-6th century AD). Another ancient Buddhist site, Kostobe is located on the bank of Talas River.

Isolated Buddhist objects in ceramic, metal and ivory works are found in Kazakhstan. They include a statue of Bodhisattva in Abhaya Mudra (7th-8th century AD) found in an area between Talas and Chu Valley. There are also Hindu idol statuettes with some Sanskrit scriptures found in the Chu Valley. At the ancient town of Bundjikent, archaeologists found fragments of pottery with Swastika motifs, as well as a clay mould of a *stupa* from the 7th-8th century AD.

The rock carvings of the sitting Buddha in the lotus position with Tibetan inscriptions are found in the south of Chu valley. Similar carvings are also found on the rocks south of the Issykul Lake. Tibetans may have possibly carved them during their occupation of the region in the 8th-9th century AD.

In the west Semirech'e, near the town of Talgar (ancient Talkhir) an ivory statuette of a standing Buddha with musicians was found. There is yet another significant Buddhist site in Semirech'e belonging to the 9th-11th century.

### **Antonovka (Ancient Kailak)**

The Antonovka Temple is located 500 kilometers from Almaty towards the east at the foothills of the Jungarski Alatau Mountain. Historians believe that the site may have been ancient Kaylak, then the capital of the Turk Karluks (11th-12th century AD).<sup>15</sup> Baipakov in 1999 found the Buddhist temple belonging to a Uyghur proto-Lamaist school. It is a square structure (16 x 18 metres) with several rooms, corridors and towers on the sides.

It has architectural similarity with the temples of Hami, Dunhuang and Kara-khoto (Etsin-gol oasis, in south-west corner of Mongolia). Historians believe that temple was once visited by Franciscan monk Rubruquis (Van Rubroek) in 1253 on his way to Karakoram. Until now, no objects have been found at the site. Antonovka is now inhabited by Russian Cossack people who have preserved this historical site without causing much damage.

The third phase of Buddhist entry in Semirech'e was traced from the period 14th-15th century lasting up to 18th century. This relates to the Tibetan Lamaistic Buddhism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan introduced by the Oirat-Kalmyk Mongols. The monuments belonging to this period are mainly monasteries and stupas. The major ones include the monastery of Sumbe in Kegen district located at Kazakh-China border. F. Gregoriev excavated the monastery in 1992. It is a square structure and has the characteristics of Tibetan constructions.

Another monastery, Ablait, was found in Semipalatinsk province but the site was not fully excavated in 2001 when this author visited there. Another monastery was found at Kyzil-Kent in the Karkaralinsk district of Karaganda province. So far, Kyzil-Kent represents the western-most Buddhist site of Central Asia. Zh. Smailov excavated it in 1986. It consists of a square plan, with four side-chambers, and two floors. Several Lamaist forms of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as well as, Tantric cult objects similar to those widespread in Tibet and Mongolia were found here. The site is on a beautiful location next to a rocky hillock. The place is not fully excavated as yet but a private Kazakh firm KUMBEZ has taken up a project to restore this Buddhist monastery belonging to the 17th century.

Most of these monasteries present classical type Lamaist architecture and cult objects. The spread of the Tibetan form of Buddhism was probably associated with the Mongol scholar, Zaya Pandita (1599-1662) who, after receiving education in Tibet, began to popularize the Tibetan Geyluk-pa sect among the Western Mongol tribes including amongst Oirats, Jungars and Kalmyk. The influence of Tibetan Buddhism had perhaps reached up to the central parts of Kazakhstan.

Tibetan Buddhist imprints are also visible in the Chu and Ili basins of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. No clear records are available but they were created by the Kalmyk monk Zaya Pandita who propagated Buddhism across the Zungar deserts during 16th-17th century. The Kalmyk Mongols had to flee from Western Mongolia

due to internecine fighting or due to conflict with the Chinese. They migrated through the Kazakh steppes and Ural Mountains in the 17th century, finally to settle down at the bank of Volga.

## **Ili Buddhas**

One of the most magnificent Buddhist sites in Kazakhstan of the Mongol-Lama period is the Buddha carving in Tamgali Tas near Ili River. The immense figures of Buddha and Budhisattvas are carved in deep relief onto a rock face on the Ili River, near Kapchagai Lake, not far from Almaty.

The Ili River originates in East Turkistan and flows across the southeastern parts of Kazakhstan before it dries up in Lake Balkash. There are no well-documented local records available about the Ili Rock carvings, except a Russian scholar describing it in a book on Central Asia in the 19th century. Later, Kazakh social scientist, Chokhan Valikhanov had drawn pictures of Ili and wrote bit descriptions about the carvings in some of his writings. A Kazakh scientist Rogozhinsky Alexei from the Kazakh Institute of Archeology told this author that proper scientific research about such a monument was totally banned during the Soviet period, hence no detailed work was being done on it. Moreover, the Kazakhs generally tend to view aspects relating to Buddhism as signs of Chinese imperialism.

This author was the first to decipher Tamgali Tass writings in 1999 when he was the Director of Indian Culture Centre (IIC) in Almaty, and gave a presentation on the carving at Mukhtar Aueзов House in Almaty in late 1999. It was later presented to the Kazakh President in December 2000.

Tamgali Tass Buddha since then has attracted a lot of attention from ordinary Kazakhs. The local authorities and educational institutions have shown a lot of interest about this historical site.

The Buddha images along with Tibetan and Mongolian scriptures on the rock indicated that the Central Asians too professed Tibetan or Mahayana Buddhism at least during the 16th-17th centuries. Perhaps they appeared after the Jungarian expansion into

Kazakhstan. It is also likely that they have been created either by the Uyghurs of Khotan who professed Tibetan Buddhism prior to their conversion to Islam in the 10th-11th centuries. More probably, the Mongols of the Kalmyk-Jungar tribe who adopted the Tibetan form of Buddhism in the 16th-17th centuries, had carved the Buddhas. It may also have been the works of Kalmyk monks who immigrated to the Volga through the Ili River during the 17th century.

The significant aspect of Buddha carvings on the bank of Ili River is that it is on the legendary Silk Route. It was natural that pilgrims, travellers, merchants, conquerors and saints may have traversed the route over the centuries. It may also have been an important halting place for Central Asian merchants on their way to Lake Balkash.

Both in their artistic style and metaphysical characteristics, the images of Ili typically belonged to the Vajravana or Tantric Tibetan School. The main rock has three figures with Tibetan sub-titles:

**Figure 1: Buddha S'akya-muni (Sakyamuni Buddha)**

*Sans-rgyas S'akya-t'ub-pa la n-mo* (adoration to Buddha Sakyamuni)

**Figure 2: Buddha Avalokita or Avalokitesvara (Compassion Buddha)**

*Sans-rgyas bphag-pa spayan-ras-gzigs la n-mo* (adoration to Buddha compassion) Phagspa-Chenraisi is the central figure of Ili.

**Figure 3: Buddha Manla (Medicine Buddha)**

*Sans-rgyas sman-gyi bla la n-mo* (adoration to Buddha Medicine)

**Figure 4: Nagaarjuna** – a Buddha figure with snakes covering his head perhaps depicting Nagarjuna, who propounded the Doctrine of Madhyamika (Middle Path), is located right below on an isolated rock. The figure has been damaged due to tempering by visitors.

**Figure 5: Other Buddha Figures**

There are other isolated Buddha figures on the rocks closer to the bank of the river with no descriptions. But several inscriptions in Tibetan and Mongolian/Uyghur scripts are clearly visible. A number of popular Buddhist mantras, chiefly the *Om ma-ni-pad-me*

*Hum* written in Tibetan, Pali, and Uyghur/Mongolian or perhaps in Manchu on a cluster of rocks in Ili, are visible. The ones written in Tibetan and Pali can be deciphered more clearly.

So far, the Ili Buddha remains the most popular Buddhist site for visitors, tourists and academic researchers. The site was popularised by Indian Culture Centre in 1999. Since then the Kazakh Institute of Archeology and Kazakh Institute of Conservation had begun to show more interest for its preservation. In 2002-2003, the Worldwide Heritage Center had assisted the collection for the nomination of Ili Buddha complex in the Worldwide Heritage List of UNESCO.<sup>16</sup> The Government of Kazakhstan too has since taken some measures to provide juridical and physical protection of the monument through a special Decree in 2001.

### **Issyk-Ata (Chu Valley) Rock Carvings**

One of the most interesting Buddhist sites is the rock carving of the Buddha at a site called Issyk-Ata, 70 km east of Bishkek on the lower hills of Chu Valley. The figure is that of *Sangyas Manla*, the Tibetan version of Medicine Buddha, carved on a rock in a narrow valley. The Buddha figure is 1.5 metres in size and is in a sitting position. Its left hand is holding a bowl with fruits and the right hand is posturing towards the knee in a healing mudra. Around the figure, one could decipher the Tibetan Mantra of *om-ma-ni-pad-me-hum*. The figure is in good condition, but the writings are indecipherable. It appears that the site was famous for hot-spring water therapy. A small stream of hot-spring water continues to flow 5 metres next to the Buddha carving. A mosque has been built near the site in recent years.

The rich legacy of Buddhism in Central Asia now remains a part of history. There exist no indigenous people practicing Buddhism in the Semirech'e region. The Tsarist Russian Census Agency had reported that 82,000 Kyrgyz and 1,19,162 Kalmyk practiced Mahayana Buddhism towards the end of the 19th century. This was apart from the Buddhists of the Buryatia and Chita regions in Siberia.

It is unlikely that Buddhism will ever return to influence the normal cultural life among the Central Asians. However, there is growing recognition for the Central Asian Buddhist past. In fact, the linkages built via the Silk Route at one point of time were so intense and inseparable, transcending all human activities from language, literature, religion, medicine, and folklore to culture and traditions.<sup>17</sup>

It is evident that merchants, travellers, monks and pilgrims from Central Asia played a vital role in propogating Buddhism while also connecting the cultures of India to the distant Asian landmass.<sup>18</sup> Buddhist imprints are still visible across Central Asia in the form of historical names to include a few such as Gilgit, Kashmir, Gandhara, Takshashila, Oddiyana, Swat, Balkh (Mazar-i-Sharif), Parthia, Khorasan, Merv, Margiana, Sogdiana, Bukhara, Samarqand, Tashkent, Ferghana, Suyab, Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Niya, Kucha, Karashahr, and Turfan (Qocho), Dunhuang, Dzungaria, Beshbaliq (Urumqi).

Interestingly, many Central Asian families and individuals including scholars and collectors, continue to retain Buddhist relics and statues. They include statues of Zaya Pandita, Tsongkhapa, Buddha, Tara and relics like prayer wheels, Lamaistic objects, etc. Many antique collectors in the past occasionally approached the Indian Culture Centre in Almaty for their possible sale. More than 25 objects of gold-plated bronze statues, figurines, cult objects from the 7th-9th century found in the Chu Valley are in the hands of private collectors. Many collectors in Almaty are in possession of several Buddhist statues of Mongolian and Jungar origin. Bronze statues of Khalka Jebtsundamba of Mongolia and Vajrapani are seen in possession of private collectors.

Renewed interest for learning Buddhist philosophy in Central Asia has grown since the Soviet collapse. Several organisations have come up especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which strive to restore the region's Buddhist legacy. The explorers are also still unearthing fresh evidence of robust Buddhist presence in the region which firmly conforms to the deep-rooted ties between India and Central Asia. Quite recently, in Turkmenistan, a treasure of 1515

coins of Vasudeva, the Kushan King (3rd-4th century AD) has been found. These coins are perhaps kept at the Turkmenistan National Museum.

### **Buddhism as a Source of Influence**

Evidently, there are growing signs of Buddhism becoming a serious source of influence among major Asian powers, for Buddhism allows them to enlarge their scope of communication and build an emotional connect with countries that share the same heritage.

For example, China has lately been projecting itself as the main patron and sponsor for the Buddhist world and is drawing on its vast cultural resources for establishing cultural links with Buddhist institutions throughout Asia. In fact, since 2009, China has been forcefully evoking Buddhism as a means to underpin its 'peaceful rise' and using it as soft power advocacy to boost its global and regional influence.

China is building psychological connections of Buddhism to win the hearts and minds of people in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal and other Southeast Asian countries, possibly to reap geopolitical benefits from these links. This can be viewed as an attempt to make inroads into its traditional sphere of influence, a reason why New Delhi is unable to respond to China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative. Given the fact that China's own Buddhist heritage has a deep connection with Central Asia, Beijing may already be exploring joint collaboration projects on Buddhist themes in the region.

### **Prospects for India**

From India's perspective, Buddhism making a retreat from the vast Central Asian region proved fatal for its links with the region. However, several well-known scholars suggest that Central Asia still retains a range of Buddhist attributes that needs to be fully realised. Many facets of India-Central Asia linkages need to be revisited, at the academic and archeological level. A simple profiling of the Central Asian Buddhist past could provide a useful understanding as to how

India should be dealing with this region at least to build a layer of connectivity with the scientific community of the region. New Delhi needs to undertake several measures to retain its centrality in managing the Asian cultural space.

First, it should draw on its understanding of the past while emphasizing its relevance to the future, especially in the context of an Asian renaissance for reinvigorating cultural, socio-economic and intellectual aspects of Asia.

Second, while pursuing its connectivity projects including the Chabahar transport projects to seek direct physical linkages with Eurasia, India should also seek to incorporate the need for promoting its soft power connections with the countries of Central Asia.

Third, it is possible that Western India including Kutch and Saurashtra has the potential to emerge as the new centre to promote India's past links with Central Asia. For example, with this incredible record, especially after the discovery of Dev né Mori and Vadanagar, Gujarat could become foci of attention for India's future spiritual connectivity to Eurasia.<sup>19</sup>

Dev né Mori's can potentially reignite Asian renaissance. It may even act as a strong stimulus for its economic and spiritual interconnection not just among those who share Buddhist heritage and where Buddhism is still a living tradition, but even with those who share a common archaeological history, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. And, as Eurasia becomes ever more integrated, Buddhism could offer a new language of peace to cultures increasingly threatened by extremist ideologies.

Fourth, India should start engaging Central Asian scholars, historians, archeologists and others through scientific and scholarly exchange programmes i.e., invite them for participation in cultural conferences such as those being organized with Southeast and East Asian scholars.

Finally, India should start building its archeological linkages such as supporting the Central Asia countries in their excavation and exploration work.

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## 9. Central Asian Imprints on India

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Conversely, Central Asia left its own imprints on India during the medieval period in terms of shaping India history, polity and culture. In fact, the prolonged and intense interface had created the idea of “Hindustan” in the popular imagination of Central Asian people which still remains a critical factor for India’s ties with the region.

### **Gaznivides to the Mughuls**

Even before the Mughal dynasty was established in India in the 16th century, Central Asian Turkic rulers, especially the Gaznivides (911-1186) from Khorasan (Afghanistan) held influence up to Northern India. It was the period when aristocrats, writers, artists, singers and military leaders of Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmens Tajik and Kyrgyz origin were drawn to India to serve the Delhi Sultanate. The soldiers and merchants coming all the way from Kazakhstan and East-Turkistan spoke the Turk-Kipchak language. In fact, the Kipchaks who formed a large portion of the workforce during the Mughal period, introduced Turkic vocabulary in the Indian bazaars. The written text *Farhangy Zabancuyava Jahanfuya* by Badr-ad-Din described the use of Turk in Mughal courts.<sup>1</sup> Over a period of time Central Asians left a deep imprint on Indian life including language, paintings and arts. In fact, Urdu language was born as a mixture of Khariboli dialect and Turkic vocabulary.

For example, Qutub-u-Din-Shah and his associates had come from Turkistan city. Many of the Turkic kinfolks and feudal families

who came to India during that period continued to maintain their genealogical tree through their *Shadjra* tradition.

The Tamerlane invasion had caused many human disasters in India as he looted and murdered thousands of people, except craftsmen and masons who were taken to Samarkand and Bukhara to teach them the techniques of building monuments – the two-way movement of cultural flow continued during the mediaeval period.

India's contacts remained strong with the Farghana Valley – the heart of Central Asia and now shared by three countries Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It was from Ferghana Valley that Zahir-u-Din Babur, a descendent of Chagatai Turk-Mongols came to India and founded the Mughal Empire (1526-1858). During their three centuries' rule the Mughals introduced in India multi-faceted Central Asian culture and artifacts including, art, architecture, music, songs, theatrical traditions, epics, poetry and even cuisines which are now part of Indo-Islamic culture. The Mughal-era architectural splendours are living examples of Central Asian imprint. Babur died in India (1530) but in his autobiographical work the *Baburnama*, he nostalgically wrote about his former life and home in Osh. Babur's retreat house *Chilla* is still standing on the Suleyman Mountain in the centre of Osh.

Babur wrote his memoir in Chagatai language. Similarly, Humayun, Mirza Kamran, Mirza Askari and Mirza Hindal also wrote verses in Turki languages. Turkmen poet Bairam Khan's son Abdal-Rahim who knew Turki and Persian was assigned the task of translating *Baburnama* into Persian. Mirza Haidar Dulati later sustained the literary contact between India and Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia. His master work *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* is now regarded as a symbol of historical and literary contact between India and Kazakhstan. It is said that Gujarat Governor Aliquei Khan in Baidar wrote in Turki under the pen name of Sultan.

T. K. Betsembiev noted that Aurangzeb had issued a decree in Turki to a Russian Merchant Seamen Malenky, exempting him of custom duties for doing business between Russia and India.

Clearly, Chagatai language was highly developed in India and commonly used by the elites and intellectuals. A vast repertoire of

grammatical and lexicographic works in Turki was developed in India during the 17th-19th centuries. It is said that Aurangzeb patronized Muhammed Yaqub Chingi to complete *Kelur Namah*, a compendium of Central Asian Turki, following which other texts like *Haft Akhtar* by Kasibin Barbal, *Lughat-i-Turki* by Azah Khan, *Lughat-i-Djali fi bayan-light lughat-i-turkiyya* by Shah Tabib Bukhari, and *Farhang-i-Astari* and *Misan-Turki* by Ali Bakhat Gurangani appeared in the 18th century. The most recently found Indian work in Turki was a dictionary of five Turkish languages composed in 1727 at Ahmednagar by Muhammad Taqi Beg Qaraqyunku. The dictionary is believed to be containing enormous amount of words as well as useful information about the Manghishlag Peninsula of the northern Central Asian steppe.

Evidently, the use of Chagatai language in India had resulted in entry of a wide stratum of Turko Mongolian vocabulary into Indian languages. Both Hindi and Urdu received specific Turkic words, which are still being used in India. In turn, a large amount of Indian lexical elements entered the Central Asian vocabulary mainly through mutual contacts. There are several Indian loan words in Central Asian languages such as *Arisan* (mineral), *Bang* (drug leaves), *Bibi* (lady grandmother), *Bukhara* (vihara), *Shatir* (umbrella), *Erden* (ratna), *Jingil* (forest), *Lak* (lakh), *Nargil* (coconut), *Nil* (indigo), *Quant* (sugar), *Sandal* (sandalwood), *Sheker* (sugar). Similarly, some Turko-Mongolian words used in Hindi and Urdu vocabulary include Urdu (army), *Aga* (head master), *Aqa* (head), *Elchi* (ambassador), *Bhadur* (hero), *Tukma* (button, badge), *Top* (canon), *Chakoo* (knife), *Chamak* (flint), *Daroga* (overseer), *dafter* (office) *Dogla* (mixed origin), *Kabu* (power), *Kalass* (worthless fellow), *Kooli* (porter), *Keema* (minced meat), *Nokar* (servant) and many others. The suffix *chi* used in Urdu appears to be of Turko-Mongol origin. For example, words like *Bavar-chi*, *Khazan-chi*, *Masan-chi*, etc. The Mongols still suffix *chi* such as *Tumur-chi* (blacksmith), *Tharya-chi* (farmer).

Certainly, interactions between the two regions were not one-way processes. The renowned Uzbek scholar Al-Beruni visited India in the 11th century and wrote the famous book on India *Kitab-*

*Takkik Al-Hind* which remains one of the most authoritative historical accounts. Similarly, Abdurazzak Samarkandi, Ibn Sina and Al-Khorezmi were acquainted with Indian scientific works. The writings of Russian and Central Asian scholars reveal a huge influence of Indian culture on folklore, geographical names, moral-ethical codes and rituals in Central Asia.

Following the advent of Islam, the level of interface between India and Central Asia in the literary field had made substantial gains. This was mainly through the intermingling of numerous legends, folklore and heroic ideas coming from Arabic and Iranian writings. Azad Shamato, a well-known Uzbek Indologist in his extensive research on Indo-Central Asian folklore tradition traces the language confluence among Turki, Persian, Tajik, Arabic, Sanskrit, Bangla, Braj, Awadhi and Dakshini Bhasas that later became a court language of Muslim poetry, with its first genius in the form of Amir Khusro (1253-1325).<sup>2</sup>

Shamato studied the entire process of common linguistic and literary formation in the Indo-Central Asian region out of two streams of languages – Sanskrit, Braj Bhasha and Awadhi commonly used in India and Turkic, Persian and Arabic, widely used in Central Asia. He contends that the confluence was not only because of geographical proximity but also by cultural and social similarities in the life of those nationalities and tribes of the both regions.

Most experts refer to common legends, epic stories and folklores that were spread over the two regions through a long process of interactions. It is interesting how al-Beruni's through his book *Kitab-Takkik Al-Hind* was able to popularise ancient Indian legends, and folklore among Persian and Turkic-speaking people.

The *Panchatantra* became popular in Central Asia when it was translated into Arabic, Persian and Turkic under the title “*Kalilaand Dimna*”. The love story of *Nal Daman* written in Braj literary tradition was translated by Persian poet Faizi. Similarly, *Totynama* were translated by Zia-ud-Din Nahshabi into the Farsi-Tajik language. During Soviet times, M. A. Shiryayev translated

*Shukasaptati* (seventy stories of the parrot) into Russian. *Totynama* is now translated into many Central Asian languages.

In the 16th century Badr-al Din Kashmiri who lived in Bukhara, wrote two important texts, *Raudat al-ridvanvahadiqat al-ghilman* and a poetic work, *Zafar Namah*, while Central Asian scholars like Khodauli Beg Balkhi, author of *Tarikh-i-Qipchaq Khani*, and Astrarkhandind prince Hadji Mir Muhammad Salim, author of *Silsilat at-salation*, provided vivid accounts of the evolution of Mughal period in India.

The popular Arabic legendary romantic stories such *Laila Majnun* composed by Perso-Tajik poet Nizami in the 12th century, became most popular in both the regions. Inspired by Nizami and Amir Khusro's versions, Alisher Navai created an Uzbek version of *Laila Majnun* in the 15th century.

Similarly, "*Yusuf Zuleikha*", and "*Shah-Nama*" remain a part of the popular myth both in India and Central Asia. The popular heroic legend of Shirak in Central Asia seemed borrowed from the Indian legend on Kanik Raja of Kannauj. A Kazakh folk narrator, Uljan Baibosinova<sup>3</sup> noted that the Indian concept of presenting a ring as token of love which finds origin in the Puranic literature, *Birth of Kumara* and Buddhist legend *Bibisar King*, had highly influenced the Central Asian legend.

Persian poet Amir Hasan Sijji compiled his composition *Ishq-Nama* based on a story of Indian lovers. Similarly, *Madhumalti* was translated by Adil Khan Razi in 1654 under the title *Madhumalti* and *Manohar*. Razi also wrote a famous Awadhi poem *Padmavat* in Persian under the title *Shama Parwana*. Other folklore themes that are popular include *Gul-e-Bulbul* (Rose and Nightingale), *Diwa Patanga* (Candle and Butterfly), *Chand Chakor* (Moon and Partridge).

The works of the 17th century Indian writer Abdal-Qadir Bidel seemed to have had a great influence on Central Asian literature. It is believed that Bidel's compositions were translated into Eastern Turkish languages. Bidel's verses were more popular in Kokand, where people reciting Bidel's verses were called *Bidel Khan*.

Similarly, the legendary stories such as *Kamrup* and *Komalta* were translated into Farsi by Muhammad Murad in the 17th century. The South Indian poems *Chandarbadan* and *Mahiyar* were translated by Bayyani under the famous name *Ishq-Nama*. Similarly, the Kashmiri text *Rajatarangini* and Punjabi folk story *Qaiskii Lailii* became integral parts of literary interest among Farsi-speaking people in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

The same was true for folklore traditions in both regions in terms of orally used *proverbs and sayings*, including the catch-words and aphorisms such as *Chupa Rustam* (hidden hero), *Rustam-e Hind* (the Rustam of India) that are commonly used proverbs in Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi and other languages.

Clearly, through this process of convergence the Persian-Tajik language, which is spoken largely in Southern Central Asia, got enriched by Sanskrit and Awadhi. Similarly, Dakshini literature too had immense impact on the Central Asian languages. Conversely, the Hindustani, Punjabi, Kashmiri literatures were influenced equally by Arabic and Persian literature.

Shamatov noted that the entire evolution of Indo-Central Asian cultural phenomenon was a part of a complex and indivisible stream of traditions supported by Buddhism, on the one hand, and as Persian-Tajik literature, on the other. Therefore, languages in both the regions have a common lexicon and phraseology, tales and legends in numerous vernaculars and written languages such as Hindi and Urdu (Hindustani), Punjabi, Kashmiri, Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, etc.

Confluence was also no less in the artistic and creative fields. The masterpiece encyclopedia *Matloul-ulum, waMajmaul-funun* written by Indian author Wadjid Ali provides a full description about the symbiotic relations in artistic traditions, i.e., calligraphy, painting, style, compositions, materials used as recipes for paints, etc.

Central Asian architects such as Muhammad Sharif from Samarkand, sculptor Alsa Muhammad from Bukhara and other masters are believed to have taken part in building of the Taj Mahal complex. The Mughal school of miniatures also evolved out of the Bukhara school of art. The Mughal paintings and art especially

borrowed a lot from the Central Asiatic schools, absorbing shapes of gardens and park landscapes.

During the 18th-19th centuries, the Kashmiri style of art also influenced the miniatures in Khokand and Bukhara. Many Central Asians absorbed the Kashmiri style of art in their printings. Similarly, manuscripts and miniatures on subjects like “*Kamasutra*”, “*Anangaranga*” were adopted. Kazakh historians cite the 17th century Persian treatise “*Zamzama-i Vahdat* (Tune of Unity), written by an Indian musician, Baquiyai Baina, which affirmed the intense relations of India and Central Asia in the fields of music.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that works of Kokand historiography in Persian and Chagatai are extremely important for understanding the medieval contacts between India and Central Asia. Many of these manuscripts are being found in the Oriental Studies Centres of the former Soviet Union. Some 385 manuscripts of Indian literary works are being kept at the Institute of Oriental Studies at Tashkent. Similarly, Kazakh historians talk about vast source materials lying in Indian archives and libraries, which are of great importance to the history of medieval Indo-Kazakh relations.

So far, little attention has been paid on the commercial and trade ties in the past between India and Central Asia. An interesting fact revealed by the Kazakh historian, Meruert Abuseitova was that trading between Central Asia and India was mainly conducted through Afghan intermediaries.<sup>5</sup> The exports from Central Asia to India included horses that transacted through Bukhara. Abuseitova cites that Kazakh merchants alone transferred to India up to 40,000 horses during the 7th-8th century.

The two regions also powerfully and mutually influenced each other in terms of shaping the modes of life, custom, social habits and the ethos of people. This aspect, in fact, cannot be under-estimated in the modern context of building relationships.

### **Central Asian Icons in Indian History**

There are several Central Asian historical figures who are still considered symbols for promoting Indo-Central Asian traditional

ties. For example, Khwaja Syed Muhammad Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (1173-1235) who came from Osh to India to become a highly respected Sufi saint of the Chishti Order founded by Moinuddin Chishti. Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki was instrumental in establishing the Chishti Order in Delhi. Iltutmish named Qutub Minar and the *baoli* in Mehrauli after Qutbuddin Kaki. Mahatma Gandhi visited Kaki's Dargah during the annual *Urs* in 1948. Kaki's variant of Sufism is known for universal brotherhood and charity that continue to attract large number of followers from South Asia. His dargah in Mehrauli is the venue of his annual *Urs*. Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki is an important link between India and the people of Ferghana Valley – the hub of Central Asian Islam.

Bairam Khan was a powerful statesman and mentor at the court of the Mughal Emperors Humayun and Akbar. He was honoured by Humayun with the title of *Khan-i-Khanan* (king of kings) and was also entrusted the position of *muhrdar* (keeper of the seals) for his great service to the establishment of the Mughal Empire. Bairam Khan was a Shia Muslim and was not liked by the Sunni Turkic nobles. He was perhaps killed by an Afghan at Patan in 1561. Bairam's son, Abdul Rahim Khan-i-Khanan was also regarded in the Mughal court as one of the '*Nau-rattans*' (Nine Gems) of Akbar. Bairam Khan is still a powerful link between India and Turkmenistan.

Mawlana Abul-Ma'ani Mirza Abdul-Qadir Bedil popularly known as Bidel or Bidel Dehlavi (1642–1720), was a famous master of Persian poetry, Bidel belonged to the Turko-Mongol Chagatai tribe of Central Asia. Bidel wrote poetry and ghazals in Dari-Persian language. He authored sixteen poetry books that were admired by both Mirza Ghalib and Iqbal-e Lahori. Bidel became popular in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. He remains a symbol of literary ties between India and Tajikistan. Bidel's grave, called *Bag-Bidel* (Garden of Bidel) is situated opposite Purana Qila, at Mathura Road, New Delhi where Tajiks come to pay their obeisance and respect to the great Persian poet.

The other legendary figures include Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati originally Muhammad Haidar Ibn Muhammad Husain

Gurgan (1500-1551), who served as the Governor of Kashmir under the Mughal Emperor Humayun. He is popularly known in Indian history as Mirza Haidar. He was a son of a powerful noble family of the Dughlat tribe, today found mainly in south Kazakhstan near the Jambul region. His ancestors too belonged to the Chagatai Mongol tribe. Haidar's father Muhammad Husain Gurgan was a close friend of a senior Mongol Khan, Sultan Muhamud, who ruled the Semirech'e or Mughalistan<sup>6</sup> during 1487-1508.

It is said that Mirza Haidar was either born in Ura-Tube or in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) where Muhammad Husain Gurgan was the governor in 1495. From his mother side, Mirza Haidar was the grandson of Chagatai Khan Unus who was a cousin of Babur who founded the Mughal Empire in India.

After his father died in Herat in 1508, Haidar left Bukhara to Kabul to seek shelter under his uncle, Babur. For about four years Mirza Haidar had stayed with Babur in Kabul where he got his early education. Later in 1512, Mirza Haidar left for Kashgaria, where one of his cousins Sultan Sa'id had established a Mongol estate with its capital in Yarkend.

Mirza Haidar was an extraordinary person. He was well-versed in Persian and Turkic languages. He was a great military commander and also a poet. Among his famous poems included the *Jahan Nama*, which described the experiences of his stay in Badakhshan region during 1529-1530. Mirza Haidar at an early age led many military campaigns in Kafirstan, Badakhshan and Ladakh (1527-1533).

When Haidar's cousin Sultan Sa'id Khan died in 1533, Sa'id's elder son Abdar-Rashid occupied the throne in Yarkend. It is said that Abdar-Rashid was totally hostile towards Mirza Haidar because of which he had to leave for India to serve under Mughal emperor and Babur's son Humayun (1530-1556). As he was a shrewd military leader and a diplomat, Mirza Haidar quickly helped Humayun capture Kashmir in 1541. Haidar's campaign in Kashmir and surrounding regions are well recorded in Indian history.

Mirza Haidar died in Kashmir when the local Shia population revolted against him in 1551. Haidar had planned to stage an attack

on the rebels in the night, but the night was believed to have been foggy and he was killed by mistake by one of his soldiers, Nazar Kurchi. Prior to his death, he had declared his younger brother Mirza Abdar Rekhman as his successor. Later his followers fortified themselves in Indrakot. Mirza Haidar's body was later buried in *Mazar-i-Salatin* in Kashmir.

It is said that his wife and children later left Kashmir for Kashgar. His first gravestone perhaps laid by Humayun is still in *Mazar-i-Salatin*, but it is the second gravestone laid by Mir Izzat Ullah on the order of William Moorcroft<sup>7</sup> in 1823 in Shahi Mazarin Srinagar, which is being prominently visited by people.

Mirza Haidar Dulati is also known for his master work *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* (Rashid's History), written in Persian by him in Kashmir during 1542-1546. The book he wrote was based on the legends of Mongol Khans as well as on his own experiences of fighting wars in Kafirstan, Badakhshan, Ladakh and Kashmir. *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* was dedicated by Haidar to the ruler of Kashgar Abdar-Rashid, who did not treat the former gently. However, Haidar could not forget the love and affection he received from Rashid's father Sultan Sa'id who accepted Mirza as an orphan and treated him as his own son.

*Tarikh-e-Rashidi* revolves around the history of Chagataids (successors of the second son of Chenghiz Khan) as well as the rise of Dughlat rulers in Central Asia and Eastern Turkistan. *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* is the single-most original historical source material for the history of Semirech'e region between 14th-16th centuries. The book contains a vivid account of Turkic people, about Kafirs, Tibetans and Kashmiris. It gives detailed accounts of the Islamisation of Tibetan culture in Western Ladakh, through which he crossed on his way from Kashgar to Kashmir. In one of his narrations about Ladakh, Laurence Austine Waddell in his book *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* quoted Ney Elias' discovery of *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* in which Mirza Haidar wrote "On the day appointed, I approached the fort (of Mutadar in Nubra), and talons of Islam seizing the hands of Infidelity, the enemy were thrown into the disorder and routed. Having deserted the fort, they fled in confusion and dismay while

the Musalmans gave them chase as far as was possible, so that not one of these bewildered people escaped. Brukpaswasslain, together with all his men, and their heads formed a lofty minaret, so that the vapour from the brains of the infidels of that country reached to the heavens. Thenceforth no one dared offer resistance.”<sup>8</sup>

*Tarikh-e-Rashidi* is considered as the primary source material for the study of Central Asian, particularly the Kazakh Khanate. The Kazakhs today regard him as the first historian of the Kazakh State (1470-1718). Even the Indian historians consider Haidar’s writings as a unique piece of original information which are being referred to by most contemporary historians including Europeans. In fact, the European Orientalists like E. Denison Ross, edited by Ney Elias translated *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* with their own introduction in 1895. In 1990, American historian W. Thackston published the Persian version of *Tarikh-e-Rashidi* into English.

Interestingly, Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet era has resurrected Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati as one of its national heroes. The Uzbeks and Kyrgyz also claim him to be their own past hero. In 1999, Kazakhstan in collaboration with the UNESCO celebrated the 500th anniversary of Muhammed Haidar Dulati. Earlier in December 1998 a seminar on the works of Dulati was held in Delhi University and our historians helped Kazakhs in tracing the grave of Dulati in Srinagar. Subsequently, a big Kazakh delegation constituting historians, scholars and officials undertook a spot visit to India in 1999. The delegation visited Shahi Mazar in Srinagar and brought back with them soils from there. The soil brought from India was kept in a casket and placed in the monument built in Mirza Haidar’s memory in ancient Taraz (Jambul) city. The resurrection of Mirza Mohammed Haidar Dulati is considered as a significant moment in the building of Indo-Kazakh relations since its independence in 1991.

Clearly, the Kazakh officials and academia give high importance to this historical aspect of India-Kazakhstan relations. The Indian Cultural Centre had in the late 1990s had made considerable effort to help the Kazakhs, facilitating the rediscovery of their past hero.

The visit by an Indian cultural delegation to Kazakhstan in 2001 for an event dedicated to Mirza Mohammed Haidar Dulati was a major highlight, thereby giving a fillip to bilateral relations.

In May 2002, the author of this book and Professor Masura Haidar of Aligarh Muslim University participated in the Fourth International Conference on the Works of Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati under the rubric “Kazakhstan and Central Asia: History, Modern Life and Prospects for Future Development” held in Taraz.

Mirza Haidar Dulati has certainly become a symbol of old linkages and a good reference between India and Kazakhstan. Since Dulati is being resurrected as one of the main national figures of Kazakhstan, it is definitely serving to focus a lot of popular attention on India in Kazakhstan.

Mir Ali-Shir Nava’i (1441–1501) was another powerful Central Asian poet of Uzbek or Uyghur origin who had a great influence in India especially on the writings of *Baburnama*. Ali-Shir Nava’i is being resurrected as an important father-figure in Uzbekistan. Many places and national institutions in Central Asia are named after Ali-Shir Nava’i.

All the above-mentioned Central Asian figures barring Ali-Shir Nava’i had served in the Mughal Durbar and made India as their homes. To bolster their national heritage and historical credibility, these figures are once again being resurrected as national heroes in the respective Central Asian States they belonged to.

Following their independence, the Central Asian states are seriously attempting to re-discover their past glories pertaining to their national identity. Since many of their own written historical sources have either disappeared or do not exist, they have started valuing their deep historical cultural association with India as a useful mirror to view their historical past.

Interestingly, many contemporary scholars are writing about extraneous factors including perpetual conflict in the tribal zone of today’s Afghanistan and Pakistan that interrupted the deep-rooted trade, commerce and culture between Turkic-speaking people in Central Asia and India.

Interestingly again, many Central Asian scholars lay greater stress on reviving the traditional Indo-Turkic relations, which had been corrupted due to over-emphasis on Mughal history or what is being interpreted at least from the Indian perspective as the Indo-Islamic culture of India. Many of the Central Asian poets and literary figures consider the Turkic language as superior to Persian.

Scores of manuscripts and materials in Turkish sources that are stored in important Indian libraries and archives such as in the Asafiyya Salarjung Museum of Osmania University in Hyderabad, Mullah Feroz Library in University of Bombay, Kashmir University, Srinagar, Patna University Library, Khuda Baksh Library and Raza Library in Rampur, Bihar are of great importance to Kazakh historians.

The challenge before thinkers both in India and Central Asia is to bring a modicum of rational interpretation of history and lay a sound foundation for building mutually beneficial strategic relations between India and the countries of Central Asia. A few points in the form of policy suggestions are given in the Chapter, “India’s Soft Power: Regaining Centrality in Central Asia.”

## Notes

1. A Kazakh scholar and a historian, T. K. Betsembiev has done an extensive research on the subject. His famous research papers include “The Cultural Relations of Central Asia and Kazakhstan with India: From the 16th to the 19th Centuries”, published by the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography in Alma-Ata during Soviet times. Similarly, Chokan Valikhanov has done considerable research on the subject. M. Kh. Abuseitova, “Historical and Cultural Relations between Kazakhstan, Central Asia and India from Ancient times to the beginning of the XX century” *Dialogue*, 6 (2), October-December, 2004 at [http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia\\_Oct04/Abus.htm](http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Oct04/Abus.htm). Accessed on January 5, 2016.
2. Azad Shamatov, “Uzbekistan-India: Some Traces of Convergence in Medieval Folklore Tradition”, *Dialogue*, 13 (1), July-September, 2011 at [http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia\\_July%20011/azad.htm](http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_July%20011/azad.htm). Accessed on March 8, 2016.
3. A personal friend of this author.
4. One of the finest compilations and analytical works that covered every aspect of the linkages between India and Central Asia in the mediaeval

times, including Medicine, Technology, Arts & Crafts, Architecture, Music, Astronomy, Mathematics and Methodology, have been done through a joint study project by Indian National Science Academy and USSR Academy of Sciences. The works had been published in two volumes in India in 1990 under the title “Indo-Soviet Joint Monograph Series: Interaction between India and Central Asian Science and Technology in Mediaeval Times”.

5. Meruert Abuseitova, “Kazakhstan and India: Problems of Cooperation and Prospects”, First Indo-Kazakh Conference, Almaty, March 2002. See P. Stobdan (ed.), *India and Kazakhstan: Through Ancient, Medieval and Modern Times*, Ulke Publications, Almaty, 2002.
6. A noted Kazakh scholar, Albani explained to this author that the word Mughal stands for Mong-gol (thousand rivers) in Turko-Mongol language. What the Kazakhs call *Zhety-su* or Semirech’e (seven rivers) was also known as Mughalistan. Thus the people inhabiting Semirech’e were called the Mughals.
7. William Moorcroft, a veterinary doctor and an in charge of British studs had undertaken many projects for the East India Company in Kashmir and Ladakh. He also visited Central Asia to buy Bukhara horses.
8. Laurence Austine Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism: with its mystic cults, symbolism and mythology*, W. H. Allen & Co., London, 1895, New York, 1894, p. 583. Also see E. Denison Ross’ translation of “The Tarikh-i-Rashidi of Mirza Muhammad Haidar Dughlat – A history of the Moghuls of Central Asia”, edited by N. Elias, London, Sampson, Low, Marston and Co. 1895, 1895. Ney Elias, was a British explorer, geographer, and diplomat, most known for his extensive travels in Asia. He was a key intelligence agent for Britain during the Great Game. Elias travelled extensively in the Karakoram, Hindu Kush, Pamir, and Turkestan regions of High Asia.

## 10. “Great Game” – The Interrupted Period

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In the last two centuries, India's contact with Central Asia considerably shrunk owing to the events in the 19th-20th century – the Anglo-Russian “Great Game”, particularly the rivalry over Afghanistan. This interrupted direct contacts especially the flow of two-way idea and commerce between the two regions. India maintained limited contact only with East Turkistan (Xinjiang). Most of the traditional routes of contacts through the Hindu Kush had ceased to exist.

The British sought access to the region through Karakoram Passes into Khotan, Yarkend and Kashgar for strategic and trade purposes. Hundreds of British political officers, explorers, surveyors and traders traversed this route ostensibly for the British India's “Great Game” postures in Central Asia.

Since 1840-1850, the British explorers such as Benedict Goes and Lieutenant Wood were the first pioneers to work on the region. Other Western explorers of Central Asia in early 19th century included Baillie Feaser, Arthur Conolly, Alexander Burnes and Taylor Thomson. Following the murder of explorers like Stoddart and Connolly in 1842 in Bokhara, the interest for Central Asia among the British explorers had declined. However, by 1860, when the Russian forward movement towards the south became prominent, the British-Indian officers employed natives and trained surveyors to survey frontier regions beyond its borders. The pioneering works of Arminius Vambery and O'Donovan on Central Asia and Turkistan became a guiding force for India's contact with the region.

According to Alexander Burnes who was also a British agent,

turbans of Punjabi white cloth were used by “whole of the natives of Bokhara and Toorkistan” during 1830s. It seems there were about eight thousand Indian settlers in the 19th and early 20th century in Central Asia. The Hindu moneylenders existed in every village and town in Turkestan in the 1860s.<sup>1</sup>

Some of the early explorers who traveled to Semirech’e from Ladakh and Turkistan were G. W. Hayward and Robert B. Shaw in 1868-69. They gave a full account of their journeys and left primary data about the route up to the Pamirs and the Tian Shan ranges. Subsequently, more information became available following the Forsyth expedition in 1874, when Captain H. Trotter and Lt. Col. T. E. Gordon traveled widely into the Pamirs and Sinkiang. Other expeditions included that of Ney Elias in 1885-86, Messrs Bonvalot, Capus, and Pepin’s travels in 1888. Captain Young husband made an expedition to Turkistan in 1890-91. Rev. Henry Lansdale’s book *Chinese Central Asia* (1880s) provided a detailed account of Indian contacts from Kashmir to the Semirech’e, detailing information about Kyrgyz Mountains, Tian Shan ranges and about Kuldja, Narin and Vierny (Alma Atta) towns. The Earl of Dunmore in his narratives of a year’s expedition in the 1880s gave detailed accounts of Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary and Russian Central Asia. Of course, the illustrations and papers of Sir Aurel Stein about “Innermost Asia” are unique pieces of information. The British bureaucrats and diplomats collected some of the later information about the region. A British Consul-General, Sir Claremont Skrine subsequently gave first-hand information about Central Asia when he was posted at Kashgar in 1920s. The Indian Consul-General in Kashgar remained at the northern-most outposts to oversee that region until it was closed down on China’s instance in late 1950s. Ram Sathe was the last Indian Consul-General to be in Kashgar, who returned to India following the Leh route.<sup>2</sup>

Among the Indian travelers to Central Asia was Mir Izzet Ullah, a resident of Delhi, who accompanied William Moorcroft from Kashmir to Bokhara and Turkistan during 1812-1813. Izzet Ullah visited Kokand and southern Kazakhstan, where he collected

vast amount of material related to the region's ethnographic details and the socio-economic conditions of that time. On the advice of Willam Moorcroft, Izzet Ullah, following his return to India, had laid a new gravestone at the *Mazar* of Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati in Srinagar. The other famous Indian travelers to visit Central Asia in the 19th century included Haji Mohammed Shah (1846), Mani Singh, Mahsood, Harkishan, Mohammed Amir, A. Dolke, Delmer Morgan (1856-1858), Mohammad Hamid (1863), Mirza (1868), Faiz Bakh (1870), Ibrahim Khan (1870) and many others. They mainly provide administrative and political information about the places they travelled to in Central Asia. It is acknowledged by Central Asian scholars that Indian travellers were able to gather much more information than the British explorers because the latter did not enjoy any direct access to the people. Moreover, the Indians were able to gain information other than the scientific kind that the British were collecting.

The only active trade artery between India and Central Asia in the 19th century was through Kashmir, Ladakh and the Karakorum Pass. To a greater extent the East India Company promoted this as a major commercial outlet to Central Asia. Following an agreement signed in 1919 between India and Sinkiang, commercial and trade ties had thrived further. Traders from India exported tea, tobacco, textiles, sugar, gunpowder, swords, weapons, opium (*charas*), spices, saffron and medicines to Central Asia. Punjabi and Kashmiri merchants went up to Leh and exchanged goods with Uyghur traders. The Indian and Afghan traders received special protection from British political officers stationed at the Mission in Kashgar. Goods imported from Turkistan included leather, felt, wool, carpet and silk. Until very recently *Aksakals* dealing with *charas* trade continued to remain active in Leh Bazar. There are only two families of Uyghur traders now left in Leh. Others have either left for Europe or got assimilated in Jammu and Kashmir.

K. Warikoo has done some serious work on this subject in recent times. Following the revolution in Russia and subsequent Chinese occupation of Sinkiang, goods imported from India, especially

textiles and sugar became less competitive. Besides, there were political reasons that led to gradual cessation of trade between India and Sinkiang.<sup>3</sup>

In the 20th century, the trade linkages continued until the Chinese Revolution in 1949. But there have been incidents of Kazakh, Tungan and Uyghur rebellions fleeing from East Turkistan towards India across Ling-ze Thang and Aksai Chin Plains of Ladakh in the early 1950s. Some elderly Ladakh is still recall two batches of Kazakhs refugees crossing Ladakh on their way to Kashmir. At least 2000 Kazakhs were said to have been killed enmasse near Leh by the Chinese agents by food poisoning. Some managed to settle in Leh and Srinagar, but a majority took asylum in Turkey, Germany and Taiwan. This episode is not yet fully touched upon by historians and political analysts in India. Information relating to this is also scanty, except for records maintained by the Leh or Srinagar *Mafis Khana*.

Much of Indian understanding of Central Asia during the 20th century had been written with the Soviet perspective. The studies carried out by Indian researchers on the region included Soviet ethnic policies, socio-economic development and cultural advancement of Central Asian people. Papers written by B. Prasad (1955), Ravat Indra Singh (1977), Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (1955), Rahul Sankrityaan (1947), Ram Rahul (1973), Devendra Kaushik (1970, 1975, 1976) and Audrey J. Ahmad (1959), Ajay Patnaik (1982) and many others, covered a wide range of issues concerning Indo-Central Asian relations in contemporary times. Historians like ManusraHaidar, Fida M. Hassnain, Nityananda Patnaik, R. C. Agarwal, Devendra Kaushik, K. Warikoo and others have researched on Indo-Central Asian relations in the recent past based on new information.

During the Soviet period, direct ties between India and Central Asia remained limited and were guided by Indo-Soviet relations and through Moscow. Delegations from Central Asian Republics had participated at the First Asian Relations Conference in New Delhi. The event is still being considered as significant for Kazakhstan. Several scholars from the region during the Soviet period took deep interest in Indian contemporary affairs. Among them included the

famous political analyst KenesKhozhakhmetov, a veteran Kazakh Professor of the Kazakh State University of Al-Ferabi, who became a specialist on the Sino-Indian conflict and the Indian freedom struggle.

Central Asians still recall with pride the visit by the First Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru along with his daughter Indira Gandhi in 1955. The visit by Nehru and Indira Gandhi had left a deep imprint in the region. Following Indira Gandhi's visit thousands of new-born girl children were named after Indira, which became a symbol of women's pride in the region. Indira is now a localized popular name in Central Asia.

Interactions in the field of science, technology, education and culture between India and the Central Asian Republics remained active throughout the Soviet period. India maintained a Consulate in Tashkent until the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1990s.

Many Kazakh intellectuals including veteran writers like Mukhtar Auezov and Anwar Alimzhanov visited India and widened the scope of close literary and cultural ties between India and Kazakhstan. The relationship between the two countries was sustained through activities conducted through Friendship Societies established in all-important cities. The Friendship House in Almaty remained quite popular, where ordinary Kazakhs were able to have a glimpse of Indian paintings, art and films. Almaty also had a shop called *Ganga*, which sold a variety of Indian goods including Indian tea, handicrafts and medicines.

Similarly, the great Kyrgyz epic *Manas* has inspired and thrilled many Indians, which also has a reference to India and historians have drawn parallels between *Manas* and The Mahabharata. As a mark of respect, India has named a road after *Manas*. As a mark of respect and recognition of Kyrgyz identity, India had awarded the great Kyrgyz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov, the Jawaharlal Nehru Award.

During the 1960s and 1970s, much of India's cultural influence in Central Asia came through the popularity of Indian films. The Soviets particularly patronised Indian films among the Central Asian Republics as a cultural outlet to the outside world. Whole generations

of Central Asians were brought up with Indian films, who still recall the great emotional memories and the finer aspects of Indian cinema. Raj Kapoor still remains a household name, so also popular actors and actresses like Nargis, Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini, Mithun Chakraborty, etc. Almost every Hindi film was dubbed in Russian and screened all over Soviet space. Despite the entry of Western films in the recent years, Indian Hindi cinema still remains popular among Central Asian people even in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. The local television channels continue to screen one Hindi film a week, which are popularly watched by people.

### Notes

1. J. N. Roy and Braja Bihārī Kumāra, *India and Central Asia: Classical to Contemporary Periods*, Astha Bharati, Concept Publishing Company, Delhi, 2007, p. 79.
2. For details read P. Stobdan, *India and Kazakhstan: Civilizational Explorations*, Heritage Publications, New Delhi, 2003.
3. K. Warikoo, “Trade relations between Central Asia and Kashmir Himalayas during the Dogra period (1846-1947)” at <http://asiacentrale.revues.org/429>. Accessed on June 18, 2016.

## 11. Reconnecting with Central Asian States

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Central Asia in its reordered geopolitical form has emerged as a field of continuing interest and concern particularly in the context of its strategic and economic relevance in India. The region that emerged on the scene after being a backwater of world politics and a pawn of the great powers for a long time became a matter of great curiosity particularly among Indian intelligentsia. Certainly, there has been no case for Central Asia regaining the Timurian type of dominance of power that was once displayed during medieval times, but the region became geopolitically important both in terms of external interest and internal potential. Therefore, the dynamics that evolved in the region since the Soviet disintegration were bound to have implications far beyond what one might have imagined earlier. In fact, there have been trends of several geopolitical actions in the region that were viewed as signs of major powers' clash of interests.

Though India had sought not to join this contested game, it had to seek certain posturing that was linked to its strategic concerns. The key challenges for India at the initial stage included not just the imperative of deepening political engagement with the new states but also to take counter-measures to deter forces inimical to India's interests in the region.

Security considerations – especially the Afghan situation and the emergence of the Taliban – remained the paramount concern in India. India's chief concern centred on the rise and spread of Islamic fundamentalism and the fear of Pakistani exploits of the regional environment vis-à-vis India. It may be recalled that

Pakistan, throughout the 1990s, viewed Afghanistan and Central Asia as an adjunct to its rivalry with India. This also coincided with the advent of Pakistan's new regional policy of launching proxy wars in both Afghanistan and Kashmir. Which is why, India quickly strived to build high-level diplomatic and political contact with the five Central Asian states by opening Indian missions in all the five capitals.

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited the region in 1993 and instituted cooperation agreements in diverse fields. These formed a good part of India's initial initiative towards Central Asia as New Delhi also lent support to the regimes that sought to forestall trends that were detrimental to India's interests. During Prime Minister Rao's visit to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 1993 and to Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995, India offered an aid package of \$15-20 million to each Central Asian country.<sup>1</sup> The credit lines have been renewed after every three to five years.

Importantly, New Delhi supported number regional initiatives to mitigate the influence of destabilising forces. Mindful of India's civilisational linkages with the region and need for restoring them, emphasis was particularly given on the cultural diplomacy by opening Indian Cultural Centres in three capitals in Central Asia. India also enjoyed tremendous political goodwill among Central Asians due to the Soviet legacy. In fact, India too tried to capitalise on the goodwill to achieve political and trade synergy with these oil-rich nations.

India's key policy then underscored deepening of relationship by providing substantive development aid and technical support to the Central Asian states. This was done with a view to share India's achievements with the new states and develop a reputation as a partner rather than a contender to exploit the region's vast oil and gas resources which was the policy pursued by other suitors in the new region.

After Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and Dr. Manmohan Singh visited the region in 2002 and 2006 respectively.

It is also true that Central Asians themselves initially considered India as one of the big and legitimate stakeholders if not a compelling geopolitical alternative to offset the conflicting forces in the region; a reason why the leaders of these States chose India to be the first country outside the former Soviet bloc for their State visit in 1992. However, India in the early 1990s did not have the instruments of economic and financial leverage and as such, despite enormous goodwill available in the region it failed to make commercial progress. There were of course the geopolitical constraints – Pakistani hostility; the Afghan instability among others – that kept India and Central Asia physically disconnected. In addition, there was also the basic problem of lack of scholarly understanding of the region in terms of history, social composition and language. A tendency to understand the region from the Western prism also tended to obscure rather than clarify the centrality of the Indian understanding. As a result, India lacked strategic clarity for a Central Asia policy. Even till date, Central Asia remains a subject of continual intellectual debate and conference enterprise in India, which neither entails any meaningful academic accolade nor meets national policy goals.

### **Getting closer to Central Asia**

The civil war in Afghanistan had brought the spectre of the cold war close to India's doorstep. The resulting effect had raised Pakistan's military status beyond proportion with immense implications of altering the regional balance in South Asia. The emergence of Mujahideen guerillas and the related politicisation of Islam in Afghanistan had set off a new but dangerous trend with consequences for regional politics. The volatile situation in close proximity has had a direct negative implication for India's security interests. It was feared then that the situation would have a similar bearing on Central Asia as well.

More seriously, the collapse of the Soviet security structure in a way had altered the regional strategic balance against India. It was hard to presume that the new Central Asian setting would be able to provide India with the same geographical counterweight

as had existed during the Soviet period. The Soviet retreat meant reduction in India's commercial presence in the region. Moreover, extra-regional powers with varying ideological and political goals to fill the vacuum in Central Asia posed a serious challenge to India. For example, countries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had gone all out to exploit the Islamic sentiment. Pakistan, in fact, made an effort to build geo-Islamic thinking to engulf post-Soviet Central Asia into the Islamic *Umma*. By doing so, Pakistan sought to justify first, its own existence as a Muslim state. Second, it intended to find "strategic depth" vis-à-vis India. Third, it expected Central Asia to provide a regional Muslim market. Lastly, Pakistan saw it as the greatest opportunity to broaden its sphere of influence and become the leader of the Islamic world.<sup>2</sup> However, none of these Pakistani wishes have been fulfilled. Instead, the prolonged inter-ethnic civil war in Afghanistan and also briefly in Tajikistan, greatly frustrated Pakistani designs for Central Asia.

For the US, its initial worry centred on the possible leakage of nuclear weapons and fuel from these states to potential recipients like Iran and Pakistan. Of course, the US energy companies started making large-scale investments in the Caspian and Kazakh oil fields from the beginning of the Soviet breakup.

Certainly, there was an inclination in the US to view Pakistan as an important factor for advancing the American policy goals in Central Asia. Given Pakistan's role as a frontline state against the Soviets in Afghanistan, repetition of the Reagan doctrine in Tajikistan in the 1990s was not ruled out.

On its part, China was slowly but powerfully pushing itself on the Central Asian stage. Beijing's initial defensive approach was to prevent the Central Asian crisis spilling over its own vulnerably, Xinjiang. But, it had quietly revived the "Silk Road" idea to make an impressive commercial penetration in the region by responding to the immediate economic needs of these states. With its rapid economic growth and its military power, it was clear then that China was going to eventually outrank Russia in Central Asia, whereas India unlike other powers did not have a particular agenda

except to counter certain negative trends in the region which may adversely affect India's security interests. But it was also evident that the changing strategic environment of Central Asia was becoming more demanding for India, especially keeping in mind the economic dimension of the relationship which was drawing India's interest to the region.

India, therefore, pursued a new goal of engagement with the region under the formulation of India's 'extended neighbourhood' precept, evolved around the end of 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Since then, India certainly tried its best to build strong bilateral relations with each state of Central Asia based on cultural and political goodwill. It had undertaken a number of important strategic initiatives to make inroads into the region, primarily driven by India's quest for energy security, need to break the connectivity bottlenecks and importantly, the overriding concerns about regional security.

### **Lending Political Support**

At the political level, India lent support to a number of regional initiatives undertaken by leaders of Central Asia. Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao's second visit to Central Asia in less than three years in 1995 assumed importance in the context of safeguarding the regional situation in Central Asia – particularly in the context of protecting India's wider interests in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The visit was aimed at consolidating and strengthening ties with the fragile states of Central Asia which were passing through a difficult formative stage and trying to address fundamental issues pertaining to their nation-building process.

Fortunately, in the mid-1990s, except for the inter-ethnic, inter-clan conflicts in Tajikistan, a relatively stable order had already emerged in the region. But other states too were vulnerable to similar problems though with varying intensities; domestic pressures both on the economic and political front and the task of containing the religious and nationalist uprisings troubled them constantly. For countries such as India political engagement with the region was

important in view of the attempts being made by some 'regional powers' to exploit the sentiments of 55 million Muslims living in the politically weak Central Asian states.

For example, support for religious fundamentalism, political extremism, international terrorism and armed subversion had become an important component of regional strategy for countries like Pakistan. Places like Afghanistan, Kashmir, Tajikistan and Chechnya had become victims of subversive Pakistani activities since the early 1990s. Although national, sub-national, sectarian and tribal fragmentations remained stronger than the pan-Islamic or pan-Turkic unification movements, the danger of exploiting primordial sentiments among the Central Asian people by outside powers persisted for a long time. Trans-border terrorism and the destabilisation process resulting from the continued instability in Afghanistan encouraged by Pakistan were causes of concern for all the states in the region.

It was against this that Prime Minister Narasimha Rao had expressed concern in 1995 in both Ashgabat and Bishkek on the growth of terrorism and forces of extremism in various parts of Asia. The Prime Minister's call to safeguard and promote secular ideals was aimed at countering separatist and sectarian tendencies which threatened the stability and integrity of Central Asian states and India.

At the nascent stage of Central Asian independence, India's key strategic concern was to make sure the new states remain stable and they do not get exploited by external powers.

In fact, Turkmenistan, from the early 1990s had emerged as the most prosperous state in Central Asia. In striking contrast to most of the erstwhile Soviet Republics, Turkmenistan showed remarkable progress in its economy and stability in its polity. Absence of any inter-ethnic division and cohesiveness in its social and political structure was one of the important factors for Turkmenistan's stability and progress. It needs to be underscored that President Saparmurat Niyazov not only aptly contained nationalist forces and prevented Islamic zealots but also transcended the inter-ethnic and inter-tribal divisions in a country of 4 million diverse people. He had

adopted a cautious economic restructuring policy which also proved to be a most successful economic experiment in the region. In sharp contrast to other states, Turkmenistan was able to maintain a 6-7 per cent growth in the post-Soviet period. With the introduction of a new currency in late 1993, Turkmenistan's business prospects had become brighter and had attracted Western and other foreign interests, especially in the hydrocarbon industry. It was speculated then that Turkmenistan would become a second Kuwait.<sup>4</sup>

It was interesting how President Niyazov chose a different approach in the international front in contrast to others. Unlike other Central Asian leaders, he refused to countenance a CIS political or military union and instead favoured a stronger bilateral military and security ties with Russia. Interestingly, Niyazov, on the one hand, managed to ignore warnings from both the US and Russia and developed close links with Iran. On the other hand, he strongly voiced against the formation of an Islamic bloc and stressed that institutions like the ECO should discuss economic issues only.

More interestingly, Niyazov had also opposed successive attempts by Pakistani leaders to politicise various Central Asian regional forums. In fact, Turkmenistan's "positive neutralism" policy served as an important countervailing factor for policies adopted by the other Islamic countries. This had very much suited India's interests.

There were other regional initiatives that served to keep Central Asia stable. For example, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev's initiative of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), developed since 1992 as an inter-governmental forum for enhancing cooperation towards promoting peace, security and stability in Asia proved useful in countering the interventions of organisations like the OIC in the new region.

Similarly, India had then supported the initiative of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov for a "*Permanent Seminar*" for regional peace and security in Central Asia in 1995 that enjoyed UN support greatly reduced the possibility of potential destabilising forces exploiting the fragile situation in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Kyrgyzstan was an equally important country in the region with significant strategic value for the entire Central Asia. Like Tajikistan, it was vulnerable to the ‘aggressive anarchy’ emanating from Afghanistan. Unlike Turkmenistan, the fragile internal constitution of the country and the relative weakness of its economy made it more vulnerable to external pressures. Kyrgyzstan still represents a complex mosaic of ethnic groups with inter- and intra-ethnic contradictions.

In 1990, it was for the first time in Central Asia that inter-ethnic conflict in the southern city of Osh in the Fergana Valley claimed over 320 deaths when Kyrgyz and Uzbeks fought each other. At the nascent stage of nation-building, President Askar Akayev was faced with a vulnerable situation especially from the nationalist forces. Akayev had to press for private ownership of land and rapid transition to market economy. Such a reform on the economic front and early introduction of democracy also brought certain degree of instability in the country as compared to other states. However, due to lack of natural resources, Kyrgyzstan’s economy always remained weak. In 1990 it became the first country to leave the Rouble zone and introduced its own currency with the help of IMF.

Kyrgyzstan’s secular outlook was extremely important for India. It became one of the reasons that Prime Minister Rao spoke in Bishkek at great length about the need for restructuring and democratising the United Nations.<sup>6</sup> He also stressed on the representation of developing countries as permanent members of the Security Council.

### **Breaking the Transport Bottleneck**

India’s support to the region was not confined in the sphere of politics alone. New Delhi aggressively pushed regional initiatives to help break Central Asia’s transport bottlenecks. For example, India offered financial assistance for the construction of the Sarakh railway line, a part of India-Iran-Turkmenistan tripartite railway-line project, to provide the landlocked Central Asia access to the Persian Gulf for the first time. The project was commissioned in 1997 and it became the hallmark of India’s diplomacy, regarded then as

a coup of sorts to shape the triangular region of South, Central and West Asia.<sup>7</sup> However, this project failed to entail significant results because of various reasons. In fact, no Indian VIP had even found time to attend the inaugural event of the railway project in 1997.<sup>8</sup>

### **Key Impediments**

However, in the 1990s, there existed several key impediments that came in the way of developing satisfactory relations between India and the Central Asian states.

First, India in the early 1990s did not have the instruments of economic and financial leverage to make a serious foray into Central Asia. India itself had just initiated its first economic reforms during the 1990s; as such it could do little to assist the new states despite the strong bonds and enormous goodwill India and Central Asian countries shared with each other.

Second, the geographical inaccessibility and lack of direct connectivity remained a major constraint that perennially kept India and Central Asia physically disconnected. This is reflected from the fact that the total two-way trade with the whole region could not progress.

Third and the most critical factor was the geopolitical barrier created by continual Pakistani hostility and never-ending instability in Afghanistan that severely hampered India's ability to make a major impact in Central Asia. Pakistani diplomacy throughout the 1990s was aimed at averting India's reach to Central Asia. The rise of the Taliban also posed a serious challenge for India's quest for closer cooperation with the region.

Fourth, Central Asia's close geographical proximity to China made it possible for the latter to easily penetrate the region commercially, as compared to India. By the late 1990s, the Chinese were able to capture the entire Central Asian market.

Fifth, it was also true that India lacked the basic scholarship in terms of understanding the Central Asian dynamics – its polity, social composition and structures – that was critical for formulating a sound policy towards the region. The policy thinking in India also

somehow could not transcend nostalgia for the Soviet times. As a result, the tendency had been to approach Central Asia through the prism of Moscow which was simply inadequate to deal with the region.

Sixth and as a result, the regional leaders who, on the one hand, initially looked towards India for support gradually became cool towards New Delhi when they realised that India cannot meet their expectations. On the other hand, the Indian leadership too failed to take Central Asia seriously. In fact, to cite an example, from the beginning the chemistry between the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and President Nazarbayev never worked well. In 1992, Nazarbayev cut short his visit to New Delhi and instead went to Islamabad where he received a most friendly reception. Similarly, Central Asian leaders found 'meditative' Prime Minister Vajpayee to be unimpressive,<sup>9</sup> while in sharp contrast, Pakistani leaders displayed genuine enthusiasm, a brotherly attitude and above all, greater warmth and friendship towards them.

To be sure, some of these nuances seemed to have left negative imprints for cementing a closer Indo-Central Asian relationship in the initial phase. Moreover, there was also the aspect of Central Asians avoiding competition with Russia when it came to India. In fact, they had also learnt to maintain a neutral position on the Indo-Pak disputes.

### **Renewed Efforts**

Mindful of its historic Silk Route ties with Central Asia, and hoping to make an entry into the largely untapped energy potential of the region, India's intention to be active in Central Asia once again became more pronounced in the second phase when a series of policy announcements were made during the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime.

It was during the visit by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to the region in 2002, that India broadly indicated a shift in its focus beyond its traditional China-Pakistan frontiers to reach out to Central Asia seriously. It seemed that among other things the

conflict with Pakistan in Kargil in 1999 had forced India to make changes in its Central Asia policy. Subsequently, Defence Minister George Fernandes visited Tajikistan in 2003 and at the same time, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha visited Tashkent during the same year to secure several economic and security interests in the region.

For the first time India made a determined effort to access rich Central Asian hydrocarbon reserves by bidding in several Kazakh oil and gas fields. By 2003, the ONGC Videsh Ltd. made a bid for 15 per cent holding in Kazakhstan's Alibekmola oil fields and a 10 per cent stake in the Kurmangazi fields. At the same time, oil and gas-rich Uzbekistan as well as water-rich Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan had lined up to offer energy and hydropower projects to India.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, initiatives for getting a gas pipeline from Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) and another linking Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) were pursued seriously around that time.

India also made a bold strategic move to be militarily present in the region by undertaking renovation work of the Ayni air base in Tajikistan in 2002. This was part of a bilateral initiative between India and Tajikistan. However, India's first-ever initiative to take up a military project outside its soil had added a new wrinkle to the geopolitical struggle unfolding in Central Asia then.<sup>11</sup> The Ayni air base project was viewed as a tangible sign of India's determination to play a role in Central Asian security.

Besides, India also developed an idea to build a new power grid that integrates Central Asian states with those of South Asia, possibly with the strong support of the United States. This was thought about ostensibly to enhance India's overall economic profile in Central Asia.

After diplomatic success in Southeast Asia, it appeared that India was now primed to replay its historical role in Central Asia. The visits by the Prime Minister, Defence Minister and External Affairs Minister to the region within a short span of three weeks and a series of initiatives including the holding of India-Central Asia Conference by the New Delhi-based Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

(IDSA) in Tashkent in November 2003, underlined the importance of Central Asia in India's new policy outlook.<sup>12</sup>

It was for the first time that India had held a high-level Regional Conference in Tashkent to coincide with the high-profile visits to Central Asia by Indian government functionaries. A modestly aimed but scrupulously planned event by IDSA in the Uzbek capital drew attention to India's perspective on Central Asia, hitherto not accepted among major players. Organised against the backdrop of growing external military forays, including American, NATO, Russian and Chinese presence, it signaled India could not be discounted from the evolving geopolitics of Central Asia.<sup>13</sup>

There was also a time when India was getting ready acceptance as a reliable partner in the region. The fall of the Taliban not only vindicated India's policies but also paved the way for deepening ties with the Central Asian states. This is just as well, because a number of "outside" powers had been noticed traipsing in and around a region which, without doubt, remains part of India's zone of strategic interest.

By that time, US activism in Central Asia had invited responses from Russia in an area it considered as part of its traditional sphere of influence. On October 23, 2003, Russia formally returned to its old garrisons with a new military base at Kant airport, near Bishkek. The rapid deployment force stationed in Kant under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was primarily designed to deliver a sobering message to terrorists. But it could also have been an attempt to blunt NATO's expansion in the region. Vladimir Putin by then had made many changes to Russia's Central Asia policies. Unlike Boris Yeltsin, he was seeking re-engagement, if not quiet acceptance, in the space occupied by the former USSR. He was winning long-term energy contracts and offering unemployed youth from Central Asia recruitment in Russia's armed forces. China, too, was reacting sharply to unfolding events. China started conducting military exercises under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Many had viewed them as Beijing's answer to the growing US military presence in the region. China also started

reviving its interest in the energy sector by bagging a major oil contract in Kazakhstan.

Russia's and China's growing activism in Central Asia came at a time when the US had forcefully signalled the importance of energy to security. There were growing fears that the US military presence in Central Asia with the "laudable" goals of handling terrorism and promoting security, may also have had an opportunistic aspect, for instance of seeking control over the politics of the region. There were talks about the US military creating "lily pads" for deploying rapid mobile forces to intervene in local conflicts, which may in turn inflame young minds and give a fillip to terrorist outfits in the region.

There was also a lurking residual apprehension in many Central Asian countries that dependence on fickle US policies could be counter-productive. Some went to the extent of saying that the US would dump Central Asia in favor of using Pakistan as its 'subedar' for the region.

As mentioned earlier, observers keenly watched as to how China and Pakistan develop their engagement and relationship with NATO in Afghanistan as well as Central Asia. The balance of advantage seemed to indicate that as long as NATO sorts out the destabilising elements in Afghanistan, its presence would be alright. But if it had to withdraw due to an unacceptable number of body bags or domestic politics in its member-states, the resurgence of Taliban would have been inevitable. One was also careful about the duplicitous moves by Pakistan which, clearly, had been running with the hounds while hunting the hares for the US.

This reconfiguration in the region was a compelling reason for India to reclaim its geopolitical rights and responsibilities in Central Asia. Its engagement here over the past decade pre-dated the total paralysis of Pakistan's Central Asia policy based on religion. Islamabad had been lying very low indeed and the clergy it sent in droves were highly unwelcome, more so after 9/11, since there was a common understanding that Pakistan continues to be the global epicentre of terrorism. Therefore, India need not waste its time on the Pakistan factor in forging ties with Central Asia.

This writer then argued that the exposure of the issue of Jammu and Kashmir must become part of the Indian government's initiatives in Central Asia. There are many cultural and historical linkages and new opportunities as well – as, for instance, the possibility of the opening of a new energy highway along the Sinkiang-Ladakh frontier.<sup>14</sup> India needed to have traced its steps with deliberation and should have prepared to engage with this region more closely. In fact, this would have demonstrated a serious shift in India's foreign policy direction – enlarging its role in the strategic region.

The backdrop at that point of time also included the isolation of Pakistan that faced admonition following its attempted export of fanaticism to Central Asia. Indian experts through the conference in 2003 skilfully covered the changing international architecture, including intricacies involved in the war against terror.

For Central Asian states seeking orientation towards the West and East, the conference gave a glimpse of what the “South” could offer. Team India articulated persuasively the techno-economic-security potential of India, which could be accessed in a cooperative, mutually beneficial partnership.

In many respects, Central Asians viewed India as a beacon of hope and a route to progress in what they perceived as their “southern arc of instability”, involving Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Energy security and imperatives for developing transportation corridors draw Central Asian states to India. The projection of India as a technology major in areas such as energy and infrastructure was revealing to them.<sup>15</sup>

The event helped to sharpen the need for an inter-dependent “energy community” of suppliers and consumers. Central Asian recognition of the need to diversify energy export routes corresponded with India's quest for diversifying imports.

India's External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha saw the logic in investments for setting up downstream production facilities instead of exporting raw materials through expensive pipelines. This was to help overcome the region's transport bottlenecks. The suggestion

differed certainly from those seeking to pump out Central Asia's riches for gratifying themselves.

In fact, post-9/11 had another positive effect for improving India's air connectivity to landlocked Central Asia. As a consequence of Central Asian airliners ceasing to fly to Pakistan after 9/11, air traffic between the region and India has notably increased. Tajik and Kyrgyz Airlines are the most recent regional flyers to operate in the New Delhi sector.

Post-9/11 also drew interest in Afghanistan from both sides. The need for understanding regional underpinnings was re-emphasized among Central Asian and Indian thinkers. Also sought was a common approach for building a normal society in troubled Afghanistan.

In fact, India hosting such a conference was qualitatively a new step – a shift away from outmoded conduct of cultural diplomacy. Besides this gathering in Tashkent, other high-level visits to Dushanbe, Bishkek and Almaty had enhanced India's visibility in the strategic region. Certainly, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were figuring more seriously in India's policy calculus.

The Prime Minister's visit to Kazakhstan in June 2002 led to high expectations of production-sharing from some Kazakh oil blocks. But this could not be realised and mostly due to the absence of efficient follow up. It also came as a stark reminder that the complex states of Central Asia cannot be equated with those in Africa and Latin America. Careful handling through staff equipped with specialized area knowledge, was felt necessary.

Traditionally, India maintained strong defence relations with Russia, but since 2002, India also expanded its defence cooperation with the Central Asian states. Agreements were signed with the regional states for joint production of military hardware and military training through bilateral mechanisms of Joint Working Groups (JWGs) on Military and Technical Cooperation with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Joint military exercises have been held regularly with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. India has also shown full commitment to fight against terrorism and signed a JWG agreement on Counter-

terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India pledged to provide support for building a naval force for Kazakhstan in the Caspian Sea to protect its oil routes. Cooperation moved further as India bought six Ilyushin mid-air refueller planes from Uzbekistan for the use of the Indian Air Force and procured diesel and electric torpedoes from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2005, India had shown keenness to join the Central Asian grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – a proposal welcomed by Russia, but opposed by China.

Efforts were also made to overcome it while making certain strategic decision to improve the connectivity. In 2000, India had signed an agreement with Russia and Iran to build an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that was to carry cargo from Mumbai to the Astrakhan Port in the Caspian Sea via Bandar Abbas. Additional transport connectivity to Central Asia via Chabahar Port in Iran and through the Zeranji-Delaram Road in Afghanistan was also envisaged. Similarly, the idea of opening the old Silk Route via Kashgar to Central Asia had also attracted attention, at least in Kazakhstan.

India also gradually stepped up its development assistance plan for Central Asian countries, the objective of which was to share its technological achievements and experiences with them. The programme included opening of IT centres, assisting them to modernize hydroelectric projects and setting up of small and medium scale industrial units. Another area in which India has shown keen interest was to contribute to Central Asian human resource development. India offered slots to Central Asian experts and students to undertake customized courses under its ITEC and ICCR programmes which became very popular in the region.

Notwithstanding strong commitments made in pursuance to the high-level discussions and political goodwill, most of these ambitious Indian projects did not get off the ground. Indian companies had tried in vain to explore stakes in region's energy resources as an alternative source of imports. But, OVL's failure to bid for the takeover of Petro Kazakhstan was a major setback.

This was among many such disappointments which had gradually instilled an impression that Central Asian leaders were not well disposed towards India.

Critics in India however felt that India's policy towards Central Asia was directionless, uncoordinated, unfocused and devoid of an overall strategic concept. The opinion at home also was for India to pursue an independent Central Asia policy and shed the past practice of finding common political and economic causes with Russia and Iran. Whatever may have been the intrinsic reason for an India-Iran-Russia collaboration, it has failed to break new grounds in Central Asia even in the second phase. India's commercial progress with Central Asia therefore remained rather tardy with total trade increasing from \$94 million in 2000-2001 to only \$230 million in 2004-2005.<sup>16</sup> New Delhi, however, indicated that India tried hard but did not succeed. Since 2005, New Delhi's overall strategic intent towards Central Asia got somewhat diluted even at the highest political level.<sup>17</sup> Around this time, India's foreign policy under the Manmohan Singh government got oriented more towards the West.

However, in the following years, India displayed every requisite intention not only to position its stakes but also to respond to great power diplomacy in Central Asia. Following the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to the region in 2006, India once again sought to enhance its interests in getting access to Central Asian energy resources in many ways. India signed several agreements since then for energy exploration rights in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC) have tied up agreements with Uzbekistan for up-stream, mid-stream and down-stream exploration of petroleum and gas.<sup>18</sup> Islam Karimov had promised exploration of acreages to Indian firms in Uzbekistan's energy and mineral sectors. These included the Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs) between ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) of India and Uzbekneftegaz Company of Uzbekistan.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from playing the energy chess game, India had made a strategic move in acquiring stakes in Central Asian uranium reserves.<sup>20</sup> In fact, soon after India got a waiver from the NSG in

2008, Kazakhstan showed its readiness to supply nuclear fuel to India. Subsequently, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan too showed their willingness to cooperate with India in the uranium sector.

In 2006 India's Central Asia policy had come into sharp focus. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh became one of the first high-profile dignitaries to visit Tashkent, since the bloody crackdown on demonstrators in Andijan on May 13, 2005. Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov had then steadfastly rejected Western pressure for an international investigation and even broken the strategic partnership with Washington. Russia and China instead quickly bailed out Karimov by offering major economic and military sustenance. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Tashkent was viewed against the possibility of China seeking a military base in the region, the threat of Taliban revivalism and a search for energy security.

In fact, the visit was long desired. But, in the rapidly evolving Central Asian dynamics, India's role had been rather feeble. Initiatives like the India-Iran-Turkmenistan railway project failed to bear fruition. Trade with the region still remained low. Notwithstanding political goodwill, a stake in Central Asian energy was yet to be achieved. Such a gross failure notwithstanding, India kept trying for a footing in the region but such promises had no meaning unless they were translated into reality.

Kazakhstan has been making promises for upstream projects in Alimbekmola and Kurman-gazy fields. But, the sale of Petro Kazakhstan to China over the ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL)-Mittal combine's bid was among many reverses for India. This brought to the fore the fact that India lacked a clear Central Asia policy with a strategic intent.

Against these changes, Central Asians perceived India's potential to be a countervailing factor. However, they noticed India was conspicuously lacking a strategic framework to deal effectively with the region.

Unquestionably India's had gained tremendous success by that time in building strong bilateral relations but the dynamics of most Central Asian countries especially Kazakhstan, Tajikistan

and Kyrgyzstan increasingly falling into China's economic lap somehow torpedoed any possibility of India making an impact. The Chinese through the SCO mechanism had started facilitating transportation highways, railway lines and pipelines across the Tian Shan and Pamirs for creating a China-oriented regional cooperation in Central Asia. As stated elsewhere, China's Central Asia strategy was linked to Beijing's priority of focusing on the development of western China in its third phase of economic reforms. A web of energy pipelines – including the one from Tarim to coastal China – were planned to change the regional economic landscape north of India.

It would have seemed imprudent though for India to join the SCO at that point of time, but a regional framework involving India, China and Central Asian states minus Turkmenistan could have been thought of as a viable option for long-term cooperation. However, India was unprepared to factor China in its Central Asia policy.

## Notes

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## 12. India's Security Concerns in Central Asia

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With so many external powers jockeying for influence in Central Asia, India has a case to worry about its security concerns, especially the consequences of these reconfigurations for Indian policy. India had been initially concerned whether the Americans would stay in the region beyond their mandate of countering terrorism in Afghanistan and become a bulwark against China, Iran, India and Russia.

Though India had endorsed US/NATO actions in the region in the wake of post-9/11 events, New Delhi, by and large, had chosen the path of going-alone for securing its interests both in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

India's overriding concerns were security-related and not strategic. Strengthening cooperation with the region became even more imperative immediately after the Soviet collapse when the security situation in Afghanistan went into a state of flux.

### **Defence Relationship**

Apart from economic and political engagement in Afghanistan, India was quick to join the Joint Working Group (JWG) on countering terrorism with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. India's defence relationships with other Central Asian countries have also been strengthened since then. India shared the goals of security and stability, i.e., curtailment of drug trafficking and terrorism in the region.

India has been cooperating in the JWG both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. In fact, India's cooperation with Tajikistan

and Uzbekistan goes back to the days of support to Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. In 2001, India had set up a small field hospital at Farkhor in Tajikistan, located near the Afghan border, ostensibly to treat the Northern Alliance fighters fighting against the Taliban.

Post-9/11, India made a bold strategic move to be militarily present in the region by undertaking renovation work of Ayni air base in Tajikistan in 2002. This was a part of the bilateral initiative between India and Tajikistan but India's first ever initiative to take up a military project outside its soil had added a new wrinkle to the geopolitical struggle unfolding in Central Asia then. The Ayni air base project was viewed as a tangible sign of India's determination to play a role in Central Asian security. It was also viewed as part of India's grand strategic thinking to be present at a vantage location to monitor conflict-torn Afghanistan and hostile activities by Pakistan vis-à-vis India, especially after the Kargil conflict. The scale of India's defence cooperation with Central Asian states has expanded to cover many areas ranging from military-to-military cooperation to procurement of defence spares.

### **Kazakhstan**

India's cooperation with Kazakhstan is held under the India-Kazakhstan Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership (January 24, 2009), the Agreement on Defence and Military Technical Cooperation (July 8, 2015) and the India-Kazakhstan Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter-Terrorism (last held, May 3, 2017).

### **Kyrgyzstan**

Defence cooperation with Kyrgyzstan is guided by the MoU on Military-Technical Cooperation (1997). India provides instruction and training to Kyrgyz Armed Forces for UN Peacekeeping Missions and assistance in training and holds Kyrgyz-Indian joint mountain training exercises, "Khanjar" on a regular basis.

## **Tajikistan**

The India-Tajikistan JWG on Defence Cooperation was signed in 2003. The India-Tajikistan “Strategic Partnership” (2012) and the India-Tajikistan JWG on Combating International Terrorism (last held, June 14, 2017) regulate our security cooperation. India played a major role in upgrading the Gissar Military Aerodrome “Ayni airbase” in October 2010 and provides training to a large number of Tajik officers and cadets in India.

## **Uzbekistan**

The India-Uzbekistan JWG on Counter-Terrorism and the India-Uzbekistan Agreement on Cooperation in Military and Military-Technical were initiated in 2005. An understanding for expanding cooperation in defence and cyber-security, law enforcement agencies and special services has been reached in July 2015.

In general, though India’s multi-faceted relationship with these states have been limited, the key components include the sharing of intelligence, training and assistance, the servicing and upgrading of military hardware, import of transport aircraft from Uzbekistan and torpedo parts from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Indian navy has been acquiring spare parts for thermal and electrical torpedoes from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and there is a good degree of collaboration with Kazakhstan on research and development of underwater naval armaments.

## **Cooperation on Anti-Terrorism**

India has a well-worked out mechanism and a common approach regarding combating the phenomenon of terrorism and radicalisation with SCO member- states. The JWG on Combating International Terrorism with all the Central Asian states are held regularly. India offers special training courses on combating terrorism and information security to Central Asian specialists.

The officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been attending courses at NDC, DSSC, IMA, NDA, AEC Collage, CIJW, HAWS and at the UN Training Centre. India has been offering

special training courses for specialists of Central Asian states in the field of combating international terrorism and information security. India has been holding Joint Army mountaineering expeditions with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Indian army has established English Language Training Centres and Computer Labs in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to train their military personnel. India is also in the process of setting up English-cum-IT labs and deployment of army training teams in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Like the Ayni base in Tajikistan, there are other such projects being undertaken in Central Asia by the Ministry of Defence. For example, the DRDO's Defence Institute of Physiology and Allied Sciences (DIPAS) had opened the Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre (KIMBMRC) to study mountain acclimatization procedures in Bishkek. Former Defence Minister A.K. Antony inaugurated the Centre in July 2012. However, the actual utility of these facilities for Indian security interests is doubtful except for the purpose of creating some goodwill for India.

For the first time, India's Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had meetings with the Central Asian Defence Ministers during the SCO's Annual Defence Ministerial Meeting on April 24 2018. India's security interactions with Central Asia would grow henceforth under the SCO format.

### **Strategic Concerns**

On the strategic front, India, like other states, was faced with contradictory situations. At one level, the US troops' withdrawal would risk a revival of the Taliban type regimes in Central Asia considering the past actions of the IMU in the Ferghana Valley (Batken, Osh and Andijan) during Taliban rule in Afghanistan. On the other hand, a sense of apprehension prevailed about the strategic consequences of prolonged US presence in the region, especially when US troops had reached the doorstep of India.<sup>1</sup> In October 2005, the NATO troops (in response to a request from Islamabad) entered Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) for earthquake relief operation.

Of course, the Russians and Central Asians reacted differently to the US' entry but the Chinese were equally uneasy about the American troops reaching close to their vulnerable Xinjiang province. In fact, there were visible signs then of the Uyghur movement gaining a new twist, even though the US authorities have designated the East Turkistan Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist group after 9/11. The American troops, numbering a few hundred, stationed in Bishkek were already undergoing lessons in Uyghur language and were also actively socializing with ethnic Uyghurs in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>2</sup>

### **Terrorism, NATO and India**

NATO took command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan on August 11, 2003, marking its presence in Asia for the first time. The organisation stated in 2003 that its commitment to the ISAF mission is a reflection of their transformation agenda and the alliance's resolve to address the new security challenges of the 21st century.<sup>3</sup> Not only had NATO talked about expanded security operations in Afghanistan but also about its 'indefinite' presence in the region.<sup>4</sup> The US and NATO troops have been located in close proximity to Jammu and Kashmir, within 1,000 km from the Siachen Glacier and the Nubra Valley.

Against this scenario, the Indian strategic community was concerned about the nature of NATO's presence and what it would entail for India's security directly. First, given the US' close proximity with Pakistan, questions had been raised as to how the Western forces would respond to the scenario of a direct military conflict between India and Pakistan. Second, most Indians were also concerned as to how the relationship will develop between the Pakistani Army and NATO forces while the latter were stationed as ISAF in Afghanistan.

As mentioned above, India's concerns particularly got heightened when Pakistan had asked the NATO on October 11, 2005 to launch urgent relief operations after the devastating earthquake in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK) on October 8, 2005 that killed 80,000 people. In addition, NATO deployed engineers and medical units from the NATO Response Force to assist in the relief. In three

months of operations that ended on February 1, 2006, NATO deployed 1,000 troops to take part in the relief work in PoK and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa). NATO's air bridges lifted almost 3,500 tons of aid to Pakistan with 168 flights and deployed medical units and specialist equipment to assist in relief operations. NATO engineers repaired nearly 60 km of roads in the region. NATO engineers also supported the Pakistani Army's Operation Winter Race in PoK.<sup>5</sup> The NATO Secretary General then described the operation as 'something unprecedented in NATO's history.'<sup>6</sup>

Speculation and criticism was levelled by Pakistani opposition parties, especially the Islamist alliance, Muttahida Majlis Amal, about Pakistan's decision to offer a military base in PoK. However, the NATO disaster relief team Commander, Air Commodore Andrew Walton dismissed allegations of NATO having such a plan.<sup>7</sup>

India too provided relief material including 50,000 tents to Pakistan by air and train, but Pakistan rejected the offer of helicopters from India for relief operations. President Musharraf then welcomed the offer but asked them to be sent without Indian pilots, because of certain "sensitivities."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, the thinking in India was that it should try to either neutralise or collaborate with NATO, both in terms of fighting terror in Afghanistan as well as in terms of safeguarding India's own security calculus in the region.

Third and equally important, was to analyse the way China responded to NATO's presence in Central Asia. Beijing, of course, downplayed the US' entry in Central Asia suggesting that it is an insignificant security concern considering the larger threat China faces in the Asia-Pacific region. Instead, China quickly started engaging NATO in a dialogue. It was reported then that the Chinese Ambassador to the EU instantly got in touch with NATO officials in Brussels. Moreover, the Chinese did not believe that the US forces will remain in the region for a longer period.<sup>9</sup>

China's own growing influence in Central Asia has been a matter of concern to India. Through the SCO, China has created

a profile for itself in the region. China's diplomacy in Central Asia has been a success story to the extent that it has ably replicated its Pakistan and Myanmar policies with regard to Central Asian countries. The future of SCO and its implications has been a matter of concern for India. Since 2005, India keenly pursued its case for becoming a member of the Chinese-led regional body in Central Asia. (India's membership of the SCO is being dealt separately.)

### **China's Growing Influence**

The growing Chinese influence has resulted in Russia losing its security edge in Central Asia. With its stakes in Central Asian energy increasing, China has been seeking direct security ties with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan by way of military weapon transactions with them.<sup>10</sup>

As the threat of terror spilling over from Afghanistan and the putative threat of the IS grew, China sought additional incentive for making a strategic entry into Central Asian security space.

China's proposal, made by General Fang Fenghui, Chief of General Staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during his visit to Kabul in February 2016, for creating a four-nation anti-terror quadrilateral regional alliance comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan has come as a surprise move. The proposal has received support from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani.<sup>11</sup> China's active commitment in Afghan security with its pledge to offer \$70 million in military aid to Afghanistan could alter the regional security alignment that would exclude Russia and India.

Six month after General Fang Fenghui's visit to Kabul, top military commanders from China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan met in Urumqi, capital of China's Xinjiang province on August 3, 2016 to formally form a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in Counter-Terrorism (QCCM).<sup>12</sup> This came after another quadrilateral dialogue on seeking a political reconciliation in Afghanistan, involving China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States.

The QCCM opens the scope of China's military involvement in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The QCCM aims to fight against terrorism and extremism that pose serious threats to regional stability. It reiterated their willingness and readiness to make joint efforts to deal with those forces in order to maintain peace and stability of all member-states. The "quadrilateral mechanism" is meant to coordinate with and support each other in a range of areas, including study and judgement of counter-terrorism situation, confirmation of clues, intelligence-sharing, anti-terrorist capability building, joint anti-terrorist training and personnel training, and that the coordination and cooperation will be exclusive to the four countries.

To be sure, such a parallel security enlargement process of China will offset the Russian-led CSTO, the main agenda of which is to uphold the stability in Central Asia through military bases and infrastructures in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Barring Tajikistan, these states are also the members of EAEU. China is definitely eyeing the opportunity of taking advantage of Russia's current difficult moments i.e., the standoff with the West and resultant geopolitical decline in Central Asia. The fact that the US has already endorsed China's proposed security alliance on the grounds that such an effort would help bring long-term stability in Afghanistan is a matter of serious concern. China and the US are already engaged with the Afghan and Pakistan governments for talks with Taliban.<sup>13</sup>

### **Central Asian Internal Dynamics and India**

While dealing with Central Asia, there is also the aspect of interplay between internal and external factors. Political divisions between and among the states have hardened due to variety of reasons.<sup>14</sup> This is primarily driven by the big-nation-small-nation syndrome, which makes regional security far more complex. The security concerns of each state are linked to the other in such a way that the action of one has consequences for others. The fear of Uzbekistan becoming a regional bully has forced other states, particularly Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, to look for support from outside, including China.

Similarly, an Islamic threat fostered by Pakistan through the Taliban, promoted China getting well entrenched in Central Asian security affairs, thereby impinging on India's interests indirectly.

Interestingly, each of the Central Asian states is in a convoluted geo-strategic location. Each state shares boundaries with four to six other states. The most strategically located country from India's security point of view is Tajikistan that shares borders with Afghanistan and China. It is also located in close proximity to PoK. This probably was a reason why India sought to make a bold move and undertook renovation of Ayni air base in Tajikistan since 2002. The decision came in the aftermath of the Kargil conflict of 1999.

Another concern related to the Central Asian pursuit of their divergent foreign and security policies. None of the Central Asia states had exercised any explicit foreign policy goals. Turkmenistan's 'positive neutrality' bewildered everyone. Kazakhstan follows a somewhat open-ended foreign policy, avoiding one-sidedness and promoting its interests in many directions, dubbed as a 'multi-vector' policy. It was essentially aimed at counter-balancing the interests of each power, while at the same time engaging each of them politically and economically to advance its goals. Kazakh regional initiatives such the CICA process emphasized resolution of the Kashmir issue for building peace in Asia. The Kazakh Foreign Ministry even had a dedicated cell on Kashmir.

Kyrgyzstan followed a policy somewhat akin to the ones followed by Kazakhstan. However, unlike the latter, Kyrgyzstan was unable to sustain such a policy due to its inherent economic and political weaknesses. As a result, Kyrgyzstan looked more closely towards China. Uzbekistan conducted its foreign policy as trial balloons from year to year. Tashkent has been the most fervent in asserting its independent position, but its foreign policy choices – flip-flop of siding with Russia or the US – have created more confusion than a sense of security in Central Asia.

Tajikistan has been viewed as the first 'failed state' in the region. The country went through a prolonged civil war that ended only in the mid-1990s. It continues to exist as a Russian protectorate with

Russian troops stationed along the country's southern borders with Afghanistan. In essence, the Central Asian states tend to play on the contradictions between various states.

India, therefore, could not be counted in the policy decisions of the Central Asian states. Even on Afghanistan, the positions of the Central Asian states vacillated several times in the past. Uzbekistan, at one point of time, took a U-turn in favour of dealing with the Taliban. Similarly, on several occasions, Kazakhstan too favoured engaging the Taliban in a dialogue and even established a *modus vivendi* with the Afghan militia. Turkmenistan's position always remained favourable to the Taliban. Therefore, even though India's security interests find convergence with those of the Central Asian states, the methods and nature of approaching those problems differed, as they also lacked an independent voice in foreign policy making.

Central Asians also followed an even-handed approach to the India-Pakistan conflict. They used harsh words about India and Pakistan going nuclear. The perception about the threat of nuclear conflict in South Asia and its fallout on Central Asia generally finds articulation among influential Central Asian circles. Although, in the aftermath of 9/11, Central Asian relations with Pakistan have somewhat weakened, in the context of the war on terrorism, Pakistan's importance to Central Asia has been dramatically underscored. In the current context of improved relations between Russia and Pakistan, most Central Asian countries have started to buy the Russian and Chinese line of thinking on Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

In the past, extremist elements from the region have reportedly been found fighting along with Jihadists in Kashmir. But the regimes in Central Asia have maintained a balanced position on the Indo-Pak dispute over Kashmir. At the same time a tendency to refer to the Kashmir issue at the popular level remains a common practice. Privately, people tend to express sympathy towards the 'fate and cause of Kashmiri people' and the subject is usually discussed in religious places and academic institutions.

The vernacular media often carries features on Kashmir. Components of JKLF and other elements sympathetic to Kashmir cause do have their presence in Central Asia. Obviously this cannot happen without the support they receive from local elements. The Kashmir solidarity days are also marked as they get sufficient media coverage. In the longer run, especially when Central Asians too will have surplus petrodollars, India's concerns emanating from the region would become critical. It is quite possible that some oil companies could be funding madrasas in Central Asia, and such philanthropic actions could also extend to India in the future.

In the current context of fundamentalism in Central Asia, Islamic parties are already sharing power in the government in Tajikistan. It is only a matter of time when Uzbekistan will also find itself in such a situation. However, it needs to be underlined that Islam in Central Asia is so far used only as a source of political mobilisation and not for capturing political power.

It is generally believed that Islamic parties in Central Asia hold no negative outlook for India and Indian policies.<sup>16</sup> The majority groups, especially the moderate ones, have respect and admiration for India. However, such a sympathetic attitude towards India may be lost sooner or later, if India does not move in the region with an open and flexible mind.

For India, the Russian and Turkish-speaking jihadists are unlikely to pose any immediate threat. The problem will be serious if they are allowed to network with other terrorist outfits in the FATA region. The IMU is part of that network and it needs careful watching by Indian security managers. Traditionally Central Asian Muslims hold India (Indi or Hindostan) in high esteem. The challenge for Indian diplomacy is to sustain the degree of goodwill among the Muslims of Central Asia and Xinjiang. The points of connecting with these forces may be missing now and serious efforts are required to harness the traditional links with them in the Ferghana valley. Of course, Xinjiang needs to be viewed by India in a wider political context and therefore, requires a separate policy treatment.

## The Uyghur Issue and India

After a lull of decades, the Uyghur issue is seemingly regaining its strength, drawing significant attention from the world outside. The attention to the Uyghurs has widened in the wake of 9/11 and the subsequent war against terror. The listing of the ETIM as a terrorist organisation has further sharpened the focus on Xinjiang.<sup>17</sup> China's State Council after concealing them for decades came out with details on terrorist activities in Xinjiang. However, the region in India's proximity is restive like never before in recent times. Groups of varying influence and potential are active with separatist objectives. World powers with perceived interests in the region are preparing to stoke fire. It is difficult to predict, though, what the future portends for Xinjiang and countries in the neighbourhood; the regional balance of interests on the Central Asia-China frontier has been under rapid transformation and so has been the Chinese preparation to deal with the Uyghur problem.

In fact, Xinjiang got exposed to the Western world after the Western energy companies had moved into Central Asia in a big way since the early 1990s, acquiring major interests in oilfields in the Caspian Sea region and Kazakhstan, presumably the major source for hydrocarbon supplies in the world in the next few centuries.

Of the eight countries that share borders with Xinjiang, the northern group – Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – would be loath to be assertive on the Uyghur issue for quite some time to come. Among the southern group, Tajikistan and Afghanistan have their own internal instabilities that limit their actions.

Only Pakistan has the will, driven by its sense of cross-purposes with India, to shape the course of future events in Xinjiang. In fact, Pakistan had an ambitious programme for the region, which lost steam due to its inherent shortcomings. Still it acts as a vehicle of Saudi Wahhabism, promoting fundamentalist groups, and providing a fundamentalist safety valve in Xinjiang on behalf of communist China. These activities favourably mesh with Pakistan's design of encircling India with a pan-Islamic arc. Xinjiang has the potential to become yet another area where Islamic forces will try to pin down India.

Therefore, here, only the interests of major powers may converge with those of India and New Delhi should not lose sight of that.

From the Chinese perspective, the spectre of jihadi terrorism is spreading across Xinjiang province. China by its own assertion stands committed to fight against the “three evils” – terrorism, separatism and religious extremism – through the SCO. It has promised not to make use of internal conflict as a tool to sabotage the security of others and opposes applying double standards on terrorism. However, in practice Beijing’s double-speak on terrorism has been quite evident.

It has used the SCO to fight only those cases of terror that fit with its own definition of terrorism. On the one hand, China describes Uyghur activism in Xinjiang as an act of terror and wants others to support its fight against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). But on the other hand, it refuses to oppose some terrorist groups that attack other countries.

Beijing has been using Pakistan and its instruments of terror to expand its own geopolitical interests. Such double-speak on terrorism may have prompted India to up the ante by allowing a group of Uyghur political activists to participate in a gathering in India.<sup>18</sup> This Indian attempt at provoking China came in the wake of China’s move to block India’s bid to get Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar and Lashkar-e-Taibacommander Zaki-ur-RehmanLakhvi banned by the UN.

The issue surrounding the granting of a visa to Uyghur leader Dolkun Isa was a clear message to Beijing that India too can play around with the definition of terrorism and it can also hit China where it hurts.<sup>19</sup> India has also got sufficient assets should it choose to up the ante on Xinjiang.

## **Impact on India**

In the context of Sino-Central Asian relations, the scenario of both confrontation and cooperation will have consequences for India. Three out of five states share commonality with India of having large borders with China. Unlike India, the present regimes in those

states have signed controversial border agreements with China. In Kyrgyzstan, border concession to China has become the cause for internal instability. Similarly, in Kazakhstan, opposition parties are reluctant to approve border settlements in favour of China and this could be raised any time once the democratization process begins in the future.<sup>20</sup> This is also true for water disputes. China has extracted maximum benefit from weak Central Asian states while dealing with disputes over water resources. China has been diverting several sources of Central Asia like Ili and Irtysh river waters to Xinjiang – required for settling the Han population migrating from other provinces.

In a situation where the Central Asian domestic political situation alters fundamentally in the future and the US interest in the region grows, the Sino-Central Asian theatre would turn into a zone of confrontation. Any increase or reduction in tension along the Sino-Central Asian frontiers will inevitably have military implications for India.

In a scenario where Central Asia and China continue to cooperate in economic and military fields, the security complexion in the region lying north of India would alter significantly. Already, multiple networks of roads, railways and pipelines connecting Central Asia and Western China and beyond are in full progress under the One Belt-One Road (OBOR) plan. In recent months, China has revived its interest in Central Asian and Caspian oil. China's grand project CPEC is aimed not only at linking Pakistan into China's Central Asia economic loop under the OBOR scheme but also strategically encircle India.<sup>21</sup>

China has already also signalled its intention to play a greater economic role in Afghanistan in the post-US withdrawal. China's first cargo train was set to reach Afghanistan on September 9, 2016. This was part of Beijing's effort to consolidate ties with Kabul, as part of its OBOR initiative along the ancient Silk Road.<sup>22</sup>

The train left China's eastern city of Nantong on August 25 and took 15 days to reach Hairatan, on Afghanistan's border with Uzbekistan. The train came through the Alatau Pass on the China-

Kazakhstan border and crossed into Afghanistan through the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan border at Termez at Amu Darya. China's railways entering Southern Central Asia and Afghanistan would have major implications for consolidating China's position in South Asia.

All these developments in India's northern sphere could become a disturbing trend that could isolate India from major international transport and communication highways. It is here that the question of whether India should factor China into its Central Asia policy assumes importance.

### **Options for India**

Through the better part of India's history, links with Central Asia had been the most important in its contact with the outside world. However, in the post-Independence period, India has grossly and perhaps consciously overlooked the studies and understanding of the areas, which traditionally formed its 'buffer zones' against external aggression. India has already paid prices for this in the case of Afghanistan, Tibet, Myanmar and Xinjiang.

In the coming years, regional complexities are likely to undergo a major change with major powers stepping in and around India's northern flanks. In all probability, a repeat of the 'Great Game' or a clash of major power interests cannot be wished away. It is necessary for India to evolve its own perspective and understanding, as well as to broaden the operational scope of Central Asia to include the frontiers of China (Xinjiang). From this perspective, the following points merit consideration:

- India needs to draw contingency plans, lest the situation unfolds in a manner that alters the security environment in fundamental ways,
- India's relations with Central Asia would assume importance should Russia's relations with Pakistan improve in a dramatic way in the future. The trend is already moving in that direction and this is bound to impact India-Central Asia relations,
- The role of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan is critical to India's Afghan policy,

- It is important that India's policy guidelines for relations with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan should factor in India's China policy. All major powers seemingly have their China-centric activities substantially concentrated in Central Asia,
- The relevance of SCO and the formation of a sub-regional framework involving India, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Afghanistan could be a viable option for long-term cooperation,
- India's policy outlook for the region should also cover the understanding of Ismaili Shias and Nur-Bakshia Sufis inhabiting the contiguous areas of the Pamirs, Hindukush, Wakhan and Gilgit-Baltistan region. Access to this region should become a priority policy for India,
- The Uyghur movement is critical to India's security. Events in the region have so far scarcely engaged India's security concerns. Inevitably, it will soon draw compelling attention, more so as Xinjiang directly shares borders with the sensitive state of Jammu and Kashmir bordering both Aksai-Chin and the PoK. India should be prepared to face a new situation in Xinjiang and should broaden the operational scope of Central Asia to include Xinjiang as well,
- India needs to closely monitor the events by developing networks for gaining hard information. India enjoys certain advantages if it chooses to broaden its policy options in Xinjiang. It shares religious and cultural links with the region going back to ancient times. India had thriving trade relations with Xinjiang until a few decades ago until the Indian Consulate in Kashgar was closed down in the 1950s. India needs to re-harness its traditional interests for the region,
- India had received some 20,000 Uyghur refugees who fled Xinjiang in 1949. They included prominent leaders who strongly acknowledged India's gesture in their difficult times. They do not abhor India; rather they value Indian culture and ethos, which are part of their ancestral Indic and Buddhist heritage. In fact, relations with the Uyghurs must be harnessed through

academic contacts. It must be underlined that New Delhi is closer to Kashgar, Kotan, and Turfan than any other important city of the world,

- A clear distinction needs to be made between Uyghur or Turkic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism. Every attempt should be made to divide these streams by promoting antagonistic relationships between them,
- India should build contacts with various moderate Uyghur groups based in Central Asia and Europe. Important Uyghur scholars must be engaged and invited for scholarly seminars and conferences in India. Young ethnic Uyghurs in Central Asia must be selected for higher studies in India under the scholarship schemes and should be nurtured,
- India can play an important role to revive their Sufi culture and heritage, which has been very much part of their traditional practices. India has vast resources and institutions linked with Sufi traditions, both in Kashmir and other parts of northern India. Perhaps those linkages and institutional contacts can be rebuilt through policy implications. In this regard, India could initiate special projects to include Central Asian states, Afghanistan and scholars from China's Xinjiang province,
- India, so far, hasn't achieved much success in winning substantive deals in Central Asia's oil sector – the reasons for which are many, ranging from technical hurdles to high-stake politics. The problem of inaccessibility apart, the issue of avoiding transit through Pakistan itself has become a fact of life. Therefore, it becomes essential – and inevitably so – to factor China in India's energy security calculus,
- India should try to explore opportunities in the OBOR especially for regaining access to the northern axis, prevented by loss of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) to Pakistan. Therefore, India needs to weigh the option of getting a physical entry into Gilgit-Baltistan, Sinkiang and Wakhan areas which hitherto remained out-of-its-way – it can't be in India's interest to support the project and not reap all the economic benefits,<sup>23</sup>

- Logically, any connectivity to Eurasia should follow the traditional India-Central Asia route that went across the Himalayan passes and the Xinjiang steppes. During British rule, the route via Xinjiang was preferred for conducting trade and commerce with Central Asia. As noted earlier, a web of energy pipelines is being planned in the region, including long-distance ones from Kazakhstan and Western Siberia to coastal China. The feasibility of constructing an oil and gas 'Energy Highway' from Russia and Central Asia along Western China connecting Northern India is now well established.<sup>24</sup> Should this happen, it would bring about unprecedented strategic change, let alone endowing energy supplies to the entire northern India. In fact, it is the only option which is realistically attainable and worth pursuing. The shift of thinking in this direction is something that India can no longer afford to put off, unless India wants to remain disconnected with its immediate vicinity only to inculcate more insecurity and the fear of China encircling India.
- For India, the route via the Ladakh-Xinjiang axis has a strategic consideration. It could counterpoise CPEC plans and could help India gain direct access to Central Asian transcontinental transport corridors linking Asia with Europe. In fact, a countervailing strategy for India would be to offer to offer a mollifying connectivity plan for a direct transport, energy, trade, fibre optics and communication highway connecting the Persian Gulf with China through Indian territory under the rubric of the India-China Silk Route Corridor (ICSRC). It could serve multiple interlocking interests for India from infrastructure-building to buying guarantee against Chinese misadventures. The idea could help open a new path and become a masterstroke counter-strategy in India's long-term home and foreign policies.

The aforementioned points impinging on India's security require specific treatment and in-depth analysis. Some of India's traditional interests could be re-harnessed through rigorous research activities.

India has a good number of intellectual and institutional resources which can work on the potentials of reviving the lost linkages.

It is, therefore, necessary that India's policy outlook demands broadening of the conceptual parameters of Central Asia to include the wider Eurasian space. Major Power have broadened their perspectives, as dynamics evolving in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are increasingly becoming China-centric. It is time for India to factor-in China in its Central Asia policy. Above and beyond, India has been traditionally a legitimate player in Central Asia until not so long ago. In the changed circumstances, India must benefit from China's development plans in Xinjiang and Tibet.

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## 13. Energy Deal: Untying the Gordian Knot

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India has been always aware of the enormous energy reserves within its geographically proximate Central Asian region that could potentially fulfil its energy demands. The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the region in 2015 paved the way for India to finally acquire a long awaited energy stake in the region, though it may still take many years to fully realise India's goals in the region.

The new developments could not have been possible without the evolving undercurrents of the new geopolitical balance of power in the region. Russia seems to be playing a conspicuous role in nudging both India and Pakistan towards cooperation on the energy pipeline. However, there is no case to be euphoric on this front. India's energy diplomacy in Central Asia will fail if it continues to discount the Russia factor in its policy.

Three recent path-breaking developments in the nuclear and oil sectors will finally unlock India's entry into Central Asian energy sector. First, President Nursultan Nazarbayev's daring decision to sign a major contract for a renewed long-term supply of uranium to India is the most significant takeaway of the Prime Minister's visit. Second, India's ONGC-Videsh Ltd (OVL) has finally made its first breakthrough when Prime Minister Modi launched the drilling operations for oil exploration in the Satpayev block on July 7, 2015.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the Ufa Summit and Prime Minister's follow-up visit to Turkmenistan may also have possibly shown the way finally even for the TAPI pipeline to see the light of day. There have been some extremely positive movements taking place on the TAPI project in

the last four months. In Ashgabat, the Prime Minister called the TAPI project a “key pillar” and pushed for its realization “quickly”. He said “TAPI could transform regional economic cooperation and bring prosperity along the route ... I convey our interest in long-term investment in the energy sector in Turkmenistan.”<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, these developments could not have been accomplished without the evolving undercurrents of a new geopolitical balance of power in the region. Prime Minister’s visit to Ufa, his meeting Putin and Nawaz Sharif there followed by a visit to Ashgabat cannot be without a well thought-out strategy. It only underlines the point that global and regional power balance is more sharply impacting India’s policy directions and perhaps in a way that is more positive and realistic.

In fact, it is not terrorism but the energy factor that may have turned the tables on India-Pakistan for talks in Ufa. The global politics and the role of Russia in this are conspicuous whether one likes it or not. Russia may be attempting to nudge both India and Pakistan towards cooperation, especially in terms of working on the energy pipeline.

### **India’s Energy Hunt in Central Asia**

India was always aware about the availability of enormous energy within its geographically proximate Caspian states of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan and they could become potential suppliers to meet Indian energy demand.

Kazakhstan is among the top 15 countries in the world in oil reserves (3 per cent of world’s total oil reserves. More than 20 per cent of the country is occupied by oil and gas areas with 172 oil fields so far. The figures suggest that Kazakhstan’s oil reserves stand at currently 4.8 billion tonnes, or more than 35 billion barrels.<sup>3</sup> It is said that the Kazakh section of the Caspian Sea may be having another 17 billion tonnes or 124.3 billion barrels. According to the Ministry of Energy of Kazakhstan, oil production in 2017 was 81 million tonnes and will gradually grow to 88 million tonnes by 2020. Given the oil and gas reserves, Kazakhstan is likely to remain among top oil producers.

According to the *Oil & Gas Journal (OGJ)* Kazakhstan's current proven natural gas reserves are 85 trillion cubic feet (Tcf).<sup>4</sup> Besides, the country also has 31.8 billion tons of proven coal reserves as well. To add to the Kazakh natural gas reserves are Uzbekistan's current proven reserves of 65 trillion cubic feet and Turkmenistan's 265 trillion Tcf (world's fourth largest natural gas reserves).<sup>5</sup>

These hydrocarbon riches offered alluring possibilities of meeting India's thirst for energy – a reason why India always placed high priority for getting a toehold in Central Asia ever since the countries of the region had gained independence following the Soviet collapse.

India's ONGC-Videsh Ltd (OVL) had opened its office in Almaty in the mid-1990s and was located inside the Indian Embassy. The OVL since has been persistently pursuing exploration stakes in the Kazakh oil fields. Similarly, talks with Turkmenistan for gas supplies had been going on since 1992. The plans for pipelines across Afghanistan and Pakistan were discussed even during the heyday of the Taliban's control over Afghanistan.

### **An Intricate Pursuit**

The OVL's pursuits for exploration in Kazakhstan have been anything but simple. Its efforts for almost two decades seemed frustrating as the Kazakh authorities repeatedly cold-shouldered its bidding process. Of course, as the global energy sharks including Chevron, Exxon, Unocal and others had entered the Caspian and Kazakh oilfields by mid-1990s, OVL was made to look like a small fish in the big Central Asian energy game – a reason why the OVL probably decided to close its representative office in Almaty by 1998.

To be sure, India's pursuit for oil exploration in Kazakhstan was driven more by strategic considerations. The OVL officials knew that both production and transporting of hydrocarbons from the region to India didn't seem viable.

India's aspirations in the region were also based on certain wrong assumptions and misplaced imagination. The general expectation among many people was that the country's old and

shared civilizational links plus the enormous cultural goodwill available would help India gain deals on easy terms.<sup>6</sup>

Another assumption was that the Kazakhs would give preference to OVL vis-à-vis the Chinese companies on strategic grounds. This was probably borne out of the fact that prominent Soviet-era members of the Kazakh strategic community had been espousing the idea of engaging India to counter the potential threats from China.

Clearly, the cultural goodwill rhetoric has played little or no role for strategic engagement. In fact, President Nazarbayev made a commitment for Indian oil explorations several times but dragged his feet later. Surely, Nazarbayev, known for being a sly fox, may have used India in his delicate balancing game of engaging various suitors for the competition for energy. Importantly, New Delhi's mistake has been that it never tried to take Russia on board while dealing with Central Asia.

After negotiating back and forth for a decade, Petro Kazakhstan did give an assurance in 2005 for a \$4.18 billion stake in an oil field to a new combined venture of OVL – Mittal Energy Ltd (OMEL). But, the Kazakhs later strangely maneuvered the deal in favour of China while intriguingly allowing China's CNPC to revive its bid to beat OVL for the same deal. This had caused a serious disappointment and setback for the Indian endeavor.

In 2009, India stepped up diplomatic engagements with Kazakhstan considering its strategic importance for India not only for energy contracts but also for nuclear supply. The effort culminated in New Delhi inviting President Nazarbayev as the Chief Guest for India's 60th Republic Day celebrations in 2009.

Among other things, the Indian negotiators wanted to clinch deals on: (a) atomic fuel supply and (b) an oil exploration stake in the highly prospective Caspian acreage of Satpayev. Both were considered path-breaking deals.

However, for Indian negotiators, negotiations with the Kazakhs have always been a tough exercise as they showed no considerations for the so called "goodwill" factor towards India.

Take the case of Satpayev. After years of negotiations between KMG and OVL and after originally having agreed to offer a 50 per

cent stake in prospective Caspian acreage, the Kazakhs later cut it down to only a 25 per cent for OVL. This too on the insistence that steel tycoon Laxmi Mittal, who is well entrenched in the Kazakh business, be brought in – the reason why it perhaps became ONGC-Mittal Energy Ltd (OMEL). It was not clear whether Mittal himself played the mischief for gaining a pie in the India-Kazakhstan energy deal.

Of course, the sticky points revolved around financing and paying bonus to KMG at the exploration stage.

### **Interesting Gauche**

To add to the tricky negotiation process, an incident though inadvertent, may have perhaps dampened the spirits of Nazarbayev's visit to India to attend the Republic Day parade. In a rare case of bad timing, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had to be admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) to undergo a coronary 're-do' bypass surgery when Nazarbayev's plane had taken off from Astana for New Delhi. To resolve the odd situation South Block had to place President Pratibha Devisingh Patil opposite Nazarbayev as an alternate, while Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee received President Nazarbayev on January 26 for the parade ceremony. Customarily, the Prime Minister receives the Chief Guest.<sup>7</sup>

The Prime Minister's absence wasn't a surreptitious move but a diplomatically awkward one may have been arisen especially when Nazarbayev was known for his extremely ostentatious and self-aggrandizing character. The Kazakh President however sent his courteous good wishes to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for his speedy recovery.

Nazarbayev's visit however saw the conclusion of an agreement between ONGC-OMEL and KMG for a stake in Satpayev, as well as a MoU for cooperation in the civil nuclear energy sector between NPCIL and KazAtom Prom. The agreements did include the full terms of reference for their implementation.<sup>8</sup>

It was only two years later during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Astana in April 2011 that the OVL and KMG

firmed up a package of three agreements on the Satpayev exploration block. The package included: (i) the Participating Share Assignment Agreement to work out the transfer of 25 per cent stake from KMG to OVL; (ii) the Carry Agreement to define the key features of OVL's "carry" and KMG's repayment of the carried amount in case of commercial discovery and development of the discovered fields; and (iii) the Joint Operating Agreement to define the terms of reference for the relationship between the two parties.<sup>9</sup>

India was hopeful that the 2011 agreement on Satpayev would mark the entry of OVL in Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon sector and will pave the way for a long-term relationship.

However, to India's dismay, Nazarbayev in 2013 once again gave India a raw deal when he went back on a promise to give OVL an 8.4 per cent stake worth \$5 billion in the new Kashagan field from the US giant Conoco Phillips. The deal was once again manoeuvred in favour of the Chinese company. There was a sense that New Delhi's indifference and diplomatic ineptness possibly once again factored into Nazarbayev changing his decision in China's favour.

### **Future Prospects**

Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the launch of oil drilling operations in Satpayev during his visit to Astana.<sup>10</sup> It can be counted as a successful visit but one has to wait to see whether the OVL is still left with any stamina for pursuing further oil exploration in Kazakh fields.

Interestingly, the OVL has probably refused to accept Kazakhstan's recent offer of 25 per cent stake in Abai field abandoned by Norway's Statoil.<sup>11</sup> However, there were also reports earlier that the OVL was closely studying the proposal to be part of the massive oil and gas exploration, the "Eurasia Project" initiated by Kazakhstan in the Caspian Sea, which possesses a whopping 300 oil and gas fields.<sup>12</sup>

Prime Minister Modi was hopeful for more opportunities. He told the media "I am pleased that President Nazarbayev responded

positively to my request to consider additional mature blocks for Indian investments.”<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding all constraints, India can ill-afford to ignore Kazakhstan’s reserves of its giant Tengiz, Karachaganak, and its offshore Kashagan fields. Kazakhstan currently exports 1.4 million bbl/d of crude oil mostly to the European energy market.<sup>14</sup> Around 16 per cent of crude goes to China. Its export capacity would increase once Kashagan comes online.

The country is sitting on natural gas reserves of 85 trillion cubic feet (Tcf). To be sure, the situation will change in a way that there will be ample opportunity for India to import cheap gas from Kashagan field once the connectivity is improved. In this context, gas supply from Kazakhstan will remain a long-term option for India’s energy market.

Besides oil and natural gas, Kazakhstan also has 31.8 billion tons of proven coal reserves. In fact, India should have gone whole hog tapping into Kazakhstan’s booming power sector. During Nazarbayev’s 2009 visit, India’s National Thermal Power Corporation Limited (NTPC) was invited for setting up new power plants and renovating the country’s existing ones.<sup>15</sup>

Kazakhstan’s state-run power company Samruk suggested then that the country has huge coal and gas reserves for generating power but was hamstrung by production capacity and lack of distribution networks. Samruk wanted NTPC’s assistance in setting up new power projects, transmission lines and in undertaking pollution control measures.

In 2010, NTPC was exploring the possibility of setting up two coal-based thermal power plants in Kazakhstan in exchange for coal from Kazakhstan.<sup>16</sup> Since then, there has been no news from NTPC.

Kazakhstanis currently focusing on establishing electricity links with the emerging Eurasian Economic Community’s (EAEU) energy market as well as with the State Grid Corporation of China (SGCC) through long-distance transmission lines. The NTPC should have made a strategic deal then to seek long-term interest for entering the Central Asian power sector.

## Uranium Deal

Among the five agreements signed with Kazakhstan on July 7-8, 2015, the one on renewal of contract to supply 5,000 metric tons(MT) of nuclear fuel by the National Atomic Company (NAC) “KazAtomProm” JSC to the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL) for the period 2015-19 is a huge development.<sup>17</sup>This is more than double the quantity (2,100 MT) of uranium ore concentrate that Kazakhstan earlier supplied to India under the first purchase contract for 2009-2014. The deal on atomic fuel has proved to be more promising than achievements in the hydrocarbons sector.

There is no doubt that Kazakhstan had been enthusiastic for nuclear ties with India. Unlike Australia and Japan that insisted on India signing the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), Kazakhstan attached no strings to nuclear ties with India. It was among the first countries to support India at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) meet in 2009.<sup>18</sup>

This can be attributed mainly to: (a) the strategic factor of Russia-India cooperation being extremely important for a country like Kazakhstan to enter into a deal with India on items like atomic fuel or other sensitive areas relating to technology transfer; (b) Russia directly and indirectly controls Kazakhstan’s nuclear sector – uranium mining, production, enrichment and reactors. Russia’s Rosatom has tie ups and equity shares in KazAtomProm for uranium exploration and the mining industry.

This should underscore the point that Kazakhstan does not have the manoeuvring space to conduct foreign relations without having concord with Russia. The country falls within the Russian-driven politico-security orbits such as CIS, CSTO and EAEU that underline the obligatory specifics.

It is not that Kazakhstan has no nuclear tie-ups with others. It has agreements for fuel supply with Japan and South Korea. Importantly, the country has cooperation agreement with the China Guangdong Nuclear Power Group Holdings (CGNPC) and with the China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC) for uranium supply and fuel fabrication. In 2011 CNNC signed a contract to

buy 25,000 tonnes of uranium from Kazakhstan. According to the World Nuclear Association, KazAtomProm exported 55 per cent of Kazakhstan's uranium production to China in 2014.<sup>19</sup> It is here that Russia favours India as a countervailing measure against China's monopoly on Kazakhstan's uranium exports.

However, unlocking the atomic fuel with Kazakhstan has also never been easy for India; it involved not just international agencies but also Russia's final stamp. It was evident from the endless and often frustrating negotiations between the officials of the Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and Kazakh negotiating teams prior to signing of the deal in 2009.

Here again the negotiations often got bogged down due to lack of clarity on the Kazakh side on critical issues of safeguards, licensing, liability, etc. The negotiations remained cautious, incremental and they often left out the details fearing that the process will be derailed. The failure to remove the sticky points seriously impeded progress in bilateral ties. In fact, a fear persisted whether specific contracts would be signed during Nazarbayev's visit to New Delhi in 2009.

As *The Times of India* reported in January 2009 from Astana while quoting a Kazakh source:

It seems the Kazakh negotiating teams do not have clear directive or mandate from the top. There's lack of clarity on some aspects of the nuclear negotiations. Also, there's too much haggling. If deals do not happen this time they will not happen ever. Maybe, when the President meets your Prime Minister they can cut through the red tape.<sup>20</sup>

The NPCIL and KazAtomProm signed a MoU in January 2009 to supply 2100 tonnes of uranium concentrate over a period of six years.<sup>21</sup> But it was in 2011 that a legal framework agreement was agreed upon for cooperation in peaceful uses of nuclear energy including fuel supply, nuclear medicine, use of radiation technologies for healthcare including isotopes, reactor safety mechanisms, exchange of scientific and research information, exploration and

joint mining of uranium, design, construction and operation of nuclear power plants, etc.<sup>22</sup>

According to official figures, the NPCIL has received 600 MT of uranium ore concentrate from KazAtomProm (300-400 MT annually) during 2009-2014.<sup>23</sup> The first contract period ended in December 2014, but in March 2013 the two sides agreed to extend the civil nuclear cooperation ties beyond 2014.

### **Future Challenges**

The recent renewal of contract to supply 5,000 MT of nuclear fuel to India for the next six years is a welcome move. As India's uranium fuel needs will grow in future, Kazakhstan's uranium reserves which is world's largest share (38 per cent) followed by Canada and Australia, is an enormous attraction. Moreover, the country is all set host the IAEA's low-enriched uranium (LEU) bank that will cater to civilian nuclear power reactors of importing countries. Similarly, any energy deals with Kazakhstan are good for India's ambitious plan of adding 175 GW of renewable energy.

However, it needs to be underscored that India's energy ties will continue to face several challenges for the following reasons:

- Make no mistake, Russia is and will remain an important factor for India's accessibility to Central Asian energy and atomic fuel reserves. This will remain pertinent so long as Russia needs to counterbalance China in Central Asia. Moreover, as long as India's fuel imports from Kazakhstan remain modest as well as the ties do not get deeper, a major hurdle for getting atomic fuel is unlikely.

However, the growing Russia-China convergence, which is decidedly aimed at jointly shaping the future of Central Asia, would mean further loss of manoeuvring space for a country like Kazakhstan. Therefore, India's nuclear ties with Kazakhstan will be conditioned by future change in the geopolitical climate just as geopolitics has so far decisively undermined India's quest for importing hydrocarbons from Central Asia.

This should in many ways highlight the fact that India's policy approach of discounting Russia's importance prematurely in Central Asia was a mistake. In fact, such a policy line has not only delayed India's success but also made India's diplomacy in Central Asia a more arduous exercise.

- Although Kazakhstan professes a multi-vector foreign policy, in reality the country is deeply integrated with Russia geographically, politically, economically and in terms of security dependency. By implications, Russia would never think that the West will ever succeed in out manoeuvring Kazakhstan against Russia's interests. Hence, Moscow will be in a position to regulate the future direction of Kazakhstan-India energy ties. Kazakhstan is allowed to export its energy to China but the main supplier of hydrocarbons to China is Russia itself.
- The existing Kazakh energy outlets moving northward and also eastward are unlikely to change any time soon. China's efforts of creating networks of economic and infrastructure activities across the region have now gained credence. The process of integration will be further strengthened by Beijing's Silk Route project for Eurasia. Any plan for re-routing of supply lines in the southern direction will therefore require a fundamental geopolitical change in Eurasia, which is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the region south of Central Asia suffers a huge image problem from Kazakhstan's perspective. Any shift in changing the mindset would require more than the Indian efforts. Afghanistan and Pakistan provide a major reason for their apprehension for looking southward.
- The Kazakhs just as the Russians undeniably consider India to be a reliable, trustworthy and a predictable partner, but at the same time they do not consider India to be a good performer. Many have argued that New Delhi's indecisiveness always prompted Nazarbayev against energy deals with India. Even though, the Kazakhs realise the importance of engaging India for countervailing the Chinese, but they also know well that it is only China which can fit their bill ultimately.

- More importantly, India, despite having strong intentions, suffers from multiple constraints especially from financial limitations for having a presence and competing with China, Russia and others in Central Asia. India's investment in the region has been dismal so far. Its engagement policy carried out in the framework of "development assistance" programmes does not have vitality for spurring a desired rhythm of economic interdependency between India and these countries. Geography is not the only factor, even the Indian private companies having deep pockets have not shown the necessary interest. They too tended to take shelter under the government-patronised schemes abroad.
- The Indian companies which have ventured in Central Asian markets in the past have experienced instances of business irregularities. Such incidents often scared Indian investors moving into the region as they also remain apprehensive about uncertain legal and taxation systems practiced in the former Soviet republics. Besides, language is a major barrier. Visa regimes for Indian visitors are extremely tight in these countries. Indians are clubbed into the category of "Southern Countries" along with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and others that are viewed as a potential threat to them. Recently, Kazakhstan has excluded India from the list of 19 countries that would avail a visa-free travel programme for staying up to 15 days once their pilot projects get completed. All these continue to dampen enthusiasm and keep the potential investors away from venturing into Central Asia.
- Lack of understanding and expertise in India on Central Asia is a major handicap. India has not produced scholarships on the region with depth of knowledge on historical, political, linguistic, and above all the intricate socio-tribal structural underpinnings, i.e., the function and relationship among Kazakh *zhuz* (hordes) that ultimately regulate decision-making processes. As a result, the Indian government and businesses tend to rely mostly on the official and diplomatic channels that do not necessarily entail the desired results. That is why engagements so far have largely

remained government-to-government contacts. This approach over a period of time has led to a distortion in overall relations –the reason why the depth of India-Central Asia ties has always remained in question. India possibly uses the good services of NRI steel tycoon Laxmi Mittal, who enjoys a huge clout among Kazakhstan’s political elite, but this cannot endure in the longer term.

In comparison, other powers have developed and nurtured deep expertise and skills required for dealing with various political and social stakeholders. Central Asia does remain a subject of continual intellectual curiosity in India, but the exercise is confined mostly to the conference enterprise which unfortunately neither helps entail any meaningful academic accolade nor serves to meet the policy goals.

- It is also wrong to believe that foreign policy choices for Central Asian countries are as flexible and as muddled as they exist anywhere else. Despite them being independent, the governments here pursue their policies in consonance with others and more firmly under Russia’s guidance if not fully under its direction. Therefore, the belief that they are anxious to have stronger ties with India would be a misnomer.
- Also, to be also fair, the recent fall in world oil prices has put constraints on investments in the Caspian region. As a result, the economies of the Caspian states – specifically Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – have suffered slowdowns since mid-2014, though they might recover due to significant currency reserves.

In addition, the knock-on effects of Russia’s economic crisis on them keep the energy market in the region at a low level. In fact, the international oil companies (IOCs) are said to be revisiting their investment programmes considering the high production costs in Kashagan which are already about four or five times higher than the average costs of production in Iraqi or Saudi fields. According to the US Energy Information Agency (EIA) exploration and export projects are currently not so economical

to justify long-term investments. No wonder the OVL has rejected Kazakhstan's recent offer of 25 per cent stake in the Abai field that was abandoned by Norway's Statoil.

- For India, the problem has never been about sourcing energy resources but about routing them. And this is less to do with distance and more with the geopolitics of making India a victim of strategic denial. This situation is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

From India's perspective traversing a gas pipeline through Pakistan will remain a risky proposition especially when the revenue Pakistan will earn on the transit fee from India could be redirected to sustain terrorism against India. This apart, India by letting the pipeline come through Pakistan will consciously close its options for military strikes and thus allow its adversary to perpetually blackmail it. It is equally unlikely that India will forsake Kashmir for the sake of gas supplies. As Stephen Philip Cohen argued, "both countries are willing to take economic losses in return for short-term political and strategic gains in their political and military standoff."<sup>24</sup>

- This is not to suggest that India will have no stakes in the Central Asian energy opportunities. It should find other innovative ways to engage itself in Kazakhstan's energy sector. India could very well join international energy consortiums for exploration and production in Kashagan and other offshore fields in the Caspian. LNG purchases from the region are also a better option than the construction of a gas pipeline.
- India and Kazakhstan have much in common in terms of resources, demands, expertise, and capabilities. With the singular exception of Arcelor Mittal, owned by NRI Laxmi Mittal, no other Indian entity is profiting in Kazakhstan. His midastouch in *-Karmet* steel plant in Temirtau is a glaring example for what India could emulate at a bigger scale. *Ispat-Karmet* contributes approximately 8 per cent to the Kazakh GDP.
- Central Asia and the Caspian region could become another West Asia for the Indian engineers, management experts, skilled

and semi-skilled workers to find employment in the Kazakh oil industry. They could earn a huge amount of foreign exchange from the region's energy service sector. Apart from *Ispat-Karmet*, Indian companies such as Punj Lloyd have gained a major presence in that country since 2002. It is an active player in the engineering and construction business.<sup>25</sup> It had undertaken the *KAM 16" dia* crude oil pipeline project from Kumkol to Dhuzaly with a skilled workforce with an Indian to Kazakh ratio 15:580 delivered results in temperatures ranging from  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$  to plus  $50^{\circ}\text{C}$ . The company created history while working on the large bore-small bore 333 km pipeline project for Tengiz Chevroil/PFD in Kazakhstan. It is also involved in the Kashagan Experimental Programme for AGIP KCO Engineering, Procurement and Construction (EPC) of Export Oil & Gas Pipeline.

- Similarly, KEC International Limited, TCS, etc. have gained a major presence in Kazakhstan's construction, electric transmission lines and IT-related projects. These and other foreign-based companies have employed thousands of Indian workers in the oil-ancillary sectors in Kazakhstan. In Turkmenistan, approximately 2,500 Indian technicians and semi-skilled workers are employed at the Yolotan refinery plant alone. Hundreds of Indians are in the construction business in Ashgabat and in sites in the offshore Caspian region.
- The ancillary and drilling sectors of the oil and gas industry will rapidly grow in the Caspian region. Already, the volume of construction works in petrochemicals, metallurgy, pipeline and mining are becoming extremely attraction sectors. Billions of dollars are being committed in the oil and gas sector, especially the processing industry, in pipeline construction and the transport and communications segment in Atyrau and Mangistau oblasts. Tengiz, Karachaganak, and Kashagan fields will open up major opportunities for Indian engineering and construction services.
- Kazakhstan is also opening up chemicals, nuclear and manufacturing sectors. It has envisaged launching 927 investment projects to boost both civil engineering and non-

residential construction including renovation of roads running up to 2019. Owing to higher economic growth, several regions of Kazakhstan could offer long-term potential for construction business in the residential, non-residential and civil engineering segments of the market. New business centres, shopping malls, cultural centres, sports complexes, roads, etc. are being planned in the cities along the oil-rich Caspian region in the west. Turkish construction firms are already operating in the country.

- Clearly, Indian companies, financial services providers, contractors, design and project management specialists should quickly grab the opportunities in every profitable sector such as housing construction, road and railway construction, electric power transmission and distribution, telecommunications, power generation, etc.

Prime Minister Modi has seized the opportunity for asserting India's influence in Central Asia. Some successes have been achieved in securing access to the region's abundant natural resources. The Turkmen and Kazakh natural gas reserves are certainly not the last solution for India's energy needs but they will certainly contribute to satisfying its growing demands. The continuous denial of access to affordable gas also means that India will continue relying on burning domestic coal that will pose a threat to the global environment.

Importantly, the Modi government seems to have realised that India's internal issues including Kashmir, energy security, connectivity and above all problems with Pakistan are linked to a bigger balance of power game. They are interlinked and hence cannot be treated in isolation.

The attempts made by the governments under previous dispensations to resolve the Kashmir issue, Indo-Pak conflict and enlarging interests in Central Asia failed to get off the ground. It is here that the Modi-led government is trying to broaden the scope of geopolitical engagement.

Modi's meeting with Putin and Nawaz Sharif at Ufa and the follow-up visit to Ashgabat was part of a well thought-out

strategy. The Prime Minister pushed for quick realization of the TAPI in Ashgabat during his meeting with President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov.

Surely, Turkmenistan wants to develop its gas fields on its own if it has the manoeuvring space and India would assist in its efforts. But the TAPI and also the IPI are vexed into a larger global power game. The US has so far opposed the IPI and instead backed the TAPI pipeline which was opposed by Russia. The US still has its eye on the TAPI project and wants its companies like Chevron and Exxon to win the contract. Chevron has its office operating in Ashgabat.

Russia earlier opposed the TAPI because it wanted Turkmen gas supplies to cater to its internal market and export them to Ukraine via Russian pipeline. However, the geopolitical and corporate games around pipeline projects have diametrically altered following the Ukraine crisis and the ensuing Russia-West standoff.

In the changed context of a breakthrough with Iran the US might be changing its earlier stance on IPI and would possibly encourage Pakistan and India to opt for it. Russia on the other hand wants its Gazprom to not only control Turkmen gas reserves but also oversee the direction of its gas flow including the TAPI operation. Clearly, Russia would make sure that the US energy giants are unable to take the Caspian wealth towards the Western market. Instead, Moscow would like to push for the early implementation of the TAPI.

As India's energy demands increase in future, the vying for access to supply lines would also increase that would in turn bring India to the centre of important geopolitical and energy relationships evolving in Asia. It will become more complex after the recent breakthrough between Iran and the Western powers.

The relevance of the Prime Minister attending the BRICS and SCO summits in Ufa in 2015, his visit to the Central Asian states, his talks with President Putin, President Xi Jinping, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, etc., was part of this growing trend.

Even though Russia, under the current scenario, may be moving closer to China as a result of Western sanctions, there may be an opportunistic aspect to the scenario. Moscow will never be able to

ignore India for a future contingency when Russia and China will clash against each other in Central Asia.

However, the tempo for regional cooperation including in the field of energy which picked up in 2015 has been derailed once again by Pakistan's hostile posture vis-à-vis India especially by invoking insurgency in Kashmir.

However, India has indicated its seriousness for enhancing regional cooperation and connectivity with Central Asia. India has found ways by committing investment for developing the Chabahar Port in Iran, upgrading the Chabahar-Zaranj Road and constructing a highway from Zaranj-Delaram in western Afghanistan with the aim of accessing the Central Asian countries.

India's investment for developing Chabahar is the only way to overcome the geopolitical hostility imposed by Pakistan and a ring of Chinese encirclement impeding India's outreach to Eurasia.<sup>26</sup> Hopefully, the Chabahar Port will not only provide India with access to gas fields in Central Asia, Caspian, Iran and Western Siberia but would also pave the way for India to tap the vast deposits of high-value rare earth minerals in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

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## 14. Enhancing Strategic Engagement

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A six-day integrated tour of Central Asia by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in June 2015 covering all the five states – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – proved not only a symbolic feat for Indian diplomacy but also a smart strategic move that paved the way for overcoming predicaments that have so far stymied India's outreach to an important region lying in its strategic vicinity.<sup>1</sup>

The visit to Central Asia was one of the key features of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy outlook aimed at rebuilding India on its glorious past but with a modern content. Reconnecting with Central Asia formed a critical part of this approach. The visit was also important for widening the strategic perimeter and imagination among our own people towards the region beyond Pakistan and China.

A focused attention to Central Asia was needed for several reasons, and Prime Minister Modi's visit took place against the backdrop of major trends and two major noticeable trends should draw out attention:

First, the region has been speedily getting swamped by the Chinese. China has for long pushed for an interlocking of economic and security interests to break a century-and-a-half of Russian monopoly in Central Asia. China now controls the flow of goods and services to and from the region. China has come to enjoy an air of respectability in the region. The states are seeking to benefit

from China's aspirations pushed under the \$40 billion "Silk Road Economic Belt" initiative. For them, the One Road One Belt (OBOR) would revive the legendary Silk Route's marvel. Interestingly, China's growing presence in the region invoked neither any resistance from Russia nor has it stirred any challenge from the United States and India. The West occasionally questioned Russia's economic agenda, but remains silent on China's drive in the region.

Second, Central Asia along with Russia's Caucasus region and China's Xinjiang province is emerging as the next frontier of the Islamic world resembling the Middle East. The fear is that this region comprising of about 70 million Salafi Muslims, could form a new arc of instability.

In fact, behind the current secular settings, a major shift is underway towards political Islam. The fundamentalist wave has been growing with a variant of local outfits like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Movement of Turkistan (IMT), Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT), Jund al-Khilafah, Takfir wal-Hijra, etc. that have emerged to challenge the local regimes. Their desire is to establish *Caliphate-i-Rashida* (The Rightly Guided Caliphs) in the entire Central Asian space. They have carried out a spate of terrorist attacks.

Central Asia is also located next to the world's most unstable Af-Pak region. The states here continue to live under the constant and pervasive shadow of threat posed by the Taliban and al-Qaida trained terrorists. Borders with Afghanistan remain extremely porous for those engaged in drug trafficking and weapons proliferation.

The emergence of the IS in eastern Afghanistan, purportedly to recreate *Wilayat Khorasan* poses an additional security threat. Worst, the appearance of IS' footprints in Central Asia have sent shock waves across the region.

The idea behind situating *Wilayat Khorasan* in the Af-Pak region as its pivot baseline could be to broaden its expansion to other parts of Asia. Any scenario of the IS gaining a toehold in Central Asia would have grave implications for the region and beyond, including for India. Even though it may not be able to trigger a huge campaign,

the *Khorasan* idea will inspire new radical elements that may be formidable security irritants to countries like India.

The fragility of Central Asia is a source of concern for India. Clearly, both the trends of rising extremism as well as China's deep penetration in Central Asia do not augur well for India. Together they could spell the death knell for India's northern outreach. Ideally, Russia's benign presence in Central Asia all along was a preferable option for India. But Russia's influence and capacity to be a potential bulwark for Central Asia has been waning. Instead, Russia has been seeking convergence with China in the face of its worsening standoff with the West.

India for the first time seemed to have understood the deeper underpinnings of pursuing its overarching interests. It was against this geopolitical backdrop that the importance of Prime Minister Modi's touching base with Central Asia assumed significance. For he also knew that Uzbekistan is the nerve centre of Central Asia and India cannot wish away the deep cultural contacts with the land of Babur. The energy-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan deserved India's immediate attention. Kyrgyzstan has huge hydropower potential and like Mongolia, it is a democracy. India enjoys historical affinity with Tajikistan besides the country being strategically critical in the context of the Af-Pak region.

### **Important Takeaways**

The recurring themes in the Prime Minister's discussions with the leaders of the five Central Asian countries included the need for enhancing connectivity, strengthening economic and energy ties, cooperating on combating terrorism, cementing defence and security relationships and promoting the traditional cultural bonds. In all, 21 bilateral agreements were signed with the five countries.

Improving connectivity with Central Asia remained a formidable challenge. The reasons are numerous and intrinsic – they are hard to triumph over. Routing through Iran and Afghanistan or via the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are important pursuits, but even the best pursued connectivity and

pipelines projects like the TAPI have not seen the light of day. The delays involved in actualising them went against India's economic interests.

The Prime Minister during his visit stressed on harnessing transport corridors and ports via Iran and Turkmenistan. The launch of the Chabahar Port development project in Iran in May 2016 was the result of his visit to the region in 2015. This plus the completion of the Kazakh-Turkmen-Iran rail link should help realise India's untapped economic potential with Central Asian states. Chabahar is key to India's efforts to circumvent Pakistan to access Central Asia through a route to Afghanistan. The Prime Minister also mooted the idea of bypassing Afghanistan to link with Central Asia through surface, digital and air connectivity. This is in line with India's desire to catch up in furthering its economic interests. Today, China's trade with the region is over \$50 billion compared to India's paltry \$1.4 billion.

Central Asian energy reserves offered alluring possibilities for India. However, thus far, the pursuit of energy interests in Kazakhstan had been anything but simple, as the Kazakh authorities repeatedly cold-shouldered India's bidding efforts. But, Prime Minister Modi's visit helped impart a new momentum for furthering these interests. Four path-breaking developments in this regard deserve attention:

First, in Kazakhstan, after a prolonged delay, India's ONGC-Videsh Ltd (OVL) has finally made its first breakthrough when Prime Minister Modi launched the drilling operations in the Satpayev oil block on July 7, 2015.<sup>2</sup> Hopefully, it should pave the way for India winning more contracts in the Kazakh oil exploration business. It could also lead India to explore the possibility, if any, of transportation of hydrocarbons through the long-distance pipeline route with Kazakhstan.

Second, the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev also took a daring decision to sign a major contract for a renewed long term supply of 5,000 metric tonnes (MT) of uranium to India during the next five years. It was the most significant takeaway of the Prime Minister's visit. In fact, the deal on nuclear fuel supply with

Kazakhstan has proved more promising than achievements on the hydrocarbons side (see Annexure 1).

Third, in Uzbekistan, Modi had sought to operationalise the deal for supplying 2,000 metric tonnes of uranium signed between the two countries in 2014 (see Annexure 2). The contract with Uzbekistan was highly significant as Tashkent has put the least number of riders in accessing its nuclear material. However, it needs to be seen how it gets finally implemented.

Fourth, in Turkmenistan, Prime Minister Modi's visit had shown the way finally for the TAPI pipeline to see the light of day. In Ashgabat, the Prime Minister called the TAPI project a "key pillar" and pushed for its realisation "quickly" (see Annexure 3).

No major deal was signed with Kyrgyzstan, although India could have explored the possibility of benefiting from Kyrgyz hydropower, agriculture, health and education potentials. India and Kyrgyzstan reinforced each other's commitment to work together once the India – Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free-Trade Agreement came into effect. Inking of a MoU for cooperation between the Indian and Kyrgyz Election Commissions is significant, though the Kyrgyz have been looking to Western countries for democratic experience (see Annexure 4).

A flurry of agreements on defence and security were signed, but they remain largely symbolic. They have been there for quite some time though, without much significance. India has deployed a defence attaché in each of the Indian Embassies of the five Central Asian Republics. Military training and Joint exercises have been conducted with some of them. The defence agreements signed with these states are significant, but one should note that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the Russian-led security alliance the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and thus they are obliged to follow its direction.

Take the case of Ayni airbase in Tajikistan that India acquired post-Kargil and the IC-814 hijacking. India refurbished the base at a cost of \$70 million in 2007, yet we do not know whether it is really using the base or Tajikistan is allowed to permit India using the base

under the CSTO obligation. There was no mention in this regard in the official statements. However, Prime Minister Modi's visit to the newly-built military hospital at Farkhor was widely tweeted (see Annexure 5).

Defence co-operation with Kyrgyzstan has been going on for a few years but with little benefits to India.<sup>3</sup> The DRDO setting up a Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre in Kyrgyzstan's mountains is meaningless when the Himalayas offer far greater high-altitude conditions for research. Kyrgyzstan is a democracy, but the country has fallen in China's economic orbit and it has far closer bilateral military ties with China.

Combating terrorism especially the threat posed by the Islamic State gained prominence with Prime Minister Modi suggesting that it is a "threat without borders". Central Asia is not a hotbed of terrorism. But, the Prime Minister rightly touched on the shared Islamic heritage and Sufi traditions of Central Asia and India. Like in the Indian subcontinent, Sufism is also rooted in Central Asia's local culture. The region's major Sufi orders include Kubrawiya, Naqshbandi (Uzbekistan), Qadriya (Ferghana), Yassavi (Kazakhstan), Hamdani (Tajikistan) and many others. Sufism rejects extremist ideology. It would be wise for New Delhi to focus on regenerating the traditional Sufi schools of Central Asia that may serve to work as de-radicalisation centres for preventing the birth of radicalism and terrorism in Central Asia.

The Prime Minister's visit had a strong cultural connotation though the past links with Central Asia have not yet yielded the desired results. Prime Minister Modi gifted a reproduction of *Khamsa-i-Khusrau* to President Islam Karimov. Similarly, he invoked the linguistic and literary links with the Tajiks. Clearly, the visit entailed a strong joint socio-cultural rhetoric – references to Yoga, Hindi, Sufism, IT, among others, added substance to India's soft power.

Prime Minister Modi's visit had certainly aroused expectations for a closer outlook towards Central Asia in an imaginative way. He has infused new energy into India's relationship with the region that

had lost momentum in the past decades. Of course, there were no big-ticket items to turn the spotlight, but the Prime Minister's own strong presence seems to have created a huge excitement, perhaps no less than the imprints that Raj Kapoor, Indira Gandhi and Mithun Chakraborty had earlier made on the people's imaginations. Modi has become a factor in Central Asia and this is important. In fact, it has been decades since any popular Indian leader visited these countries and they felt positive about it. Such a visit was long desired; as one friend of this author put it, "we needed such a thing because Indian leaders have always appealed to everyone in Central Asia."<sup>4</sup>

Also, it was imperative for India to widen the strategic perimeter and imagination towards the region lying beyond Pakistan and China among its own people. Prime Minister Modi's visit helped realise this goal. In fact, he has proved to be the most historically conscious Indian leader after Jawaharlal Nehru. Sadly, the Indian media failed to bring that traction.<sup>5</sup> Barring the state-owned channels, mainstream media remained muted simply because the visit lacked the scintillating "rock-star" image and the Diaspora's patriotic fervour.

### **Challenges Ahead**

Surely, India's ties with Central Asia remain strong, but it is yet to capitalise on various opportunities and potentials. Prime Minister Modi has seized the opportunity to set the agenda for India's future engagement in Central Asia.

For looking ahead and if India is keen to up its game in Central Asia, it will have to first solve the connectivity problems and that cannot be overcome without improving ties with India's immediate neighbours like Pakistan – a reason why Prime Minister Modi was perhaps trying to broaden the scope of India's geopolitical engagement. His visit to Central Asian states followed by a visit to Russia, Afghanistan and even his brief stopover in Pakistan wouldn't have been planned without a well thought-out strategy, although India's engagement with Pakistan has so far failed to yield any results. Clearly, as India's energy demands increase, India will find

itself in the centre of important geopolitical and energy relationships in Eurasia.

Second, make no mistake, Russia is and will remain an important factor for India's ability to do business in Central Asia. India's premature discounting of Russia was a mistake. In fact, such a policy line not only delayed India's success but also made its diplomacy in Central Asia a more arduous exercise. India's energy requirements in Central Asia suggest a continuing positive relationship with Russia.

Third, India faces financial limitations and the current engagement policy does not have vitality for spurring economic interdependence. Geography is not the only factor, even the private sector with deep pockets have been hesitant to make a foray into the region. They too have tended to take shelter under the government-patronised schemes abroad.

Fourth, the lack of scholarship and knowledge to deal with the region is another handicap. Indians have avoided understanding the intricate socio-tribal structural underpinnings that regulate the decision making process. As a result, relying on official and diplomatic channels has not yielded the desired results. The approach has led to a distortion in overall relations – the reason why the depth of India-Central Asia ties has always remained in question.

Fifth, India certainly enjoys a huge cultural edge not only in historical affinities but also in contemporary goodwill in all the five countries. Love for Indian culture, Indology, dance, music, Bollywood, Hindi TV soaps, etc. is palpable among people, yet nothing much has been done to take them to the next level of partnership.

Sixth, India has been helping these countries with half-baked skill development and capacity-building programmes. They don't appear to be showing any concrete results. India needs to explore smart projects that will push direct development processes, people-to-people contacts through increased air traffic and promotion of tourism between India and these countries.

Seventh, Central Asia is a region of immense resources. India should enter the region's agro-farming and mining sectors. Indian

companies should be investing in pharmaceuticals, textiles, engineering, construction and small and medium enterprises. They should also invest in refineries, petrochemicals and fertiliser plants in the region.

Eighth, the opportunity seems to be opening up now that India is ready to join the regional mechanisms like the SCO as a full member and where Central Asian republics have wanted India to play a larger strategic role.

Finally, Central Asians undeniably consider India to be a reliable, trustworthy and predictable partner. But at the same time, they do not consider India to be a good performer. Many have argued that New Delhi's indecisiveness always influenced Nazarbayev against energy deals with India. Even though these states realize the importance of engaging India, they also know well that it is only China that can fit the bill. Hopefully, in the years ahead, the SCO could help resolve at least some of these problems

## Notes

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## 15. Strategic Focus on Kazakhstan

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Uzbekistan undoubtedly is the key to Central Asia's overall regional dynamics, but Kazakhstan should deserve India's immediate attention. There are strong reasons to pick out the oil-rich state of Kazakhstan. The country (size of India) – the largest in Central Asia – is of key interest to all major powers. Kazakhstan's location makes it integral to Eurasian linkages but also serves as a buffer between the East and West.

Until two decades ago, Kazakhstan was known for being a dumping ground for the Soviet prisoners, gulag camps, and nuclear tests. It had the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal with over 1,000 nuclear warheads and 40 TU-95 heavy bombers, which the country voluntarily rescinded.<sup>1</sup> Semipalatinsk was the world's second-largest nuclear military-industrial complex and the site of nearly 500 nuclear test explosions. It had uranium enrichment plants at Ust-Kamenogorsk and a rapid neutron reactor site in Aktau. As recently as in 2006, Kazakhstan diluted 2,900 kg of high-enriched uranium, which was sufficient to make 25 nuclear warheads. Besides, the country had large biological and chemical weapon facilities at Stepnogorsk, which too were shut down in 1990s.

Kazakhstan has today emerged as the most prosperous, most stable, most secular despite a Muslim majority population, and the freest economy in the entire post-Soviet space. In a short span, the country has made a brisk resurgence and is now slated to be the most sought-after modern state and the strategic focal point amongst the former Soviet republics, according to the opinion survey by the

Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM).<sup>2</sup> The country's income levels and GDP per capita have risen from \$1,647 in 1990 to \$13,172 in 2013 – already a middle-income country according to The World Bank criterion. The country maintains a high growth of 6-7 per cent. It has accumulated a huge foreign exchange reserve that gave birth to a credible financial and banking sector. For example, the real estate's rates in Almaty are growing higher than in New York or New Delhi. The country also has a successful welfare system that has so far averted Western criticism of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been ruling the country since it came into being after the Soviet collapse in 1991. He has managed to survive by shrewdly manipulating the internal politics and devising internal means to gain political legitimacy. Nazarbayev is ageing and there aren't any clear succession plans despite some surreptitious intrigue among members of the ruling elite. Therefore, there is an element of political uncertainty despite high achievements on the economic front.

### Oil – Key Driver

The key driver behind the Kazakh resurgence is obviously its oil exports. Kazakhstan holds per cent of world's total oil reserves. The figures suggest that Kazakhstan's oil reserves stand at currently 4.8 billion tonnes, or more than 35 billion barrels.<sup>3</sup> It is said that the Kazakh section of the Caspian Sea may be having another 17 billion tonnes or 124.3 billion barrels. According to the Ministry of Energy of Kazakhstan, oil production in 2017 was 81 million tonnes and will gradually grow to 88 million tonnes by 2020. Given the oil and gas reserves, Kazakhstan is likely to remain among top oil producers.

According to the *Oil & Gas Journal (OGJ)* Kazakhstan's current proven natural gas reserves are 85 trillion cubic feet (Tcf).<sup>4</sup> The key to production is linked to further development of the Tengiz, Karachaganak, and specially the offshore Kashagan fields that will make the country an important player in the world's energy and oil markets.

## Strategic Mineral Resources

Kazakhstan has the second-largest phosphorus reserves, second-largest copper ore reserves, 31.8 billion tonnes of proven coal reserves, 15.4 billion tonnes of potential iron ore reserves, plus trillions of dollars' worth Rare Earth Metal (REM).

It is not oil and gas alone, Kazakhstan produced 22,829 tonnes of uranium ore in 2013, the world's largest share (38 per cent), followed by Canada (16 per cent), and Australia (11 per cent) in that year.<sup>5</sup> Kazakhstan's uranium mines are vast and they have already attracted financial investments from several key foreign companies including Cameco Corporation. Already, China's National Nuclear Corporation has a 30 per cent stake in KazAtomProm Company. Japanese, French, South Korean, and Russian companies have also entered the market. Clearly, Kazakhstan is likely to play a leading role in the world's nuclear fuel commerce in future.

## Avoiding Dutch Disease

Uniquely, Kazakhstan, unlike the countries in West Asia, does not depend on oil exports alone. With investments pouring in, the country is poised to diversify its economy beyond the energy sector to focus on its vast agricultural and industrial base so as to avoid the so-called "Dutch disease." According to the International Grains Council (IGC), Kazakhstan produced over 26 million tonnes of grain in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

The country is also embarking on an ambitious diversification programme to promote targeted sectors like transport, pharmaceuticals, telecommunications, petrochemicals, and food processing. Since 2010, Kazakhstan has been a member the Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia Customs Union which has now been transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union since January 2015.

There are other signs pointing to Kazakhstan's growing vitality. For example, its aerospace assets are rapidly expanding. Its Baikonor Cosmodrome launched Sputnik 1, the Earth's first artificial satellite and thereafter, over thousands of space vehicles were launched. From 2011, it is the launch site for manned Soyuz missions to

the International Space Station. A new complex *Baiterek* is being developed for space tourism.

The Kazakh Defence Ministry has vast military industrial complexes from the Soviet times. The government is trying to refurbish many of them. Some of them are already being privatised and their products find ready buyers in the world's weapons market. Besides, the country also aspires to build a credible naval force in the Caspian Sea to protect its energy assets and supply routes.

### **Smart Diplomacy**

Kazakhstan is a unique country having economic prosperity with a pluralistic ethnic structure. The country has promulgated a Constitution adhering to democratic and secular values like India. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has proved to be adept at containing internal ethnic dissension, where other Central Asian leaders have failed. Nazarbayev, notoriously characterized as a sly fox, has also been adept in foreign policy. He shrewdly pursued diplomacy of balancing relations with Russia, China and the West. The country's location in the heart of Eurasia, its rising energy and economic profile has allowed Nazarbayev to play off major powers against each other while also drawing them into energy and geopolitical competition. Even the West seems to like Nazarbayev's independent streak of taking an even-handed stance on critical issues.<sup>7</sup>

After successfully courting China, Nazarbayev also tried to draw India into a delicate balancing game. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) carried on tough negotiations with the Kazakhs going back and forth several times on their promise to offer an oil-block. India's benign indifference prompted Nazarbayev to manoeuvre against India's OVL-Mittal combine's bid for a \$4.18 billion takeover of PetroKazakhstan Inc. in 2005 in favour of China.<sup>8</sup> In 2009, India made a special gesture by honouring President Nazarbayev as the Chief Guest during India's 60th Republic Day celebrations. In 2013, Kazakhstan promised an 8.4 per cent stake in the Kashagan project to ONGC but later the deal was manipulated in favour of China's CNPC.<sup>9</sup> This was a huge setback

and disappointment and dampened enthusiasm in India for closer relations with Central Asia.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, Nazarbayev's achievements and his popularity instilled in him a sense of worth and as such, he seeks political recognition. It was not commerce but politics that factored in the PetroKazakhstan deal in favour of China. Many viewed that Nazarbayev has never been opposed to giving India a favourable strategic presence in terms of offshore projects, but for New Delhi's reluctance in playing its potential cards assertively. In fact, for a long time Kazakhstan's strategic community has espoused the idea of engaging India for countervailing any imminent Chinese threat. The fact remains that notwithstanding the high level of bilateral relations, the anti-China sentiment looms large in popular Kazakh perception.

### **Stakes for India**

India's inability to win major exploration bids in Kazakhstan certainly remains a discouraging point. However, it also underscored the point that Central Asia was not ready for India's entry. There have been other instances of business irregularities such non-payment for goods supplied by Indian exporters, which have scared Indian investors moving into the Kazakh market.

Keeping pace with the new geopolitical reality evolving in the Eurasian region, India needs to take note of the potential of Kazakhstan very seriously now. In fact, the matrix of Indo-Kazakh relations is quite sound. Kazakhstan was India's largest trade partner in Central Asia amounting to 1032.81 million or about 70 per cent of total trade with the entire region in 2017-2018.<sup>11</sup>

Kazakhstan shares the strongest affinity with India in terms of political and economic commitment, shared values of secularism, and plural structure. Nazarbayev has been persistently pursuing an Asia dialogue on security cooperation through the CICA. Kazakhstan has also shown full commitment to the fight against terrorism and signed a Joint Working Group (JWG) agreement with India on terrorism, which could form a basis for strengthening cooperation in the SCO.

The two countries have a strategic partnership agreement and an agreement to cooperate in stabilising Afghanistan.

Clearly, Kazakhstan is a most promising country. According to the vision “Kazakhstan’s Way – 2050” the country’s GDP per capita will grow from the current \$13,172 to \$60,000 in the next two decades. Kazakhstan’s Sovereign Wealth Fund Samruk-Kazyna is sitting on \$146 billion and is planning a number of large investment projects in the immediate future.<sup>12</sup> It slots mining, petrochemicals, chemical industry, power industry and the real estate sector as priority areas. It seeks to import new technologies for exploration, production, and processing in the mining sector.

It has huge deposits of almost all the metals and ores. Along with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan is going to become the new global centre of Rare Earth Elements (REM) production worth trillions of dollars in the future. According to its strategy, Kazakhstan wants to increase the reserves of copper, lead and iron ore.

Enormous scope exists for Indian entrepreneurs to take advantage of Kazakhstan’s free market regulations and a stable government. India should start thinking about tapping Kazakhstan’s abundant oil and mineral resources. Although, ONGC has tried to get a toehold in the oil & gas sector – sadly, 15 years too late and China has already taken a large share. The ONGC Videsh Ltd has made some deals with KazMunaiGas (KMG) lately to pick up a stake in the Satpayev block in the offshore Caspian Sea when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had visited Astana in 2011. This was the first breakthrough for India in the Central Asian energy sector. It seems, the OVL is closely studying the proposal to be part of the huge oil and gas exploration “Eurasia Project” initiated by Kazakhstan in the Caspian Sea, which possesses 300 fields mainly in deep lying oil and gas horizons.<sup>13</sup>

Kazakhstan figures at the top on India’s diplomatic priority for nuclear commerce. An MOU exists between the National Company KazAtomProm and the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited for supply of Uranium to India under the civil nuclear cooperation agreement. A deal with Kazakhstan is attractive for India in terms of

both fuel supply and a possible joint venture in setting up small and medium nuclear reactors. In fact, Kazakhstan was among the first countries to support India during negotiations at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) at Vienna in 2009.

Opportunities are plenty in areas such as modernisation of refineries, services exports, pharmaceuticals, IT software, biotechnology, banking, health, and education services, defence industries, agriculture farming, textiles, etc. India should seek agricultural land on lease from Kazakhstan for commercial agriculture farming. The country has a number of the Soviet-time industrial units lying either abandoned or under-utilised. The country has a large-scale space technology research centre and military hardware production complexes could be exploited by India for mutual benefit. But, with the singular exception of Arcelor Mittal, owned by NRI Laxmi Mittal, no other Indian entity is profiting in this sector. His Midas touch on *Karmet* steel plant in Temirtau is a glaring example for what India could emulate at a larger scale. Of course, lately India's Punj Lloyd, KEC International Limited, TCS etc. have gained a major presence in that country, especially in the construction of pipelines, electric transmission lines, IT, etc.

In fact, in many fields the resources, demands, expertise, and capabilities of India and Kazakhstan are complementary to each other. It also seems clear that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Nursultan Nazarbayev share similar economic outlooks and bents of mind. Modi has launched "Make in India" programme to boost India's economy and encourage foreign investments for strengthening infrastructure and manufacturing capabilities. Nazarbayev too initiated a programme, 'NurZhol' (Path to Future), to accomplish a similar vision for Kazakhstan.

Clearly, their chemistries are likely to click as they may seek convergence of interests to work on the complementarities and focus on manufacturing industries based on innovation. Kazakhstan needs help from India and especially desires Indian firms to make use of Kazakhstan as a manufacturing hub to export the products across

Asia to Europe while taking advantage of its connectivity routes. A right platform is needed to envisage this vision.

Taking a cue from Premier Hu Jintao and President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Modi should visit Astana and take the Strategic Partnership further, which will make Kazakhstan the linchpin of India's policy goals in Central Asia.

Kazakhstan and India share an old relationship through Buddhist and Sufi links. It needs to be reinvigorated keeping with contemporary realities. The time has come for India to mark the beginning of a new diplomatic phase in Central Asia – a region very vital for geostrategic reasons. It would also be useful to resuscitate, by way of commemorating Mirza Muhammed HaidarDulati (1500-1551), who was the Kazakh icon in Indian history and the Governor of Kashmir under the Mughal Emperor Humayun.<sup>14</sup> The Kazakhs have resurrected Haidar Dulati as their national hero. Dulati is an important reference point and a symbol of old linkages between India and Kazakhstan.

## Notes

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## 16. Seizing New Opportunities Trade and Business Prospects

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As mentioned earlier, the complementarity of the Indian and Central Asian economies is extremely high in potential. After experiencing a complete breakdown in the manufacturing sector, the supply of raw materials and the lack of markets, Central Asian states are fast getting linked to the global market for production, supplies of raw materials and services. However, against the backdrop of changing economic environment, the prolonged recession in Europe, the financial crisis in Russia, the fall in oil prices, etc., are opening new vistas of opportunities for the Central Asia-India trade partnership to grow. Some expert-level studies, after identifying a trade potential index using a gravity model of trade framework, indicated huge untapped potential for increasing trade between India and Central Asian countries. The experts also identified the geopolitical constraints and suggested an early viable trade route.<sup>1</sup>

Even though India-Central Asia trade suffered blockage by Pakistan, trade in goods has increased manifold over the past decade. India's exports to Central Asia remain particularly high in the case of Kazakhstan – \$261.52 million in 2013-2014 – but the figure has gradually come down to \$151.91 million in 2015-2016. The decline was mainly due to new trade regulations in Kazakhstan after it joined the Customs Union (now called Eurasian Economic Union – EEU). India's export to the country has declined after Kazakhstan's economy fell following the fall in oil prices. Similarly, Central Asia's exports to India, particularly from Kazakhstan, had suddenly jumped by 368.85 per cent from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014. Imports

from Kazakhstan had increased over the years to over \$900 million in 2017-2018, resulting in an overall increase in trade turnover to \$1,032.81 million in 2017-2018.

**Table 16.1: India's Trade with Central Asian Countries  
in 2017-2018**

(Values in US\$ million)

Country	Export	Import	Total
Kazakhstan	125.37	907.43	1032.81
Kyrgyzstan	28.59	30.94	59.53
Tajikistan	23.94	50.29	74.24
Turkmenistan	54.31	26.15	80.46
Uzbekistan	132.72	101.67	234.39
Total	364.93	1,116.49	1,481.21

Source: Department of Commerce: Export Import Data Bank

<http://www.commerce.nic.in/eidb/ergnq.asp> (updated on 14/08/2018)

A study by Pradeep Agrawal and Seema Sangita of the Institute of Economic Growth (IEG) entitled, "Central Asia: Trade Routes and Trade Potential" (2013), suggested that the trends in the values of exports of Central Asia are heavily driven by prices of commodities in the international market, such as by energy prices in the case of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and cotton prices in the case of Uzbekistan.<sup>2</sup> Of the five Central Asian countries, India's biggest trade partner was Kazakhstan around \$1,032.81 million in 2017-2018. Uzbekistan is a distant second at \$234.39 million in the same year (Table 16.2). India's trade with Central Asia has substantially increased to almost \$1.5 billion during 2017-2018.

India's imports mainly include precious and semi-precious stones, chemicals, iron and steel, machineries, mineral oils, copper goods, plastic goods, wool, and leather. Export items include coffee, tea and spices, apparel and clothing (both knitted and unknitted), pharmaceutical products electrical and mechanical equipment.

**Table 16.2: India's Trade with Central Asian Countries**

(Values in US\$ million)

**Kazakhstan**

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Export	244.39	286.23	261.51	250.68	151.91	120.88	125.37
%Growth		17.12	-8.64	-4.14	-39.40	-20.43	3.72
Import	191.86	139.99	656.33	701.67	352.93	521.29	907.43
%Growth		-27.04	368.85	6.91	-49.70	47.70	74.08
Total Trade	436.25	426.22	917.84	952.35	504.84	642.16	1,032.81
%Growth				3.76	-46.99	27.30	60.83

**Kyrgyzstan**

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Export	30.55	34.99	34.54	37.76	25.11	30.14	28.59
%Growth		14.53	-1.27	9.32	-33.49	21.22	-6.10
Import	0.89	2.09	0.64	0.77	1.79	1.48	30.94
%Growth		134.28	-69.29	20.14	132.17	-16.96	1,985.13
Total Trade	31.44	37.07	35.18	38.53	26.90	31.93	59.53
%Growth				9.52	-30.18	18.68	86.44

**Tajikistan**

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Export	21.28	35.16	54.27	53.71	22.26	20.44	23.94
%Growth		65.25	54.37	-1.04	-58.55	-8.20	17.17
Import	8.86	12.86	0.86	4.39	9.98	21.82	50.29
%Growth		45.15	-93.34	412.50	127.43	118.79	130.45
Total Trade	30.13	48.01	55.13	58.09	32.24	42.26	74.24
%Growth				5.38	-44.51	31.09	75.67

**Turkmenistan**

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Export	43.95	69.92	73.62	91.98	68.53	57.60	54.31

%Growth		59.08	5.29	24.94	-25.50	-15.95	-5.71
Import	19.46	8.33	14.10	13.05	46.97	21.32	26.15
%Growth		-57.20	69.35	-7.51	260.03	-54.61	22.66
Total Trade	63.41	78.25	87.73	105.03	115.50	78.92	80.46
%Growth				19.72	9.97	-31.67	1.95

### Uzbekistan

Year	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
Export	89.39	124.90	114.07	170.44	94.64	108.97	132.72
%Growth		39.73	-8.67	49.43	-44.48	15.14	21.79
Import	37.04	31.85	31.50	55.86	45.26	46.54	101.67
%Growth		-14.02	-1.11	77.37	-18.99	2.85	118.45
Total Trade	126.43	156.75	145.56	226.31	139.89	155.51	234.39
%Growth				55.45	-38.18	11.16	50.72

Source: Department of Commerce: Export Import Data Bank.

<http://www.commerce.nic.in/eidb/ernq.asp> (updated on 14/08/2018)

Note: Since 2006-07, Petroleum figures are being computed from Import Daily Trade Returns (DTRs) to generate country-wise/port-wise Tables. Up to 2005-06 consolidated petroleum import figures were being received from the Petroleum Ministry.

## Partnership Prospects

Apart from Kazakhstan a major opportunity exists for some significant trade in other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan as well. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also have huge reserves of minerals and hydrocarbons. Uzbekistan is the world's 17th largest producer of natural gas, ninth largest producer of gold and sixth largest producer of cotton. The country's abundant natural resources are yet to be tapped.

Several areas such as the hydro-power sector, mining and metallurgical industries, construction industry, development of entrepreneurship and infrastructure, agro-industrial sector, information technology, pharmaceuticals, silk, sewing and textiles, leather, tourism, higher education, and food processing

sectors, present excellent opportunities for Indian investment and cooperation in Central Asia.

### ***Hydropower Sector***

Unlike other countries, Kyrgyzstan has no rich hydrocarbon resources but it has abundant hydropower potential (estimated 142 billion kWh a year) of which only 10 per cent is exploited. The country faces the challenge of an energy quagmire leading to frequent civil unrest and political instability. The government of Kyrgyzstan plans to build hundreds of micro hydro projects to meet the power shortages. India should assist Kyrgyzstan to build at least one small/medium-scale hydro station.

Tajikistan is the world's third-largest hydroelectric power producer, but only 40 per cent electricity production is used. Over 90 per cent of Tajikistan's hydroelectric potential is yet to be developed. It also has huge aluminum producing capacity.

### ***Agro-Industry***

Kazakhstan has territory almost equal to that of India but with a total population of only 15 million. Kazakhstan produced over 26 million tonnes of grain in 2012 and is also among the world's five largest grain exporters. The country's huge cultivable areas are lying barren and without being put to any productive use. In fact, the Chinese have been eyeing Kazakh land and leasing tracts of areas for growing soya bean. Indian companies could plant several hundred hectares under soya bean, add value by processing the crop into soya nuggets, soya oil, soya milk, soya sauce, soya based animal feed, etc. The world's largest consumers of soya-based products are China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan.

Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's Chu valley, and Tajikistan's Vakhsh River valley in southern Tajikistan offer enormous opportunity for the cultivation of pulses, which can possibly produce two crops annually. A large quantity of pulses including kidney beans (rajma) grown in the Chu Valley of Kyrgyzstan are bought over by Turkish companies and are re-exported to India. Indian agribusiness

companies such as ITC or Bharti or Reliance should look into these opportunities in Central Asia for setting up commercial agro-industrial complexes.

### ***Construction Industry***

The region is experiencing a real boom and it presents many opportunities. Kazakhstan particularly has created a dynamic and competitive market to attract considerable foreign investments in the industry. Similarly, the volume of construction work is increasing in Uzbekistan's cities such as Tashkent, Bukhara, and Samarkand. This is also true for Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Dushanbe (Tajikistan), and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan).

Industrial construction (petrochemicals, metallurgy, pipeline and mining) are key sectors of attraction. Billions of dollars are being committed in the oil and gas sector, processing industry, and the transport and communications segments in Kazakhstan's Atyrau and Mangistau oblasts. Many engineering projects are expected in the oil and gas sector, especially in pipeline construction in the Tengiz, Karachaganak, and Kashagan fields. Such projects will require engineering and construction services. Indian's L&T is already in the pipeline construction business and is doing well.

To reduce dependence on the energy and mining industries, the country is seeking diversification to open several sectors, such as chemicals, nuclear and manufacturing. It has envisaged launching 927 investment projects to boost both civil engineering and non-residential construction including renovation of roads running up to 2019. Owing to higher economic growth, several regions of Kazakhstan are particularly considered as having long-term potential for the construction business in the residential, non-residential and civil engineering segments of the market. The new capital – Astana – is a fast growing city. New business centres, shopping malls, cultural centres, sports complexes, roads, etc. are being planned in the cities along the oil-rich Caspian region in the west. Turkish construction firms are already operating in the country.

India companies, financial service providers, contractors, design and project management specialists should quickly grab the

opportunities. The country is encouraging international investors to expand their presence in Kazakhstan. Several Indian companies are making world-class structures in India, UAE and other West Asian and Gulf countries. DLF, Shapoorji Palonji, Ansals, Lokhandwalas, Rahejas and Hiranandan could find huge opportunities to join hands with local firms such as Ahseel Holding, Aldar Properties, Astana Development Group etc. This is a very profitable sector where Indian firms could build excellent structures at a reasonable cost. Large Indian companies also need to bid for road and railway construction, electric power transmission and distribution, telecommunications, power generation, etc. that are being undertaken with the support and assistance of ADB, WB, EBRD, IDBI, etc. Indian companies would have an excellent opportunity to be part of these projects.

The prospects are huge for export of construction materials currently imported from Turkey, China, and Germany. The Kazakh builders are using very large quantities of granite and marble in building construction. Indian granite and marble-producing/trading companies could present their stocking and selling materials directly to the major construction companies. A few small size Indian companies have already entered this field.

Kazakhstan has almost limitless reserves of iron ore and coal. Yet, the country has little production of TMT bars and other structural steel items. Most of these items are imported from Russia and China. Indian companies must look at the possibility of setting up medium-sized steel rolling mills for producing TMT bars, angle irons and joists in Kazakhstan. The steel products produced here can also be exported to China. This is what Arcelor Mittal does by exporting steel to meet the gluttonous demands in China.

It is imperative for Indian companies to look at the Kazakh market in a pro-active manner if they wish to garner a substantial part of the new projects that are being undertaken in Kazakhstan.

### *Digital Technology*

Central Asians have a huge attraction for the English language, information technology (IT), management studies, energy studies

and other fields of science & technology. Several private individuals have made unsuccessful attempts to open branches of the Delhi Public School in the region. India enjoyed a niche reputation in the region for IT but no serious attempts have been made to enter this market. The government should encourage Indian institutions to open educational centres including campuses of Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in the region to impart world-class education in various fields in the English language medium. There is great scope for Indian investors in this very vital field and in the process, the trained and qualified Indian teachers and IT experts find lucrative employment in these oil-rich countries.

### ***Pharmaceutical Sector***

In fact, apart from tea, pharmaceuticals represent the largest components of Indian exports to Central Asia worth \$151.41 million or 28.14 per cent of the total exports. Most large Indian companies are represented in the market. Like in the tea business, smaller Indian pharmaceutical companies, driven by a short-term profit motive supplied low-quality drugs and therefore damaged their reputation.

However, given India's strong position in this sector, both in terms of quality as well as pricing, Indian companies can with a little focused and aggressive marketing significantly expand their share in the market. Some fresh initiatives that Indian companies, both private and public sector can take are to establish joint ventures and manufacturing units for pharmaceutical products.

### ***Leather Industry***

The entire region is a large producer of raw hides and semi-processed wet blue skins. Uzbekistan has dynamic domestic leather production facilities, notably in Khodjaabad, Urgench, and Kokand. France has set up the Kofra Uzbek-French joint leather footwear venture in Kokand. Kazakhstan's cattle and sheep population is huge. The Siriopet tannery in Petropavlovsk produces 170 tonnes of leather

and leather products, and semi-finished chrome-tanned cowhide monthly. About 90 per cent of raw skins are exported to China and Turkey.

Similarly, 90 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's cattle hide, sheep, and lambskin are exported to China. Tajikistan's Kukhandiz tannery in Dushanbe requires modernisation and skills to market products. However, the livestock breeding sector and leather processing facilities face a difficult financial situation and require investments.

Indian leather companies should open tanneries here and convert the abundant raw materials hides and skins into finished leather as well as garments, bags and shoes of the highest quality for export to Europe. Similarly, Indian companies should source wholesale supply of raw hides and semi-processed wet blue skins from Tajikistan these countries.

### ***Silk and Textile Industry***

Sericulture in Central Asia introduced in the 4th century AD, is as old as in India. For thousands of years, sericulture and the cotton textile industry has been tied to the culture, traditions, and economies of India and Central Asia. Export of raw silk and silk goods traded from China to India and Persia traversed through Central Asian towns. Other commodities like amber, glass, spices, and tea were also traded along with silk through this region.

The sericulture industry had declined and total areas under mulberry had decreased in the last few decades. However, following the Soviet collapse, sericulture is once again developing as a major economic source and this could potentially help the rural population find remunerative employment and prevent migration to the cities. After China and India, Uzbekistan is the third largest producer of silk to the world markets, with 20,200 tonnes of cocoon per year; Tajikistan also produces more than 300 tonnes of fresh cocoons per year.

Today, it is an important potential agro-industry, but because of the free-market economy and the lack of a developed market, the farmers do not get much encouragement. In Kyrgyzstan, it is a dying enterprise, due to the lack of any government support.

For quite some years, many private handicraft and textile industry setups have been showing interest in learning from India's silk industry. In fact, their focus on India is related more towards promoting sustainable development in countries like Kyrgyzstan, which do not have many natural resources to export. Learning from Indian traditional craft, silk fabric, woolen industry, etc., which are environment-friendly were viewed as reliable sources of economic stability. The Indian experience was attractive for three things: create jobs in rural areas, remove poverty, and a means to preserve national traditions. Indian investment in silk and textile industries would serve to promote a positive image of astutely handling social, cultural, and governance issues. This is a low-cost option, with small investments and the assurance of high visibility, positive publicity, and dividends in terms of goodwill.

All Central Asian states including South Kazakhstan also produce cotton of high quality. Some major Indian textile companies must consider setting up a few integrated textile plants in the region to manufacture good quality cotton and blended fabrics. Industrial land in the region is very cheap. So is electricity and labour. Such textile units can be highly profitable ventures for Indian companies. The lucrative European markets are only 10-12 days away by road transit freight.

### ***Demand for Fresh Flowers***

The entire Central Asian region consumes vast quantities of fresh flowers on a daily basis. Most of the better-known fresh flowers (especially roses) are imported from South America via Holland. Indian horticulture companies can look at this very lucrative market for export of all kinds of fresh flowers in very significant quantities. A special chartered flight two times a week can easily be arranged in Kazakhstan.

### ***Popularity of Indian Tea***

India is the world's second largest tea producer with production of 1205.40 million kg in 2013-14. Out of this over 200 million kg are exported worldwide. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

alone imports 51.58 million kg of tea from India. A less publicized fact has been that a large quantity of Indian tea is consumed in Central Asia. They mostly import large quantities of the crush, tear, and curl (CTC) variety. During the year 2013-2014, tea constituted \$52.63 million or 9.78 per cent of India's total exports to the region. Out of this, tea worth \$50.28 million was exported to Kazakhstan alone.

Kazakhstan is ranked fifth in the world in terms of Indian tea consumption and imports 12.61 million kg annually. Kazakhs are amongst the highest tea drinkers in the world. According to reports, the per capita consumption of tea in Kazakhstan is 1.5 kg annually – that is an average of 5-6 cups of tea a day, a reason why many people are labeled as “tea drunkards”. Given the enormous popularity of tea in our country, it also noted that the Kaznet website was created for Kazakhstani “tea drunkards”.

Unfortunately, Indian tea trade is still left to mainly the unorganised small tea traders who, driven by a short-term profit motive, contributed greatly towards damaging the reputation of Indian tea. Supply of low quality, poor packaging and other manipulations by Indian tea companies has cost Indian tea dearly. The total tea export during 2013 has been reduced to 208.26 million kg against 211.86 million kg in 2012. India's marketshare is lost to tea from Kenya and Sri Lanka. This does not mean that Kazakhs have stopped drinking Indian tea. The difference is that Indian tea is imported from third countries such as UAE, Hong Kong and Russia.

The story is no different in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, where the popularity of Indian tea is high. It is still possible to rectify this situation by ensuring that only good quality teas are exported to Kazakhstan. The Indian Tea Exporters' Association (ITEA) or the Indian Tea Board should take the initiative of setting up a simple tea blending and packing factory in Central Asia to offer the best quality Indian teas to the tea-loving people.

### ***Tourism Industry***

The people in India and Central Asia are attracted to each other's art, culture, architecture, monuments, and goods for ages. People used

to travel back and forth for centuries until the 20th century when physical ties snapped. Indians are greatly drawn to the Great Silk Road, which is a rich tapestry of tourism destinations. Uzbekistan, for example, has a unique and outstandingly rich Islamic heritage, the fabled mosques and madrasas of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, with their intricate colourful design of tile works.

Kazakhstan, larger than the size of Western Europe, is a vast country of steppes and has a wealth of tourist attractions, including picturesque mountains and lakes along the Tian Shan range. It has many adventurous spots, alpine ski slopes, lakes, vast deserts, and steppes. There are other interesting sites like former labour camps and nuclear test sites. Kyrgyzstan has forested mountains, grassy steppes, and inland lakes such as the famous Issyk-Kul Lake. It was once called the Switzerland of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan has a rich Persian history and culture. It also has the beautiful, untouched, rugged and scenic Pamirs. The beautiful, rugged and mountainous territory is ideal for trekking and adventure tourism. Turkmenistan has many historical spots dating back to the 4th century BC. Both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, located on the Silk Road, were home to several civilisations including Buddhism.

The entire region has a bounty of natural beauty, four clear seasons, good infrastructure and shopping, and is inhabited by wonderful and friendly people with an exotic cultural heritage who are genuinely attracted to India and Indian culture. If developed, they can be as exciting and as promising as any popular tourist destination in the world. These countries could easily attract the Indian film industry for film shootings by holding a couple of “road shows” in Mumbai and by highlighting the beauty through advertisements to the Indian people.

Kazakhstan is trying to become a top destination for domestic and foreign holidaymakers. It intends to invest some \$10 billion to develop its tourism sector by 2020. The country intends to attract 8 million tourists a year by 2020. It is building ski slopes and lakeside retreats for rich tourists. It offers a mix of European luxury and the Asian landscape. The cities of Astana and Almaty are as good as

cities in Southeast Asia. In fact, all these countries are close to India in terms of location and distance as compared to travelling within the country from Delhi to Kerala. Yet, little is known about Central Asian tourist destinations among Indian overseas travellers.

However, it is also true that a complicated visa policy is one biggest obstacles for Indian travelers visiting these countries. Kazakhstan introduced temporary visa-free entry to citizens of 10 countries that excludes India. Other Central Asian countries also put Indian visitors in the same category of those coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Perhaps these are carried over from the erstwhile and archaic Soviet system but they effectively dampen the enthusiasm of many potential travellers to Central Asia. India needs to insist that these Governments change their visa policies for Indians. This will give a great fillip to the tourism industry of these states.

Conversely, India is a very popular country amongst the Central Asians as they also look towards India as a growing global power. Agra, Jaipur, Goa, Ladakh and Kerala are major attractions and of interest to Central Asian tourists coming to India. Kazakh travellers currently spend about \$400 million annually on vacations abroad and most rich Kazakh tourists go for their holiday to Turkey.

### ***Medical Tourism***

Central Asians recognise India's advancements in medical science with many state-of-the-art hospitals and medical research institutions. Thousands of patients from the region are travelling to Moscow, Istanbul and Urumqi for all sorts of medical procedures and treatment. Lately, many patients from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have begun coming to India for treatment and they all go back fully satisfied with the treatment and care – often at only one-third, the cost they would incur in other countries.

With the surge of medical research taking place, medical tourism is likely to increase within the next decade in India. However, medical facilities in India are still not well exposed to the Central Asian population. Lack of information and the language barrier could be the major reasons. The idea of promoting medical tourism from

Central Asian states is a worthwhile project that India should pursue at the highest policy level. As a part of its assistance programme, India should initiate a Medical Assistance Scheme for a five-year period under which the Government of India should sponsor the treatment cost of at least 5-10 serious medical cases each year from each of the five Central Asian countries. This will help promote medical infrastructure and gradually the cost factor will attract more patients for treatment to India.

As the Soviet-built medical infrastructure is collapsing, the Central Asian states including Kazakhstan lack world-class medical facilities in spite of having well-trained doctors and other medical personnel. Major Indian hospital chains such as Apollo, Fortis and Max must consider setting up state-of-the-art hospitals in the region, staffed with specialists from India and from amongst the local pool of excellent doctors, to provide affordable world-class medical assistance to the citizens of all Central Asian Republics. Like in many other parts of the world, Indian doctors and paramedics could become the backbone of the national health services in Central Asia. Over thirty Indian pharmaceutical companies are well-entrenched in the market, selling their basic formulations, but it is time that they enter into the manufacturing sector in Central Asia.

### *Alternative Therapy and Spirituality*

Due to historical connections, Central Asians have a special place and taste for Indian music, dance, culture and films. They are now increasingly getting attracted to Indian alternative healthcare systems and to spirituality. Places like Goa, Kerala, Bangaluru, Kodaikanal and the Himalayas are important tourist attractions for the people of the region, especially for Kazakhs. They come for naturopathy, traditional and classical Ayurvedic medicines, and authentic Ayurvedic therapy at various treatment centres and health resorts. Tibetan medicine is yet another attraction. Many of them have started visiting India for undergoing regular and therapeutic yoga and meditation classes. Besides, health tourism and religious tourism has huge potential. Large numbers of Kazakhs already come

for blessings of Satya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, Anandmayee Maa and others. This sector has immense possibilities and it could be organized and popularized among the Central Asians. Clearly, two-way tourism can be a huge growth area between India and these countries. An action plan is required to highlight and promote the tourism potential of India and Central Asian countries.

### ***Spices and Dry Fruits***

Many important spices especially essential Mediterranean spices that are consumed in India are found in Central Asia. They include barberry, black pepper, basil, bay leaf, caraway seeds, cardamom: chervil, chives, cilantro, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cumin, fennel, fenugreek, saffron, sage, almond, asafetida, black mustard seed, dill seed, garden cress, marjoram, tarragon and many other spices are found all over Central Asia. Asafetida or the flowering asafetida plant, native to Central Asia, is grown wild in the region. This spice is not consumed by the local people. Export of Asfetida alone could increase the volume of trade between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and India. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan produces large quantity of fresh and dry fruits. Trade facilitation centres are required to bolster the centuries-old dryfruit trade from Central Asian countries and northern Indian cities like Amritsar which is connected by road to Afghanistan via Pakistan.

### **Logistic Factor**

Similarly, no Indian airline has ventured into Central Asia. So far, only the Central Asian carriers like Air Astana, Uzbekistan Airlines, Turkmen Air, Tajik Air and Manas Air (Kyrgyzstan) fly between cities there and Delhi. India's middle class of 350 to 400 million people wish to explore travelling to Central Asia and experience its different cultures and cuisines. India is a big country and a neighbour of Central Asian states. It is very important for India's image that its national carrier be seen in these cities at least on a weekly basis. If a standalone flight is not viable, there should be Delhi-Europe flight via Central Asian cities or Delhi-China flights

via Almaty or Tashkent. This will also be a fillip to trade, business and travel between the two countries.

It is sad that no Indian bank is operating in the region except the Punjab National Bank in Almaty. In fact, Pakistan National Bank has a wider network in Central Asia than Indian banks. The Government of India should address this anomaly and encourage opening of more Indian banks in Central Asian cities.

On the whole, the Central Asian states also do recognize the strategic importance of India's participation in their economies including in the oil industry. However, it may take some time for this to become a reality. Nonetheless, the Indian presence in the region has been growing, as hundreds of Indian technicians and skilled workers are finding their way into infrastructural development projects.

About a thousand Indians were already working in the Aksai and Karachaganak-based Consolidated Construction Company (CCC) and SAIPEM Company, undertaking pipeline construction.<sup>3</sup> With the increasing participation of Indian workforce in petroleum management, the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia would inevitably become another model like the Gulf, for India.

An intervention from the state to divert the Indian student crowd to study in the Central Asian Republics would also go a long way in broadening the scope of energy cooperation. India could also participate in the educational, information technology and healthcare sectors. Conversely, a breakthrough with India in the flow of information and ideas through digital and people-to-people (P2P) contacts could add a new dimension to the India-Central Asia ties in the 21st century.

## Notes

1. Pradeep Agrawal and Seema Sangita, "India and Central Asia: Trade Routes and Trade Potential", IEGIEG Working Paper No. 334, 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. P. Stobdan, "Great Game on the Silk Route", *Indian Express*, December 18, 2002.

## 17. Regional Connectivity and Integration

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In the distant past, Indian merchants established trading relationships with far-flung areas beyond Central Asia up to Siberia. However, India's future economic engagement as well as the trade potential with Central Asia would remain restricted and unexplored unless other trade route options are explored.

India's 'Connect-Central Asia' policy elaborates the imperatives of reconnecting with this geographic space to find new markets for India's rapidly growing industrial and service sectors.<sup>1</sup> However, so far, no viable and easy transport passage, land-linking arrangements, and important transit services points have been found to realise it. The impediment of continual Pakistani hostility and instability factor of Afghanistan seems unlikely to change soon.

The Ministry of Commerce's spot study reports<sup>2</sup> of 1993 and 1994 observed several optional transit routes, but the government finally considered the Iranian route as a viable transit option. A trilateral MOU on transit for trade signed by India, Iran and Turkmenistan on April 18, 1995 envisaged movement of goods from India via sea to Bandar Abbas in Iran and onward by surface transport to Sarakhs on the Iran-Turkmenistan border. In May 1996, Iran inaugurated a 295 km railway network called Mashad-Sarakhs-Tajan railroad, linking Central Asia to the Persian Gulf for the first time. India had contributed financially to the trilateral railway project but even to date the route is not preferably being used by Indian traders for unspecified reasons.

However, on the connectivity front, China's OBOR has certainly put India in a quandary. In fact, the decision to expand the SCO seems spurred mainly by economic factors. To allay any misgivings, Beijing has taken a grandstanding position on OBOR/CPEC suggesting that they would bring conduciveness for the development and prosperity of the "whole region".

China has separately pushed its own funded (\$60 billion) "China Pakistan Economic Corridor" (CPEC) overland project to link Western China with Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Beijing considers CPEC an economic project not aimed at a third country, but India resented China's plan of taking the building of the corridor through India's sovereign territory of Gilgit-Baltistan illegally occupied by Pakistan. Beijing has turned down India's objection saying it is a "livelihood project" but there is no way that India will compromise on the sovereignty issue of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

The issues relating to CPEC will be hard to resolve any time soon, but rhetoric aside, a set of projects envisaged under OBOR and CPEC could transform the region flanking the north of India into a new economic hub and a zone of joint projects having implications for India.

On its part, Russia has already found a way, at least at the tactical level, to reconcile its own transport connectivity plans with that of OBOR. To seek mutual benefits, Putin and Xi had decided in 2015 to bring greater synergy between projects under the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and OBOR. Similarly, all the five Central Asian states view the OBOR and EAEU potentially transforming the region into a major hub of the transcontinental transportation network.

### **India's Eurasia Agenda**

Notwithstanding certain myths being created that India is opposed to any connectivity projects – especially vis-à-vis China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)–India has displayed its keenness to join the Eurasian connectivity initiative.

In fact, in the post-BRI launch, India has indicated its seriousness for setting its Eurasian connectivity agenda – sought alternative ways by committing investment for developing Chabahar Port, upgrading the Chabahar-Zaranj Road and constructing a highway from Zaranj-Delaram in western Afghanistan with the aim of accessing Central Asian countries. In fact, the ground-breaking events in 2016 relating to Chabahar (Iran) and Salma Dam (Afghanistan) projects were seemingly meant for signalling India's strong commitment to regional integration.

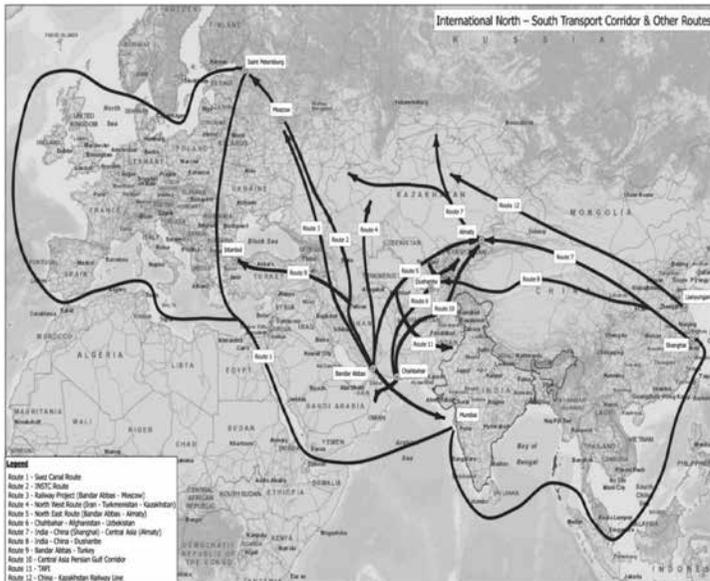
In May 2017, amid China's push for BRI projects, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) held a multi-stakeholder meet to highlight some of the latest surveys undertaken by Indian institutions such as the Federation of Freight Forwarders' Associations in India (FFFAI), the Ladakh International Centre (LIC) and the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). The meeting discussed how the implementation of the INSTC has moved to a fast-track stage after India decided to join the UN Convention on global transport and customs transit system for moving goods across international borders, also known as the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) Convention. India had acceded to the TIR Convention on June 15, 2017 and it normally comes into effect six months after the date of accession.

### **International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC)**

A lot of work is being done by India to join the Eurasian transport network that requires urgent implementation. India, Iran and Russia have been speedily working on the 4,474-mile-long land and sea trade route known as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which was initially formalised in 2002. The project has been languishing for nearly 15 years.



The INSTC is a multi-modal (ship, rail and road) transportation system for connecting the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and thence to Russia and North Europe. Apart from the original members India, Russia and Iran, 11 other countries including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria (observer status), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine are INSTC members.



In the absence of viable surface transport connectivity, Indian goods to Russia and Central Asia move either through the sea route via Rotterdam to St. Petersburg or from the Chinese port of Qingdao that takes over 50 days.



Recent studies show that INSTC can reduce the time and cost of container delivery by 30-40 per cent and once the flow of goods from the two Iranian ports begins, the corridor will be able to move 30 to 50 million tonnes of goods per year. It would help boost India-Russia trade from the current US\$ 7 billion to US\$ 30 billion over the next 10 years.

India has been consulting Iran, Russia and the Caucasus states to coordinate on respective connectivity projects under consideration. In June 2018, Prime Minister Modi and President Putin have discussed the pending issues impeding early operation of the INSTC. Once operational, India will be able to send its consignment through the 7,200 km INSTC through Iran to Central Asia, Russia, Turkey and Europe.

### **Chabahar: India's Gateway to Eurasia**

Iran is undoubtedly the ideal transit country for India to be the gateway to Central Asia and Russia as it gives ready access to a number of trade corridors (existing and planned). Chabahar in particular offers an attractive opportunity for India given Iranian

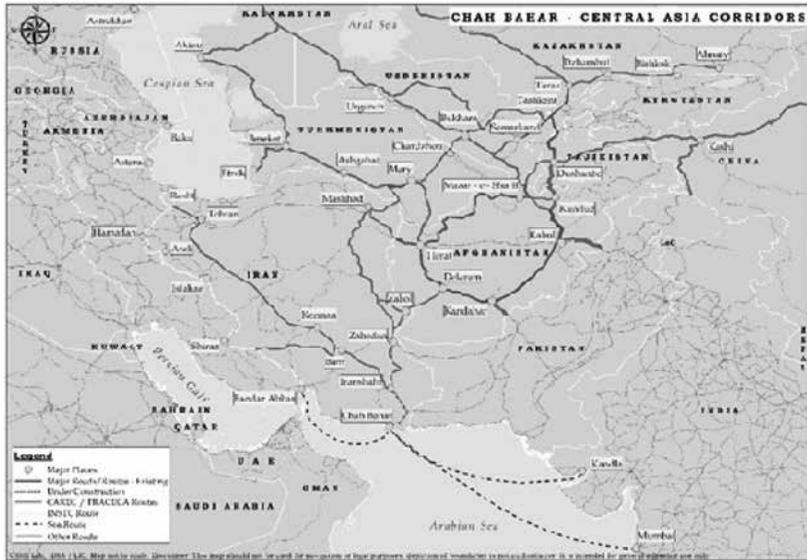
interest in building the port as a commercial hub. It is the only Iranian port on the Indian Ocean and has deeper draft compared to Bandar Abbas.

Chabahar has two terminals – Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti. The first terminal is handling about 2.1 million tonnes of cargo per year and with the operationalisation of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, the capacity will increase to about 10 million tonnes. Iran has imported cranes from Germany for the first terminal jetty at Shahid Beheshti, where shipments of wheat from India has been recently offloaded and were trucked to Afghanistan. The cost of German-made cranes and equipment worth \$85 million for the terminal was made through the Indian investment. India had earlier committed a \$500 million line of credit to develop the port soon after the Iran nuclear deal went into effect in January 2016 and sanctions were lifted.

It seems that Shanghai Zhenhua Heavy Industries Co Ltd (ZPMC) will supply four gantry cranes to accommodate large container ships in the first 8.5 million-tonne jetty. Of course, more jetties will be added to increase the port's capacity to 82-85 million tonnes.

The Trilateral Transit Agreement of 2016 makes it incumbent on India to build and operate Chabahar Port (two terminals and five berths with cargo handling for 10 years). The MoU provides the necessary legal framework for trans-shipment of goods to Afghanistan.

Map 2: Accessing Central Asian Road Network through Chabahar



With the commissioning of the Shahid Behesti terminal, a greater prospect now opens up for enlarging both the operational and practical scope of Chabahar to become a vital gateway for India to access Eurasian markets. In December 2016, India has made successful shipment of 1.1 million tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan through the Chabahar Port.

According to some estimates, with the operationalization of the Chabahar Port and INSTC, India's trade with Eurasia could grow rapidly up to \$170 billion (\$60.6 billion worth of exports and \$107.4 billion worth of imports).

## Connecting to Central Asia Network

So far, connecting to Afghanistan has been essential for India to fulfil its strategic commitment. However, benefits of the multi-purpose terminal at Chabahar such as India's plan to build a 610-km north-south railway (Chabahar to Zahedan) cannot be realised unless a Central Asian state other than Afghanistan joins the project as a direct stakeholder or India joins a Central Asian-led transport mechanism.

For the landlocked countries of Central Asia, Chabahar is now the nearest sea port by land. Now they rely on port facilities in Turkey, Russia, the Baltic States, Iran (Bandar Abbas) and China. Until recently, only Kazakhstan had expressed interest in constructing a terminal in Mundra (Gujarat). But with the opening of Chabahar Port, Uzbekistan sought access to the Indian Ocean through a deal with Afghan railways just two days after the Shahid Beheshti terminal opened on December 2017.

Map 3: Accessing Iran-Central Asian Rail Network through Chabahar



But for the route to be economically viable, reaching out to Central Asia becomes more imperative, for it is this region which houses the most strategic and high-value minerals including uranium, copper, titanium, ferro alloys, yellow phosphorus, iron ore, rolled metal, propane, butane, zinc, coking coal, etc. For example, Kazakhstan alone wants to increase its non-oil exports by 50 per cent by 2025. And, without a direct transport access, India cannot procure the Central Asian riches needed for its manufacturing economy.

India's current trade with Central Asia is minimal at \$1.5 billion and is not growing much. The volume of trade with the region accounts for merely 0.11 per cent of India's total trade. Similarly, India's share in Central Asian total trade is only about one per

cent. Only by improving transport connectivity can the prospect of commercial ties with the region be enhanced.

### **Significance of Joining the Ashgabat Agreement**

Keeping its connectivity objective in mind, India has joined the Ashgabat Agreement in February 2018, which was instituted in April 2011 to establish an international multi-modal transport and transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. The Agreement was first joined by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar on April 25, 2011. Qatar subsequently withdrew from the Agreement in 2013, but Kazakhstan and Pakistan joined the grouping in 2016. The Ashgabat Agreement came into force in April 2016. Its objective is to enhance connectivity within the Eurasian region and synchronize it with other regional transport corridors including the INSTC.

At its first meeting held in March 2017, the Working Committee of the Ashgabat grouping discussed operational issues, including details of the routes through participating countries.<sup>3</sup> The parties submitted a number of proposals to the Depository State (Turkmenistan) to be considered for approval by the Coordinating Committee. The Coordinating Committee has a list of road and rail routes that are part of a single transport transit corridor within the framework of the Ashgabat Agreement.

Among other things, the regional transport grouping is considering measures to create a “green” corridor for vehicles to reduce the time spent at railway checkpoints for replacing wheel sets, create favourable conditions and effective schemes for storing and handling cargo, and use of berths of sea ports. In order to increase the attractiveness of the routes as well as the volume of transit cargo, the group considered having a unified tariff for transit goods by rail.

On March 23, 2016, India had formally conveyed its interest in acceding to the Ashgabat Agreement. On February 1, 2018, Turkmenistan, as the Depository State of the Ashgabat Agreement, informed India “that all the four founding members have consented to the accession of India (to the agreement).” India will now provide

information to the Coordinating Committee with respect to all the details on taxes, fees, tariffs and other payments levied at the ports and checkpoints.

With this, India will now be part of a single transport transit corridor system within the framework of the Ashgabat Agreement. India's entry into Ashgabat Agreement came a month after the inauguration of the first phase of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar Port on December 3, 2017. India's joining of the Ashgabat Agreement has increased the prospect of enlarging both the operational and practical scope of Chabahar to become a vital gateway and the shortest land route to Central Asia.

Here, it is important to note that the operation of a multi-purpose terminal at Chabahar including India's plan to build a 610 km north-south railway from Chabahar to Zahedan couldn't have been realised unless India joined a Central Asian-led transport mechanism.

Connecting to Afghanistan via Chabahar has been essential for India and it has already sent shipments of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar. It seems Afghanistan has already shifted 80 per cent of its cargo traffic from Karachi to Bandar Abbas and Chabahar. More Afghan trade is expected to eventually shift to the Chabahar Port and will drastically reduce Afghanistan's dependency on Pakistan for transit of Afghan goods. The Afghan trade through Chabahar is expected to touch \$5 billion – once it starts feeding the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Its accession to the Ashgabat Agreement would enable India to utilise the existing transport and transit corridor to facilitate trade and commercial interactions with the Eurasian region. Further, this would synchronise with India's efforts to implement the INSTC for enhanced connectivity.

The Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan (ITK) railway line will be the major route under the Ashgabat Agreement. It had become operational in December 2014 and has also been included as part of the India-funded INSTC. Therefore, the Ashgabat Agreement and INSTC will be easily synchronised. The operationalisation of the INSTC is inching closer to becoming a reality. It encompasses ship,

rail and road routes connecting India with Russia, Central Asia and Europe via Iran.

In general, joining the Ashgabat Agreement would make it easier for India to reach out to Central Asia. When it comes to Eurasia, container transport plays a significant role, and for India to join the competitive situation in the Euro-Asian transit system, active participation in transportation projects becomes essential. India's connectivity approach need not be limited to increasing trade and commerce but should aim to enhance investment and services, interlinking sources of raw material, centres of production and markets between India and Eurasia. For example, a Free-Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) could spur the unhindered flow of raw materials as well as inflow of capital and technology through new industrial infrastructure along the Chabahar and INSTC routes.

Apart from the decision to accede to the Ashgabat Agreement, India has already acceded (on June 19, 2017) to the Customs Convention on the International Transport of Goods Under Cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention, 1975) which is used for international carriage of goods. TIR Carnets provides the principal security for movement of transit cargo. It is an internationally recognised, harmonised customs transit document that accompanies the truck driver and the cargo across customs points from origin to destination. The TIR facility is cost-effective. It reduces administrative and financial burdens with one international guarantee for a transport operator, replacing costly guarantees in each country of transit.

TIR journeys have become even faster and more efficient with IRU's TIR-EPD, a free-of-charge web-based digital platform with applications available in 18 languages that allows transport operators to send advance information on goods transported under the TIR procedure. The eTIR system gives real-time data availability, online monitoring, improved reliability and flexible guarantees. Central Asian states are already members of the TIR Convention.

India's accession to the UN Convention on global transport and customs transit has made the operational logistics easier. India hopes

to use the TIR Convention after it finds some trading intermediaries and logistics partners.

In Eurasia, container transport plays a significant role, and India could join the competitive market in the Eurasian transit system with active participation in transportation projects. India's connectivity approach need not be limited to increasing trade and commerce but should aim to enhance investment and services, interlinking sources of raw material, centres of production and markets across the continent.

India has also signed a bilateral agreement with Tajikistan in 2015 to enhance connectivity. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are already members of the INSTC. India's participation in Eurasian connectivity projects through the Ashgabat Agreement will serve to address the integration process under the EAEU and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in more viable ways.

All of these initiatives along with the Chabahar operation should encourage Indian companies to become part of various international transport corridors in Eurasia. For example, the proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) could facilitate an unimpeded flow of raw materials as well as an inflow of capital and technology to Eurasia through new industrial infrastructure along the Chabahar and INSTC routes.

### **Trans-Afghan Transport Corridor**

Any prospect for the early realisation of a trans-Afghan rail corridor connecting Chabahar with Central Asia would bring about the biggest breakthrough in Asian transport connectivity with enormous implications for the entire region both in terms of spurring economic prosperity and ensuring political stability.

In 2011, Uzbek state railway company Ozbekiston Temir Yollari built a short 75-km single-rail track between Hairatan, a town on the Uzbek-Afghan border, and the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif at a cost of US\$ 1.5 billion, funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Uzbekistan was keen to extend the line to other parts of Afghanistan. However, the Salang Pass posed a major obstacle in

connecting northern Afghanistan with Parwan Province and onward connections in Kabul Province.

At the same time, a plan to extend the approximately 700-km railway line from Mazar-i-Sharif through the towns of Sheberghan, Andkhoy and Maymana to Herat in the west of Afghanistan was discussed by Ozbekiston Temir Yollari and Afghan railways. Importantly, an agreement to complete the line was signed by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani at Tashkent on December 5, 2017.

Herat is a gateway to Iran, and when this trans-Afghan transport corridor project is completed, both Afghanistan and Uzbekistan will get a direct link to sea ports and be able to send and receive cargo to and from Chabahar.

The completion of the trans-Afghan railway corridor would enhance the strategic role of Chabahar Port to develop an integrated transportation network. For India, the proposed Chabahar-Iranshahr-Zahedan-Mashad corridor is the most ideal route to connect to Sarakhs on the Turkmen border. India has already committed to laying rails from Chabahar to Zahedan.

The corridor can be linked to the existing Eurasian railway line which connects other parts of Central Asia. Similarly, this route can merge with ongoing corridor plans and programmes like the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and other multilateral transport initiatives in the region.

India could solidify connectivity to Central Asia through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. So far, India has completed the 218-kilometre road from Delaram, Afghanistan, to Zaranj on the Iran-Afghanistan border.

India should consider taking part in the Uzbek-Afghan initiative to connect Mazar-i-Sharif with Herat. (According to Uzbek Railway officials, the Joint-stock Company O'zbekiston Temir Yo'llari has full capacity to undertake the building of 100 km of rail line every eight months. The cost of the project is estimated to be less than \$2 billion).

## Prospects for Connectivity Convergence

A myth has been created that India is opposed to any connectivity projects, especially with regard to China's BRI. India certainly objected to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project because it goes through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir which is claimed by India as its sovereign territory – the reason India boycotted the BRI Forum in China last year. However, New Delhi has sufficiently indicated that it would have no objection to joining any BRI-related projects if the CPEC project could be diverted through non-disputed areas such as being done on the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) pipeline project.

India would not oppose CPEC if it instead passed through Afghanistan. Significantly, at the Wuhan summit in April 2018, both Prime Minister Modi and President Xi agreed to jointly work on reconstruction of Afghanistan, which could not be possible without reconciling each other's connectivity schemes.

Therefore, an encouraging prospect of cooperation is expected on Afghanistan in the coming years between India and China – possibly in the development sector. Recent reports reinforce what Chinese Foreign Minister proposed to his Pakistani and Afghan counterparts on extending CPEC to Afghanistan. Differences on issues related to regional connectivity are quite natural, but in the long-term, prospects for convergence will still emerge if parties move ahead under the principle of extensive consultation, transparency and sharing benefits.

China has already aligned its BRI projects with those of EAEU through a FTA signed between the two. Many stakeholders are waiting for India and EAEU to sign a FTA, which should happen sooner than later.

It will be quite natural for India's Chabahar project to ultimately align with other ongoing connectivity projects now going on in the Eurasian region.<sup>4</sup> More significantly, the Chabahar link would singularly make Afghanistan the most important regional transportation hub and a bridge connecting the Indian Ocean and Central Asia. Afghanistan shares borders of 137, 744 and 1,206

km with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, respectively. However, trade among the three countries has remained low due to poor transport infrastructure. The construction of railway tracks would enable Afghanistan to play a bridging role in integrating the Central Asian region with global markets. The ADB had earlier estimated that an improved transportation link between Central Asia and Afghanistan would boost regional trade by up to US \$12 billion.

To be sure, connectivity requires better transport alignment, closer coordination in international customs clearance, efficient regional logistics including reloading facilities and better financial institutions. India should be amenable to support any viable plan to set up an SCO Development Bank considering the reasons it joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was founded as a multilateral financial institution to bring countries together to address daunting infrastructure issues in Asia.

In the next stage, India, therefore, needs to rope in one or more of the Central Asian countries, preferably Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, in the Chabahar project and this could also be pursued under the SCO framework. Apart from this, India should focus on the following priority areas:

- Take early operational control of Chabahar,
- Facilitate regular and frequent shipping links between the ports in India (Mundra, Kandla and Mumbai) and Chabahar,
- Envisage extending the Chabahar-Zahedan-Mashad rail link up to Herat in Afghanistan,
- Consider taking part in the Uzbek-Afghan initiative to connect Mazar-i-Sharif with Herat.

### **Need to Seek Cooperative Approach**

It is evident that any policy based on rivalry is not going to be successful in Eurasia. Iran has sought Indian collaboration on the Chabahar project but has also indicated that it would keep its options open on Chabahar and does not want it to become a pivot of regional rivalry. The top Iranian officials have denied Chabahar

to be a rival project to Gwadar port of Pakistan. Instead, Tehran seems to be looking for partnership with Pakistan and China with also an eye to join China's OBOR initiative as well as to tap into CPEC. Tehran has already sent a compelling message, this time by inviting Pakistan's Minister for Maritime Affairs Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo to the inauguration ceremony, who not only hailed Chabahar Port as a welcome sign for the entire region but also designated it as the sister port of Gwadar.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, Iran is also keen to push its own gas pipeline along the same route to reach China's Western province.

Similarly, the Afghan Ambassador to China Janan Mosazai also stated that his country has an "extraordinarily" close relationship with India but supports the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>6</sup> As stated earlier, Russia and the Central Asian states have applauded China's OBOR as an initiative to bridge the East and West.<sup>7</sup>

Remarkably, China too is seeing Chabahar in a positive perspective. Chinese media close to the Communist Party has instead lauded India, in an editorial for contributing to 'regional connectivity'.<sup>8</sup>

Against these regional perspectives, India cannot be taking a position other than a cooperative one if it wants genuinely exploit opportunities that the SCO processes may offer. Any policy underpinned by the spirit of rivalry is going to make India the odd one out.

For a start, India should play a positive role in the SCO with a fresh mind without carrying any ambiguity – though it should be mindful of the geopolitical calculations underpinning these connectivity projects.

Surely, no country in the region is willing to articulate as yet, but China's plan to integrate Central and South Asia with its so-called Silk Road Economic Belt is not hidden. The Iranian policy thinkers while interacting with this author among others – during the Prime Minister's visit to Tehran during May 22-23, 2016 – admitted that OBOR is definitely geopolitically-driven, as they also suggested that the matter was to be discussed with the Chinese jointly by India and Iran.<sup>9</sup>

The same can also be true about China's other projects undertaken across the Eurasian space and along the maritime route across the Indian Ocean. Chinese investment in Gwadar, port building in Sri Lanka, a military base in Djibouti and now developing port and industrial facilities in Oman are underpinned by Chinese geopolitical and military objectives. These have been a source of concern for India, but others will also eventually feel the need to challenge China's aggressive posturing. The countries in Southeast Asia are already questioning China's real motives as they are gradually falling into China's debt trap.

India also needs to take note that Russia connectivity interests also do not necessarily coincide with that of China's BRI plans.<sup>10</sup> On May 14, at the Beijing Summit on BRI, President Vladimir Putin advocated Russia's own "Greater Eurasia" connectivity plan to expand the capacity of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM), the Trans-Siberian Railway (TSR), and the Northeast Passage. While supporting China's initiative, Putin talked about integrating the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), BRI, SCO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for building a Greater Eurasian transport corridor. In spite of the symbiotic synergy formalised between BRI and the Russia-driven EAEU in 2015, Putin is fervently enlarging the scope of the EAEU to bring over 50 European, Asian and Latin American states under its ambit. Moscow is thereby trying to protect its interests by encouraging more countries in Central Asia to join the EAEU. With a view to limit the flow of Chinese goods into these markets, the EAEU has imposed new import restrictions that have badly hurt Chinese trade in recent years.

For its part, India has never been opposed to working with Pakistan or China on transport connectivity or exploring opportunities for jointly undertaking energy projects like TAPI. But there has been lack of transparency about their intentions. Instead, Pakistan has been blatantly hostile and has refused to allow India access through its territory, virtually cutting India off from accessing Eurasia to connect with China's Silk Road projects. Therefore, India's investment for developing Chabahar is the only way to

overcome the geopolitical hostility imposed by Pakistan and a ring of Chinese encirclement impeding India to reach out to Eurasia.<sup>11</sup> Hopefully, the Chabahar Port would not only provide India with access to gas fields in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea region, Iran and Western Siberia, but would also pave the way for India to tap the vast deposits of high-value rare earth minerals in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

One strong impression that has been generated outside and also aired widely in Iran is the perilous challenge of India's ability to deliver on Chabahar.<sup>12</sup> Iranian experts have jibed at India for taking 13 years to decide on a formal agreement on Chabahar.

At the same time, it must also be underlined that the Indian experience in the past of availing commercial and strategic opportunities through Iranian ports has never been easy. Way back on May 18, 1995 – over two decades ago – India signed a trilateral MoU on transit for trade with Iran and Turkmenistan that envisaged movement of goods from India via the sea route to Bandar Abbas and onward by surface transport to Sarakhs on the Iran-Turkmenistan border. In May 1996, the 295-km railway network called Mashad-Sarakhs-Tajan was inaugurated to link for the first time any post-Soviet state to the Persian Gulf.

India had contributed financially to the trilateral railway project envisioned then to be the gateway for India to access Central Asia. But till date the Iranians have never tried to develop the Bandar Abbas-Mashad-Sarakhs rail corridor in a meaningful way for enabling the shipment of Indian goods to Central Asia and vice-versa.

In fact, no sensible traders and shipping companies (Indian and Central Asian) seemed to have preferably used Bandar Abbas Port for sending cargo freight for reasons unspecified despite the shorter distance. Instead, they have preferred to ship cargo to Central Asia through a long circuitous route via the Chinese port of Tenjin because of better logistics and professionalism in delivery of consignments.

Considering the rapidly changing developments on the connectivity front, the joint LIC-IDS report suggested that India

needs to position itself to stake its economic claim in Eurasia, which is being increasingly infringed by other powers, especially China. The report noted that India's current volume of trade with the Eurasian region is minimal.

India's total trade with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) countries is merely \$9 billion and only \$28 billion with the INSTC members. India's total two-way trade with the whole Central Asian region has not grown beyond paltry \$1.5 billion of which 75 per cent is only with Kazakhstan that is being conducted through the Chinese ports. Similarly, India's trade with Russia has been stagnant—hovering around \$9-10 billion despite Bandar Abbas Port and more so with the opportunity available in the wake of Western sanctions on Russia. Therefore, India's trade with INSTC member-countries and Central Asia is only \$29 billion. No country falls in the list of India's top 20 trading partners. Iran is 21st in the list with bilateral trade standing at \$9 billion, whereas bilateral trade between India and China has touched \$85 billion and it could be increasing.

Therefore, there seems to be no guarantee that the Bandar Abbas-Sarakhs story will not be repeated for the Chabahar-Milak-Zaranj-Delaram highway as well.

A lot has already been written about the strategic significance of Chabahar Port for India in the context of (a) providing a transit gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia; (b) checkmating of Chinese and Pakistani moves through Gwadar; and (c) monitoring insurgency in Balochistan among others. However, it must be underlined here that India's partnership with Iran or with Afghanistan cannot be compared with the level of strategic and military proximity that exists between China and Pakistan. Therefore, the rationality about India's connectivity projects even to reach out to Eurasian region needs to be constantly reviewed from time to time. It should not happen that India's strategic positioning on Chabahar become another case like India having an airbase at Ayni airfield in Tajikistan, which is nothing but empty posturing having no real utility for Indian security.

The success of any major connectivity project in this sector and even the Chabahar Port will not depend so much on India's strategic

intent or lack of it, or even on India's deficiency on delivery, but mainly on the political commitment and the efficiency of managing port facilities on the part of the host country such as Iran in this case. Given the nature of Iranian politics both within and vis-à-vis the outside world, excessive strategic investment in the country would be a bit risky. To be sure, the Chinese may have studied the prospects of developing Chabahar at least from the commercial feasibility angle.

This apart, the problem is also linked to the size of the markets such as in Central Asia and adjacent regions. The absence of large trade volumes as well as high-value trade items may have been the reasons for the tardy implementation of the much-hyped INSTC, the first agreement for which was signed in May 2002 between India, Iran and Russia. The objective of the corridor was to move freight from Mumbai to Astrakhan in Russia via Bandar Abbas. A study then found that through INSTC freight rates would be 30 per cent cheaper and distance-wise 40 per cent shorter than if the traditional route was followed.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, the sustainability of the project would ultimately depend on the commercial viability and profitability for Indian investors and business firms to keep the Port alive. Certainly, operational sustainability of Chabahar cannot survive only on the basis of transportation of Afghan farm and horticulture products and other exports, but would require high-value import items such as strategic minerals essential for Indian industry.

India therefore, needs to have full understanding and assessment of the potential of the markets, and trade volumes to Afghanistan and Central Asia. For now, the project seems more about political rhetoric than based on a full business plan. In fact, the failure in sifting the details would risk the Port facility becoming a transit route for illicit drug trafficking through the Golden Crescent.

To be sure, Iran is certainly going to open up once the sanctions are fully lifted but that would not guarantee any substantial strategic opportunity for India in a manner that one would expect.

Although, Indian energy companies have more opportunities for investments in the Iranian oil fields, but the Chabahar Port,

meant to connect with Afghanistan and Central Asia, could face formidable challenges at least on the geopolitical front. The situation in Afghanistan is yet to stabilise that has also frequently derailed the proposed TAPI pipeline plan.

For India the geopolitical opportunities are great but India does not have the wherewithal and importantly the necessary strategic partners to play the game in Balochistan. Iran itself is not likely to let India use Chabahar for such purposes.

Therefore, India's connectivity plans need to be linked with the larger regional economic integration trends rather than be confined to its narrow objective of finding ways of outflanking Pakistan.

A comprehensive Eurasia policy, therefore, should incorporate a long-term strategy that would require steps for opening up borders for achieving greater connectivity with the rest of Asia. In the case of Eurasia, natural connectivity can only be sought through the northern parts of India rather than through the western seacoast because the issue is not about accessing Eurasia per se, but also about orienting and benefiting from the economic integration of India's immediate borderland with that of the Eurasian growth story.

While it is important to pursue connectivity through the overland route through Iran and Afghanistan or via INSTC, even the best pursued energy pipelines such as the IPI and TAPI have so far failed to be realised. The prospects for having a seabed pipeline from Iran and Oman to a port in India is being discussed for decades. Of course, Pakistan and India should not foreclose the overland alternative through Pakistan. However, the time factor of delaying the process goes against Indian economic interests. Neither India nor Pakistan is an immediate neighbour of the region, but the latter has been seeking connectivity to the region by excluding India. Islamabad has done this by denying India direct access to Afghanistan through Pakistani territory.

Additionally, both routing through the sea and transiting through the politically troublesome Pakistan-Afghanistan region falls short of realising the real regional integration process with Eurasia. These are essentially regionally disconnected options that are not helpful for India's long-term interests.

More significantly, the US pulling out of the landmark nuclear accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Tehran, along with the renewed threat of sanctions on Iran and Russia under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) would severely endanger the prospect of the Chabahar project moving ahead.

However, if India is able to stay the course, its participation in Eurasian connectivity projects through the Ashgabat Agreement will address the integration process under the EAEU and the SCO in more viable ways.

### **Finding a Synergy – Carving out a Path on China's Road**

Even though India's northern regions are close to Central Asia than its own states in the South, because of the constraints imposed by geopolitical factors (read Pakistan), India's trade with Central Asia and Afghanistan has fallen short of realising its full potential.

This imbalance suggests an obvious rationale for increasing India's connectivity with Central Asia. Therefore, India has been exploring different variants of realistically attainable transport connectivity with Eurasia.

Eventually, India's connectivity projects will have to find a synergy with China's BRI projects in Eurasia and they will become complementary to each other for the larger good of the region.

A breakthrough for the regional infrastructure network arrived with the recent successful trial operations of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan international road transportation through the Ferghana Valley.

In the coming years, India will need to start working with one or more of the Central Asian countries, preferably Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, on the Chabahar project, which could be pursued under the SCO framework. The Tashkent conference on Afghanistan from March 2018 confirmed the need to firm up multilateral cooperation including in the SCO framework.

A new obstacle for India came in the form of China's renewed push into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) through its CPEC

initiative. The China-Pakistan strategic nexus is nothing new but the motivation, significance and implications of CPEC have been carefully analysed already.

The plan seemingly aims to build a crucial two-way bridge-link for China to access the Indian Ocean and conversely for Pakistan to reach out to Eurasia. But it is likely to deepen the already complex strategic ties between the two “iron brothers” dubbed now as equivalent to the US-Israel links. China expects that CPEC will yield far-reaching economic benefits and regional security is instrumental for this purpose.

First, the Karakoram (land) with Gwadar (sea) alignments have both commercial and military significance to serve as strategic choke points vis-à-vis India.

Second, the CPEC is suspected to be about offsetting the growing US-India intimacy as also in China’s quid pro quo to counter India’s “Act East” policy earlier and now the “Indo-Pacific” format.

Third, it seems linked to preventing the Afghan-Pak area from potentially becoming a safe haven for Uyghur militants once the US troops leave Afghanistan. Beijing’s frantic initiatives for Afghan reconciliation talks explain that.

Clearly, Beijing seeks new opportunity to fill up gaps where India has largely failed. Considering PoK’s strategic location, it could have many ramifications for India. It is here that CPEC is linked to Pakistan’s recent attempts at manipulating the legal and demographic profile of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Islamabad wants to make GB the fifth province of Pakistan. As far as speculations go, Pakistan could lease additional areas in GB to China like the Shaksgam Valley that was surrendered in 1963. Opening a Chinese Consulate in PoKis also in the offing. This is too serious for India to ignore.

Meanwhile work under the CPEC has started, ranging from building of hydro projects, roads and tunnels to leasing land in Gwadar. While Beijing has justified CPEC as a “livelihood project”, Pakistan has gone the whole hog to get the landlocked SCO members to join the corridor and offered them access to the Indian Ocean.

For India, China's OBOR plan posed a dilemma: joining it raised fears of getting sucked into China game plan, but not joining is inconsistent with New Delhi's broader diplomatic strategy. New Delhi also seems irritated over the way Beijing announced the plan without prior discussion.

India's non-endorsement of OBOR has raised eyebrows on the future course of India-China relations. China's plan obviously carries security undertones, but staying outside it seems short-sighted. However, there have been significant positive movements towards India-China cooperation in Eurasia during the Wuhan Summit in April 2018 and India's entry into the SCO.

### **Creative Engagement with China in Eurasia**

To take the momentum forward, India requires a two-pronged strategy. First, New Delhi should start placing Gilgit-Baltistan plus Ladakh (82 per cent of J&K) on the centre stage to blunt both the Kashmir rhetoric and CPEC. It is also time to start working on Pakistan's domestic resistance, i.e., in Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan. These regions under the occupation of Pakistan are now abuzz with pro-freedom slogans.

Second, India should explore opportunistic aspects in the OBOR especially for regaining access to the northern axis, prevented by loss of GB to Pakistan. Therefore, India needs to weigh the option of getting a physical entry into the GB, Sinkiang and Wakhan areas that hitherto remained out-of-its-way – it can't be in India's interest to support the project and not reap all the economic benefits.<sup>14</sup> Further, considering the region remains a critical focus of India's threat perceptions, being on the road would be beneficial for tracking regional terrorism and developing capabilities to respond to future uncertainties. Opting out is a diplomatic risk as Pakistan may exploit India's absence. As in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), Pakistan would be on the lookout to place India in the role of the spoiler within the SCO. Clearly, Russia and others would want India in the OBOR as a counterweight to Chinese influence. Regardless of economic interests, India can't

ignore the symbolic significance as it is along the Silk Route that Indian trade and philosophy (Buddhism) once travelled to the rest of Asia.

It's an open question whether this type of diplomacy will be successful, but India's philosophy should be clear: travel on the road. This is a tricky balancing act, but the challenge is to re-conceptualise and seek new economic, diplomatic and security realities on the ground. Just as India joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a wise approach would be to creatively join the Silk Route.

In fact, a countervailing strategy would be to offer a mollifying connectivity plan for a direct transport, energy, trade, fibre optics and communication highway connecting the Persian Gulf with China through Indian territory under the rubric of the India-China Silk Route Corridor (ICSRC). It could serve multiple interlocking advantages for India from infrastructure building to buying guarantee against Chinese misadventures. The idea could help open a new path and become a masterstroke counter-strategy in India's long-term home and foreign policy.

### **Reopening the Old-Silk Route via Ladakh**

Logically, any connectivity to Eurasia should follow the traditional India-Central Asia route that went across the Himalayan passes and Xinjiang steppes. Again, the logic is not about accessing Eurasia for the sake of it, but it is more about seeking an interlocking of regional economic integration with India's northern neighbours including China. In fact, it is the only option which is realistically attainable and worth pursuing. The shift of thinking in this direction is something that India can no longer afford to put off, unless India wants to remain disconnected with its immediate vicinity only to inculcate more insecurity and fear about China encircling its neighbourhood.

First, it needs to be underscored that China and Central Asian countries have already facilitated various transit and transport systems to overcome their inter-regional trade problems. Since 1992, China has reactivated its old rail link with Kazakhstan. Several major railway, road, and pipeline projects are being launched traversing

from Xinjiang across Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Iran under China's latest "Silk Road Economic Belt" project. Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is already the hub for any mode of transportation. It has 16 Class A ports and 11 Class B ports connecting with eight countries.

Second, there are other initiatives taken up by others. An ambitious railway project connecting Iran, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan had started in December 2014.<sup>15</sup> A second project will cover the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan section.<sup>16</sup> Plans are also afoot to construct a 250-mile railroad linking Afghanistan's Akina-Andkhoy to Turkmenistan's Atamurat-Ymamnazar via Pyandzh in Tajikistan.<sup>17</sup>

China's projects are going to have far-reaching implications for the region especially paving the way for transforming connectivity covering the Persian Gulf region, Caspian Sea, Central Asia, Western China and the Trans-Himalayan region of India. India should press for joining these fast developing transport networks to break its geographical isolation and exposure to the Eurasian region. For India, Xinjiang should become the natural and strategic choice to reach out to the Eurasian region while bypassing the immediate and troubled Af-Pak region.

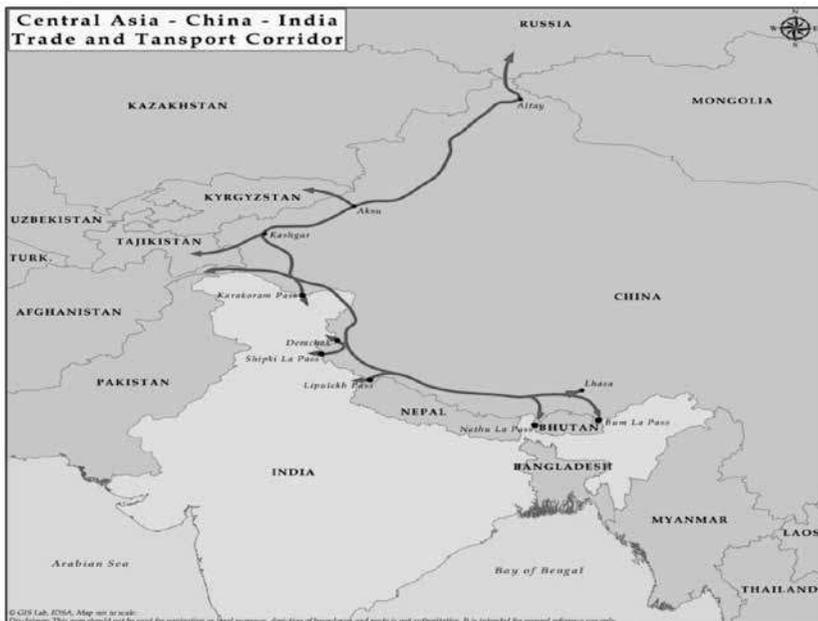
### **Interconnectivity Option**

In fact, there already exist roads and railway alignments in a north-south direction from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Western China to India. From the north, the existing road runs from Almaty, Korgas (Highway No. A-353), Yinning, Kuqa (No. 218), Aksu, Kashgar (No. 314), Yarkand, Yecheng (Xinjiang-Tibet Highway No. 219), Mazar, Shahidulla, Sumxi, Derub, Resum, Shiquanhe, Gar, Kailash, Burang, Lepu-lekh. The total distance is less than 3,000 km as compared to over 5,000 km through the long route via Iran. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan and Western China are connected by the Bishkek-Kashgar road through the Torugart Pass and the Osh-Kashgar road via the Irkeshtam Pass. The Xinjiang highway is also connected to Tajikistan through the old Silk Route

across the Pamirs. A road also connects Xinjiang with Afghanistan through the Wakan corridor. Importantly, these routes are functional and it is only a matter of interconnectivity.<sup>18</sup>

### Untying the Karakoram Knot

To be sure, a transport corridor through the difficult Himalayan mountain passes would be a huge challenge. From the feasibility point of view, a linkage through Ladakh to the Xinjiang highway through the legendary Karakoram Pass or Demchok is arguably the shortest, but China's sensitivity for any engagement in this sector could be a problem. However, the Karakoram Pass forms part of the International Boundary (IB) and hence should not be a problem for both sides. Alternatively, in terms of topography, the Lipu-Lekh Pass in Uttarakhand, which is open for border trade with China since 1992, could be an entry point to start transit trade. The refurbishing of the road connecting Shipkila in Himachal Pradesh and Lipu-Lekh in Uttarakhand is already in progress.



On the positive side, the proposed route involves only one country (China) as a land-link between India and Central Asia, as compared to the longer western routes traversing through Iran and Afghanistan. Even though the route via China would be seasonal, its reactivation would have a symbolic significance, essentially for reviving the traditional Silk Route that was vibrant until the 1950s.

Importantly, the route passes through relatively stable Xinjiang as compared to the turbulent areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, transiting trade through Iranian ports has not been problem-free. Indian traders still prefer to use Chinese ports for better efficiency and timely delivery.

For India, the route has a strategic consideration rather than just an economic angle. The Ladakh-Xinjiang route could help counterpoise Pakistan's plan for an 800-km long railway from Gwadar to Kashgar. Besides, India would have the advantage of gaining access to the transcontinental transport corridors especially the Chinese proposed "Silk Road Economic Belt" project, linking Asia with Europe.

The route could rebuild India's connection with Xinjiang going back to 240 BC when Asoka's son Kushtana founded the Khotan kingdom and introduced Buddhism in present-day Xinjiang, which was historically described by the Indians as *Ratna Bhumi*. Politically, through the reconnection, India will regain its status of a legitimate Central Asian player which it enjoyed until the closure of India's Consulate in Kashgar in the mid-1950s. It would revive the traditional social and cultural ties between the Uyghurs and the people in Ladakh whose economies were interconnected to each other for centuries. The revival of cross-border trade – however small – should help enhance confidence-building between India and China.

Significant volumes of trade exist for markets in India, China, and Central Asia. China could earn considerable revenue from transit fees. Conceivably, arrangements for swap deals with China could also be worked out gradually. Availability of goods from neighbouring India would cut down the cost of transporting basic commodities from Eastern to Western China. Indian goods are extremely popular

in Xinjiang, which was demonstrated during the trade fair first held in Urumchi in 1992. Similarly, for India, opening the Xinjiang route would allow imports of essential goods from across the border. This will reduce the delivered costs of goods including fuel supplies to the remote trans-Himalayan region through difficult passes. Currently, goods worth crores of Rupees cross into Ladakh through illegally.

With the technological breakthrough, the negative side of the feasibility is now reduced to China's geopolitical willingness to cooperate. The issue of territorial disputes between India and China would certainly come in the way. But cross-border cooperation could also serve as a confidence-building measure leading to boundary settlement. China may be receptive to the idea. Any security apprehensions could be mitigated by assuring the Chinese that India could be counted as a factor of stability rather than a threat to restive Xinjiang. In fact, any resulting gains and prosperity from economic exposure to the Chinese and Central Asian frontiers could only trigger major development and growth in Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab and Himachal Pradesh.

The risks of trans-border exposure are for both sides. For example, China is equally vulnerable in Xinjiang where the Uyghur people show closer affinity and warmth to Indians than to the Chinese. But, China will achieve better internal harmony by exposing Xinjiang to India than to Pakistan. The Karakoram Highway is already becoming a terrorist highway to export the trained jihadist from Pakistan into Xinjiang.

The reasons for not moving ahead are well known, but actions to bridge the gaps are lacking. Fortunately, the possibility of India and China cooperating in Central Asia is already becoming a reality. An India-China oil consortium in Central Asia is being talked about. India's GAIL has invested in Chinese gas pipeline projects in Kazakhstan. Both India and China are carrying out mega projects in Afghanistan's energy and mining sectors including extraction of iron ore and copper. Eventually, the two countries could develop huge stakes in the stability of Afghanistan as they have common economic and security interests.<sup>19</sup>

Russia and India have been aiming to collaborate in Eurasia. The Indo-Russian Joint Statement of 2014 envisaged some tangible action including early implementation of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) through Nhava Sheva via Bandar Abbas to Astarkan, exploring the possibility to have a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement between India and the newly-formed Eurasian Economic Union (EEC) by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Armenia. Kyrgyzstan is likely to join the EEC soon. Russia has offered Siberian oilfields (Vankor and Yurubcheno-Tokhomskiye) for gas and oil exploration and production as well as in LNG projects and supplies by ONGC. It talked about exploring the building of a \$40 billion long-distance oil and gas pipeline system from Russia to India. Agreement to facilitate scientific cooperation to explore prospects in the Arctic and the Northern Sea Route is also envisaged. Surely, not all these projects are possible to implement easily, but they are promising areas and if they materialise, they would turn the trade prospects around and bring rationality in India-Russia-China relations. Again, any viable future long-distance transport grids, including an energy highway from resource-rich Western Siberia and Central Asia to India cannot be realized without them transiting through Western China.

Clearly, the convergence of interests among Russia, India, and China (RIC) are gradually growing. The trio is committed, politically and economically, for broadening their base of interactions under the BRICS, G20, SCO and RIC fora. They share similar perspectives on many key regional and global issues, including cross-border terrorism, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The RIC also have more direct and vital strategic stakes in the immediate region. The rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in their geostrategic vicinity would inevitably have implications far beyond.

For India, the sustained China-Pakistan alignment and US-Pakistan ties have essentially served to erect a barrier-wall for direct access to the Eurasian region. If India overlooks the fast-developing transport and pipeline network intersecting with growing Sino-Russian, Sino-Pakistani and now Pakistani-Russian partnership,

it could adversely affect its long-term interest. Creative diplomacy is therefore urgently needed to overcome the physical barrier with Central Asia.

### **Action Plan**

India needs to note that Central Asian States have been seeking India's entry as a balancing force. With India joining the SCO, its stakes in Central Asia could inevitably grow and this cannot be realised without Chinese and Russian cooperation. India should frankly articulate its viewpoint in the future SCO Summit platforms.

- India has to highlight that the entire Eurasian region shares a common history and culture once bound by the Silk and Spice Trade Route. Clearly, these connecting points would help better economic relations and enhance improved political ties. Moreover, the security and stability of these countries will get more and more intertwined.
- India needs to underline that direct land connectivity from India through China to Central Asia and Russia is necessary if organisations such as RIC, BRICS, and SCO are to become more robust.
- India should eventually take up the proposal of Ladakh-Xinjiang connectivity directly with China. This could also form a counterpoise to China's call for India to join its Silk Route idea. Alternatively, Central Asian countries especially Kazakhstan are in a position to take the initiative as they hold key advantages vis-à-vis China should they wish to exercise them in order to push the idea. If China responds positively, then the matter could be taken up further.
- The proposal should initially involve a country-specific linkage approach. India and China already have border trade agreements. However, to make the proposal viable for the longer term, it would require a regional approach at a later stage. For example, Russia, three Central Asian States, and Afghanistan should be involved in the cooperation efforts. Therefore, a proposal for a sub-regional framework agreement amongst India, China

and Central Asian republics to facilitate cross-border transit trade along the measures adopted by ASEAN, Greater Mekong Sub-region, TRACECA, ECO, BIMSTEC, and others could be mooted.

- China, India, and the Central Asian States should consider using the existing facilitation agreements for transit transport at the multilateral, bilateral, trilateral, and sub-regional level. The proposal could also be perused within the SCO framework, as well as under the Asia Cooperation Dialogue (ACD) mechanism. Several intergovernmental agreements on the Asian Highway Network already exist under the UN-ESCAP programme.
- India and Kazakhstan already have a Joint Working Group on Transport which should be activated to include the above proposal so that the exploration process and implementation could be initiated.
- It is pertinent that a joint multilateral (India, Kazakhstan, China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan) study group is set up for undertaking a feasibility study.
- India should factor the importance of using Xinjiang corridor as a priority with China and Central Asian States. India and Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) already has an agreement signed on civil aviation cooperation when the Governor of XUAR Ismail Tiliwaldi visited New Delhi in 2005. The start of flights from Urumchi to Delhi will also improve India's air connectivity with landlocked Central Asia; they can hob via cities such as Almaty, Tashkent or Bishkek.
- India should also press for the re-opening of the Indian Consulate in Kashgar, which was closed in the mid-1950s. India's primary geopolitical purpose should indicate not containment of China or any other power but to promote regional cooperation and this will help us come out of the self-defeating and zero-sum approach to regional polity. Any possibility of realising a future transport link between India and China through the old Silk Route would unlock the huge potential for India-China

cooperation and foster integration of Asian economies. It would be an ice-breaking moment for the future of India-China relations.

If such an idea were to be pushed forward, it could become a grand announcement indicating India's willingness to deepen economic engagement with China and would be akin to how Russia and China started two decades ago. The new corridor could help revive the shared legacy of a common history and culture enriched by the trade in silk and spices. The development could pave the way for strengthening trust between the two countries and eventually contribute to the solution of the boundary problem.

The initiative could prove to be a masterstroke of a counter-strategy in India's long-term domestic and foreign policies. It would be a coup de maître for India in dealing with multiple challenges of countering an expansive Chinese foreign policy, aggressive Pakistani designs, the growing threat of extremism, and addressing the connectivity issues.

### **Ladakh – Critical to Forge Connectivity with Eurasia**

In a major boost to connectivity to the north, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2018 had inaugurated the overarching national vision of a tunnel through the Zoji La Pass (11,578 feet) that connects Kashmir Valley with Ladakh.

A tunnel through Zoji La has remained a constant dream for the last several decades. The initial survey for the tunnel was carried out in 1997, but the actual planning had started only after the Kargil war in 1999.

The construction of the much-awaited Rs 6,808-crore Zoji La Tunnel project spanning over 14.15 km is expected to be completed in 2026.<sup>20</sup>

The project aims to build a 14.15-km long two-lane bi-directional single tube tunnel with a parallel 14.2-km long escape tunnel, excluding approaches on the Srinagar-Leh section connecting NH-1A at Km 95 (baltal) and at Km 118 (Minamarg).

With the completion of this strategic tunnel, Leh will get all-weather and snow-free road connectivity that will enable traffic to move swiftly and safely between Kashmir and Ladakh.

### **Trans-Himalayan Railway Corridor**

In addition to this, the government has now turned its focus on building a major high-elevation all-weather, snow-free rail axis for connecting Ladakh with the rest of the country. The decks are being cleared to build two types of railway links for Leh – Bilaspur-Manali-Lehand Srinagar-Kargil-Leh. The move comes with the commitment to catch up with the rapid infrastructure growth in neighbouring China.

The survey details are going on in full-swing for the first alignment from Bhanupalli Valley in Ambala division to Bilaspur via Manali to Leh. The second alignment, Bilaspur via Pathankot, Jammu, and Srinagar to Leh is also being sanctioned by Indian railways.

The foundation stone of the Bilaspur-Mandi-Leh (BML) sector for the Final Location Survey (FLS) was laid in June this year by former Union Railways Minister Suresh Prabhu. The survey has been delegated to RITES Limited (Rail India Technical and Economic Service), a Railways PSU.

The Detailed Project Report (DPR) is expected to be completed by 2019 at an estimated cost of Rs 157.77 crore which will be funded by the Defence Ministry. The total cost of construction of 498 km railway line has been calculated at Rs 22,831 crore for building a 1,676 mm (5 ft 6 in) broad gauge railway track covering a total distance of 498 km. The length could go up to 650 km depending on the gradients and the alignment.

The Himalayan railway connectivity is a strategic project. The Leh railway line is one of the 14 strategic connectivity projects initiated by the Ministry of Defence to cover the border areas along China, Nepal and Pakistan.

The Leh rail network will have enormous strategic significance for boosting India's defence capabilities and preparedness, enhancing the communication network both along the China border and the border with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK).

It would eventually help enhance people-to-people connectivity so as to leverage the common heritage of the state, specially to explore the potential of pilgrim tourism in all three regions of the state – Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. How to make an alternate route to Kailash Mansarovar through Demchok that will be safer, dependable and shorter would become a reality if the relations with China improve.

Connectivity would also help the country optimise Ladakh's strategic advantage as a pivot to accessing Central Asia, China, Russia and Mongolia for political, trade and commercial ties.

This is critical in the context of counterpoising China's epic BRI initiative including the CPEC that passes through close vicinity of Ladakh. Clearly, the Chinese forays into Gilgit-Baltistan – albeit on the pretext of CPEC – could have serious adverse implications on Ladakh in the longer term. After completing railway projects in neighbouring Tibet and Xinjiang, the Chinese are planning to have trains penetrating the Karakoram Mountains.

India needs a counter-plan and it is for the Prime Minister to set the stage for exploring Ladakh's strategic value as a gateway for gaining direct access to Tarim Basin and the Tibetan plateau. By doing this, both Kashmir and Ladakh can once again be brought at the centre stage to become the economic and cultural hubs of India's connectivity to the north.

India's engagement with Eurasia has become critical. With India becoming a member of SCO, its stakes in Central Asia will increase.

Here, connectivity to Ladakh could offer a bigger strategic perspective and a historic opportunity for India to physically connect with China, Eurasia, Europe and beyond, which could be the kernel not only for broader change and but also be beneficial to India's strategic outreach to the north.

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## 18. India and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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The SCO has certainly emerged as the most important regional grouping in the Eurasian region but to be sure, multiple conflicting interests would intersect at the SCO forum, ranging from regional and global issues to combating terrorism.

It has become a contested region among major powers in a rather romanticised fashion. The countries of Central Asia initially welcomed the external players, as they badly needed international political and economic contacts. They have of course largely remained within the Russian regional setting and have also undertaken several initiatives for regional integration albeit without much success. Broadly, the regional political elites tried to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy as a way to balance the interests of major players.

Traditionally, India never featured in the Eurasian geopolitical equilibrium, even though the regional states perceived India's potential to be a countervailing factor for the region. This articulation found pronouncement both within and outside governments of regional states.

However, Central Asian states started to view India as conspicuously lacking a framework or not being able to find itself a place in any of the concentric rings that outside actors had embossed on the region. Yet, from India's perspective, Central Asia formed a critical and paramount strategic component in its thinking both from the Afghanistan-Pakistan angle and from the point of view of China's growing influence.

The fact is that the SCO was originally created to resolve the volatile border issues that China had with the former Soviet republics. However, China never tried to place India under the SCO for the simple reason that China and India had built their bilateral mechanisms to deal with boundary and trade issues.<sup>1</sup>

From India's point of view too, joining the China-led outfit would have made no sense if the Sino-Pak strategic nexus was not going to be altered. Instead, joining the SCO would have provided Pakistan with yet another regional forum for mobilising support for Kashmir with the tacit support of China.

Also, in the absence of a direct land border with Central Asia, India's ability to assert in the SCO would have been rather meager. The forum had been used to voiced rhetoric against the West, something which New Delhi would have preferred to avoid. Most importantly, the SCO is a group – comprising of communists, autocrats and semi-democrats, who have little respect for human rights. Respect for ethnic groups and religions would have been at odds with India's basic principles. Among other things, India certainly couldn't have willingly sacrificed its respect for Uyghur nationalism by endorsing China's suppression of minority Uyghurs under the pretext of SCO collaboration.

### **India's Position and Interests**

Despite all its demerits, India recognized SCO as one of the remarkable regional forums in the Eurasian space in the post-Cold War era. The high-profile SCO summits drew huge global media attention and its declarations have had profound diplomatic impact for the international balance of power.

Sceptics at home though criticised India joining a Chinese-led body as a junior member, New Delhi expressed its intention to be a part of the SCO process since 2005 at the Astana Summit.<sup>2</sup> Since then India has been enthusiastically participating in all SCO activities as an observer, for it sincerely believed that stakes are high for India in the Eurasian security and economic spheres. Clearly, India's concerns are essentially security-driven, fearing that SCO

could possibly be used as a smokescreen by inimical forces including Pakistan to drum up support for anti-India activities. Thus, staying outside cannot be to India's advantage.

However, there have been several issues relating to its full membership into SCO.

The delay in granting full membership to India and the other observers has been caused by several factors including the lack of criteria, procedures and timeline. The grouping had always entertained some reservations about the entry of South Asian countries. China in particular has retained its ability to prevent something that it does not approve of either directly or through others. In addition, UN sanctions prevented the SCO from admitting Iran as a member.

But, first, it has been very apparent that China being the SCO's ultimate boss had strongly opposed India's entry. Even if the membership comes through, it would have come with a great deal of prescribed terms and conditions. The Chinese argument has been that India and China has several other mechanisms for cooperation; thus India need not be a part of SCO. China treated the forum as its domain to pursue its exclusive goals.

Second, despite Russia pushing India's case and China pressing for Pakistan's entry, the SCO rather remained reticent fearing it would get mired into a South Asian conflict. Some cited SAARC's failure as an alibi. Others saw India's proclivity as being towards the East and West rather than Eurasia.

Third, many commentators were and still are of the view that a high profile country like India needs to chart its own regional economic course and need not seek membership into an organisation where it will have a lesser political voice and status.

Notwithstanding the above points, India has taken a broader view and decided to seriously engage with the Eurasian region under the SCO auspices particularly with the motive of enhancing common political stability and economic prosperity for the whole region. Besides, India has seen direct potential gains from being a full member of the SCO.

### *India's Stakes*

First, India sees its entry as essential for protecting its own interests in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the withdrawal of US forces. Although, both SCO and CSTO are unlikely to play more than a “defensive” role, India could provide a value addition in terms of generating a positive political environment for Afghan peace. Even though a power vacuum in Afghanistan is unlikely, the possibility of negative forces inimical to India pursuing their interests through the SCO mechanism remains a worry.

Second, Russia and Pakistan have been increasingly building bridges, the contours of which are not clear yet. This will affect India's interests in Central Asia. Ironically, Pakistan has quite successfully inserted itself into this new alignment. Even Russia's confidence in Pakistan seems to have increased though it may have an opportunistic aspect. Clearly, the acceptance of Pakistan in Eurasia would grow henceforth. Pakistan has its geographical advantage unless Afghanistan continues to remain a thorn. And, if Pakistan gains more political acceptance in Eurasia, it may use the forum as a smokescreen to cover its support for anti-India activities.

Third, to an extent the SCO has been successful in containing the spread of extremism and terrorism in Central Asia, primarily because of China's constant interests and engagement with these states. The region may become the next hotbed of sectarian conflict. It is the next emerging Muslim region. The existing SCO states constitute a Muslim population of almost 100 million of Sunni/Salafi variant with affiliation to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

Importantly, Chechnya, the Ferghana Valley and Xinjiang are likely to become the arc of future instability. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) could play a vital role in observing trends in radical political Islam spreading in the Ferghana Valley and across the Amu Darya into Afghanistan and Pakistan. India therefore needs to understand the emerging trends in the region and this can only be achieved by being in the SCO. India could gain from engagement with the RATS through information on counter-terrorism efforts,

regional and international security etc. It seems RATS assists its members, sharing information during conference preparations, summit meetings, VIP visits, public meetings, sports events, etc.

Fourth, the SCO membership could give India a new way to build promising bridges with Central Asia, while maintaining its emphasis on reaching out to this region through direct bilateral channels.

Fifth, stakes are also high for securing energy and connectivity interests – to invest in oilfields also with an eye to get its way on the pipeline route. The SCO could especially give India more leeway in pursuing its energy interests in multiple fields. It could change the way for energy projects, including the TAPI which may finally see the light of day. India has invested hugely in developing the Chabahar Port that could provide it access to Central Asian countries. If India becomes a member along with Pakistan, the connectivity and energy corridor projects such as CASA, TAPI, IPI and others might finally see the light at the end.

Sixth, India could provide value addition to the SCO's growth while contributing in the Information Technology (IT) and banking sector. Conversely, India could bring to the SCO its techno-economic expertise, markets and financial commitment. India's experience in dealing with multi-cultural settings is an attraction among many sections in Central Asia. India brings decades of experience in dealing with social issues especially in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural settings that could be shared with the SCO member states which are confronted with many social and religious challenges. India's liberal-democratic values could serve as a better alternative in building civil societies, pluralistic structures, ethno-religious harmony, and rule of law, which are needed in Central Asia. Many in the region expect that India's approach will contrast the Russian and Chinese policies of maintaining the status quo against the desire for a gradual change among many sections.

Seventh, India could gain from the SCO's public information and mass media mechanisms for enhancing presence in the Eurasian space.

Eighth, India could gain access in the soft-political areas of the Eurasian region that it knows little about, such as our participation in educational, environmental protection, disaster management and rescue operations, the climate change debate, water-related issues and people-to-people contacts (through institutional means).

Ninth, participation in other non-conventional security areas such as food security measures, drug-trafficking control, information and cyber security, etc. could be advantageous for India.

Finally, India's participation in the SCO's military and counter-terror exercises could prove beneficial for our armed forces to understand and interact with other militaries, thereby instilling greater confidence at the regional level.

Clearly, joining the SCO could also help India get out of the current tight geopolitical spot – wedged between a wall of Pakistani hostility and fear of cooperating with China.

### **India's Entry Elusive**

However, India's attempt at entering SCO as a full member remained elusive for a long time. Some member states such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have been firmly supporting India's inclusion into the SCO, but China and others have been pushing for a more "process-bound" entry of new members. But the Dushanbe Summit in 2014 cleared the legal procedural hurdles for admitting new members.

Expectations however, were aroused when the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2014 had considered that improving India-China relations would be his "historic mission". Xi has articulated China's new "Asian security concept"<sup>3</sup> at the CICA Summit and believes that China would "pro-actively" seek to build a regional framework. Under Xi India figured high in China's calculus.

China's push comes in the face of its increased tensions with Vietnam and with US allies, the Philippines and Japan, over its more assertive claims to maritime territory. Another reason is China's restive Xinjiang province that has been getting more and more critical in recent years. Xi Jinping, therefore, tried to seek broader

regional cooperation to deal with the spread of terrorism. Besides, cooperation with India in Central Asia was viewed as essential from Beijing's point of view. It had also sought to build fresh bridges to prevent India's new leadership teaming up with the US "Asia Pivot" strategy.

From the SCO's point of view the invitation by Prime Minister Modi to Pakistan's Prime Minister to the swearing in ceremony in 2014 had a positive impact for removing the negative factor in Indo-Pak relations that had thus far obstructed the expansion plan.

Similarly, Russia's attempt at rebalancing its strategic interests in Asia was clear in the face of its standoff with the US and the EU on the Ukraine crisis. Strengthening of the CSTO and enlarging the SCO was emphasised in the Moscow Conference on International Security (May 23-24, 2014) organised by the Russian Defence Ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Kazakhstan has been squeezed by the recent economic and strategic closeness of Russia and China (post-Ukraine events) and wished a more diversified space to protect its energy interests. Also and importantly, after having evolved themselves as independent actors in the immediate region and at the global level, states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have been seeking expansion of contacts beyond Russia and China.

However, unlike Pakistan and Iran, India has waited for the SCO to complete its formal legal procedures for new membership. A formal application was placed in 2014 during the Dushanbe Summit by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj when all legal hurdles were removed – short of ratifying lengthy 28 page draft documents of the group.<sup>5</sup>

India hoped to become a member of SCO at its Ufa Summit on July 9-10, 2015. But a statement came from Moscow prior to the Ufa Summit that accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO was still being examined. It was clear there was a new hitch.<sup>6</sup>

Prime Minister Modi attended the Ufa Summit of the six-nation SCO, after the BRICS Summit.<sup>7</sup> From India's perspective, SCO membership would open a new opportunity to reconnect with

Eurasia after a century of disruption. Prime Minister Modi said at the Ufa summit that membership of SCO would be “a natural extension of India’s ties with member countries.”

SCO could offer India with some unique opportunities to get constructively engaged with Eurasia to address shared security concerns, especially for combating terrorism and containing threats posed by ISIS and the Taliban.

Earlier, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had attended the BRICS and SCO summits in Yekaterinburg in 2009, albeit as an observer. This time, unless India has been assured of a full membership, the Prime Minister would not have agreed to stay back after the BRICS Summit held in July 2014. Earlier, China had welcomed India into the SCO during Prime Minister Modi’s Beijing visit.

The attempts to join the SCO in 2016 once again proved elusive. The Tashkent Summit held June 23-24 had finally given a go ahead for initiating the process of India’s accession to the SCO. This was done after India agreed to sign the base document called the ‘Memorandum of Obligations’ at the Tashkent Summit. With this, the case of India’s membership is being sent to the respective parliaments of each member state for ratification.

Having signed the ‘Memorandum of Obligations’, India will now have to sign over 30 mandatory conventions and draft documents of the SCO over a period of time. No details are available as to what those additional documents actually contain. But obviously, they probably constitute obligations already undertaken so far by the member states (Russia, China and four Central Asian states) under the SCO framework. It seems those terms of reference cannot be renegotiated – which means India will have to study carefully what those obligations mean, for the implications they may entail for its interests.

The caveat here was possibly about the clause ‘good neighbourhood’ behaviour that India and Pakistan must agree to undertake before they expect full membership into the SCO. In other words, the onus is on India and Pakistan to adhere to the SCO’s expectations. It appears that SCO is demanding the equivalent of

a ‘peace treaty’ between the neighbouring countries that would eventually culminate in India (and Pakistan) acceding to the SCO.

This indicated that India’s entry into the SCO was not a done deal. Rather, the matter has been postponed and it was still going to be a long-drawn process with no concrete timeframe for its full entry. According to Rashid Alimov, SCO’s Secretary General, the process could take anywhere between six months to a year. The Russian officials on June 22 revealed that the Summit will discuss “possible accession” of India (and Pakistan) during 2017 when SCO is also planning to admit Iran as a full member. Therefore, at Tashkent it was just a step closer to membership. As of 2016 the status was still of an “Acceding Member” and not a full member.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly, the delay or rather lengthier process of India’s entry into SCO seemed linked to shifting global geopolitics of growing big power rivalries from Eurasia to the ‘Indo-Pacific’. The China-led Eurasian grouping – which is intended both as a counterweight to the US-led global order and a key link in Beijing’s new plans for connectivity – appears unsure of India’s full commitment to the SCO’s *raison d’être* and Charter.

Clearly, the insistence on paperwork appeared to be merely a pretext for China to keep the SCO as its exclusive domain, one in which the inclusion of India was not a priority – or even a requirement. Though delaying India’s entry meant doing the same for Pakistan and Iran, Beijing has other windows of opportunity to deal with Islamabad and Tehran.

The SCO still cites a number of reasons to delay expansion. Uzbekistan’s President, Islam Karimov, suggested during the Ufa summit in 2015 that the inclusion of India and Pakistan into the group would change the very character of the SCO.

In an interview to the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* in June 2016, President Putin was diplomatic. “The international environment is complicated and multifaceted, and issues are not resolved by the mere fact that countries with different approaches to and views on various international issues join the SCO creates conditions for those issues to be resolved.”<sup>9</sup>

India's SCO membership prospects were therefore closely linked to ongoing global rebalancing games and were not unrelated to the deepening of Indo-US military ties, New Delhi's position on the South China Sea and the country's bid to join the coveted NSG club.

India's desire to join the Eurasian group comes at a time when New Delhi is more decidedly aligning itself with the US's strategic vision of pivoting to the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region – now no longer a euphemism for a China containment strategy.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, Indo-US ties only deepened further since Prime Minister Modi attended the Ufa summit in 2015. Any ambiguity that may have existed so far in the Chinese mind stands removed after Modi's visit to Washington in June 2016. Given the range of military and technological cooperation agreements signed, India's bilateral ties with the US are bound to grow to unprecedented levels.<sup>11</sup>

The US decision to push for virtual 'ally' status for India and India's willingness to sign the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) may have slowed the pace of India's entry bit in the SCO; which means China still wants to wait and watch India's behaviour and its intentions about seeking membership in the Eurasian body. This also underscored China's negative approach to India's bid for membership in the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG) in 2016.

On its part, however, India can always argue that the country's growing ties with the US are not meant to target others. In fact, Pakistan's status as a 'major non-NATO ally' never came in the way of China-Pakistan military ties. Similarly, New Delhi's closer ties with Washington ought not to prevent it from boosting ties with Russia and China, for which India already has multiple avenues for engagement, such as BRICS and the EAEU.

The SCO has traditionally been welded on the Sino-Russian entente and if the Indo-US entente grows beyond the military sphere to committing themselves to promoting shared values and interests in the Asian region, this could contradict the SCO's aspiration of becoming a counterpoise to Western dominance.

Having joined the SCO, India's role in the grouping is not going to smooth due to different approaches pursued in other areas as well.

Take the case of combating international terrorism on which India's position is going to be at odds with that of other SCO members. It could face several contradictory situations. China, for example, by its own assertion stands committed to fight against the "three evils" – terrorism, separatism and religious extremism – through the SCO. However, Beijing's double-speak on terrorism is not going to be liked by India.

China cannot be taken as a reliable partner on fighting terrorism. It has used the SCO to fight only those cases of terror that fit with its own definition of terrorism. On the one hand, China described Uyghur activism in Xinjiang as an act of terror and wanted others to support its fight against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. But on the other hand, it refused to oppose terrorist groups that attack other countries. For example, Beijing has been using Pakistan and its instruments of terror to expand its own geopolitical interests.

In Central Asia, though China tended to avoid a direct face-off with Russia, it adhered to other subversive means including Islamic militancy to coerce individual Central Asian governments to come to terms with Beijing. It was quite clear that the Chinese in connivance with Pakistan and the Taliban-fomented Islamic insurgencies, created hotspots such as Batken in 1999 and 2000, which compelled Kyrgyzstan to seek assistance from China. Consequently, China responded through both military and economic aid while inducing the former to resolve difficult border problems on China's terms. The Kyrgyz government faced wide public criticism for signing a secret agreement, surrendering some large territory to China in 1999. Kyrgyzstan received substantial military aid, as well as deepened its military contacts with China since 2000.

Similarly, Uzbekistan's compulsion to join the China-led SCO came against the increasing threat posed by fundamentalist groups like IMU led by Juma Namangani and Tohir Yuldash. The IMU was supported by the Taliban and in turn by China's ally Pakistan. China, under no circumstances, is expected to use military force against countries where terrorists are bred. Nor, is the China-Pakistan nexus going to change by India joining the SCO. Instead, the SCO will

become another forum for Pakistan to mislead the Central Asians on Kashmir.

In the absence of a direct land border with Central Asia, India's ability to assert in the SCO will be rather meager. The forum has often been used to voiced rhetoric against the West which would not be liked by India. The SCO as a group – comprising communists, autocrats and semi-democrats – has little respect for human rights, ethnic groups and religions. India certainly cannot afford to confuse the Turkic nationalism such as within the Uyghur issue with that of Islamic fundamentalism.

In fact, such double-speak on terrorism may have lately prompted India to up the ante by allowing a group of Uyghur political activists to participate in a gathering in India. India's attempt at needling China came in the wake of China's move to block India's bid to get Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar and Lashkar-e-Taiba commander Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi banned by the UN.

The issue surrounding the granting of a visa to Uyghur leader Dolkun Isa in April 2016 was a clear message to Beijing that India too can play around with the definition of terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, under this conflicting interest on terror, any convergence at SCO could prove problematic. Similarly, China will expect India to be in consonance with the SCO's position on the South China Sea dispute, no matter how difficult that may be. Not doing so would surely be dubbed as an unconstructive role on India's part.

Clearly, as the SCO celebrated its 15th anniversary in 2016, it became more demanding as many non-Eurasian countries had expressed their willingness to join it. Belarus has observer status now, while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Turkey and Sri Lanka have become the SCO's dialogue partners.

From India's perspective, as the Indian officials explained, that the issue of expansion of the SCO is part of a long-drawn multilateral discussion and it is linked to India's approach of seeking a "fairly flexible multilateralism" in its "extended neighbourhood."<sup>13</sup> They believe that signing of the Memorandum of Obligations will lead

to a process of more intense engagement with the SCO members on several fronts like anti-terrorism, transport, and culture.

Therefore, the spotlight in Tashkent in 2016 was more about Prime Minister Modi's bilateral meetings with President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin and Presidents of the other four Central Asian states.

Of course, the spotlight was more on Prime Minister Modi seeking China's support for India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) which ultimately remained an elusive effort after China blocked India's entry into the body.

The Prime Minister however said that India looks forward to a fruitful engagement in the SCO. India's entry into SCO as a full member he said will provide an opportunity to have extended cooperation with member countries in areas of defence, security and counter-terrorism. He said India attaches great importance to ties with Central Asia and always seeks to expand economic and people-to-people ties with the region.<sup>14</sup>

But, does SCO membership actually hold any direct potential gains for India? As explained earlier, the SCO has been about India's increasing its political, economic and security stakes in Central Asia. This is why New Delhi keenly pursued formal entry despite critics at home challenging the wisdom of joining a China-led body as a junior member with a lesser political voice.

Entry to the SCO would create new opportunities for India to reconnect with Eurasia after a century of disruption. And it shares security concerns with the region, especially to relate to combating terrorism and containing threats posed by the IS and the Taliban.

India could certainly benefit by tapping into the SCO's existing regional anti-terrorist structure. SCO membership will also provide India an avenue to secure its energy. Proposed once by Iran, the SCO has been debating about forming an "energy club". But how the SCO will enable the fructification of Indian energy and connectivity projects, including TAPI, is a curious question. For India, dealing with tricky authoritarian leaders plus the challenge of getting the energy supplies to India has been insurmountable.

The issue has never been about the source of energy but about transporting it.

India's experience in dealing with multi-cultural settings is an attraction among sections in Central Asia and the countries are appreciative of Indian efforts towards the civilian reconstruction process in Afghanistan.

On the connectivity front, OBOR and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have certainly put India in a quandary. Rhetoric aside, a set of projects envisaged under OBOR/CPEC could transform the region north of India into a new economic hub and a zone of joint projects, which would definitely have an impact on India.

Russia and Central Asia have reconciled their own transport connectivity plans with that of OBOR to transform the region into a major hub of the transcontinental transportation network. Afghanistan too supports the CPEC. By joining the SCO, India can think more sharply on how to respond to OBOR and find ways to join both the Russian and Chinese-built transport network. In fact, India should be consulting Iran, Russia and the Caucasus states to coordinate on the various connectivity projects.

By committing investment to develop the Chabahar Port, India has indicated its seriousness to boost regional connectivity. In fact, the Chabahar announcement and the inauguration of the Salma Dam in Afghanistan also signaled India's strong commitment to the regional integration process. However, many doubt whether Chabahar is an Indian India's gift for SCO or for America. Hopefully, the Chabahar Port will not only provide India access to Central Asian, Caspian, Iranian and Western Siberian gas fields, but will also pave the way for India to tap the vast deposits of high-value rare earth minerals in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

While India had expressed its desire to cooperate with the Moscow-led EAEU in 2015, it did not quite approve of Beijing's OBOR idea. Instead, it has expressed its resentment towards China's plans for the US\$ 46 billion economic corridor through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Here lay the potential problem. Beijing had turned down India's objection in this regard, saying it is a "livelihood

project". The differences it seems will only enlarge and for India, navigating the evolving contradictions in SCO may remain less than a smooth one.

To exploit the opportunities under the SCO process, India could not have taken a position other than a cooperative one. India therefore joined the SCO in 2017 with a fresh mind and without any ambiguity.

For India the issue is quite clearly about its strategic ambivalence and lack of clarity. The SCO is more often than not used as a counterweight against the West. For India to play an ancillary role in SCO of offsetting the US would be tricky. Earlier Pakistan used to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds for the US. It seems this role is being passed on to India now.

So far, Prime Minister Modi has not only displayed pragmatism but also clarity, for surely, India realises that any attempt at matching the Russian or Chinese leverages in Eurasia would be unrealistic. India is approaching the SCO for building greater convergence with China and Russia in Eurasia.

Geostrategic relevance apart, India will have to engage with SCO pragmatically. India's foreign policy obviously is now directed at promoting trends, which lend to broader economic integration through multilateral institutions of cooperation. In this sense, membership in SCO would complement India's wider objective of promoting an Asian configuration.

Irrespective of how Indo-US relations will shape, understanding with Moscow and Beijing assumes importance for India to realize its broader geopolitical aspirations, including its quest to become a permanent member of the UN Security Council. India could use the SCO as a useful means to reboot India's relationship with Russia, which has been losing its vibrancy. India is also unable to help Russia overcome its economic isolation compared to China. As India's engagement with US grows, any prospect of resentment must be avoided. Russia is very upset and unable to digest others overtaking it as a weapons supplier to India. Many in Moscow are sulking, seeking retribution by ending the arms blockade to Pakistan.

Russia's pursuit of a divergent foreign policy is evident. Russia has not only pivoted itself towards China but also started to cozy up with Pakistan even though the interactions may be limited at present and this could be linked to Moscow's current isolation over the Ukraine standoff. President Putin has clarified that its proposed arms supply to Pakistan will not impede ties with India.<sup>15</sup> Russia considers Pakistan as an important determinant in Afghanistan and believes that engagement with Pakistan will have a positive influence in the Af-Pak region that would serve India's interests too. As stated, Moscow may be contemplating playing a role in bringing about a serious thaw between the two South Asian states in future under the SCO auspices.

Moscow's big shift of orientating its economy towards China does not portend well for India, even though it would be difficult at this stage to gauge the future direction of Russia-China relations. Beijing is certainly taking advantage of Moscow's difficulties. There could be an opportunistic aspect, but it may potentially alter the balance of power in Asia with major implications for India.<sup>16</sup>

India, Russia and China are working together in a number of multilateral initiatives such as BRICS and now SCO. India joining the China-led AIIB is another example and the bilateral economic relationship is unstoppably growing. India and Russia are committed to strengthen the strategic partnership agreements. India intends to sign a free trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to boost trade and economic ties with the region that had a GDP of \$2.2 trillion in 2015.

This is contrast to India's protracted standoffs with both China and Pakistan, which remain stalemated. India could also use the atmosphere for cooperation in SCO to turn around India's relationship with China in a big way. Clearly, in the changed environment, China is laying greater emphasis on building a regional framework with India featuring high in it. Beijing sees higher convergence of interests with India on tackling terrorism and cooperating at least in Afghanistan. Both countries also see the benefit of cooperating in the energy and mining sectors. In fact, the idea of an India-China oil consortium in Central Asia is already underway.

The grouping intends to promote the spirit of multi-polarity. Given the Chinese financial muscle, disrupting China's expanded energy plans would be difficult. The European Union and Russia have realised this. India should utilise it to mitigate some of its core concerns as well as limit China's rising regional outreach while pursuing a nuanced diplomatic approach. The rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism in India's close vicinity is equally a source of serious concern. China's concern in Xinjiang underscores Beijing's fear about the growing threat from extremism including from ISIS. Cooperation with China and Russia would be essential for assuaging this. However, India needs to be more watchful about duplicitous moves that Pakistan and China could play in the SCO. Any possibility of the US using Pakistan as its arbitrator of future change in the region should be checked.

For sure, Moscow and Beijing and even Astana possibly relish the idea of using the SCO forum to get a serious India-Pakistan thaw. But creative diplomacy by India could minimise the impact of the China-Pakistan alignment, which has tended to undercut India's direct access to Central Asia.

However, to be sure, the SCO will inherently remain a fragile regional grouping. Russia and China are important, but the positions of the Central Asian states fluctuate regularly in line with their interests, even opting for bilateralism with the US. They ably play the suitors off one against the other to extract economic benefits and reinforce political control at home. India needs to build its own leverages with these countries to be an effective member of the SCO. But more importantly, India needs more clarity on SCO so as to avoid the risk of becoming a focal point of criticism by Central Asian States, like it happens in SAARC, of course for different reasons. So long as India was not a full member, expectations from it were less. But once India is in, the countries of the region are going to compare India with China.

As explained earlier, India's imperatives are looming security concerns such as the spread of terrorism, the Afghan fallout and the growing footprint of the ISIS in Central Asia. It is fearful that the SCO

could possibly become a forum for inimical forces to drum up anti-India voices. Thus, staying outside cannot be to India's advantage. At the same time, India could benefit from SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and also learn from its counter-terror exercises. Being part of the SCO means that opportunities would also be open for India to cooperate in soft-political areas of the region that it knows little about.

Ironically, Pakistan seemed already geared up to fully operate in SCO coordination efforts. Already, Russia's confidence in Pakistan seems to have increased after the Inter-Services Intelligence selectively eliminated or handed over Chechen or Central Asian terrorists fomenting trouble in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Consequently, the acceptance of Pakistan in Eurasia as a partner has already advanced.

On countering terrorism, the SCO's key anchor, China, has been siding with Pakistan for protecting terrorists who have targeted India. It needs to be underscored that Russians and Central Asians often exaggerate terror threats as a ploy to tighten domestic control as well to gain external help and legitimacy. In this regard, the threat from ISIS is a new tool to garner global support. The West has raised eyebrows over crackdowns and the curbing of rights of even children in the name of countering the threat from ISIS. But Central Asians know what pleases Indians and make their demands accordingly. India should take Central Asian concerns about radicalisation with the proverbial pinch of salt.

On Afghanistan, these countries have sufficient mechanisms in place under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to counter the threats along the Afghanistan-CIS border. With Pakistan in, any plan to create a Northern-Alliance-type group for countering the Taliban is unlikely to fructify.

But the question is whether joining SCO could help India get out of the current tight geopolitical spot it finds itself wedged in – between a wall of Pakistani hostility and a fear of cooperating with China. To date, talking about this option has been scoffed at. It is important to see how joining SCO will help India get out of this tight spot.

Finally, the Indian intention to join the Eurasian Great Game is a good one, but it lacks the diplomatic finesse or capability to play that game. India does not have complete understanding on China leave aside Eurasia as a whole on which it lacks scholarship and depth of understanding. Much work still needs to be done.

Meanwhile, India joining the SCO largely has a symbolic meaning. As of now, there is a lack of clarity about what it means for India – whether an opportunity or a risk or even a trap. So far, public opinion had been rather mixed. Sceptics wonder whether SCO has any consequence for India in terms of any specific function and benefits. They suggest that joining a China-led club is not a good idea and India will remain the odd one out in a club of ex-Communist states.

Thus far, SCO's achievements have been rather minimal except for blowing its trumpet over how much population and territory it holds. Its declarative political aspects have been repeatedly ridiculed and criticised by the Western powers.

However, India cannot afford to be left behind in the strategic Eurasian region where only the SCO has emerged as an important geopolitical pole. Therefore, logic demanded that it was better to be in it rather than out of it.

But, importantly, India's confusion ended after Prime Minister Modi in June 2017 at the Astana Summit reposed full faith in the grouping and took the membership in a constructive spirit. The Prime Minister spoke about deepening India's association with the SCO as he also fine-tuned India's aspirations in the SCO, especially benefits in economics, connectivity and counter-terrorism cooperation, emphasizing on certain redlines – “respect territorial integrity, unite against terror”.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, the SCO could certainly become a new frontier for India. As for the potential benefits for India, the practical implications of the SCO are unlikely to be dramatic in the near term but in the longer run the group could create an environment for regional integration that would benefit India.

## **The Pakistan Factor**

On the down side, the Pakistan factor could put a spanner in India's goals in the SCO. Islamabad has been waiting in the wings to link up with Eurasia for a security, trade and connectivity push. Pakistan views its membership in the SCO as a "historic occasion" and "an important milestone."

Islamabad is expected to bring more practical agenda on the SCO table including the CPEC project in order to increase its profile in the group. In fact, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan had long crossed India's sovereignty red lines when they signed the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) with Pakistan in 1995 to the Karakoram Highway (KKH) passing through Gilgit-Baltistan as a transit corridor. Tajikistan has recently joined the QTTA and Kazakhstan showed interest in joining CPEC.

Potentially, the CPEC and QTTA will not only strain India's ties with Pakistan but also dent our ties with other SCO states. Therefore, there would be a risk for India if it were to castigate Pakistan within the SCO.

## **Combating Terrorism**

The SCO has been taking the ISIS as a more serious threat to regional security rather than the Taliban. In fact, Pakistan, China, Russia and Iran have expressed more concern about the emergence of the ISIS in their neighbourhood.

Russia and China have seemingly recognised Pakistan's role in counter-terrorism because of the years of experience it has in fighting terror. For them, Pakistan is already a factor for combating terrorism. This is one of the reasons for roping Pakistan into the group. Pakistan hopes to share its vast experience in countering violent extremism in the SCO.

So far, India's position has been that Pakistan is a source of terrorism and India's efforts have been to isolate Pakistan. Therefore, India's position may sometimes be at odds with that of others, especially China.

It is unclear as yet how India could benefit from the SCO's established institutions, but it is reasonable to predict at least some benefits in the security sphere.

India has already expressed interest in constructively addressing the shared regional security concerns, especially for combating terrorism. At the Astana Summit, the Prime Minister expressed full faith that SCO would give a new push to India's efforts in the fight against terrorism.

In fact, India could use the SCO in a beneficial way. Rather than applying bilateral pressure, the SCO could be used as a neutral forum to discuss terrorism in a broader global and regional context. India could leverage the platform to obtain Beijing's cooperation on curbing Pakistan-sponsored terrorism. A key principle of the SCO Charter is "to jointly counteract terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations", which would make it difficult for China to unduly favour Pakistan or ignore the way it deals with these.

The 'Shanghai spirit' or its consensus-based decisions often reflect and endorse the Chinese viewpoints on issues. But decisions being arrived at through consensus would also enable India to negotiate outcomes which serve its interests in securing regional peace and stability. It can serve as a platform to steer India's problematic relationships with these two neighbours.

### **China's Concerns**

Beijing has its own set of worries over the growing threat of terrorism. Many analysts say that Chinese nationals are getting exposed to a greater terror threat – and Beijing has no option but to seek cooperation from others.

Three recent events may certainly influence Chinese thinking; (a) the suicide bombing on the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek, on August 30, 2016 highlighted the expanding threat from ethnic Uyghur militant groups; (b) the video released by ISIS in March 2017 explicitly threatening China with attacks on its soil. The video purportedly showed Chinese ethnic Uyghurs fighting for ISIS

militants in Iraq. They threatened to return home and shed “rivers of blood”; (c) the abduction and murder of two Chinese citizens by ISIS in May this year in Quetta, southwest Pakistan.

These incidents – especially the ISIS video – have invoked increased concerns in China about the problems related to terrorism and extremism. There is also the growing perception of persecution by Beijing of ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang that remains tightly controlled along with increased security presence in the region.

The killing of two Chinese youth in Baluchistan has evoked massive public outcry among the Chinese, mostly through social media, vociferously calling for seeking “revenge”. Clearly, Islamophobia is also on the rise in China.

There is however little coordination between China and the global coalition fighting against terror including the ISIS. China adopted a law in 2015 allowing military deployment overseas on anti-terror missions. But the possibility of Chinese forces joining the Russian or other forces against ISIS remains unlikely.

China’s longstanding approach to terrorism is to avoid attracting too much attention and becoming a target. That is why China clubs terrorism along with extremism and separatism ostensibly to convey that it not against Islam. But in any case China’s Xinjiang experience demonstrates the perils of large-scale anti-Muslim policies. So far, the Western countries have not fully endorsed the Chinese anti-terror policies in Xinjiang.

However, the current Chinese counter-terrorism policy implemented after 9/11 and based on the concept of “War on Terror” has not proved efficient in reducing the terrorist threat in China overall. The casualties from terrorist attacks in China seem to be in fact, on the rise. More importantly, Xinjiang has become the focal point for terrorism in China after 9/11 despite repeated security crackdowns in the region. In fact, Xinjiang has seen an ideological shift from Uyghur ethno-nationalism to religious fundamentalism.

Many analysts suspect that China’s approach to terrorism may change as more Chinese nationals get exposed to a greater terror risk across the globe.

## **Afghanistan and Regional Security**

We need to note that China has been hedging its own bets by formulating a sub-regional security grouping involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. The China-Afghanistan-Pakistan foreign ministers' dialogue mechanism to get the Afghan Taliban to join the reconciliation process is worrisome for India. Afghanistan has also pledged closer cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative. President Ghani cherishes Afghanistan's friendship with China.

To what extent India can play a role to formulate a regional consensus on an Afghan peace proposal under the SCO, is an important issue. It is possible that India and China might eventually find it imperative to work collaboratively in Afghanistan.

## **Relations with Russia**

India should use the SCO setup for building better convergence with Russia. There are several projects being pursued by both countries to seek stronger convergence in the Eurasian space through trade (India-EAEU, FTA) and transport connectivity (INSTC) which are under speedy implementation. More importantly, India and Russia should take up joint projects in defence production by using the vast strategic assets in the Central Asian republics.

## **Relations with China**

The June SCO Summit in Astana emphasized the need for China and India to respect each other's core concerns. So far, despite differences, New Delhi and Beijing have come together at several multilateral forums such as BRICS.

The SCO might also provide impetus for the Indian military to interact with the PLA and shed misgivings about each other.

Moreover, India needs to see how the forum can be used for minimising the intensity of the China-Pakistan alignment that actually undercuts India's direct access to Eurasia.

While India enters the Eurasian integration path, it needs to factor in the changing political dynamics within Central Asia. Following the recent change of leadership in Tashkent, the nature

of the regional outlook is changing in favour of intra-regional cooperation. The new government in Uzbekistan, led by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, appears more open to boosting the country's relationships within and outside the region. If the trend continues, it wouldn't be always easy for China to overcome the broader set of issues that come in the way for realising its BRI vision.

Chinese expectations would be that SCO will provide a fresh impetus for China, India and Pakistan to talk about the CPEC and help reduce India's misunderstanding of the project. At the moment the SCO is fully aligned with China's vision.

### **India's Aspiration**

But mainly, India's journey in the SCO would depend mostly on how India and China would weigh ties on security and economic calculations. Of course, it will also depend on other factors, especially on the future trajectory of the Indo-US relations.

Joining the SCO will largely improve India's international influence provided India and Pakistan keep a low profile and do not act as spoilers. The Central Asian states have a lot of expectations from India. They are sensitive and also pragmatic. They would start comparing India with China in terms of performance.

The group could also instill strategic trust among member states and in the longer run could stir up new impulses for India's constructive, instead of confrontational, engagement with its two neighbours – China and Pakistan. Having joined the SCO, both India and Pakistan will have to respect the 38 parameters that the two countries have signed prior to joining the organisation.

However, in the immediate term, except for political rhetoric, member states will continue to function through bilateral and other multilateral engagements, though China could seek inclusion of bilateral contents in the SCO's ambit. If nothing else, the limited immediate benefits of joining the SCO will be more than compensated for by improved defence cooperation with the Central Asian states.

Besides, it also provides an opportunity for India to display its independent foreign policy and diversify its partnerships.

We need to note that China follows an opportunistic but a non-confrontational approach in the SCO. Over the years, China has rather successfully used the platform to create a favourable atmosphere for itself. Compared to 15 or 20 years ago, China's relations with Central Asian states have phenomenally transformed.

It has persistently talked about deepening strategic cooperation and mutual trust. The consensus-based decisions in the SCO or "Shanghai spirit" tend to serve China's interests because of the strong bilateral economic ties it has maintained with other member states. Moreover, China's approach has been to harmonise its policies with Russia's regional agenda.

### **Modi's 'Informal' Talks with Putin and Xi**

The SCO's Qingdao Summit held on June 9-10 became the most watched diplomatic events of 2018. Even prior to the summit, the Chinese hosted over 120 activities involving SCO participants in a wide array of fields ranging from military to art and culture.

The summit took place in the midst of extraordinary global disapproval of American belligerence, sanctions and protectionist measures<sup>18</sup> under the Donald Trump administration, which threaten to cast a shadow over the global economy.

The summit was also held against the backdrop of the strategic formulation of the 'Quad' and the 'Indo-Pacific' idea by the US, Japan, India and Australia. It came amidst Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin prolonging their leadership mandates. It was also important in the light of Xi's rising global diplomacy, the growing Sino-Russian proximity and Modi's recent 'informal' meetings with China<sup>19</sup> and Russia.<sup>20</sup> It took place in the context of the on-again-off-again Trump-Kim summit talks.<sup>21</sup>

What gave the Qingdao meeting additional punch is the geopolitical shift underway in Asia, compounded by the unpredictability of the US policy under Trump.

The recent meetings of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe with Chinese and South Korean leaders, besides the meeting between

Prime Minister Modi's and President Xi may have come as a result of their declining faith in the US as a reliable strategic ally.

Tokyo and Beijing upgraded their communication to better manage not just their economic issues but also frequent face-offs in contested waters.

### **The Putin Factor**

The Putin-Modi meeting at Sochi<sup>22</sup> was clearly an effort to reconcile their positions ahead of the SCO's summit at Qingdao. Putin, who was rarely seen getting excited about ties with India, may have cautioned Modi to be wary of falling into a geopolitical trap that the US has laid for it in the hope of balancing China.

Second, Putin quite clearly would have cautioned Modi against walking a lonesome path in the SCO and would have advised New Delhi to consult Moscow closely to avoid the risk of making wrong strategic judgments about the wider region. Russian experts often cite India staying out of the Chinese-led belt and road initiative (BRI) as one such example.

Though Sino-Russian relations are currently at a comfortable level, Russia does have differences on many geopolitical issues with China. This was perhaps one of the reasons why Moscow wants India to embrace closer ties with Beijing and line up behind BRI. New Delhi also has an interest in balancing China by deepening its understanding with Moscow, especially when China is going to bolster Pakistan's interest further through the SCO route.

### **Modi's Priority**

For the moment, Modi appears to be prioritising an improvement of India-China relations. In fact, the SCO summit perhaps showed the results of Modi's informal meeting with Putin at Sochi and the extent to which Modi and Xi managed to reset regional alignments at Wuhan.

No doubt, Xi and Modi deserve credit for the success of the Wuhan summit. If indeed a foundational understanding has been reached, it is now time to resolve the prickly bilateral issues in a gradual manner.

Bilateral ties are certainly back on track after the Doklam stand-off in 2017. At Wuhan, Xi and Modi agreed to “handle all differences through peaceful means”. The challenge is to translate the confidence built there into a predictable if not durable atmosphere of peace along the Himalayan borderland. Both leaders have issued “strategic guidance” to their respective militaries to lower tensions on the frontier.

Yet, nothing can be ruled out. Tensions will rise if both sides continue aggressive patrolling along the borders while also adding infrastructure: new bunkers, helipads, airports, roads and huts.

However, there is now growing awareness on both sides – in view of the increased level of intertwined interests and higher level of interdependence in each other’s welfare – that the perpetuation of hostile sentiments does not serve their national interests. Past experiences also suggest that recourse to coercive measures by either side have failed to yield benefits.

## **Deliverables**

A key deliverable of the Wuhan and Qingdao summits from New Delhi’s point of view would be Beijing finally giving a go-ahead to India’s entry into the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) over time.

Modi avoided flagging the much-touted cross-border terrorism issue at the SCO 2018 summit as fervently as before. In fact, his low-pitch emphasis on terrorism at the Shangri-La Dialogue<sup>23</sup> held in the run-up to the Qingdao summit was a pointer to this.

However, whether China will stop ignoring Pakistan-sponsored terrorism against India and stop preventing the addition of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) Chief Masood Azhar’s name on the UN list remains an issue. But in the context of the reset in ties, Beijing might feel the need to review its decision on Azhar. Russia had supported India’s stand on JeM and LeT in the BRICS declaration at Xiamen in 2017.

A change of heart was nonetheless visible. Recently, Beijing refused to bail out Pakistan being put on the watch list<sup>24</sup> of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog on

terror financing. India, in turn, supported China's bid for the vice-presidency of the FATF. New Delhi also reciprocated by curtailing the activities of the Dalai Lama.

At Qingdao, the SCO adopted a 'Cooperative Security Treaty' to evolve a sustainable regional security concept including a three-year (2019-2021) action plan to counter the "three evils" – of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, and setting up a cooperative network of law-enforcement agencies.

The Chinese minister of public security, Zhao Kezhi visited New Delhi in October 2018 to explore new ways to deepen engagement in security and counter-terrorism. In a first, India and China signed a first-ever agreement on security cooperation to strengthen and consolidate assistance in counter-terrorism, organised crimes, drug control, human trafficking and exchange of information, marking a new beginning between the two countries.<sup>25</sup>

The Deputy National Security Adviser Rajinder Khanna attended a meeting at Beijing and met President Xi and Zhao Kezhi in May 2018.

On the positive side, Beijing has reopened access to Kailash-Mansarovar<sup>26</sup> for Indian pilgrims and also resumed sharing of hydrological data of Brahmaputra and Sutlej water flow.

In fact, these reciprocal moves provide some interesting indicators. First, it goes to show that China enjoys stronger leverages than the US in controlling the terror machine in Pakistan – a fact admitted even by US National Security Advisor John Bolton. New Delhi can't ignore this fact while dealing with Beijing on security.

Quite clearly, Modi's back-to-back "informal" diplomacy with Putin and Xi wasn't just for seeking a common ground at the trio of nations but also to roll out a fresh opening on the Indo-Pak front.

These apart, China has agreed to open up greater market access to Indian products and possibly resolve the issue of removing obstacles to Indian pharmaceutical exports. On a positive note, China, from May 1, seems to have removed import duties<sup>27</sup> on as many as twenty-eight Indian drugs, including all cancer drugs.

China seems to have also agreed to import more than one million tonnes of sugar worth \$500 million from India.

Clearly, after the Wuhan summit, both sides seem to be working on a clear roadmap to narrow down the huge trade imbalance. India's trade deficit with China stood at \$1 billion in 2016-17. To bridge the financial impact of the deficit, China has also committed to make more investments in India.

More importantly, amid rising tensions with the US, any Chinese reduction in import tariffs on cars can open up the financial sector and would ultimately benefit India, especially widening the Indian production basket of value-added products in the Chinese market.

The proposed India-China joint project in Afghanistan that emerged from the Modi-Xi meeting at Wuhan could be implemented under the SCO's auspices. Obviously, this wouldn't be easy, especially since Moscow – like Beijing – has been articulating the position that Pakistan is also a “victim of terrorism”.

Fostering “people-to-people exchanges” is yet another new mantra for bolstering cooperation at the SCO. A new high-level mechanism on people-to-people exchanges is being announced with foreign ministers Sushma Swaraj and Wang Yi as its co-chairs.

The idea of an India-China high-level mechanism on the people-to-people front that had emerged from the Wuhan meeting will create multiple opportunities for the two nations to reverse the centuries-long stagnation in learning from each other.

## **The Way Forward**

India's improved ties with China could hardly be construed as a sign of an evolving a policy harmonisation process. However, the process of building mutual trust between the two nations has started since India joined the SCO. On its part, China will have to eventually shed its misgiving and get used to the growing US-India defence ties so long as they remain bilateral in nature without overtly being taken “with an eye on China”. The same stands true for India's defence ties with Vietnam. India too will have to get used to the new order with China as a major player.

Qingdao also called out to address global governance, the trade system, development strategies and connectivity (the Belt and Road Initiative).

Already, China's flagship project BRI is deeply embedded in the SCO's cooperation framework, which is nothing but a consensus-building mechanism for Beijing to influence the neighbouring states that are pursuing infrastructure projects. Qingdao, the venue of the summit, itself the symbolic pivot to BRI – is connected to Europe through a railway network and linked to Asia through the Maritime Silk Road.

China has achieved another breakthrough by successfully conducting the trial operation of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan road transport alignment<sup>28</sup> that would change the face of Eurasia.

BRI is backed by financial connectivity through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Silk Road Fund, SCO Interbank Consortium and the China-Eurasian Economic Cooperation Fund. With the Panda bonds and RMB financing to the companies, a plan seems afoot to set up an SCO development bank to generate and channel new funding.

According to the latest figures<sup>29</sup> released by China's Ministry of Commerce ahead of the Qingdao summit, China's trade with SCO countries stood at \$217.6 billion – \$150 billion worth of exports and \$67.3 billion worth of imports – last year.

China's cumulative investment in energy, industrial and other projects in the SCO member states stood at \$84 billion at the end of March.

At some stage, New Delhi too will have to find a way to reconcile with China's BRI – the main elephant in the room – without compromising on its core interest. The issue is how to get infrastructure surplus capacity in China to solve the infrastructure deficit in India, especially to boost its high-speed rail.

Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) partners and China's BRI vision is already fully aligned. China signed an FTA with the EAEU on May 17, which will speed up the Russia-China and Central Asia-China trade corridors.

Only Vietnam so far has succeeded in signing an FTA with the EAEU (which has a GDP of over \$4 trillion) while Iran, Indonesia and Singapore are scheduled to do the same. India's case for an FTA with the EAEU is still pending. Is it contingent on India joining the BRI first?

The Wuhan meet may have infused a lot of strategic confidence for India to operate at various levels. Qingdao has shown both India and China are prepared to take the Wuhan process forward, and given an impetus to improving China-India ties.

## Risks Galore

However, there is no guarantee that forces both inside and outside India will not sabotage closer India-China ties from gathering momentum. Modi's first attempt to "reset" ties with China in 2014 was probably derailed by ill-informed advisors at the cost of wasting enormous time and resources.

Modi's displeasure at playing the Dalai Lama card was known, but his zealous aides left no stone unturned to use the Tibetan Lama for irritating China, albeit in the name of promoting Buddhist diplomacy. They may have squandered enormous amounts of money in the garb of culture only to end up with an advisory note issued by the cabinet secretary for the officials to stay off from the Dalai Lama and other exiled Tibetan leaders.

There is no guarantee his latest efforts may not be sabotaged, but after four years, Modi may have hopefully gained more experience and wisdom to take his own call.

For now, the loud noises in the country have suddenly become quiet after Modi and Xi agreed to enhance military communications and provide "strategic directions" to de-escalate border frictions.

But a hawkish and chest-thumping media continues to look for negative reportage to play mischief. For example, a report of Chinese mining operations across the border from Arunachal Pradesh<sup>30</sup> was instantly flashed widely in the media to create friction along the disputed Himalayas. Similarly, a top US official has said that China has quietly resumed its activities in the Doklam area and

neither Bhutan nor India has sought to dissuade it, while comparing Beijing's actions in the Himalayan region with its manoeuvres in the disputed South China Sea.<sup>31</sup>

### **Complexities at the SCO**

Surely, for India to fly with the flock of 'wild geese' in the Eurasian sky will not be easy. First, multiple conflicting interests would intersect at the SCO, ranging from global to bilateral issues.

Second, the grouping's environment is dominated by former communists, dictators and autocrats, who tend to take an anti-American position and prefer to align themselves either with Russian or Chinese viewpoints on critical regional and global issues. India's preference is to either take the US policy line or remain ambiguous in most cases, thus turning into an outlier whose positions make a united Eurasian story rather difficult and incomplete. One can already hear some pessimistic rumbling about India playing a "disruptive" role, thus holding back the prospects of both the SCO and BRICS.

In contrast, and as the SCO moves ahead, Pakistan is likely to put forward many positive regional cooperation agendas on the table such as CASA-1000, TAPI, CPEC and the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) among others. Islamabad is already displaying, at least outwardly, a cooperative spirit, standing up for a united position along with Russia, China and others on issues like conflict in Afghanistan, terrorism, connectivity, etc.

The work on the CASA-1000 power transmission project to supply 1,300 MW of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan is expected to start soon.<sup>32</sup> This will have an impact on Afghanistan and on its development.

Among others, CPEC could become a critical variable for Pakistan to provide the shortest sea route to the Central Asian states. Almost all of them have shown an interest in joining the CPEC.

In comparison, India's Chabahar project, given the many hurdles, cannot provide sufficient impetus for SCO members.

In any case, India's interests in SCO would recurrently clash with either those of Pakistan or China. Others will take full advantage and interpret India's lack of interest as an obstructionist stance, which in turn could increase sympathy for Pakistan by default.

New Delhi would do well to avoid a zero-sum game with China in Eurasia, because others would then advocate admitting more South Asian states such as Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal into the SCO. Iran, Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia are observer states, while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey are already SCO's dialogue partners.

In a way, for India, navigating regional diplomacy in the SCO would prove to be far more complex and challenging than in any multilateral forum so far. New Delhi will have to decide whether it will embrace the spirit of Asian-centric regional cooperation or would it continue to vacillate.

China upsets the core Indian mindset, especially of the West-oriented Indian elite, and considering the high level of Sinophobia fed to the people, any attempt at making a shift would not be easy. At the same time, China is not a country with which India has any intrinsic disagreements.

Looking ahead, and to undertake a fundamental shift in policy, New Delhi's approach must be nuanced and calibrated with the purpose of displaying a willingness to move ahead cooperatively.

Constant vigilance is certainly required, but overall transactions with China need to be adequately de-securitised. India also needs to ensure that its policies towards China are steered less by the intelligence community and more by those having comprehensive knowledge of dealing constructively with China.

China and India both have a shared stake in bringing the ancient trade routes back to the Eurasian continent after three centuries of "Euro-Atlantic domination".

Similarly, both India and China are keen to revive what was once the world's richest trading network – the Indian Ocean economy – stretching from China to the West Asia with India in between. Restoring these old trade routes across Eurasia and the

Indian Ocean after centuries of stagnation makes sense to both India and China. India is a geographical lynchpin for China's BRI. In turn, the initiative affords India a historic opportunity to play a pivotal role in the region.

### **SCO: A Pivot for India-Pakistan Entente?**

In the aftermath of the SCO's summit at Qingdao held on June 9, 2018, China and Russia took regional diplomacy and security to a higher level. China already appeared more excited over India's and Pakistan's entry, with President Xi saying this has increased the SCO's "potential for cooperation", especially terror fighting capability.

The coordinated entry of India and Pakistan into a regional security body is being marketed as the SCO's key achievement – something even Washington has been unable to accomplish so far. The addition of another 1.5 billion people provides fresh excitement, for the SCO will now represent the voice of three billion people – that's half the world's population.

No explicit signs are in the offing, but Putin and Xi have showed sufficient indication of offering to play an informal mediatory role between the two South Asian neighbours. Such a scenario looks premature at the moment but Russia and China know that the high-level and broad-based diplomatic and security interactions which take place at different levels under the SCO framework could bring about a positive change in the regional climate. The Chinese believe that the SCO can be an ideal platform to turn the decades-old hostility between India and Pakistan into friendship.<sup>33</sup>

Russia's shift of policy towards Pakistan has been a nuanced one, with Moscow playing a balancing game without sacrificing its ties with its traditional partner India.

Weapon sales aren't the main consideration for Russia's improved ties with Islamabad, but they do serve Moscow's interest to work on the widening US-Pak mistrust – besides filling up the strategic space the US is vacating in a region that borders Central Asia. Given the continuing standoff with the West, a closer tie-up with Islamabad

adds to Russia's foreign policy options. Also, Russia seems unwilling to leave Pakistan entirely to China and has been making efforts to extend its own influence over Islamabad.

Today, both Beijing and Moscow are visited frequently by the Pakistani civilian and military leadership, including by national security advisor Nasser Khan Janjua, army chief General Qamar Bajwa, foreign minister Khwaja Muhammad Asif and others.

Moscow hosted the military drills of the SCO Peace Mission 2018 in the Urals where troops from India and Pakistan have participated. Quite possibly, Moscow may not have the inclination to use Islamabad against India, the way China tends to do.

Though the SCO's charter prohibits the raising of bilateral issues, Moscow and Beijing seem eager to make the organisation a pivot for closer India-Pakistan entente.<sup>34</sup> In fact, Beijing hosted the conference of SCO's Security Council secretaries last month where President Xi received top Indian and Pakistani security officials.<sup>35</sup>

On May 25, Pakistan hosted the SCO-RATS Dialogue of legal experts in Islamabad to discuss ways and means to tackle terror.<sup>36</sup> This proved to be the first litmus test for Xi's diplomacy as it meant getting officials from India and Pakistan in the same room to discuss terrorism.

For New Delhi, the "consultation in Islamabad was part of its commitment to fight terrorism"<sup>37</sup> but Islamabad saw the legal experts meeting as a prime opportunity to portray itself as a victim, and not the fount, of terrorism. The Pakistanis spoke the about sacrifices they had made – \$120 billion plus the lives of thousands of citizens and security personnel – in fighting against terror. They pleaded against identifying terrorism with any religion or country. Not just that, Pakistan offered to share its vast experiences of winning terror battles with fellow SCO states.

The group, in fact, does provide a rare opportunity for the militaries of member states to engage in joint military drills where they coordinate on operational details and share intelligence.

At the Astana summit in 2017 when India and Pakistan were formally inducted as members, the SCO adopted an "anti-extremism treaty"<sup>38</sup> document which awaits approval. The aim is to draw

up measures to prevent youth from turning to extremism, deepen exchanges, holding joint exercises, and foster military culture, education and the training of security agencies.

A call to pledge strict adherence to the SCO charter<sup>39</sup> on “Long-Term Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation” would aim to bind the two new members – India and Pakistan – to the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ through a five-year action plan that runs till 2022. Both South Asian countries will commit to “strictly follow” the spirit of “good-neighbourliness” prescribed in Article 1 of the SCO’s charter.

### **CPEC’s Long Shadow**

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) still remains the elephant in the room, but Beijing has recently refrained from making any direct comment on Pakistan’s May 2018 decision to approve the Gilgit-Baltistan Order 2018<sup>40</sup> – seen as a step in the direction of incorporating the region as the country’s fifth province. The Chinese official position is that the Kashmir dispute should be resolved through “dialogue and consultation” and that CPEC will not affect China’s stand on the Kashmir issue.

So far, India has stood by its position that “talks and terrorism can’t go together”. Yet if recent developments are anything to go by, terrorism and ‘consultations’ seem possible if not through bilateral parleys then through multilateral means via the SCO calendar of meetings.

Quite clearly, Prime Minister Modi’s back-to-back “informal” summit diplomacy with President Putin and President Xi at Wuhan and Sochi was not only aimed at finding a common ground at the trilateral level but also at looking for ways to roll out a fresh engagement process between India and Pakistan.

Fifty years ago, Soviet mediation did produce an agreement between India and Pakistan at Tashkent. However, the resulting peace under the famous Tashkent Declaration in 1965 did not last long. Today, Russia and others still contemplate SCO making a pivoting point to beget a gradual thawing of Indo-Pak tension. In fact, the recent reciprocal moves made by all sides provide some interesting indicators.

The SCO does facilitate large-scale diplomatic and security interactions at different levels. It also, provides a rare opportunity for the militaries of member states to engage in joint military drills where they coordinate operational details and share intelligence. However, there is little prospect of the SCO breaking the Sino-Pak strategic nexus. As long as New Delhi and Islamabad do not resume their dialogue, Pakistan is likely to carry its anti-India rhetoric to the platform while China will continue to use Pakistan to blunt India's influence in Eurasia, should it join the club.

To be sure, the SCO will inherently remain a fragile regional group. Russia and China are important, but the positions of the Central Asian states fluctuate regularly in line with their interests. India needs to build its own leverages with these countries to be an effective member of the SCO. But more importantly, India will do well if it is able to avoid becoming a focal point of criticism.

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## 19. Widening Strategic Footprints Under the SCO Framework

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When the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was formed in St. Petersburg on June 15, 2000, it had adopted two fundamental documents, the Declaration and Convention on combating the so-called “Three-evils” of Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. This led to the formation of Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) through a special agreement with the objective of enhancing coordination among special services of SCO member states to fight terrorism.

The “Shanghai Spirit” was coined as the guiding principle of the defence cooperation framework that focuses on building mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respecting for diverse civilizations, seeking common development, deepening pragmatic cooperation, and contributing to maintaining regional peace and stability.

### **Annual Defence Ministerial Level Meet**

The SCO holds regular Defence Ministerial level meetings with the participation of SCO’s Secretary-General and Director, Executive Committee of RATS that meets annually to review pressing issues related to the international and regional security environment (read threats and challenges) as well as coordinate action plans. The Defence Ministers issue Joint Communiqués and other documents following the meeting. The last annual Defence Ministerial meeting was held at Beijing on April 24, 2018.

## Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)

The SCO's common security threats are conceptualised in the form of fighting against the "Three-evils". Article 6 of RATS elucidates the key objectives and functions to act on the proposals and recommendations of relevant SCO bodies and at the request of the parties to deal with the three evils.

The RATS' charter includes sharing of intelligence and compiling a list of extremist groups, actors and individuals that pose a threat to the region.

Its main tasks and duties include:

- Maintaining working relations with competent institutions of the member states and international organisations;
- Sharing of intelligence inputs;
- Assist in preparation of counter-terrorism exercises at the request of concerned member states and preparation and conduct of search operations;
- Joint drafting of international legal documents;
- Gathering and analysis of information, compiling list of extremist groups, actors, individuals for RATS data bank;
- Jointly responding to global challenges and threats;
- Holding of conferences and workshops and sharing of experiences in the field.

The RATS' achievements so far are considerable in terms of gathering information on terror networks, spread of ideology and propaganda, cross-border organised crime, and terrorist financing and money laundering. It has a defence cooperation mechanism to ensure cross-border crimes.

It regularly takes part in the meetings of the Eurasian Group on Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism (EAG) and other agencies working in the field.

Cyber Security is a key institutional mechanism in RATS that interacts with competent authorities of the member states.

It holds meetings of technical experts to create a Protected Information and Telecommunications Security System for SCO States.

It conducts online counter-terrorism exercises such as the “Xiamen-2015” joint-command-post exercises on countering the use of the internet by terror groups.

RATS has seemingly achieved tangible results: it has curbed over “500 terrorist crimes, eliminated over 440 training bases; caught 1050 members of international terrorist organisations, seized 654 improvised explosive devices, more than 5,000 firearms and 46 tons of explosives.”<sup>1</sup>

The SCO-RATS has a list of terrorist outfits that are banned in the SCO space (see the list at Annexure 6).

To strengthen international cooperation RATS has signed protocols and MoUs with the CIS Counter-Terrorist Centre and with the CSTO. These ensure large-scale security cooperation arrangements in the common Eurasian space.

### **New Anti-Terror Draft Strategy**

The SCO adopted a draft convention on a single consolidated legal framework on terrorism, terrorist acts and terrorist organisations on March 31, 2017.<sup>2</sup> The earlier draft included the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism (2001) and the Convention Against Terrorism (2009) that was primarily aimed at combating terror and drug-trafficking in Central Asia.

The Astana Declaration of the Heads of State of the SCO (2017) said that the “member states will continue to cooperate in order to counteract the activities of individuals and legal entities related to the recruitment, training and utilisation of terrorists, public calls for terrorist activities or the justification of acts of terrorism, and financing terrorist activities.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Annual “Peace Mission”**

The SCO’s military cooperation includes regular conduct of its Annual “Peace Mission” or “anti-terrorist” exercises. The drills focus on the anti-terror command coordination operations and combat readiness. The last such drill was held in Kyrgyzstan in September 2016, wherein about 2,000 troops were involved. The

SCO Peace Mission 2018 was held in Chebarkul, Russia in August 2018, which was aimed at enhancing cooperation between member states to deal with growing threat of terrorism and extremism.<sup>4</sup> Both India and Pakistan took part in a joint military exercise for the first time.

The planning and coordination of these joint exercises takes place within the framework of the SCO's annual defence ministerial meetings.

During the June 2017 defence ministerial meeting a Protocol of Intent was signed for studying and preserving the historical and cultural heritage. The meeting also approved the SCO Defence Ministries' Cooperation Plan for 2018-2019. The meeting expressed the hope that joining of new member in military cooperation would significantly boost mutual trust among member states.

The SCO Defence Ministries' award For Promoting Friendship and Cooperation has been conferred on people who contribute to strengthening better cooperation between the organisation's defence ministries.

Since 2014, SCO has been holding military music festival the "Trumpet of Peace" with military bands participating from member states. Russian has been the common operating language for these exercises, but in recent years Chinese language has been added to improve interoperability. It remains to be seen whether English will be added to it with the entry of India and Pakistan. There has been much resistance against introducing English as one of the official languages of the SCO.

## **Geopolitical Issues**

The defence ministers of member countries tend to highlight their respective security and strategic concerns and try to garner maximum support from the SCO group.

So far, the SCO meetings have generally discussed various issues of global and regional interest including the role of UN Security Council. Its position has been among other things – UNSC reform should be brought through the broadest possible consultations on a

“package solution”, to strengthen the NPT’s efficiency by all means, to guarantee Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia, to advocate advancing of SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group in restoring peace in of Afghanistan, to resolve the situation in Syria by diplomatic methods and under the UN-sponsored Geneva process, for restoring peace in Ukraine on the basis of completely and unconditionally honouring the Minsk agreement on the Ukrainian crisis of February 12, 2015 by all the parties, to implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian Nuclear Programme between Iran and the P5+1.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Russian Position**

Russian defence ministers normally raise issues concerning the security situation in Syria and would seek the SCO’s support in joining Russia in its humanitarian operation in the Syrian and other conflict zones. In 2016, Russia’s called upon partner countries including China, India, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and others for their contribution in *stabilizing* the humanitarian situation in Syria. However, the SCO rejected Russia’s proposal and instead supported a resolution in favour of using diplomatic means to resolve the conflict. The SCO defence ministers however endorsed Russia’s successful air operations targeted against the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra terrorist groups in Syria.<sup>6</sup>

Kazakhstan however plays a crucial role in steering the Syrian crisis peace process while hosting international meetings as part of the Astana Process, which is held in addition to the UN-sponsored Geneva negotiations.

### **The Chinese Approach**

China generally uses the SCO platform to reinforce and garner support for its position on the South China Sea (SCS) – favouring settling disputes with relevant parties through direct negotiation and friendly consultation on the basis of respect towards the historical facts and international law. China opposes the internationalisation of SCS and external intervention.

China has been successfully mobilising support for its “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) connectivity plan under the SCO. In fact, the SCO was the key motivator behind China’s BRI concept and Beijing has now pledged additional financial support to BRI in Eurasia. As per the Astana declaration, the SCO remains fully aligned with China’s vision of connectivity.

### **The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group**

The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was formed by the SCO in 2009 with the aim to collectively work for combating terrorism, illicit drug trafficking and organised crime flowing from Afghanistan. However, the Group has not been active until 2018 when Russia and China spoke of reviving the SCO Contact Group on Afghanistan, suspended in 2009.

In 2017, Xi had urged that the SCO should play a “bigger role in Afghanistan’s peace and reconciliation process”.<sup>7</sup> This should be viewed in the context of China protecting its BRI and CPEC projects passing through the vicinity of Afghanistan.

Russia’s policy towards Afghanistan has changed in recent years. It now sees the presence of the ISIS as a destabilising factor in Central Asia and the southern regions of Russia. President Putin has lately talked about the need to strengthen coordination among the Special Forces of the SCO to jointly combat threats emanating from Afghanistan.

The SCO’s interest in Afghanistan acquires added relevance, given the acuteness of the security situation and the vacuum created there after the withdrawal of the NATO forces.

Russia, China and Pakistan believe that peace and reconciliation was the fundamental solution to the Afghan issue, which could not be solved by violent means. They believe that the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG) should be revived to create an enabling environment for peace talks and for the Taliban to join the peace process.

Therefore, efforts are on to revive the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group as early as possible to play a constructive role in moving forward on the Afghan reconciliation process.

## **Situation in Central Asia**

The Central Asian states face several security challenges that have led to their adoption of a multi-vector foreign policy ostensibly to maintain good relations with all its neighbours. Even though Central Asia's defence policies (barring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) remained Russia-oriented – owing their military's origin to the Soviet legacy, they have developed their own armed forces and military doctrines to protect their security interests. Despite closeness with the Russian Armed Forces, the Kazakh military has been modernising its capabilities. So is the case with Uzbekistan.

Since 1994 the militaries of Central Asia have developed a Partnership for Peace programme with NATO. The countries have sought membership of a range of international organisations and institutions that they believe would enhance their foreign and security policy objectives.

In the post-9/11 years, US military engagement with all the Central Asian countries had considerably increased, particularly through high-level visits, military education in US, assistance in peacekeeping and advice on professionalising the armed forces. Other European countries too have been active, particularly with the provision of equipment through joint ventures such as the helicopter project with Eurocopter.

## **China's Security Engagement in Central Asia**

China had initially started engaging the Central Asian states in border management issues but Beijing had gradually moved on to push its economic ambitions – a process that has already outpaced Russia's traditional dominance in the region. In fact, China used the SCO to dilute Russian opposition for its slow penetration into the region. Today, Chinese interests in Central Asia have become more entrenched.

As China's economic activity grows in the region, it is subtly seeking influence in the regional defence and security areas under the aegis of the SCO. China has been cooperating closely with the Central Asian states as part of its efforts to push the BRI for

developing highways, railways and pipelines across the region, to reach Europe. Clearly, economic cooperation is leading to closer defence and security cooperation between China and Kazakhstan.

Russia still remains the main security guarantor, but Beijing has been forging its own security cooperation with Central Asian states including on counter-terrorism. China has taken steps to improve its bilateral military cooperation with the Central Asian states. These steps are pursued under the aegis of enhancing closer cooperation in the fields of education, training and military technical cooperation in the Chinese military academies.

However, cooperation in the military technical area has so far been limited. This is because Central Asian defence and military equipment are of Russian origin. There is obviously a lesser degree of interest among Central Asian military officers to learn Chinese. Therefore, despite high level signals sent by senior officials on both sides about closer engagement, actual bilateral military cooperation seems to take place at a low level, confined to low-level participation in tactical training and the exchange of military bands.

China's primary military interest in Central Asia is to forestall any threat posed by Uyghur separatist activities – a reason why the Chinese have been trying to develop a common security interest with Border States like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China is always motivated to offer financial assistance to the defence ministries/departments of Central Asian states, the idea being to keep the armed forces in these states in good humour.

Of course, the countries concerned are mindful of the threat posed by extremism but the level of border management appears undeveloped, and the reasons for this are complex. The Central Asia-China borderland is also the scene of land ownership disputes, smuggling and trading of illegal goods.

There are, of course, routine contacts being made by Central Asian states with China, but it is always under the observance of Russia. In a way, the Russia factor continues to limit Central Asia from completely embracing the Chinese doctrine.

At the same time, China is making all efforts to deepen defence cooperation with the Central Asian states, including the sale of ammunition by China to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

Beijing has been hedging its own bets in Afghanistan by formulating a sub-regional security grouping involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan. China's initiative to form a Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) in August 2016 to counter terrorism with the involvement of China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan demonstrated its intension to assert own security agenda in the region, albeit in the garb of protecting its interests.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, the prospect for China in the long run is unlikely to be a favourable one. The Central Asians still privately consider China as a threat. Currently, China is able to take every opportunity to exploit the rift between the West and Russia as well as benefit from Russia's economic fall. The sanctions and fall in oil prices actually helped rotate the Russian economy towards China. The BRI is going to further weaken Russia's strategic hold in the region.

However, notwithstanding all the rhetoric of Sino-Russian bonhomie, Moscow seems far from happy about losing its pre-eminence in Central Asia. For now, Russia, due to its recent economic woes is unable to make large-scale commitments, but Russians privately resent the Chinese exploiting their economic Achilles' heel and the outright tendency of Chinese companies to steal projects from them.

Even though, Russia and China tend to invoke the façade of their "mutual understanding" for the sake of limiting US presence in Eurasia, the undercurrents of their rivalry is glaring even in the security domain.

When it comes to security there is obviously increasing intent to share intelligence under RATS, especially after the departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Given the nature of new threats, RATS is focusing on the movements of fighters from the SCO States to Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. At the same time, it is hard to imagine how all sides would share high-value information

because of the closed nature of the various intelligence services and the mutual suspicion that generally exists between China and its former Soviet neighbours.

Against all these, Moscow should try to protect its interests by encouraging more countries in Central Asia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In fact, some of the EAEU's measures to limit the flow of Chinese goods by imposing import restrictions into Central Asian markets may have badly hurt Chinese trade in recent years. And here, in spite of the symbiotic synergy formalised between OBOR and EAEU in 2015, President Putin is fervently seen enlarging the scope of EAEU to bring over 50 European, Asian and Latin American states under its ambit. Putin has also talked about building a "Greater Eurasia" partnership through the integration of the EAEU, OBOR, the SCO, and ASEAN.

The SCO charter demands avoidance of an active military conflict, to work towards stabilising the volatile border regions, while building military trust for maintaining peace and stability. It demands strict adherence to maintain "Long-term Good-neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, work for the shared goal, and conduct friendly cooperation among member states."

### **India's Defence Cooperation Agenda in the SCO**

India's defence and security cooperation with Russia and the Central Asian states has been continuing since the days of the Soviet Union. Strengthening of cooperation with the region became even more imperative immediately after the Soviet collapse when the security situation in Afghanistan went into a state of flux.

In the changed scenario, the Central Asian states and India shared the goals of security and stability i.e., curtailment of drug trafficking and terrorism in the region. India has been cooperating both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. In fact, India's cooperation with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan goes back to the days of India's support to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. In 2001, India had set up a small field hospital at Farkhor in Tajikistan, located near the Afghan border, ostensibly to treat the Northern Alliance fighters fighting

against the Taliban. In the post-9/11 situation, the need for that facility became unimportant.

However, India made a bold strategic move to be militarily present in the region by undertaking the renovation work of the Ayni air base in Tajikistan in 2002. This was a part of bilateral initiative between India and Tajikistan but India's first-ever initiative to take up a military project outside its soil had added a new wrinkle to the geopolitical struggle unfolding in Central Asia then. The Ayni air base project was viewed as a tangible sign of India's determination to play a role in Central Asian security. It was also viewed as part of India's grand strategic thinking to be present at a vantage location to monitor conflict-torn Afghanistan and hostile activities by Pakistan vis-à-vis India, especially after the Kargil conflict.

Today, the scale of India's defence cooperation with the Central Asian states has expanded to cover many areas ranging from military-to-military cooperation to procurement of defence spares.

### **Existing Mechanisms**

All the SCO member states (including India) are in fact already involved in defence cooperation and military exercises among themselves in one way or another through various bilateral and multilateral formats.

#### ***Russia***

Bilateral defence remains an important pillar of the India-Russia strategic partnership – currently guided under the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-MTC), set up in 2000. India and Russia have a clear roadmap to further boost bilateral defence cooperation, which ranges from joint development of futuristic weapon systems to a major upgrade of military-to-military ties.

#### ***Kazakhstan***

Cooperation with Kazakhstan is held under the India-Kazakhstan Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership (January 24, 2009), the

Agreement on Defence and Military Technical Cooperation (July 8, 2015) and the India-Kazakhstan Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter Terrorism (last held May 3, 2017).

### ***Kyrgyzstan***

Defence cooperation with Kyrgyzstan is guided by the MoU on Military-Technical Cooperation (1997). India provides instruction and training to Kyrgyz Armed Forces for UN Peacekeeping Missions and assistance in training, and holds the Kyrgyz-Indian joint mountain training exercises, “Khanjar” on a regular basis.

### ***Tajikistan***

The India-Tajikistan Joint Working Group (JWG) on Defence Cooperation was signed in 2003. The India-Tajikistan “Strategic Partnership” (2012) and the India-Tajikistan JWG on Combating International Terrorism (last held on June 14, 2017) regulate our security cooperation. India played a major role in upgrading the Gissar Military Aerodrome “Ayni airbase” in October 2010. India provides training to a large number of Tajik officers and cadets in India.

### ***Uzbekistan***

The India-Uzbekistan JWG on Counter-Terrorism and the India-Uzbekistan Agreement on Cooperation in Military and Military-Technical were initiated in 2005. Understanding for expanding cooperation in defence and cyber-security, law enforcement agencies and special services has been reached in July 2015.

### ***China***

The defence cooperation and military engagement between India and China started soon after the establishment of the Joint Working Group in December 1988. It was followed by the Agreement on the Maintenance of Peace and Tranquillity along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in September 1993. The India-China Strategic and Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Prosperity was signed in 2005. The Border Defence Cooperation Agreement (BDCA) is the

last agreement, signed in March 2013. Under these institutional mechanisms, India and China have put in place several CBMs including the holding of joint military exercises.

In general, although India's multi-faceted relationship with the SCO member states has been limited, the key components include the sharing of intelligence, training and assistance, the servicing and upgrading of military hardware, import of transport aircraft from Uzbekistan and torpedo parts from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The Indian navy has been acquiring spare parts for thermal and electrical torpedoes from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and there is a good degree of collaboration with Kazakhstan on research and development of underwater naval armaments.

### **Cooperation on Anti-Terrorism**

India has a well worked out mechanism and a common approach regarding combating the phenomenon of terrorism and radicalisation with SCO member states. The JWG meetings on Combating International Terrorism with the all the Central Asian states are held regularly. India offers special training courses on combating terrorism and information security to Central Asian specialists.

The officers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been attending courses at NDC, DSSC, IMA, NDA, AEC Collage, CIJW, HAWS and at the UN Training Centre. India has also been holding Joint Army Mountaineering Expeditions with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The Indian army has established English Language Training Centres and Computer Labs in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to train their military personnel. India is also in the process of setting up English-cum-IT labs and deployment of army training teams in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Like the Ayni base in Tajikistan, there are other such projects being undertaken in Central Asia by the Ministry of Defence. For example, the DRDO's Defence Institute of Physiology and Allied Sciences (DIPAS) had opened the Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre (KIMBMRC) to study mountain acclimatisation procedures in Bishkek. The then Defence Minister, A.K. Antony

inaugurated the Centre in July 2012. However, the actual utility of these facilities for Indian security interests is doubtful except for the purpose of creating some goodwill for India.

For the first time, India's Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman attended the SCO's Annual Defence Ministerial Meeting on April 24, 2018. The meeting assumed importance against the backdrop of new opportunity to reset the ties with China especially after the 73-day long standoff in 2017 at Doklam.

Earlier, the National Security Adviser Ajit Doval had visited Shanghai to meet with the Chinese Politburo member Yang Jiechi on April 13 – both agreed to set ties on track in a comprehensive way.

The critical point has been about India's willingness to join the SCO's defence solidarity and coordination efforts defined under the "Shanghai Spirit". The agenda for 2018 was to hold a Fanfare for Peace Military Tattoo in China and Peace Mission 2018, the Joint Counter Terrorism Military Exercise in Russia. India was part of this decision taken when an Indian military delegation led by Major General Ajay Seth participated for the first time in a meeting of the international military cooperation departments of the SCO since joining the bloc in 2017.

Importantly, India and Pakistan also joined an anti-cyber-terrorism drill at Xiamen, organised by the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in December 2017. It was designed to improve coordination in a scenario dealing with a terrorist group that had infiltrated into SCO countries. Apparently, Pakistan and India expressed willingness to actively participate in defence and security cooperation within the SCO framework to contribute to regional security and stability.

Significantly, SCO adopted a draft convention in 2017 on a single consolidated legal framework on terrorism, terrorist acts and terrorist organisations. The Astana Declaration in 2017 expressed agreement to cooperate against individuals and legal entities related to the recruitment, training and employment of terrorists.

Importantly, the SCO holds the Annual "Peace Mission" or "anti-terrorist" drills, which focus on the anti-terror command, coordination and combat readiness.

The SCO could become a new frontier for India, but the Pakistan factor could put a spanner in India's goals. The SCO sees ISIS rather than Taliban as a serious threat to regional security. Moreover, Russia and China seemingly recognise Pakistan's role in counter-terrorism. Clearly, India's positions may be at odds there. Yet, it could be used as a neutral forum to discuss terrorism in a broader context as a leverage to obtain Beijing's cooperation on curbing Pakistan-sponsored terrorism or at least not to unduly favour Pakistan. As it is, China's concerns about the threat of terrorism are growing and as the BRI moves ahead, Chinese nationals are getting exposed to a greater threat from terrorist groups.<sup>9</sup>

Defence cooperation in the SCO ambit could possibly provide impetus for the Indian military and the PLA to shed misgivings about each other besides providing both India and Pakistan a rare opportunity to share several multilateral tables such as the anti-terrorism structure, military exercises, etc., to work together in coordinating operational details and sharing intelligence, which might change the regional climate in the long run. But, given the existing deep differences, defence and security cooperation with Pakistan and China would remain a challenge.

But mainly, India's journey in the SCO would depend mostly on how India and China weigh ties on security and economic calculations. Of course, it will also depend on other factors, especially the future trajectory of Indo-US relations.

### **Scope for Enhancing Defence Cooperation**

The existing bilateral-level defence cooperation with individual states should provide further impetus for enhancing the scope of this cooperation under the SCO framework in the following ways:

- India should continue with the existing bilateral defence cooperation mechanisms to accelerate engagement in the SCO. China also follows a bilateral approach in the guise of promoting multilateral cooperation.
- Indian Armed Forces should actively participate in the SCO-sponsored anti-terror and military drills. These might provide a

rare opportunity for the militaries of member states (including India and Pakistan) to work together in coordinating operational details and sharing intelligence. These could be beneficial to Indian armed forces besides strengthening military-to-military relationship – an essential element of military diplomacy. India will have to push for the induction of English language for interoperability.

- China intends to set up various manufacturing mechanisms in the SCO region by offering technology, equipment and contracting services including shifting of its own factories to Central Asia for joint-production. Against this, India is in a better position to undertake joint production of weapons and equipment in Central Asia like it has done with Russia in the case of the BrahMos supersonic ramjet cruise missiles.

The commonalities of Russian-origin technologies between India and Central Asia should be exploited. Excellent facilities such as the JSC National Company *Kazengineering* (Kazakhstan Engineering) – a conglomerate of 17 defence production units – would offer huge prospects for Indian firms in joint ventures.

Some of the well-known defence-industrial units include ZIKSTO, PZTM, Zenith, Semey Engineering, Uralsk, and Kirov-Mash-Zavod that still manufacture quality weapons and repair equipment. Similarly, the JSC Dastan and JSC ULAN in Kyrgyzstan are involved in naval armament vehicles and are trying to modernise the original Soviet technologies. The best part of these units is that they maintain research and designing centres for new weapons systems. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have facilities for overhauling T-72 Tanks and BMP-2s at Chemkent and Karabalta. India should collaborate with them for production of artillery guns, armoured vehicles, missiles, small ships, aviation systems, naval equipments, etc. Quite clearly, prospects for Indian companies partnering with Kazakhstan in the Space programme, naval shipbuilding and air power are considerable.

Russia still wields considerable influence in these countries, especially in terms of the region's military research facilities.

Therefore, coordination with Moscow would be necessary when India considers taking up high-profile defence projects in Central Asia.

- India needs to strengthen cooperation with partner countries for capacity building of civilian crisis management and military rapid response. India could contribute to creating a crisis management structure for military missions in humanitarian aid, disaster relief and rescue operations under the SCO's banner.
- Another area of potential cooperation pertains to border management. India can offer the rich experience of its paramilitary forces for fostering cooperation between Border Guards – BSF/ITBP with the Central Asian Border Guard forces.
- It is imperative to step up regular high-level contact to enhance defence cooperation. Vast potential needs to be explored in the military technical field and military-to-military areas. The existing cooperation needs to be enhanced to include other areas such as:
  - Actively participating in the Russian *IntellTechExpo*, Russian Arms Expo, and Kazakhstan Defence Expo (*KADEX*) where the Chinese presence is generally thin. Conversely, India should also invite SCO members in its own defence exhibitions *Defexpo* and *AeroExpo-India*;
  - Holding regular military sports competitions relating to physical training, military combat skills, and professional proficiency of military action: land, sea and air;
  - Actively participating and also holding the SCO Military Music Festival. The festivals should be tailored to cover educational and entertaining shows to introduce the best Indian military traditions to the key stakeholders including students;
  - To increase awareness, visibility and effectiveness of India's role in the SCO, India should institute regular strategic and security dialogue and conferences to discuss issues of common interest and identify priority areas and action for stronger cooperation. The Ladakh International Centre and the Institute for Defence

Studies and Analyses (IDSA) have already undertaken projects relating to India's role in the SCO.

- Since India already has Defence Attachés stationed in all the SCO member states, it is necessary that their tasks are reoriented to focus on collective security under the SCO – from a strategic dimension.
- To evolve a structured policy and action plan a dedicated desk needs to be created in MoD to coordinate SCO-related activities.
- To ensure that no undesirable elements get a footing in the region that would be detrimental to its interest, working closely with RATS would be extremely important. The SCO has already banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) in 2007. India's immediate attempts should include getting the chiefs of Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM), Masood Azhar and Hizbul Mujahideen (HM), Syed Salauddin designated as “global terrorists” by the SCO.
- It is intimated that India had raised its flag at the SCO's RATS Headquarters in Tashkent on June 15, 2017. Some of the brightest officers must be selected including from Military Intelligence with language skills and should be posted at RATS HQ in Tashkent.

Significantly, the SCO had banned Pakistan-based terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) during the July 2007 meeting at Bishkek. Even Pakistan had to put the Hafeez Saeed-backed terror outfit *Tehreek-e-Azaadi Jammu and Kashmir* on the list of “proscribed organisations” a day before it entered SCO as a full member in June 2017, although Islamabad cited its compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) for the ban.

### **Strengthening Strategic Presence**

India has a good degree of defence collaboration with both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on research and development of naval armaments. Strong business ties with Kyrgyzstan's only functional defence production unit, the Joint Stock Company JSC Dastan, located in Bishkek, have developed since the mid-1990s.

The JSC Dastan is a 40-year-old Soviet-time enterprise that produces naval weapons, rocket systems, aerial and armored systems, radio engineering monitoring and reconnaissance. It produces well-known weapon systems such as USET-80, modernised oxygen torpedo 53-65 KE as well as the recently developed mobile ground mine, “MURENA” and the multifunctional homing electric torpedo SET-92HK. It also produces innovative maritime weapon systems, the super-cavitating 220 mph Shkval-type rocket torpedo, which has a six-mile range and can be made both in nuclear (up to 150 kiloton yield) and conventional (210 kg of chemical explosives) variants. Research Institute No. 24 created the Shkval anti-ship complex with the M-5 missile. The length of the missile is 8,200 mm; caliber-533.4 mm. The missile can be launched from ordinary torpedo tubes. The jet torpedo weighs 2,700 kg. The maximum cruising range is 11 km. The maximum underwater speed is 90 to 100 metres per second.

All Shkval torpedoes were dismantled from Soviet submarines in accordance with the agreement between the USSR and the US in 1989. It is said that the Western navies currently have no countermeasure against the weapon. Only in 2005 did Germany manage to create a Shkval-like torpedo. A new modification was created based on the Shkval torpedo in the late 1990s. Its export version was called Shkval-E. The weapons system was first offered for sale at the IDEX-99 arms exhibition in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>10</sup> In early 2011, there were reports that components of Shkval were sold to Iran in 2010.<sup>11</sup>

Dastan has a full range of test and repair facilities and the Indian Navy has been procuring spares for its Russian-made electric torpedoes as well as procures torpedoes from here. On a functional basis, apart from the Indian Navy, the DRDO’s scientists from the Naval Scientific and Technological Laboratory (NSTL) have maintained regular contacts with Dastan and ULAN companies in Kyrgyzstan since 1997.

But, for a long time, Russia’s Rosoboroexport has been seeking to control the Dastan manufacturing plant. Rosoboronexport’s interest in the Dastan was linked to prospective deliveries of the Shkval-E

torpedoes to India. Russia also intended to arm the Shuka-B (project 971) submarines with such torpedoes.

Since 2009, talks have been underway for transferring Dastan's 48 per cent stake to Russia in exchange for writing-off the Kyrgyz debt of \$180 million. The initial agreement was signed during the reign of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev under which 48 per cent was to go to Russia and the remaining shares was owned by the President's son, Maxim Bakiyev. The deal got mired in controversy over kickbacks and even after Kyrgyzstan received the first tranche on time and in full (\$300 million in mid-2009), shares were not transferred then.

However, following President Bakiyev's ouster in 2010, the company was nationalised and 98 per cent of its shares were taken over by the Kyrgyz authorities. Faced with critical economic crisis, the new government in October 2010 renewed its intentions to transfer the shares to Russia through ratification by the Parliament. The transfer to Russia was expected in 2010, but the Kyrgyz leadership changed its mind. In February 2011, during the visit to Bishkek by the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Kyrgyz government abruptly announced that it would instead sell the torpedo plant to Turkey. The Kyrgyz authorities, however, later ruled out the option suggesting that it can't sell the plant to a NATO member. Of course, there remains an element of unreliability on the part of the Kyrgyz.

But, the issue of Dastan largely remained mired in controversy over Kyrgyzstan's settlement of debt to Russia. Moscow resisted Kyrgyz bargaining over Dastan and in fact, it became a major sore-point leading to worsening of bilateral relations from 2009 to 2012. In 2012, Russia demanded a revision and sought 75 per cent stake instead of 48 per cent in Dastan.<sup>12</sup> Russia demanded 75 per cent on the pretext that since 2009, the assets of Dastan depreciated due to the equipment's wear and tear. The Kyrgyz were against such a plan.<sup>13</sup> The Kyrgyz stuck to 48 per cent and insisted that if Russia wanted 75 per cent it would be on different terms.<sup>14</sup> Under the old contract, the value of shares to be passed on to the Russians totalled \$19.4 million.

Finally, during President Putin's visit to Bishkek in September 2012, the issue of transferring 48 per cent share to Russia was resolved. However, there were also doubts whether Russia really wanted the Dastan Plant.<sup>15</sup>

### **Prospects of Acquiring Dastan Torpedo Plant**

In 2012, 98 per cent of Dastan was nationalised and was administered by the Ministry of State Property or perhaps now called the Kyrgyz State Property Fund (SPF) while the remaining 2 per cent of the securities were in the hands of private individuals and company employees. Importantly, Kyrgyzstan has reserved the right to offer Dastan shares for sale through auction to interested investors. Key experts were to study this issue.

The company itself had witnessed numerous scandals because of mismanagement, financial irregularities, and illegal deliveries of special-purpose devices.<sup>16</sup> The Company lacked funds to maintain the plant at a normal functional capacity.<sup>17</sup> The plant has the capacity to function for another 20-30 years. But its products face marketing problems. The Indian Navy is the sole consumer apart from the services it provides to the Russian naval fleet. In 2010, the Russian order was 26 per cent and 70 per cent was from India.<sup>18</sup> There were also reports about Dastan selling its assets including land and building premises located in the middle of Bishkek city, to private entrepreneurs.

In April 2014, the Kyrgyz Government decided to privatise 98.46 per cent state shareholding in TNK Dastan through investment tendering. A special commission, comprising members of Parliament, officials and members of civil society for evaluating the value of the company, was constituted. The applicant was required to have at least ten years of experience of global standards and financial standing. The applicant's staff must have international qualifications (CPA certificates, ASA certificates).<sup>19</sup> However, later in August 2014, the media reported that the government had failed to sell Dastan for the third time due to lack of bidders.

Dastan has tremendous prospects for joint production to be taken up by India. As mentioned earlier, Dastan also produces

components of super-cavitating 220 mph VA-111 Shkval-type rocket torpedo. It would be worth if India buys majority shares in Dastan for both research and production of modern torpedos and other navel equipment and spares.

### **\*ULAN Torpedo Range (UTR)**

The ULAN OJSC or ULAN Torpedo Range (UTR) is located in the world's second-largest mountain Lake IssykKul (180 km long and 60 km wide). The range is located close to another torpedo-testing range Ozero, which is presently owned by the Russian Navy. There have been rumours about Russia abandoning the Ozero range. But in a new defence agreement in 2010, Russia has created a unified defence facility that includes the Ozero range at Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan.

ULAN is a unique Soviet built facility set up in 1943 as a Test Range for the S. M. Kiro Machine-Building Plant. In the past, it was a leading manufacturer and a test range for naval armament and for specific submarines.<sup>20</sup> The UTR facility carries out trials of thermal torpedoes of various calibres from 324 mm to 650 mm. It also manufactures and supplies spare parts for CET-65E, TEST-71ME, and 53-65 KE torpedoes. The plant has the capacity to service CET-65E, TEST-71ME, 53-65 KE torpedoes.

The test range has access to a wide test bed with necessary capability to test and qualify maritime warfare equipment. The bed has an average depth of 410 metres, a maximum depth of 702 metres that makes it easy to retrieve and recover torpedoes. The range ensures conditions similar to sea in a calm environment and offer testing facilities almost all through the year. Karakul's remoteness makes it an ideal weapons testing site, though it is located close to the China border but is away from the prying eyes of Western intelligence.

The UTR's infrastructure includes a vessel, assembly and repair shop, oxygen and air compressor stations and an accumulator preparation section. But they are in a dilapidated state and require massive upgradation. The vintage ship available at the range has no deck launch facility.

Some individuals and company employees maintain and operate the range currently. A prominent Kyrgyz leader and the former speaker of the Parliament Ahmatbek Keldibekov and Alexander, who is also the Director, External Relations of M/S ULAN, hold the majority 67 per cent of the securities. The other main shareholder is the Kazakh Company, Kirov Mash Zavod with 22 per cent while the remaining 11 per cent are in the hands of private investors including M/s Dastan which holds 2 per cent.

### **India's Stakes**

India has been using the UTR range since 1997 and on an average 20 trials is being conducted in a year. Besides, torpedoes procured from Dastan by the Indian Navy and the DRDO's Naval Scientific and Technological Laboratory (NSTL) that develops prototype torpedoes, are brought here all the way from India to test them at the UTR.<sup>21</sup>

Following Russia's declining interests in Dastan, both ULAN and Dastan had approached India for a possible future collaboration, including their willingness for leasing the facility for a specific period. However, while China has been eyeing these facilities for a long time, Kyrgyzstan does not have independent authority to lease any military facilities to China without Russian consent. Turkey too has been surveying these facilities in Kyrgyzstan for quite some time.

During this author's assignment in Kyrgyzstan, India's Defence Minister was invited to Karakul to inspect the ULAN Torpedo Range (UTR) on July 6, 2011. But, before any deal could be signed, the international media gave a strategic spin to the Defence Minister's Issy-Kul visit.

Washington-based Joseph Farah's *G2 Bulletin* wrote, "India is developing nuclear torpedoes at a deep-water lake in land-locked Kyrgyzstan and intends to equip its navy with them because of the threat posed by Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea."<sup>22</sup> While quoting William Selvamurthy, then Chief Controller of DRDO, the *Bulletin* wrote, "India is willing to

develop the center to test all kinds of torpedoes such as heavy weight torpedoes and those having thermal navigation system.”<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the Russian media also expressed envy about India’s interest in the UTR. A news headline said “India to Use Torpedo Plant in Kyrgyzstan, But Where Are the Russians?” The article illustrated the sensitiveness of the Kyrgyz facility that tests torpedoes of highly sensitive prototype designs including the VA-111 Shkval, a super-cavitating torpedo capable of speeds of more than 200 knots, or 230 miles per hour.<sup>24</sup> The VA-111 Shkval is rocket-propelled and is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. The *Bulletin* said that the US Navy is not known to have any defence to repel this type of torpedo. China too has no such torpedoes. It said, “In working with Kyrgyzstan, New Delhi is attempting to increase its influence throughout Central Asia through various training programs and military production efforts which analysts say are indicative of an alarming trend of the militarization of Central Asia.”<sup>25</sup> The Russian media was surprised by the flurry of Indian military activity in Kyrgyzstan and questioned Russia’s role in all these. “Will India be sharing it with Russia? It’s curious that neither Russian nor Kyrgyz sources have appeared to say anything publicly about this deal”, the media commented.<sup>26</sup>

Another media write-up said: “India may have been thwarted in its attempt to set up an air base in Tajikistan, but now it is building military ties with Kyrgyzstan, agreeing to train UN peacekeeping troops and establishing a joint high-altitude military research center in Bishkek.”<sup>27</sup> Apart from linking India’s interests in Kyrgyzstan with the situation in Afghanistan, the media also assumed that this was an effort by Kyrgyzstan’s President, Roza Otunbayeva, to lessen Kyrgyz dependency on Russia. Kyrgyzstan was a better fit for India than Tajikistan, which was more susceptible to Russian pressure to not allow India’s use of the air base in Dushanbe. The story further cautioned that “if India is still interested in a base in Central Asia, and decides to focus on Kyrgyzstan rather than Tajikistan, that would certainly get interesting quickly.”<sup>28</sup>

In the backdrop of the mystery created by the Russian media over Indian Defence Minister’s visit to Karakol, the ULAN OJSC’s

Director General Vladimir Stepanov finally did give a clarification to the media after two months. Stepanov, on September 20, 2011, said that the Indian Minister indeed visited the facility and confirmed that India and the Kyrgyz government were planning to develop a torpedo-testing centre in Karakol. He added that the company was expecting a delegation from India's military and industrial complex in October 2011. At the same time Stepanov also told the media that "ULAN had repeatedly approached Russia with an offer of possible cooperation for many years, but Russians have not shown interest."<sup>29</sup> ULAN was also not keen to sell its facility to the Russian company Ozero located closed by in Issyk-Kul near Koy-Sara village. The Director General announced that ULAN had maintained a mutually beneficial cooperation with the Indian Defence Ministry since the mid-1990s. Without Indian support, the company would not have survived, he added. Vladimir Stepanov said, "Carrying out tests on the Indian Navy's orders will give us an opportunity to buy new equipment and modernize our company's logistics base. We are counting on this very much."<sup>30</sup>

The DRDO experts felt that it is feasible to develop the ULAN facility to produce state-of-the-art torpedoes. The feasibility viewpoint concluded that the existing infrastructure can be upgraded by engaging local companies with available know-how in torpedo technology to co-develop the facility. For India, both Dastan and UTR have strategic significance as both can be used as test bed and production facilities. Once refurbished, NSTL can use the facility to test its Autonomous Underwater Vehicle (AUV) developed in its laboratory in Vishakhapatnam. Altogether, both Dastan and ULAN can potentially strengthen India's underwater attack capabilities.<sup>31</sup> ULAN is also located close to the Kyrgyz-China border and it could serve the purpose of a listing post for surveillance and navigation. Besides the Indian Navy and DRDO, the facility could be utilised by other wings of India's Armed Forces. The facility includes a residential building as well. In 2012, the OJSC ULAN quoted a rent of \$568,000 per year for the test range. It had agreed to sign a lease for five years extendable for another twenty years. India should

pursue the project to make it a part of its new Central Asia policy.

While India considers taking up high-profile defence projects in Central Asia, it needs to be clear that Russia still wields considerable influence in these countries, especially with regard to the region's military facilities. Coordination with Moscow is therefore necessary.

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## 20. Eurasia – Region of Cooperative Rebalancing

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For over two decades, the threat from China has loomed large in India – analysts have debated over impending competition between the two Asian countries. China is being viewed as inexorably exploiting India’s vulnerabilities in South Asia to ensure that it is surrounded by inimical neighbours. The idea of China’s ‘String of Pearls’ strategy – building roads, railways and ports – has been viewed as one that will eventually encircle India.

In the north, there also seems no escaping from the impact of China’s several development plans in Tibet, Xinjiang and Central Asia under the OBOR scheme. The Golmud-Lhasa railway had already knocked down the Great Himalayas. A rail line to Shigatse and then to Nepal, Bhutan and eventually to India will soon become a reality. China has also planned a parallel railway line along the Tibet-Xinjiang National Highway No. 219 that will run through Aksai Chin. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has posed a major challenge to India, though it is too early to draw any conclusion about the ultimate future of the \$60 billion project. Nonetheless, these projects that are underway would transform the region in the coming decades.

India hasn’t so far responded to these challenges in many articulated ways. India is already absent in all the major trans-continental East-West connectivity projects. New Delhi hasn’t been able to think about an equivalent smart connectivity strategy. Some of the transport connectivity projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) haven’t progressed satisfactorily

despite being initiated long ago. Even the much touted Chabahar Port project to approach Central Asia through Iran is likely to face many roadblocks ahead.

This only goes to suggest that India should be thoughtfully and cooperatively responding to the changing global strategic landscape. What it means essentially is that embracing the cold-war perception or adopting any containment strategy is unlikely to endure in the long run. Both China and India recognise that they have more overlapping than conflicting interests in this uncertain global environment. The two countries should resolve the unresolved boundary problem quickly and team up to expand the strategic opportunities further.

### **India's Regional Rebalancing**

While India's economic and security interests in the newly-defined Indo-Pacific region intensify, a rebalancing is urgently required in its outreach in the nearby Eurasian continent. In fact, unlike other maritime nations of the Indo-Pacific region, India has a large land border in the north with the Eurasian continent. Therefore, India's Indo-Pacific strategy cannot be de-linked from its policy towards Eurasia.

Historically, India had the deepest political, cultural and commercial contacts with Eurasia which of course had its advantages for both. India is already late in carving out a meaningful presence. Of course, lack of easy connectivity impeded India's efforts in the region. But, India's image and its political contacts with countries in Eurasia still stand on a sound footing.

Broadly, India's endeavour in Eurasia has been to prevent any hostile power from dominating the region. The "Connect Central Asia" policy launched in 2012 constituted a few smart strategies designed to enhance India's visibility and to seek economic and energy interests with the view to allow the region to re-emerge as a commercial and cultural hub with greater links to India.<sup>1</sup> The policy was a key component for seeking Afghanistan's stability as well, as also India's own security.

The entire Central Asia is undergoing rapid change in the face of increased capital flows, expansion of regional trade and large-

scale Chinese investments. For India, obviously, Russia's benign presence in the region would have been an ideal choice. But in the face of Russia's relatively low interest for holding on to the region and India's own limitation in reaching out to Central Asia in a major way, the choice was: either let the extremists fill the vacuum or allow the Chinese to consolidate their control over Eurasia. Obviously, the choice for India is getting starker; China appears a lesser evil here. However, similar to the ASEAN states, the countries of Eurasia too view India as a future powerhouse of global growth and wish it to play a balancer's role vis-à-vis China. In the absence of such a scenario, some of the states in the region would – if they haven't already – meekly yield to China's rise.

Interestingly, like the Chinese businessmen who had cast their gaze towards Eurasia a decade ago, the Indian entrepreneurs too are gradually finding business opportunities in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia. Many young Indians engineers and technicians are finding jobs, business and markets including in some of the high-profile energy projects in Kazakhstan's oil fields. In fact, in the years to come, the energy management sector is likely to attract many more Indian professionals to the region. Some have already invested to get a share of the natural resources in those regions.

India particularly enjoys a niche market reputation, for example in the IT industry, health and education sectors; even these fields remain unexplored. The problem so far has been that the government's policy has not followed suit. And that needs to be changed in a major way.

Central Asia, like in the case of West Asia, will continue to remain the main geopolitical lynch pin in Asia. The trend of China gradually stepping in to fill the vacuum in the region is glaringly visible. Here, economics or the energy factor alone is not the sole motivator. The emerging policy approaches seem guided more by the necessity to seemingly forestall a radicalisation plan pursued by the Islamic state (IS), to forcefully bring down the current regimes of the region to be replaced by Central Asian Caliphates.

Both China and India, despite being conscious about their energy dependency seem cognizant about preventing trends adversely affecting them. Both are aware of the Saudi-backed forces visualising a similar scenario of promoting Wahhabi anarchy across Asia – whether in Xinjiang or in Kashmir – through violent jihadi means. As it is, the continuing turmoil in West Asia not only threatens India's energy security and the livelihood and safety of seven million Indians, but is also becoming a crucial source for spreading radicalism, terrorism and sectarian conflicts that have started to engulf India as well. Clearly, India cannot afford to have additional pressures from the Eurasian front.

To be clear, the Russian and Chinese refusal to endorse regime change in Syria, or even its Iran policy, are more about leveraging against the US (strategic) and countering Saudi Arabia (extremism). In a nutshell, both China and India seem to be moving in the same direction; adopting policies that would limit outside forces stirring up insurgencies aimed at disrupting their investment efforts and growth prospects if not the territorial integrity of nations. However, China has been relying so far on its policy of enticing potential Islamic states which could also sponsor insurgencies. India's ability has been demonstrated by containing the menace through the democratic process that ensured minimum internal and external socio-political blowbacks.

Interestingly, despite all the initial euphoria about military intervention and regime change in Syria, the US is suddenly coming around to the point of taking a cautious view about supporting the Syrian rebels perhaps much to the chagrin of its ally, Saudi Arabia. The change is seen in favour of engagement – a line pursued by Russia, China, India and Iran. Clearly, the US finally seemed to have diagnosed that the Saudis have long manipulated the agenda and fuelled terrorism and used it as an instrument to retain supremacy in the Islamic world.

In this fast-changing geopolitical scenario, India should not only continue to remain engaged in the Indo-Pacific region but also play a regional rebalancing game in Central Asia in order to

broaden its prospects for shaping the global order.<sup>2</sup> In fact, in the Eurasian theatre there is a stronger case for cooperative security rather than competition between India and other major powers including China.

### **Sharing Responsibility in Afghanistan**

Even if India's key focus remains confined to Afghanistan, it is unlikely that India by itself can fully exploit the economic potential of the most difficult country in the region. Indian initiatives undertaken for reconstruction and humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan is one thing, but prospecting for large-scale business opportunities even in sectors like mining and petroleum would require teaming up for joint ventures with a third country. It is here that India and China will have to share the responsibility of bringing peace in Afghanistan.

Both China and India have huge stakes in Afghan stability and returns on the benefits of cooperating would be equally enormous.

In fact, as the US cuts down its troops' presence in Afghanistan a general growing realisation is that the situation in the region may ultimately hinge on the kind of role India and China may play in Afghanistan. India's role in Afghanistan is being fully acknowledged, but China too has been lately viewed as a potential stabilising force in Afghanistan. It is widely recognised that at the end of the day, Asian powers will have the experience and the capacity to share the responsibilities in places such as Afghanistan. Even the Taliban perhaps painfully understand this reality. If India and China make a calibrated move for working together in Afghanistan, the outcome could be more harmonising than conflicting.<sup>3</sup>

Russia is unlikely to get redrawn in Afghanistan although Moscow's contacts in Afghanistan even with the Taliban seemed to have increased in recent years. But, Russia is engaging Pakistan, hoping it will dissuade the Taliban, if they come to power, from interfering in areas of Russia's influence. Of course, Russia will have a role depending on what the Taliban will want it to play. Presumably, Moscow will consult New Delhi. But, Moscow is also keen to discuss Afghanistan only under the China-led SCO framework.

In recent years, Russian analysts have been articulating a view about the rising geopolitical importance of Pakistan and its potential to connect the massive economies of the Eurasian Union, Iran, SAARC, and China to create an integrated pan-Eurasian economic zone. A powerful article written by a prominent Russian political analyst Andrew Korybko provocatively detailed why Pakistan should gain pivotal importance in the Russian geo-strategic calculus.<sup>4</sup> He drew attention to China's grand vision of building a trans-Pakistani trade corridor under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which could be a catalyst for connecting the four economic blocs together. This includes linking of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with SAARC intersecting at the Xinjiang-Pakistan junction to be developed under the CPEC.

From the Russian perspective, the CPEC will not only represent a “geopolitical pivot for China, but also a geo-economic one”, for “it'll position the country within easy access to the Mideast oil fields”. This is the only way China will be able to quell the “externally orchestrated destabilization that it's lately found itself experiencing in Xinjiang.”

It stresses the importance of the Iran-Pakistan-China pipeline project (a part of the CPEC) becoming a reality and suggests that “should Xinjiang succeed in becoming a significant Eurasian trading hub in connecting China, the Eurasian Union, SAARC and Iran, then it would catapult in geo-economic significance to become an ultra-strategic Heartland region.”

On the prospect of India joining the Eurasian system, Korybko's article says that despite the touchy issue of India's claim over “Pakistan-administered Kashmir” “if Indian companies employ this route, the economic allure might be too tempting to resist.” Further, if Indo-Pak differences could be relaxed (perhaps within the SCO framework), then “the organization would finally be able to cash in on its economic capability and fully integrate with itself and the rest of Eurasia.”<sup>5</sup>

Coming back on Afghanistan, China, so far an onlooker on the Afghan scene, is likely to gain increasing importance in the coming

years. A former Japanese Ambassador to Central Asia, Akio Kawato recently wrote in a column “Afghanistan is not alien for China ... it was a vital part of the Silk Road and was a conduit to India from where China imported Buddhism.” Kawato wrote, the Taliban, more ‘civilized’ now than in 2001, may incur China’s strong involvement in Afghan affairs.

Make no mistake; Beijing will never get drawn militarily in Afghanistan. It would still like the Americans to ensure security of Afghanistan and want countries like Turkey and India to build its infrastructures. All China has to do is to be ready with a smart strategy to turn Afghanistan into an economic engine and connect the resource-rich country to its own industrial towns. And this is what the ‘civilized’ Taliban would be bargaining for.

The Chinese investors have on their laptops, figures of Afghanistan’s untapped deposits; copper, iron ore, gold, oil, gas, massive vein of rare earth elements including critical lithium (estimated \$1 trillion worth) which are imminently suited for their needs. Billions of dollars have already been spent in mining and China’s visitors to Kabul are invariably seeking mining privileges. Several roads, railways and pipeline projects are underway to link Western China to Afghanistan through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. A similar plan has recently been unveiled by India along with Iran to develop the Chabahar Port to strengthen connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asian states. In fact, China has viewed the Chabahar development plan by India with a positive perspective. The Chinese media has lauded India in an editorial for contributing to ‘regional connectivity’.<sup>6</sup>

True, Afghans have so far shown aversion to investments. Surely, they have no particular likings for the Chinese, for they represent a blemished or alien culture – danger to Islam. But the same was said about the Chinese in Central Asia as well. The fear was that non-Muslim outsiders extracting underground riches would invoke powerful resource nationalism. But, if the Chinese benefited from the Soviet fall and Russia’s decline, to be sure, they hope to gain in Afghanistan too.

Both China and India have high stakes in Afghanistan's stability and Central Asia, for they need a peaceful environment to achieve high growth in the next two to three decades. The chaos could bring negative consequences for both China and India and the stabilizing efforts in Xinjiang and Kashmir have not been easy. So the logic of establishing links with Afghanistan makes sense. China has successfully experimented on this with Pakistan for decades. In the changed context, China and Afghanistan need each other. Even the Taliban know that if China shed no blood, it committed no sins in Afghanistan. The Taliban too wasn't much of a headache for China. The Uyghur extremist elements were supposedly linked only to Al Qaida.

China knows pretty well about Afghanistan's political instability, its lack of governance, the threat of Islamic extremists and flow of drugs, etc. posing a threat to its Western region. The current Chinese reforms aim to preclude social and political unrests from aggravating in the Western region. Surely, India's own Afghan policy has not been designed to counterbalance anyone but for reasons not only of helping the Afghan people, but also for India's own security.

Therefore, when India reviews its Afghan policy, the China factor should not be seen in a zero-sum perception. Many in the West may press India playing a countervailing role instead of letting China monopolise Afghan affairs. Even Pakistan may be keen to see Afghanistan becoming an additional battle front for China and India which can be exploited by Islamabad in its favour. But here, on a serious note, it needs to be underlined that Indian and Chinese interests historically converged in Afghanistan as Ambassador Kawato noted. Such a common interest could also be extended to Central Asia.

Afghanistan has an observer status in the SCO, a powerful economic organisation led by China. It has become an enthusiastic member of SAARC, seeking greater involvement in trade and commerce with South Asian states. The truth is that the Afghan economy is more likely to be connected to the Chinese and Indian economies than they are to Europe, partly because of proximity,

but also because of the availability of markets for Afghan goods in India and China. This has been proven in Central Asia where the economies are now closely linked to China. India alone imports millions of dollars worth of dry fruits, spices, carpets, wool, etc., from Afghanistan which can easily be expanded further. Moreover, the Afghan economy, driven by low-wage subsistence agriculture and massive unemployment, can only be dealt with by learning from the Chinese and Indian experiences. Also, it is only China and India that can commit large-scale investments in Afghanistan, needed for its reconstruction – in fact, the process has already begun. Many commentators already started to opine that the greatest beneficiaries of Western efforts, apart from the Afghan people, are going to be India and China. In fact, as India intends to advance in the digital science sector, the tapping of rare-earth minerals and other high-value items from Afghanistan and Central Asia would become more imperative.

China could take advantage of India's cultural familiarities in Afghanistan. Being conscious about Afghanistan's human heritage, both countries can jointly rebuild Afghanistan's rich archaeological sites, which alone can revive the Afghan tourism industry and generate billions of dollars worth of revenue and jobs for its people. Also, there is no case for competition, India has a clearly cut out role to perform in Afghanistan, i.e., in health, education, tourism and cultural affairs.

Together, India and China could train the Afghan Army and build its defence capabilities. But it needs to be cautious; Pakistan is likely to make an all-out effort to involve China in the Afghan game. Pakistani leaders are reported to have told the Afghan government to split ties with the US and hold China's hand. While contemplating such a scenario of cooperation, China should be particularly careful about Pakistan's intention to get Beijing dragged into Afghanistan to play its own game against India.

Fortunately, India and China have now agreed to join hands in Afghanistan. In fact, it became one of the major takeaways of the Modi-Xi informal summit in Wuhan in April 2018.<sup>7</sup> This is

a ground-breaking development that could potentially pave the way for broader cooperation between India, China and Russia in Eurasia.

## Notes

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## 21. Soft Power: Regaining Centrality with Modern Content

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India's soft power has now been on display for centuries. A range of cultural attributes, respect and popularity entail huge advantage for India even in Central Asia. It seems a little odd that many aspects of India-Central Asia connections are either not known or are being neglected. India's civilisational contacts with Central Asia, extending over thousands of years, remain the most critical factor for building close relations with the five countries.

Central Asia always remained a fertile ground for Indian culture to grow. Buddhism was the prime mover, prominently flourishing across Central Asia and transmitting beyond to East Asia. Until the Arab conquest in the 7th century, the monasteries dotting along the Silk Route, served as Indian cultural and commercial outposts.

### **India's Lack of Cultural Orientation**

Like other powers, India's stake in Central Asia is driven by geopolitical, strategic and energy competition. But most commentators keenly watching India's policy approach towards Central Asia noted that among other things India has failed abysmally to display an orientation that would justify its political and economic positioning in the region. According to some scholars, India's Central Asia policy is not commensurate with its rising profile onto the global stage as it lacks a credible ideology of its own as compared to other major powers which have found it increasingly necessary to move

in the region with a higher strategic goal to facilitate their energy competition.

According to a Taiwanese Professor Jen-kun Fu, despite all the initiatives India has made so far, “it is not yet among the top ten countries involved in the exploitation of oil and gas resources in Central Asia. He has suggested that India will have more difficulties in finding a place on this list considering the stakes already being established by Russian, Western and Chinese companies in the region”.<sup>1</sup> India’s inability to rationalise its policy goals for Central Asia ideologically, therefore, becomes the primary cause of its failure as a successful energy competitor in the region.

According to a Hong Kong-based Professor Simon Shen, India lacks a unique ideology to increase its influence in Central Asia despite having a strong tradition of interests in the region. He asserts that India’s absence from Ideological Energy Diplomacy (IED) makes it hard for the nation to compete with other powers and as such India remains a great power candidate rather than a great power holder in the region.<sup>2</sup>

This is notwithstanding a range of ideological attributes as well as civilisational justification that India poses in the region which could entail huge advantages for speedy access into Central Asian resources.

It is a given fact that the Indian presence in Central Asia is still acceptable to the people in many ways that the Chinese is not. Moreover, India offers a moral high-ground justification as the principal proponent of peace to rationalise its encroachment on resources in seemingly non-interest-driven terms. This approach, combined with India’s historical affinity with the region could serve as a compelling alternative to offset conflicting forces, domestic nationalists and potentially be acceptable to regional and international audiences.

According to two Iranian scholars Elahesh Koolae and Masoud Imani-Kalesar India is yet to pursue a persuasive long-term energy strategy with the next-door Caspian Sea Region (CSR) despite the fact that India’s energy demands have been growing.

Moreover, Central Asia is in close proximity to India having centuries-old connections with each other. In contrast China lacks all these advantages and yet it has been more assertive in Eurasia as much as it is in Southeast Asia. Most observers see India having interests but seriously lacking actions which will prove disadvantage for it the longer strategic term.<sup>3</sup>

Central Asian attraction for India's rich cultural legacies, their appeal for India's democratic values and pluralistic character are noted by most writings.<sup>4</sup> This is notwithstanding the fact that Central Asia's contemporary cultural landscape finds less compatibility with the Indian culture.

Also in realistic terms, it is rather difficult to imagine how much of a difference Indian cultural influence makes but attraction for Indian culture is a fact of life and something akin to Indian cultural presence in Afghanistan.

Among other problematic aspects that impede India's policy goals in Central Asia are the capacities gap generated by India itself. For example, if the democratic values and principles are huge assets for India, its uncompromising Western-styled 'secularism' poses an obstacle for promoting cultural linkages. Unlike in the past, when India's destiny was to take its cultural message across the Asian continent, modern India has lost its nuanced cultural insight, leave aside responsibilities. This has fed religious extremism, lack of perspective and inaction.

The lack of intent from the Indian side, therefore, makes the Central Asians more inclined to follow the Western-style rather than the Indian variant of democracy. Today, India's traditional non-alignment foreign policy precept is being increasingly challenged by the tenets of non-interference and peaceful co-existence in the Chinese foreign policy. It is also pertinently being noted by many commentators that India's guiding diplomatic principle is radically shifting from idealism towards realism, whereas other major powers are acquiring new norms and ideas as a means to supplement their pursuit of hard power. This makes it even harder for India to compete with the other major powers in Central Asia. India's commercial

trade ties with Central Asia are paltry \$1.5 billion as compared over \$50 billion China has with the region.

Suffice is to note that India has, so far, grossly and perhaps consciously overlooked its interests in Central Asia. But, with other powers stepping in and around India's northern flanks, the regional complexities are likely to undergo a fast change. Some of them would inevitably have implications far beyond what one might have imagined a decade ago.

The world, especially the West would any day prefer the benign Indian presence in Central Asia to the shrilly control of the region by China and Russia. But, India would still prefer to treat Russia as a better bet in its regional security. However, in the light of Russia's declining status in Central Asia, the field is now being left open for either the Chinese or the extremists to fill up. Neither is in the interest of India. The strategic equation is unlikely to change for quite some time to come even if Indo-US relations gain a higher level of maturity.

As an emerging power, India ought to be taking note of these developments and clearly define and devise a meaningful response. Unfortunately, the current scholarly approach in India to understand the neighbouring regions is steadfastly through the Western prism. This has obscured rather than clarified the nature of defining Indian interests.

It is imperative therefore that India redesigns its platform that could lay the groundwork for evolving an enduring policy goal in Central Asia. However, before doing so, the following underlying facts about Central Asia must be noted:

- Central Asia is an ambiguous region with a record of diverse historical patterns. It had a tradition of being ruled by multi-ethnic culture. Almost all the important religions, languages and cultures flourished here in different periods of history.
- The Central Asian people are in an intense search for their cultural roots and heritage. Even though ethnically Turkic in origin, they are divided in heritage and allegiances. Equal opportunities exist for every cultural pattern to flourish in the vast Eurasian steppe. A strong trend indicates that the historical

components, including the distant period of Indian influence, are neither terminal nor irreversible.

- Islam is the dominant identity factor in Central Asia but Islam has never been a unifying force in the region. There had been a pattern of multiple divisions, built upon historical points of conflict among various Eurasian tribal groups. Even today these patterns persist in muted form. For example, the frequent riots in Osh and inter-ethnic conflicts in the Ferghana Valley are some of the glaring examples of the region's complexities. It is also important to note that none of the traits essential for an Islamic upsurge have any suitable foundation in Central Asia. That is why the regimes and political groups are unable to impel popular political mobilisation along religious lines. Of course, the externally supported Islamic activities in the region have increased over the years, but fundamentalist Islam is still a fringe phenomenon in Central Asia.
- At the same time, it is important to underscore the fact that Uzbekistan and also the Ferghana Valley (shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which is also the hub of Central Asian Islamic culture, would remain as the epicentre for future change in the region. It is the most unpredictable and problematic areas of great power conflict and would require close watching. In fact, some form of political Islam has already gaining strength but that could only be possible with the domestic support and participation. From the view point of policy implications, India needs to counter these portents with strategic foresight.
- So far, both Islamists and nationalists in Central Asia have not shown any antipathy towards India. Contrarily, the nostalgia for India among majority traditional people runs far deeper than the Communists who share no clear commitments other than seek their own interests. It is important, therefore, to bear in mind that India is not in a position to infuriate majority populations or groups in the region. Instead, India needs to build up meaningful contacts with all sections based on its cultural and historical relationship.

- The political situation in Central Asia is in a flux. The region is neither stable nor in a state of conflict. The local leaders have mastered the art of ruling and containing their internal problems but they have been susceptible to foreign influence which has pushed them into political strategies that are inconsistent or not necessarily to their long-term advantage.
- The Western countries seem to have failed in promoting democratic institutions in Central Asia and as such their influence in the region has fallen in recent years. The West is neither able to benefit from the declining Russian presence nor can it prevent rising Chinese encroachment in Central Asia.
- As elaborated above, India, thus far, has experienced limited success in promoting its political and economic interests in the region, but many commentators have suggested that ultimately India would gain bigger say in Eurasia. In fact, the local leaders in Central Asia have been keen to draw India in the game in order to counterpoise it vis-à-vis other major powers.<sup>5</sup> The Kazakh President, Nazarbayev, for example, has been inclined to give India a favorable strategic presence in offshore projects.<sup>6</sup> Like him, other local leaders too, in their keenness to pursue a multi-vectored policy, always tried to play on the rivalry of major powers ensuring that they belong to everyone's sphere of influence. They are already playing a delicate balancing game of triangular diplomacy by engaging Russia, the US and China in the energy and geopolitical competition.
- Tragically, the course of history in the 20th century has generally been written by the forces of violence. Like in West Asia, the 21st century may also witness a possible conflict of interests in Central Asia as well. The states and societies in the region might have to face serious stresses, threats and challenges.
- It needs to be recognised that in the midst of this awful impending situation, the voice of moderation and peace will still be relevant to Central Asia. It is also not an insurmountable task to alter the current course and it should be India's destiny to take the lead in it and achieve it. There would still be a hope for human survival

and the answer should lie in an effort to revive and relive the ways of life and thinking that had been practiced in India for centuries.

- Interestingly, Islam too, presently passing through a critical juncture in its history, is increasingly noticing the benign nature of Buddhism as opposed to Western ethics. A plethora of write-ups and analyses by Islamic scholars are coming to the fore, covering a range of historical and ethical associations between Buddhist and Islamic principles. There is certainly a renewed attempt being made in hindsight to demystify Islam as a fundamentalist force. The paranoia and prejudice toward the Muslims, carried over for centuries, has to end at some stage. At the same time, efforts should be made to prevent fundamentalist forces from influencing the Eurasian region where the culture of peace can still be preserved. History is also full of Buddhist-Muslim friendly interactions and cooperation, alliances and exchanges of trade, frequent scholarly exchanges and spiritual advancements that were not without advantage to humanity. It needs to be recognised that Sufism is a product of the long-drawn intensive interface between Buddhism and Islam that still has a tremendous capacity to entail a positive influence on a large section of humanity. Even in Afghanistan, rebuilding the Bamiyan is becoming a cultural and economic imperative not only for restoring the Silk Route heritage but also to draw millions of international tourists who could provide hopes to millions in Afghanistan trapped in tyranny and poverty. In fact, the Bamiyan tragedy seemed to have rekindled the belief among Central Asians to restore their hitherto decrepit and dilapidated Buddhist legacy.

In the light of above, it becomes imperative for India to formulate a viable policy for the regeneration of Indian philosophy, so that the voice of peace and non-violence is once again heard and understood widely and across the world. While India should pursue its political and economic goals in Central Asia rigorously, the cornerstone of

India's strategy has to be the projection of its "soft power"<sup>7</sup> based on the shared history of civilisational and cultural contacts between India and Central Asia.

As elaborated before, the people of Central Asia have traditionally held great fascination for Indian culture. The region still remains a fertile ground for Indian thoughts and culture to grow. In fact, the matrix of Indo-Central Asia relations in this respect is already rich as many social and cultural groups relating to India have emerged in the region since the 1990s. The prospects in this field are getting even brighter as new expeditions and explorations along the ancient Silk Route unearth fresh evidence of robust Indian cultural presence in the region.

To be sure, the opening of the Indian Cultural Centres in the region since 1994 by the Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) has made a good deal of difference.<sup>8</sup> Some of the activities have evoked serious academic responses from a number of important local institutions in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. At the same time, many of the existing Indian cultural diplomacy traits such as showcasing of dance, handcraft, and cousin through the Indian Cultural Centres abroad seem have become redundant and do not serve any purposeful objectives.

### **A Case for an Indian University in Central Asia**

In the context of above-mentioned potential, it is desirable that the Government of India should quickly implement its national project with an international perspective for establishing an Indian university in Central Asia for long-term benefits.

The idea of opening an Indian university was mooted in 2012 in the hope of re-harnessing the old Indo-Central Asia linkages as well as in the hope of an Asian renaissance to draw attention to the cultural, socio-economic and intellectual aspects of Asia – which could become a catalyst for peace and stability in the entire region.<sup>9</sup> It is only by invoking these elements that India could seek an advantageous term and favourable atmosphere to enhance its national interests in the region.

For India to take such an initiative is imperative because other big powers have already started enforcing application of new norms of soft power alongside their hard-power pursuits. The Americans, Russians and Europeans have opened their universities in Central Asian cities. China, for example, has swiftly established universities, Confucius Centres and even secondary schools in Central Asia. A university could serve to widen India's own understanding of the Eurasian landmass as well as help broaden its operational scope in the region.

### **Retrieving the Medieval Connect**

The challenge before policy makers both in India and Central Asia is to bring a modicum of rational interpretation of history and provide a sound perspective for building mutually beneficial strategic relations between India and the Central Asian countries.

History is full of Indo-Central Asian interactions through movement of people, goods, ideas and spiritual interface. In fact, explorers still unearth fresh evidence of robust Indian imprints in the region. The positive image of India in the Central Asian popular perceptions comes from their past trade, commerce and cultural linkages with Hindustan. It was the Farghana Valley – in the middle of Central Asia today shared by three countries – which had uninterrupted links with India through ancient, mediaeval and contemporary times. Zahir-ud-Din Babur came from Andijan and established the Mughal dynasty in the 15th century. The famous Sufi saint of the Chishti Order, Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki came from Osh. Similarly, the legendary Kazakh, Mirza Muhammed Haidar Dulati served as the Governor of Kashmir under Humayun in the 16th Century. Bairam Khan, mentor of Akbar was a Turkmen and the famous Persian poet Abdul-Qader Bedil was from Tajikistan. They all served in the Mughal Durbar and made India their homes. These legendary figures are once again being resurrected as national heroes in each of these States.

Today, the Ferghana Valley is populated by Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks and other ethnic groups. The region remains prone to

instability for both historical reasons and on account of systemic collapse – economic and social – after the Soviet disintegration.

The time has come for India to provide a poignant perspective on Central Asia – conjuring their common cultural, historical and ethnic roots. India will have to start thinking about instituting a high-level Cultural Summit around the theme of *India and Central Asia: Sharing a Common Legacy* in the coming years that will mark the thirtieth anniversary of India's diplomatic relations with all Central Asian states. India also needs to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the founding of the Mughal Empire and the occasion should send a good diplomatic message nationally and internationally.

Presidents of all the five Central Asian countries and also Afghanistan could be invited to the Summit which could be inaugurated by the Prime Minister of India. The meaning and significance of this lies in the fact that:

- It would be for the first time that leaders of all the States and India will meet in the heart of Central Asia to invoke the legacy of the Mughals;
- The event will put in contrast the Pakistani policy thrust of pursuing its sectarian/Islamic agenda for the region. It will also serve to glaringly contrast our initiative with the militaristic and economic goals being pursued by Russia, China and the US;
- Since the whole region is a critical strategic lynchpin in our security policy, the event will also serve to signal the outlines of our multifaceted policy approach for Central Asia anchored in shared strategic interest. The event will also help to showcase our soft-power and the idea of promoting Asian knowledge cooperation;
- India should also simultaneously hold a string of cultural events throughout the region; for example, on Mughal culture, art, painting as also on Sufi traditions;
- Perhaps even less well-known is the fact that Indian movies had been, since the Soviet days, a powerful instrument and the object of citizen diplomacy. Bollywood continues to captivate audiences and maintains popular perceptions of India among

masses in the region. This remains a huge asset and a powerful point of contact that could potentially facilitate speedy Indian access into the region.

Evidently, cultural diplomacy can still play a useful role in building India's ties with Central Asian states. It is high time that we learnt also from China and used the opportunities available for transforming India's global outlook. The impact is likely to be huge that would entail major goodwill for India in the region besides reinforcing the natural historic and cultural connections between India and Central Asia.

### **Sufism: Promoting Islamic Soft Power**

Clearly, the issues relating to religion are getting more complex even in Central Asia. It seems religious revival is getting embedded into the nation-building process, especially with State and national identity, something which would be difficult to address easily.

The spectre of radicalism and religious propaganda through the use of social media seems to be growing in the region, especially among the younger population. For example, the IS has proven its ability to mobilise support from across linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries by using cyber technology. The countries are concerned about the recruitment of foreign fighters, the presence of terrorist financing networks, and spread of extremist ideologies and jihadi literature.

Worried about how to deal with these challenges, many countries are in the midst of changing their counterterrorism policy which is to shift away from a purely operations-centred<sup>10</sup> (curative) focus, to adopt a more comprehensive de-radicalisation process (preventive) approach as an effective means to combat terrorism and violent extremism. Also underlying the fact that since the operation-centric military pursuits against terror are unable to mitigate the terror incidents, many Asian states have the choice to explore other options including re-energising or promoting the traditional value-based religious practices amongst Islamic societies. The objective

is to shift the gravity away from fundamentalist Islam towards the gentler and moderate version of Islam.

Such a broader counter-terror approach to prevent individuals and groups taking the extremist path and committing violence has been in practice with varying success in a number of countries. For example, within Central Asia, efforts have been made to find solutions within societies by re-energising and promoting their value-based local practices. In fact, some countries in the region have been expanding their coordination and communication efforts and religious practices amongst Islamic societies. The good thing is that Kazakhstan, for example, has been regularly hosting inter-faith dialogues and summits where different religious groups, civil societies and government officials constantly interact and share their ideas and best practices to maintain harmony amongst societies.

Uzbekistan has also changed its policy by engaging prominent religious figures like Hayrulla Hamidov to counter IS recruitment and deflate public responses to IS messaging and propaganda. It seems the tactics is likely to be more successful than the past strategies of hunting down operatives, arresting and eliminating them. Kyrgyzstan has been continuing with the old tough measures of imprisoning popular religious figures as was done in the case of Imam Rashot Kamalov who is facing charges of inciting religious hatred and disseminating extremist material.<sup>11</sup>

Increased cooperation between independent religious figures and states is being considered as a useful methodology, but for it to be more affective at the grassroots, the governments are required to be less restrictive on religious freedom and discourse, which is perhaps missing in Central Asia.

It is well known that religious freedom and the right to worship is freely practiced in India. However, against the dark shadows of violence and the war of hatred unleashed by the IS, India too has intensified its de-radicalisations efforts in conjunction with religious institutions and civil societies. Among others things, India has recently made a fresh effort for promoting its long-practiced traditional Sufi Islam which may serve as an antidote to growing fundamentalist Islam.

India held the World Sufi Forum (WSF) that was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March 2016.<sup>12</sup> For the first time, WSF attracted the world's major Sufi leaders, including Egypt's Grand Mufti, Shawki Ibrahim Abdel-Karim Allam, Shaykh Hashimuddin Al-Gaylani of Baghdad, Dewan Ahmed Masood Chishti of Pakistan, and Syed Minhaj-ur-Rahman of Bangladesh. The delegates gathered from 20 countries, including from conflict-stricken nations like Iraq and Syria, as also other countries like Turkey, Egypt, the UK, US, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia and Central Asian countries.<sup>13</sup>

The Forum focused on “de-radicalization, cessation of fanatic ideologies and the taming of extremist fringes and religio-fascist cults” that are engaged in religious misinterpretations to justify violence and intolerance. It is in line with appropriating India's long-preserved tradition of Sufi Islam.

Sufism is a mystical way of approaching Islam, a tradition based on a syncretic culture borne out of the trends in Zoroastrianism, Manicheanism, Nestorianism, Buddhism and Hinduism practices. It originated against the Arabs paying greater attention to materialistic values. Sufism stresses on humanistic values and the main goal is to seek inner peace (*tasawwuf*). Unlike Wahhabism that preaches extremism and calls for jihad to create Caliphate, Sufism professes postulancy, meditation and attainment of truth.

It presents the gentler and tolerant form of Islam. More than 65 per cent of the 145 million Sunni Muslims in India are believed to be practicing Sufi Islam that is divided into four major schools of the Chishti, Qadri, Suhrawardi and Naqshabandi order. The Sufi followers venerate Saints and worship at graves (*dargahs*). The practice is rooted in local values and traditions. Sufism continues to play a key role in sustaining India's plural culture and serves as an affective firewall against the spread of ‘*Takfirism*’ (ultra-Wahhabism) that sow discords within Islam and outside. The former US counterterrorism Coordinator, Daniel Benjamin, described India as “one of the most amazing and encouraging stories in the coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims”.<sup>14</sup>

One glaring fact is that India, despite having the world's second-largest Muslim population, has found that only a minuscule proportion of its citizens have joined the IS. They too have been arrested. In contrast, thousands have been recruited even from developed European countries.

Taking a cue from India, it is also necessary to distinguish between the IS and traditional Islam in Central Asia. Like in the Indian subcontinent, Sufism is also rooted in Central Asia's local culture. Sufism is widespread in the region and its major Sufi orders include Kubrawiya, Naqshbandi (Uzbekistan), Qadriya (Ferghana), Yassavi (Kazakhstan), Hamdani (Tajikistan) and many others.

In Afghanistan, the Sufi lineages and traditions had long been obliterated under the onslaught of Wahhabi extremism propagated by Pakistani and Saudi zealots for decades; what they collectively produced is the Taliban which is there amidst us. The same pattern has been enforced in Central Asia as well after the Soviet collapse, which has threatened to destroy the legacy of Central Asian Sufi tradition.

However, it is never too late to reinvigorate the tradition in Central Asia. India should be able to share its experience and join Russia, the European Union and others to restore the local variant of Central Asian Islam so as to counter the Wahhabi and Salafi zealots bent on imposing their version of fundamentalist Islam.

## Notes

1. Jen-kun Fu, "Reassessing a 'New Great Game' between India and China in Central Asia", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 8 (1), 2010, pp. 17-22.
2. Simon Shen, "Great Power Politics: India's Absence from Ideological Energy Diplomacy in Central Asia", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 8 (1), 2010, pp. 95-110.
3. Elaheh Koolae and Masoud Imani-Kalesar, "India's Energy Security Strategy Towards the Caspian Sea Region", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, 8 (1), 2010, pp. 83-94.
4. Simon Shen, note 2.
5. India, in the longer run, is expected to have better presence in Central

- Asia. As Jen-kun Fu has noted “India, it is thus far experiencing limited success in its attempt to promote its own geopolitical and economic interests in the region. However, India’s presence and influence in Central Asia [will] grow as potentially local leaders would eventually seek better relations with India, not only for economic purposes, but as a means to diversify security relations so that India could act as an additional geopolitical counterweight within the region.”
6. P. Stobdan, “India and Kazakhstan Should Share Complementary Objectives”, *Strategic Analysis*, 33 (1), January 2009.
  7. “India and the world - India’s Soft Power Advantage”, (October 10, 2009) at <http://indiangeopolitics.blogspot.com/2009/10/indias-soft-power-advantage.html>. Accessed on March 30, 2017.
  8. The ICCR has opened Indian Cultural Centres in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.
  9. The author mooted the first idea for a university in 2010. Read P. Stobdan, “India, Buddhism and Geopolitics in Central Asia: Regaining Centrality”, IDSA Policy Brief, June 25, 2010. The proposal was approved at the highest level by the Government in 2011, but the project never saw light at the end.
  10. Jacob Olidort, “The Game Theory of Terrorism- How ISIS Radicalizes Others”, *Foreign Affairs*, December 10, 2015 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-12-10/game-theory-terrorism>. Accessed on June 20, 2016.
  11. Peter Leonard, “Kyrgyzstan: Trial Marks Escalation in Religious Crackdown” at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74671>. Accessed on August 13, 2015.
  12. [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2016-03-18/news/71631038\\_1\\_sufism-prime-minister-narendra-modi-terror](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2016-03-18/news/71631038_1_sufism-prime-minister-narendra-modi-terror) Also read the full speech of Prime Minister released by PIB on March 17, 2016 at <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/pmreleases.aspx?mincode=3>.
  13. <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-world-sufi-forum-rejects-all-forms-of-terrorism-urges-govt-to-revive-sufism-2191926>. Accessed on March 20, 2016.
  14. Quoted by Uday Mahurkar, “What is PM Modi’s game plan in making Sufism the antidote to fundamentalist Islam?”, *India Today*, March 23, 2016 at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/narendra-modi-world-sufi-forum-islam/1/626522.html>. Accessed on March 23, 2016.

## 22. Meeting Future Challenges

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The situation in Central Asia has undergone a sweeping change since 9/11. The region became a pivotal theatre for war against terrorism that enhanced its importance internationally. Since its reappearance many suitors have been engaged in reshaping the region while also seeking affinity, proximity and political legitimacy.

The five states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) have undergone painful and complex nation-building processes, which are far from complete. Their political and socio-economic structures continue to remain frozen in a Soviet past. The underlying weaknesses of these countries therefore have made the world outside, including India, to shore up their independence and assist them in developing into stable modernizing countries. At the same time, any major political transitions would require a generational change.

In the coming years, the region is likely to become the centre of economic, political and military power play. The great powers are following multiple policies to gain their toehold in Central Asia. Broadly, they use financial measures and trade incentives to pursue energy security and regional security cooperation measures.

Russia has traditionally been the biggest regional player but its influence in the region is gradually waning. The vacuum is largely being filled by aggressive Chinese footprints in Central Asia. The contenders for the region include the Islamic forces, including political Islam. As the US and NATO forces withdraw from Afghanistan, the region is a potential threat from Islamic extremism including from the IS.

The West seems worried about the political uncertainty in Central Asia stemming from the succession issue, Russia's reassertion, and the rising threat of Islamic extremism to the region. All these are likely to provide specific reasons if not the pretext for the US to rethink its Central Asia strategy.

As suggested above, India's security concerns were inextricably linked to the turbulence in Central Asia, especially in the context of Pakistan and the instability in Afghanistan. Therefore, India had to keep its focus on the region.

In the past, the Central Asian states had followed the Indian line of thinking and had supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. However, during Taliban rule in Afghanistan, the regional terrorist groups operating in Central Asia and Kashmir have found themselves interconnected through the forces based in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Since 9/11, Pakistan assumed an important role in the foreign policies of all the Central Asian states, especially in the context of their fight against the forces of extremism backed by the Taliban. Pakistan's ability to use terrorism as an instrument of policy has made the local regimes acquiescent to Islamabad. Moreover, Islamabad displayed its own ambition to play a role in Central Asia along the lines of Muslim identity, which has subsequently lost steam due to inherent shortcomings especially after 9/11. Yet, Pakistan, primarily driven by its enmity with India, continued to push its extremist agenda in Central Asia. Within Central Asia, a possible future linkage between energy resources and Islamic forces posed a serious concern for India – a clear indication that the region will occupy India's attention vis-à-vis its security concerns, for a long time.

### **Policy Challenges Ahead**

While future policy choices are difficult to predict the evolving developments in the region could cause concerns for India as well. India needs to quickly recognise the changes, challenges and opportunities in this region. Unless India bolsters its position, it

will be relegated to the periphery of Eurasian politics. The Indian leadership should be aware of these potential threats.

While looking at the existing hard reality a new step is needed to make India's relationship with Central Asia more meaningful. The big question is how India plays the rebalancing game in Central Asia through diplomacy and cooperation rather than competition. For example, the Russia factor is still very important for pursuit of any policy in the region. So far, India has not coordinated sufficiently with Russia on issues arising out of economic developments in the region. Both India and Russia have common stakes and it is time to take up joint economic projects in the region.

On a serious note, it also needs to be underlined that the Indian and Chinese interests historically converged in Central Asia. In the past, the rationale behind the Chinese and Indian historical campaigns, including the fabled Silk Road and Spice Route traversing through Central Asia and reaching Europe, provided economic sustenance and political stability. Both India and China should recognise the non-conflicting nature of India-China links in Central Asia. Xi Jinping is revitalising the ancient Silk Route through which Indian goods and culture spread to the East. Any China-India congruity along the hard reality of shared history, geography, and economic resurgence could still spring surprises just as it happened in Europe. If India and China make a calibrated move to work together in Afghanistan, the outcome could be more harmonizing than conflicting.

It is, therefore, imperative that India now must lay the framework for an enduring policy goal in Central Asia. However, before chalking out a new policy, India must try to alter the current practices of regional economic diplomacy that often lead to an atmosphere of disappointment.

Conceptually speaking, this stems from India's approach of not encouraging an interdependent model of cooperation. Any policy that does not result in creating interdependency inevitably becomes unsustainable for regional economic relations in the longer run. Instead such a model invariably brings an element of unpredictability

leading to strains in bilateral relationships. This has been seen in India's ties with the South Asian countries.

So far, India's Central Asia policy falls within the framework of its development assistance programme pursued with the idea of assisting the less developed countries in areas such as capacity-building and human resource development, information technology, pharmaceuticals and health care, small and medium enterprises and entrepreneurship development, etc.

Such a policy approach, pursued ostensibly to meet its strategic goals and ambitions, has certainly gained a high degree of success in some African and Asian countries that were once parts of former colonial powers. However, in the case of Central Asia, the countries having been parts of a former super power state, have already gone through the process of modernisation and industrialisation. In fact, the problems here stem from a systemic collapse and dislocation of economic structures. Thus, in the context of Central Asia, India's general policy of "assistance" becomes a little opaque and does not entail enduring results either for the donor or for the recipients.

Such a discrepancy also effects India's image – as a country unwilling to forge a constructive cooperative partnership. In turn, they cause confusion among people including policy makers, traders, and businesspersons. Consequently, they lead to sharp conflicts and a sense of insecurity vis-à-vis China's growth and influence.

Policy challenges also come from India's inability to match the Chinese regional cooperation schemes presented in various conceptual ways.<sup>1</sup> India and China are theoretically noted as comparative economic powerhouses, capable of setting paradigms for a new Asian economic order. However, the new Asian economic order has already been shaped, primarily by China and the United States. Countries like Vietnam, Japan and others, which talk about joining hands with India are in fact already integrated with the Chinese or Western economies. It is time that India recognises this reality.

As the second largest power in Asia, India should integrate with the economies of the rest of Asia rather than struggle to find

a model for itself. This is only possible if India pursues a two-way partnership with the countries in the region. India, therefore, needs to adopt a fresh foreign economic policy that may help create a web of economic interdependence with other countries and regional groups. China pursues such a model while creating a network of economic and infrastructural activities spreading across the Asian and Eurasian continents. China's new OBOR initiatives essentially underpin a new approach for regional integration, which is finding more acceptability all over Asia including Central Asia.

In trying to find a corollary to the "Look-East Policy" this author had conceptualised a "Connect Central Asia" policy as a blueprint for seizing opportunities in Eurasia. The policy was officially launched in June 2012 but this formulation too lost traction and failed to gain currency mainly due to bureaucratic technicalities and policy inaction. Similarly, this author also initiated the India-Central Asia Track II Dialogue mechanism for sharing perceptions and broadening understanding at the level of policy makers, business leaders and academia. To be sure, Indian liberal-democratic values, its decades of experience in dealing with multi-cultural settings as against the status quo mindset were much desired among many sections in Central Asia. Therefore, the framework for dialogue was meant to expand the range of interface. Unfortunately, the dialogue framework too has been reduced to an annual academic exercise under the aegis of the ICWA.

The economies of Central Asian states are fast getting vested in the Chinese model of regional integration. However, some credible trade study reports suggest that the Indian and Central Asian economies have high potential to being complimentary to each other. As the 'Make in India' campaign picks up momentum, imports of raw material from Central Asia would become critical for India. On the other hand, Central Asian states are likely to find it profitable to import quality goods from India. This changing situation, according to study conducted by the Institute of Economic Growth (IEG), would lead to a huge potential in trade between India and Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> The growing trade pattern with Kazakhstan is pointing to this

fact. It is possible to develop a similar pattern with other countries of Central Asia as well.

For India, a strong economic partnership with Central Asian countries is of high strategic importance both for political and energy requirements to sustain its high economic growth. In the existing volatile global economy, there is a great opportunity for India to deepen its economic and trade ties with the region. The major regional powers are already trying to take advantage of Central Asia's location on the crossroads of Eurasia. As mentioned earlier, China has already unveiled its Silk Route project to capture that space.

The future of India's economic ties with Central Asia would, therefore, depend on how it finds new ways to establish interdependency in the Asian architecture. Of course, this will not amount to sacrificing strategic autonomy. The growing Russia-China economic relationship is a case in point. Importantly, India also needs strong initiative to be a part of the existing regional groupings like the SCO to complement rather than seek alternatives to Chinese networks. In fact, it would work to India's advantage to influence the course of regional economic order from the inside rather than from outside. It would be a waste of time and resources to set its own model.

Certainly, India is at a disadvantage, as the space that connects us with Eurasia is beset by serious problems and overcoming them is not easy. Therefore, any large-scale economic engagement with the region will face difficulties. However, the new regional forums taking shape in the region like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) could offer opportunities for India to restore some of the lost linkages with this strategically vital region.

India needs to step up trade, economic and energy linkages through joint ventures. In fact, the Central Asian energy sector remains relatively closed for Indian investors. Significant engagement by the private sector is absent. Indian companies need to invest in these two potentially lucrative sectors of energy and mining.

India should do everything possible to reap the benefits of the riches of Kazakhstan. Indian energy companies should invest in downstream processing and refining of crude oil to manufacture petrochemicals and other related products. India should also invest in setting up downstream production facilities instead of exporting raw materials out of the region through expensive pipelines. This could help the region overcome its transport bottlenecks. The suggestion could differ from those seeking to pump out Central Asia's riches for gratifying themselves. India should convey that its developmental partnership with the region is not a foray for resources. In fact, Kazakhstan's desire for diversifying energy exports would correspond with India's quest for diversifying imports. The two countries need to launch an inter-dependent "energy community" of suppliers and consumers.

While it is important to pursue connectivity through the over-land route through Iran and Afghanistan like the Chabahar or via the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), logically, any connectivity to Eurasia should be sought directly through the northern parts of India following the traditional India-Central Asia route that went across the Himalayan passes and the Xinjiang steppes. Again, the logic is not about accessing Eurasia for the sake of it, but is more about seeking an interlocking of regional economic integration with India's northern neighbours including China. In fact, it may be the only option which is realistically attainable and worth pursuing.

Security is also the most important consideration for India. The region could become a new arc of instability. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is heavily recruiting in Central Asia as more and more Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz are joining the ranks. China is concerned with new developments but it has taken tough measures to prevent threats emanating from extremism. India has set up bilateral-level structures to engage with the region on the security front. But as a full member of the SCO, India will have to start building security cooperation with them from the ground up. With the situation in Afghanistan remaining unpredictable, a common

strategy with the Central Asian countries to tackle extremism and terrorism is needed.

India needs to identify two big potential countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to be the linchpins for promoting its influence in Eurasia. The significance of deepening ties with them is necessary for counterbalancing China. India's potential role of playing the balancer in the regional power game and contributing to regional stability is well recognised. In fact, India enjoys a ready psychological acceptance in the region, as compared to the utter distrust felt towards China. Therefore, India needs to involve the people of this region in the evolving relationship. The existing India-Central Asia Dialogue should be upgraded qualitatively to a new level so that constant communication with important stakeholders in the region can be maintained.

The prevailing environment is favourable for India's active participation in Central Asia, though the windows of opportunity may quickly close, as others become more established players.

### **The Way Forward**

India has been grossly and perhaps consciously overlooking its interests in Central Asia, which traditionally formed a 'buffer zone' against external aggression. To a large degree, India has already paid the price for this in the case of Afghanistan, Tibet, Myanmar and Xinjiang. Regional complexities are likely to undergo a major change with the major powers stepping in and around India's northern flanks. As an emerging power, India ought to be taking note of the fast-changing strategic scenario and clearly define and devise a meaningful response along the following lines:

- A rising and confident India should launch a new policy initiative in the framework of Central Asia + India to raise the current level of bilateralism to a greater regional dialogue on an institutionalised basis. This must be qualitatively a new step. While the cultural and technical exchanges and similar image-building activities must continue, India must look at the hard reality to concretise its multifaceted goals. The new policy outlook could do well if

India recognises the hard reality of envisioning a partnership with China, Pakistan and Afghanistan to access Central Asia. Such an approach will complement India's economic integration process with South, West and Southeast Asia. Besides, it will generate regional stability and promote closer India-Central Asia cooperation in regional and international fora.

- The policy outlook should seek to offer a new orientation of what India could offer to Central Asia while articulating persuasively, (i) The techno-economic-security potential of India, which could be accessed in a cooperative, mutually beneficial partnership; (ii) India's modernising and stabilising influence, its liberal-democratic values, building civil societies, managing pluralistic structure and ethno-religious harmony; (iii) The need for an inter-dependent "energy community" of suppliers and consumers, as their desire for diversifying energy export routes corresponds with India's quest for diversifying imports; (iv) Willingness for a partnership in setting up downstream production facilities instead of exporting raw materials out of the region through expensive pipelines; (v) India for them will also be a countervailing factor vis-à-vis China.
- The Central Asia + India dialogue process would complement the objectives of other organisations like the SCO, the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and others. This will complement the wider Asian economic integration process currently underway through the multilateral institutions of cooperation.
- While India may complement the objectives of others, it could also play a positive role in moderating their aims. The SCO, for example, is indubitably expanding beyond Central Asia, but it may face several challenges ahead, such as: (i) the SCO's current popularity is mainly related to a shared perception on internal insecurity (threat to regimes); (ii) The atmosphere of lurking suspicion may grow with Pakistan and Iran joining as observers; (iii) Iran's future, Pakistan's role and Afghan instability could

pose several challenges to the SCO; (iv) Pakistan's proliferation activities and WMD possibly falling into the hands of fundamentalists could cause serious concern; (v) a fervent anti-US stance will impede the SCO, and if it shapes into any politico-military alliance, some members could opt out; (vi) the prospect for a strong opposition upsurge in Uzbekistan in the medium term with Western support, should not be ruled out. India's engagement with the Uzbek regime requires closer attention.

- India's initiative could provide an abstemious effect on the region, but to be realistic, India cannot match the leverages enjoyed by Russia and China, which are more intrinsic in terms of security interest, ideological convergence and economic complementary. However, India stands to gain a greater say in the SCO by addressing particularly the security issues including terrorism. India will have a greater role to ensure that the SCO does not shape into a military bloc, which is detrimental to regional peace and security.
- India's initiative must factor the regional underpinnings. It must include rebuilding of Afghanistan. The improvement in Kazakh-Uzbek relations is a positive sign and it should help India to pursue a substantive goal in the region. Afghanistan's entry<sup>3</sup> into the CAREC, SAARC, and creation of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group would have a positive influence for stabilizing Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>
- India's initiative must also include the factor of impeding any possible role of the US or Pakistan to ever become arbitrator of future changes, singly or jointly, in Central Asia, particularly in (a) restricting the SCO's influence, (b) infusing Islamic fundamentalist tendencies for the long-term containment of Russian, Indian or Chinese influence. NATO's entry into Afghanistan, which is rather in proximity to J&K, is another factor that needs monitoring. While India foresees no real differences with US policy in the region, it calls for continuous caution that America refrains from establishing cohabitation with the Islamic forces.

- The Central Asia + India initiative needs to be framed in a broader context and should be consonant with India's Pakistan and China policy. The exposure of J&K to Central Asia must become part of India's initiatives. This can be done by restoring the old frontier diplomacy beyond the Himalayas. India needs to factor-in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in India's Central Asia calculus. XUAR is centrally located in the Eurasian continent. It has borders with Kazakhstan, Russia, Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India. XUAR directly borders with J&K. In fact, India was a legitimate Central Asian player until the 1950s. Until 1954, India was an active player and its Consulate in Kashgar actively conducted trade across the Ladakh-Xinjiang frontier. The SCO and also China's "go-west" mentality is transforming the region as a major hub of trans-Eurasian connectivity and cooperation. India should aim at joining this network and make J&K a springboard for its entry into the region.<sup>5</sup> The process could inevitably spur economic prosperity, as well as help diminish the current level of the political standoff in the state. The Governor of XUAR, during his visit to India (2004) proposed to start flights from Urumchi to Delhi.<sup>6</sup> The matter needs be pursued further to improve India's air connectivity with landlocked Central Asia.
- While Uzbekistan, undoubtedly, is the key to Central Asia's overall regional dynamics, it is Kazakhstan and its potential that should deserve India's immediate attention. The country, the largest in Central Asia, is of key interest to every major world power. It has emerged as the most prosperous, most stable, most secular (despite Muslim majority population), most free economy and most democratic in the entire post-Soviet space. Kazakhstan's potential oil reserves are on par with Kuwait that will make it the world's major alternative energy supplier in the next ten years. The country is a factor of regional stability. Its Constitution proclaims adherence to the democratic and secular system, rule of law and rights to individual freedom. It shares a strong affinity with India in recognising ideological, political,

linguistic and ethnic diversity. It promotes harmony among over 100 nationalities. Given the kind of stakes in the energy contest and its proximity to China, Russia and the Islamic world, the rest of the world may take Kazakhstan very seriously in the years ahead.

- During the past few years, bilateral relations between India and Kazakhstan have acquired a dynamic character with increase in economic, political and cultural contacts. Kazakhstan shares a close affinity with India in terms of political and economic commitment, shared values of secularism, democracy and plural structure. Both share full commitment to fight against terrorism and the Joint Working Group (JWG) on counter-terrorism could form the basis for cooperation in the SCO. Nazarbayev's plans for regional integration are similar to those of India, as well as in conformity with the process currently underway in Asia for the creation of the Asian Union. All these shared values plus the imperative for cooperation in the field of energy should become the cornerstone of India's partnership with Kazakhstan.
- Bilateral Indo-Kazakh trade has reached over \$1 billion but falls short of the available potential. Indian entrepreneurs should take advantage of its free market regulations and a stable government. Opportunities are plenteous in areas such as modernisation of refineries, services exports, pharmaceutical, IT software, biotechnology, banking, health and education services, defence industries, agriculture farming, textiles, etc. Like the Chinese, India should seek agriculture land on lease from Kazakhstan for commercial farming. The country has a number of the Soviet-time industrial units either lying abandoned or under-utilised. Lakshmi Mittal's midas touch on the Karmet steel plant in Temirtau is a good example for what India could emulate at a bigger scale. India should tap its abundant mineral resources once the International North-South Transport Corridor is completed.
- While India should continue to strive for a significant share in the Central Asia energy resources pie, it should explore the

opportunity to participate in other sectors of energy as well, such as energy management and the infrastructure sector. A lot more opportunities exist in these sectors provided technical difficulties including the labour regulations are sorted out. Half a dozen Indian engineering companies and business firms have already found their footings in the Caspian and Kazakh oil fields. About a thousand Indians are already working in the Aksai and Karachaganak-based Consolidated Construction Company (CCC) and the SAIPEM Company, undertaking pipeline construction. Similarly, India's Punj Lloyd has been participating in a number of pipeline construction projects. India needs to diversify its interest and should do what it can in terms of capacity.

- Nazarbayev has never been opposed to giving India a favourable strategic presence in offshore projects but for New Delhi's reluctance in playing its potential cards assertively. Nazarbayev makes it clear that only those countries will have access to Kazakhstan's energy resources, uranium mines and mineral deposits which are willing to play his geopolitics. The matrix of Indo-Kazakh relations is already rich – it is essential that they be translated into a framework and given a strategic dimension for making it as the linchpin of India's policy goals in Central Asia.
- It is time that India extends an invitation to a Central Asian leader to be the chief guest for the Republic Day celebrations. This gesture will surely go as a mark of India's respect to Central Asian independence which is still at a nascent stage.
- Similarly, the prospect for cooperation in defence is enormous. India already has a significant achievement in building interlocking interests with military industrial complexes such as Dastan (Kyrgyzstan) and Kiro Mashzavod (Kazakhstan) and the Uzbek Aviation Company. The Indian air base at Ayni in Tajikistan operating since 2002 obviously added a new dimension to the quality of defence cooperation with Tajikistan. Serious efforts are needed to build a vision for long-term defence cooperation with these countries. One major problem that

would remain relates to future R&D programmes for those equipments. Secondly, India's cooperation with states does not have a strategic component, for instance vis-à-vis China. Therefore, defence cooperation with these countries should involve a comprehensive strategy with the eventual goal of serving India's long-term strategic interests.

- India needs to counter these portents with strategic foresight. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan like India share long borders with China. These countries, in recent years, have resolved their longstanding territorial disputes with China. Besides learning from their experiences on border negotiations, it would also be pertinent to factor-in these three Central Asian states in its China policy.
- The internal situation notwithstanding, Central Asia has become a recurring subject of geopolitical and economic significance for regional and global players. It particularly entailed major powers seeking direct military presence and jockeying for energy concession in the region. US activism in the region had invited responses from Russia in an area it considers as part of its traditional sphere of influence. After Putin returned to power, Russia formally returned to its old garrisons with new military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. On the economic front, Russian and Chinese oil giants have already secured long-term energy contracts in the region. China has been particularly active pushing its energy interests.
- From the viewpoint of policy implications, Uzbekistan, home to half of Central Asia's population and the hub of Islamic culture, would remain the epicenter for future change in the region. Karimov had failed to distinguish between nationalism and Islamism. As a result, even the peaceful form of Islam has suffered under his policies. Moreover, the country borders with each Central Asian state, like India in South Asia, and as such suffers from intrinsic regional problems. Therefore, Uzbekistan would remain one of the most unpredictable and problematic areas of great power conflict and would require close watching.

- With the demise of Islam Karimov, a fresh round of jockeying among major powers would begin for enhancing their influence in the region with strategic and economic interests on their minds. The fear is that an upsurge in Islamist activities in Uzbekistan would pose a threat to the entire region. The IMU has linkages in Afghanistan, Chechens in Russia, IS in Syria and the Uyghurs in China. Uzbekistan is likely to revert to Russia's fold as the main ally in the region.
- From India's point of view both Islamists and nationalists in Central Asia have not shown any antipathy towards India so far. On the contrary, the nostalgia for India among a majority of the traditional people runs far deeper than the Communists who share no clear commitments other than seek their own interests. It is important therefore to bear in mind that India is not in a position to infuriate the majority population or groups in the region. Instead, India needs to build meaningful contacts with all sections based on its cultural and historical relationship. The least India can do is to learn from its lessons in Afghanistan.
- History has proved that Central Asia has always been a part of India's zone of strategic influence and interest. The people of the region have always looked towards India with fondness even while they were under the Soviet system or when they became part of Russian dominance. The time has come when India should no longer shy away from claiming its historical and cultural rights and responsibilities in Central Asia.
- Finally, the aforementioned points impinging on India require specific treatment and in-depth analysis. Some of India's traditional interests could be re-harnessed through rigorous research activities. It is necessary for India to evolve its own perspective and understanding and to broaden its operational scope in Central Asia. India has a good number of intellectual and institutional resources capable of reviving the lost linkages.

## Notes

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4. Protocol on establishment of SCO-Afghanistan contact group was signed on November 4, 2005 at Beijing. [http://www.sectSCO.org/news\\_detail.asp?id=649&LanguageID=2](http://www.sectSCO.org/news_detail.asp?id=649&LanguageID=2). Accessed on December 4, 2015.
5. P. Stobdan, "India-China Cooperation in Central Asia: Evolving a Look-North Policy", *Security and Society*, 2 (1), Summer 2005, Centre for Strategic and Regional Studies, University of Jammu.
6. The Governor of Xinjiang, Ismail Tiliwaldi visited India in October 2004 to discuss the feasibility of laying a natural-gas pipeline from Xinjiang to India. Tiliwaldi expressed interest in a land link with India. India and Xinjiang have identified four areas for potential cooperation— agriculture and food processing, traditional medicine and herbs, energy and oil production, and tourism.

## **Annexure 1**

### **TejKadam: India – Kazakhstan Joint Statement**

At the invitation of Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of the Republic of India, paid an official visit to the Republic of Kazakhstan on July 7-8, 2015.

During the visit, Prime Minister Modi met with President Nazarbayev and Prime Minister Massimov. The talks were held in a warm and friendly atmosphere in a spirit of mutual understanding, which traditionally characterise India-Kazakhstan relations.

President Nazarbayev and Prime Minister Modi noted the strategic partnership established during the State visit of President Nazarbayev to India in January 2009, based on mutually beneficial cooperation in various spheres and a shared desire for regional and international peace and stability.

Leaders of both countries agreed that the visit of Prime Minister Modi would serve to expand the strategic partnership for the benefit of people of both countries.

Prime Minister Modi congratulated President Nazarbayev on his 75th birth Anniversary and noted the impressive all-round socio-economic development and progress achieved by Kazakhstan, as well as its important role in promoting regional and international peace and security.

Prime Minister Modi congratulated the people of Kazakhstan on Astana Day, the 550th Anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate and the 20th Anniversary of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Prime Minister Modi underlined the growing political and economic role of Kazakhstan, which contributes to stability and development in the region.

President Nazarbayev noted the importance and role of India in regional and global affairs and appreciated its contribution to peace and stability as well as the positive influence of the rapidly growing economy of India on the world economy. In this, President Nazarbayev sees a special role of the Indian leader in inspiring global confidence in India.

Prime Minister Modi highly appreciated the initiative of President Nazarbayev on institutionalisation of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, which has emerged as an important organisation strengthening peace, stability and security in Asia and noted Kazakhstan's efforts on transformation of the CICA to the Organisation on Security and Development in Asia. President Nazarbayev expressed gratitude for India's continued support of CICA's activity and contribution to the Conference. He also appreciated

India's active support to various Kazakhstan's international initiatives, including Expo-2017.

The two Leaders welcomed the signing of an Agreement on defence and military-technical cooperation which would further widen the scope of bilateral defence cooperation including regular exchange of visits, consultations, training of military personnel, military-technical cooperation, joint exercises, special forces exchanges and cooperation in the area of UN peacekeeping operations.

The Leaders welcomed signing of the Treaty on Transfer of Sentenced Persons between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of India and the Memorandum of Understanding in the field of physical culture and sports.

Prime Minister Modi noted the new economic policy 'NurlyZhol' (Bright Path) as well as five institutional reforms initiated by President Nazarbayev. In his turn President Nazarbayev highlighted several economic programmes initiated by Prime Minister Modi, including the "Make in India" initiative to transform India into a manufacturing hub.

The Leaders expressed satisfaction at the gradual increase in bilateral trade in recent years, and agreed to work closely to expand bilateral trade by addressing structural impediments between the two countries.

Both Leaders welcomed the organisation of Business Forum with participation of leading business CEOs of both countries as well as creation of a Joint Business council during the visit, which provided a platform for renewed cooperation between the businesses of the two countries. The Leaders noted that the signing of an Agreement between the Chamber of Foreign Commerce of Kazakhstan and Federation of Chambers of Commerce of India (FICCI) will serve to promotion of business linkages. The leaders also emphasized the importance of closer interactions between investment promotion agencies of the two countries.

The Leaders welcomed signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between JSC «Kazxnex Invest» and JSC «Invest India», which includes a "Road Map" on Trade, Economic and Investment Cooperation, which would identify concrete projects in various sectors and assist in efficient implementation of projects in both the countries to activate bilateral trade and economic relations.

The Leaders noted the successful 12th Meeting of the Kazakhstan-India Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) on Trade, Economic, Scientific, Technological, and Cultural Cooperation in New Delhi on 16-17 June 2015, where new initiatives and proposals to strengthen cooperation in different sectors between countries have been explored. The Leaders called on the IGC to monitor implementation of the understandings reached,

including through regular meetings of the various Joint Working Groups at the official level, as well as consultations between foreign offices of both countries on political, consular and visa matters.

Both Leaders welcomed the establishment of Joint Study Group between India and the Eurasian Economic Union on the feasibility of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The Leaders acknowledged that the proposed FTA would create an enabling framework for expanding economic linkages between Kazakhstan and India.

The Leaders agreed to collaborate closely in the framework of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as well as through bilateral initiatives to improve surface connectivity between two countries and the wider region. They welcomed recent initiatives by India to operationalise the INSTC, including the hosting of a stakeholders conference in Mumbai on 12 June 2015. They called upon the next INSTC Council meeting to be held in India in August 2015 to take necessary decisions to facilitate usage of the corridor by traders of these countries. The Leaders agreed that the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran rail-link, operationalised in December 2014, become a linked corridor of the INSTC. The Leaders also welcomed ongoing bilateral discussions aimed at setting up a dedicated freight terminal in one of the Western sea-ports of India for trade with Kazakhstan. They hope that these initiatives will serve as the basis for enhanced economic and commercial interaction between the two countries in the days ahead. In this connection, the Parties welcomed signing of Memorandum on Mutual Understanding on Technical Cooperation in the sphere of railways between the NC “Kazakhstan TemirZholy” JSC and the Ministry of Railways of India.

The Leaders acknowledged the importance of collaboration in the hydrocarbons sector and welcomed the formal commencement of drilling of the first exploratory well in the Satpayev block which coincided with the visit. They agreed to expeditiously explore new opportunities for further joint collaboration in this sector. The Leaders further noted the agreement reached at the IGC meeting for a joint feasibility study to explore the possibility of transportation of oil and gas either through pipeline or as LNG from Kazakhstan to India.

The Leaders affirmed the importance of cooperation in the sphere of civil nuclear energy. They welcomed the signing of a Contract NC “KazAtomProm” JSC and NPCIL for a renewed long term supply of natural uranium to India to meet its energy requirements.

The Leaders welcomed the signing of Plan of Action between JSC “KazAgroInnovation” and Indian Council of Agricultural Research for cooperation in the field of agriculture.

The Leaders noted that pharmaceuticals, mining, textiles, information technology, banking, and health are promising areas for future cooperation between the two countries and agreed to extend full support to joint projects in realising potential in these areas on a mutually beneficial basis.

The Leaders welcomed the inauguration of the Kazakhstan - India-Centre of Excellence in Information and Communication Technologies at the L.N. Gumilev Eurasian National University in Astana with India's assistance. They hoped the Centre will contribute to advanced skill development in high performance computing and facilitate scientific research in Kazakhstan.

The Leaders noted the celebration of 50 years of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme and acknowledged the contribution of the ITEC programme in capacity building of nearly 1000 professionals from Kazakhstan in different sectors.

The Leaders noted efforts to enhance air connectivity between the two countries and welcomed the decision to increase the number of frequencies allotted for early operations by designated carriers between the two countries.

The Leaders acknowledged ongoing cultural exchanges in the framework of the bilateral Programme of Cooperation in the field of culture and art. They extended support for organising cultural events in each other's countries and to consider exchange of reciprocal Cultural Festivals in Kazakhstan and India. With the purpose of further strengthening cultural ties, the Leaders expressed interest in study of common historical heritage and promotion of touristic sites in Kazakhstan and India.

Prime Minister Modi thanked President Nazarbayev for supporting the UN resolution on the International Day of Yoga and successful organisation of the first International Day of Yoga on 21 June 2015 in Kazakhstan.

The two Leaders noted the broad convergence of their views on regional and international issues and their mutual support in international organisations. They emphasized that strengthening of cooperation in multilateral frameworks between Kazakhstan and India would contribute to regional and international stability and development.

The Leaders noted the rising challenge posed by terrorism in many parts of the world and in their immediate region and underlined the importance of a stable and secure environment for peaceful economic development. They agreed to continue their active engagement in the fight against terrorism and extremism including exchange of information.

In this context, they highlighted the importance of regular inter-agency consultations and meetings of the Joint Working Group on Counter-

Terrorism. The Leaders also called for early conclusion of the UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

Expressing concern at the slow progress on the UN Security Council reform, both leaders called for concrete outcomes to be achieved in the 70th anniversary year of the United Nations. They reaffirmed their commitment to Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) to comprehensively reform the Security Council including expansion in both categories of membership.

President Nazarbayev reiterated Kazakhstan's full support for India's permanent membership in an expanded UNSC as well as for India's candidature to the non-permanent seat of UNSC for the period 2021-22. Prime Minister Modi reiterated support for the candidature of Kazakhstan for the non-permanent seat of the UNSC for the period 2017-18.

Both Leaders agreed to strengthen cooperation in the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and underlined that the SCO platform would be a useful addition to ongoing bilateral and regional initiatives to expand cooperation.

The Leaders expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the official visit and shared the view that this visit has made a positive contribution towards expansion of the strategic partnership between the two countries. President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev expressed deep appreciation to Prime Minister Modi for the visit which underlines the importance which India places on the development of its relations with Kazakhstan.

Prime Minister Modi expressed his gratitude to President Nazarbayev and the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the warm hospitality extended during the visit.

Prime Minister Modi invited President Nazarbayev to visit India. The invitation was accepted with pleasure.

Astana  
July 8, 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25437/Tej\\_Kadam\\_India\\_Kazakhstan\\_Joint\\_Statement](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25437/Tej_Kadam_India_Kazakhstan_Joint_Statement), July 8, 2015.

### **List of Agreements signed with Kazakhstan**

1. Agreement on Transfer of Sentenced Persons
2. Agreement on Defence and Military – Technical Cooperation between Republic of India and Republic of Kazakhstan.
3. Memorandum of Understanding between Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports of Republic of India and Ministry of Culture and Sports of Republic of Kazakhstan on Cooperation on Physical Cultural and Sports.

4. Memorandum of Understanding between Ministry of Railways of Republic of India and the Kazakhstan TemirZholy of Republic of Kazakhstan on Technical Cooperation in the field of Railways
5. Long term contract between Department of Atomic Energy of Republic of India and JSC National atomic company “KazAtomProm’ for sale and purchase of natural uranium concentrates

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25439/List\\_of\\_Agreements\\_signed\\_during\\_the\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Kazakhstan\\_78\\_July\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25439/List_of_Agreements_signed_during_the_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Kazakhstan_78_July_2015), July 7-8, 2015.

### **Media Statement by Prime Minister in Kazakhstan**

His Excellency President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Members of the media,

am delighted to visit this beautiful country. It has been a short but a memorable and rewarding visit.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to President Nazarbayev and the people of Kazakhstan for the exceptional welcome and hospitality.

Excellency, I congratulate you once again on your 75th birthday. I wish you great health and a long life of service for your country and humanity.

Mr. President, your leadership is deeply admired. You have put Kazakhstan on the path of rapid progress. You have also played a stellar role in regional and global affairs.

I congratulate the people of Kazakhstan on the occasion of 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate and 20th anniversary of the Constitution of Kazakhstan.

I also learnt that this beautiful new capital is still celebrating Astana Day. So, this is really a good time to visit Kazakhstan. Last evening, I spoke about my vision for India’s relations with Central Asia. Kazakhstan will play a critical role in advancing this vision.

We greatly value our relationship with Kazakhstan. We have enormous synergies of markets, resources and skills for a strong bilateral relationship. We discovered remarkable convergence in our economic policies, approaches and strategies in a number of areas.

We have shared perspectives on many international issues, including regional peace, connectivity and integration; reforms in the United Nations; and, combating terrorism.

Kazakhstan is our biggest economic partner in the region. But, our relations are modest, compared to our potential. We will work together to take economic ties to a new level.

Kazakhstan was one of the first country with which we launched civil nuclear cooperation through a uranium purchase contract. We are pleased to have a much larger second contract now.

We intend to expand cooperation in other minerals, as well. Hydrocarbons is another area of high priority for us. Last evening, we launched the drilling operations for exploration in the first oil field with Indian investments in Kazakhstan.

I am pleased that President Nazarbayev responded positively to my request to consider additional mature blocks for Indian investments. We will also give priority to investment in both directions in manufacturing and infrastructure. I was very encouraged by the interaction at the business roundtable yesterday that I chaired with Prime Minister Massimov.

We expect a new roadmap for cooperation from the joint business council of our chambers of commerce and industry.

Kazakhstan's Green Bridge Vision is similar to India's ambitious plan of adding 175 GW of renewable energy in the next seven years. This is another priority area of cooperation, including in the manufacture of equipment. In addition, India will participate on a large scale in the Expo 2017 in Astana.

We will also enhance cooperation in Space and Information Technology, including their application for governance and development.

We both agree that connectivity is an important issue, but one that we will address. The International North South Transport Corridor, the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan rail link, India's interest in joining the Ashkabat Agreement on trade and transit and India's investment in Chahbahar Port in Iran will strengthen connectivity.

The joint study group on India's proposal for a Free Trade Agreement with Eurasian Economic Union is step towards our closer economic integration. Development of human resources is a priority for both countries. Yesterday, I inaugurated the India-Kazakhstan Centre of Excellence in Information & Communication Technologies at the Eurasian National University. We are pleased to have contributed a super computer from India.

Consistent with our focus on youth, we have launched a new youth exchange programme with six Kazakh universities for the next five years.

Our defence and security cooperation is an important dimension of our strategic partnership. We both want to make it stronger, including in defence manufacturing. We welcome the new Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation.

President and I agreed on the pressing need for reforms of the United Nations and its Security Council. I thank him for Kazakhstan's continued

support for India's candidature for a permanent seat in a reformed United Nation's Security Council and for a UN Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

I reiterated India's support for Kazakhstan's candidature for a non-permanent seat in the UNSC for 2017-18. I am also grateful to him and the people of Kazakhstan for the support in making the International Day of Yoga on June 21 a huge global success.

Mr. President, thank you for a very productive and pleasant visit. I feel that this visit has opened the door to a much broader and deeper relationship, including many new areas of productive cooperation.

I have extended an invitation to President Nazarbayev and look forward to receiving him in India.

Thank you

Source: [http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25438/Media\\_Statement\\_by\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_during\\_his\\_visit\\_to\\_Kazakhstan](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25438/Media_Statement_by_Prime_Minister_during_his_visit_to_Kazakhstan) July 08, 2015

## Annexure 2

### Joint Statement between Uzbekistan and India

At the invitation of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Mr. Islam Karimov, the Prime Minister of the Republic of India Mr. Narendra Modi paid an official visit to the Republic of Uzbekistan on 6-7 July 2015.

The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Prime Minister of India held friendly, substantive and constructive discussions. They reached understanding on a wide range of issues to further deepen Uzbekistan-India strategic relations, mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation in various fields, as well as international and regional issues of mutual interest.

The Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of India (hereinafter referred to as “the Sides”) reaffirmed their interest in expanding and further strengthening long-term cooperation between India and Uzbekistan, covering diverse sectors such as political ties, security, counter-terrorism, trade and investment, science and technology as well as cultural linkages. Noting that stronger cooperation between India and Uzbekistan contributed to the mutual benefit of the people of both countries and enhanced regional stability and prosperity, the Sides stated the following:

1. Welcoming the first ever visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov noted that strengthening relations with India is one of the top foreign policy priorities of Uzbekistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi emphasized that a strong strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan is a key pillar of India’s engagement with Central Asia.
2. The Sides agreed to maintain regular bilateral consultations and political dialogue through exchange of official visits at the leadership and other levels to promote mutual understanding on bilateral as well as regional and international issues. They also encouraged greater inter-parliamentary ties as well as business, cultural, educational and other linkages between India and Uzbekistan.
3. The Sides reaffirmed that their engagement was based on mutual respect for the developmental model chosen by each country in accordance with its domestic conditions and based on their national interests.
4. Noting the importance of adequate and timely responses to threats and challenges to national as well as regional security, the Sides expressed their intention to strengthen coordination between the law enforcement agencies and special services of the two countries, including under the framework of the Uzbekistan-India Joint Working Group on Counter-

- Terrorism. They also agreed to expand cooperation in the fields of defence and cyber-security.
5. The Sides noted that despite ongoing negative impact of the global financial and economic crisis, both India and Uzbekistan have sustained healthy rates of economic growth, which could enable further development of mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation between the two countries.
  6. The Sides agreed that despite growth in bilateral trade, the current volume of trade did not correspond to the potential and opportunities that exist in both countries. They agreed to take joint measures to expand and diversify the trade basket. In this context, the Sides noted the importance of promoting long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships among their business communities, companies and enterprises, and agreed to facilitate their participation in exhibitions, trade fairs, business forums and other joint business activities in Uzbekistan and India.
  7. The Sides called for further promotion of investment cooperation between the two countries. They called for partnership in creating favorable conditions for investment by Indian companies in Uzbekistan, including in the framework of the Special Economic Zones “Navoi”, “Angren” and “Jizzakh”. They noted prospects for joint investment projects in sectors such as pharmaceuticals, light industry, IT and communications.
  8. The Sides agreed to further develop mutually beneficial cooperation in transport and communications. They noted the perspectives of expanding cooperation in the field of civil aviation connectivity through direct flights between Tashkent and Indian cities. The Sides also agreed to explore various options to enhance surface connectivity between them.
  9. The Sides stressed the importance of holding regular meetings of the Uzbekistan-India Intergovernmental Commission on Trade-Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation for the implementation of various economic agreements, identification of promising areas and promotion of joint projects in various sectors of economy.
  10. The Sides noted with satisfaction the ongoing cooperation in Science and Technology, Education and Information and Communication Technologies. They highly appreciated the productive cooperation in the framework of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme (ITEC) through which the Uzbek specialists are trained at specialised training centres in India. The Sides noted with satisfaction the joint training of Uzbek specialists in information and communication technologies at the Uzbek-Indian Centre of Information Technologies, Tashkent which was modernised recently.

11. The Sides emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation in the sphere of health, medical education and pharmaceuticals and looked forward to conclude an Agreement between the Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of India on cooperation in the health sector and medical science.
12. The Sides welcomed the proposal to set up telemedicine links connecting medical institutions in Uzbekistan and India for medical consultations, exchange of experiences and teleconferences.
13. The Sides recognise that shared historical and cultural links between the two countries over the centuries provide a firm basis for the development of contemporary Uzbekistan-India relations. The Sides welcomed the signing during the visit, of a new Programme of Cultural Cooperation for the period 2015-2017, and called for its full and timely implementation to expand cultural exchanges. The Sides agreed to expand participation of creative groups of both countries in international festivals held in Uzbekistan and India.
14. The Sides recognized tourism as an important area of bilateral cooperation and agreed to implement practical measures under the framework of the bilateral Agreement on cooperation in tourism signed during the visit.
15. The Sides discussed the situation in Afghanistan and noted that establishment of peace in that country is of great significance to the security and stability of the entire region. They expressed support for a genuine Afghan-owned and Afghan-led process for peaceful reconstruction and revival of the country.
16. The Sides reaffirmed that the United Nations must play a central role in maintaining global peace and security, assisting common development and advancing international cooperation. India and Uzbekistan will continue to strengthen their mutual support and cooperation in the United Nations and other international and regional organisations. The Sides called for comprehensive reforms of the UN structures, first of all, its Security Council, including expansion in both categories of membership. Uzbekistan reaffirmed its support to India's candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council.
17. The Sides agreed to further strengthen mutual cooperation under the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.
18. The Sides expressed confidence that the understandings and agreements reached during the visit will further deepen the strategic partnership between the two countries for the well-being of their peoples and mutual prosperity. The Prime Minister of India expressed his gratitude

to the President of Uzbekistan and the Uzbek people for the warm welcome and gracious hospitality extended during the visit.

The Prime Minister of India invited the President of Uzbekistan to pay a visit to India at his convenience. The dates of the visit shall be agreed through diplomatic channels.

Tashkent  
July 06, 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25429/Joint\\_Statement\\_between\\_Uzbekistan\\_and\\_India\\_during\\_the\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_visit\\_to\\_Uzbekistan](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25429/Joint_Statement_between_Uzbekistan_and_India_during_the_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_Uzbekistan), July 6, 2015.

### **List of Agreements signed with Uzbekistan**

1. Intergovernmental Agreement on cooperation in the field of tourism.
2. Protocol on Cooperation between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Uzbekistan, and Ministry of External Affairs, Republic of India.
3. Intergovernmental Programme of Cultural Cooperation for 2015-17

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25433/List\\_of\\_Agreements\\_signed\\_during\\_the\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Uzbekistan\\_67\\_July\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25433/List_of_Agreements_signed_during_the_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Uzbekistan_67_July_2015), (6-7 July, 2015)

## Annexure 3

### Joint Statement between Turkmenistan and India

The Prime Minister of the Republic of India, Mr. Narendra Modi paid an official visit to Turkmenistan from 10-11 July, 2015 at the invitation of the President of Turkmenistan Mr. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.

During the visit, Prime Minister of the Republic of India Narendra Modi held extensive discussions with President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on bilateral relations as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest. The two Leaders expressed satisfaction at the continued development of bilateral relations based on deep-rooted civilisational, historical and cultural linkages and a shared interest in international as well as regional peace and stability.

#### **Political and Diplomatic engagement**

The Leaders noted with satisfaction the increase in high-level exchanges between the two countries in recent years and reiterated the significance of regular bilateral interactions in reinforcing the momentum for cooperation between the two countries. The Leaders encouraged the continued enhancement of exchanges at all levels, including at the level of leaders, ministers, parliamentarians and senior officials bilaterally and on the sidelines of multilateral events.

The Leaders welcomed the successful conclusion of the 5th meeting of the Turkmen-India Intergovernmental Joint Commission on trade, economic, scientific and technological cooperation, held in Ashgabat on April 8, 2015. They noted that the Commission had identified new and potential areas of cooperation and called for effective implementation of the decisions made at the meeting. They stressed the need to strengthen other institutional linkages and in this regard, directed their senior officials to hold regular dialogue on bilateral, regional and global issues through existing mechanisms such as Foreign Office Consultations, Consular Consultations, Joint Working Group on Energy as well as establishment of additional mechanisms on mutually agreed issues.

#### **Defence and Security Cooperation**

The Leaders noted that the nature and rapid spread of international terrorism in the recent years poses one of the most serious global threats today. The Leaders resolved to deepen ongoing cooperation in countering various security threats. They also agreed to step up efforts against cross-border threats such as terrorism, organized crime and illegal drug-trafficking.

The Leaders welcomed the signing of the Defence Cooperation Agreement during the visit, which would provide a framework for intensifying bilateral defence and security cooperation through exchanges of high and mid-level visits, training and dialogue between the Ministries of Defence of the two countries and other relevant organizations. It would also enable capacity building and technical cooperation, thus imparting a new momentum to the bilateral partnership in the defence sector.

### **Economic Engagement**

The Leaders acknowledged that despite a steady increase in bilateral trade over the last few years, the trade volumes between the two countries could potentially be increased manifold to the mutual benefit of both countries. Towards this end, the two Leaders agreed to actively work towards rapid enhancement in the levels of bilateral trade, investment and economic cooperation.

The Leaders resolved to increase cooperation in various sectors and identified energy, petrochemicals, transport, communications, information and technology, textile industry, chemical and pharmaceutical industry, construction and agro-processing as potential areas for cooperation between the two countries.

The Leaders further agreed to create favourable conditions and promote participation of private companies of both countries, including through joint ventures in various infrastructural and investment projects in the two countries.

The Leaders reaffirmed their readiness to hold, both in Turkmenistan and India, national exhibitions, business forums and other events involving the business communities of the two countries for facilitating business interactions and linkages between the two countries.

### **Energy and Petrochemicals**

The Leaders noted that cooperation in energy sector, especially the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project, forms a key pillar of economic engagement between the two countries. They recognised that implementation of the TAPI project would have a transformational impact on trade between the two countries and decided to take measures for early implementation of this important regional project. They welcomed establishment of 'TAPI Ltd' as a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) in November 2014 in Ashgabat and acknowledged that it was a milestone in implementation of this strategic project.

The Leaders reaffirmed their strong commitment towards timely implementation of this strategic project for the common benefit of peoples of the four countries and noted that the selection of the Consortium Leader for the project, to be finalised by 1 September 2015, would mark a crucial step in the early implementation of the project.

The Leaders welcomed the enhanced bilateral cooperation in the field of chemicals and petrochemicals as well as the opening of “ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL)” representative office in Turkmenistan. The Leaders further welcomed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the State Concern “Turkmenhimiya” and Indian PSU Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilizers Limited to provide a framework for long-term sourcing of urea from Turkmenistan.

The Leaders also welcomed the Indian proposal to set up a urea production facility in Turkmenistan in collaboration with Turkmen entities and noted that such a proposal would expand the ambit of economic cooperation between the two countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi informed that India’s state companies in the oil and gas sectors possess diverse expertise in the field of training, designing, construction, exploration and production, and invited Turkmen Companies to engage in long-term cooperation with these Indian firms. President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov welcomed the offer and acknowledged that India’s technical expertise could be of value in assisting Turkmenistan’s efforts to further develop its hydrocarbon and petrochemical sector.

### **Transport and Connectivity**

The Leaders reaffirmed their intention to work together in exploring alternative transport corridors for additional connectivity options between the two countries. The Leaders welcomed the first expert level meeting on connectivity between India and Turkmenistan in Delhi in June 2015 and agreed to continue the discussions and interactions under the framework of a JWG for exploring various connectivity options between India and Turkmenistan. The President of Turkmenistan welcomed India’s intention to join the Ashgabat Agreement.

The Leaders acknowledged the significance of Turkmenistan as a gateway to other Central Asian countries and the Caspian region and agreed to support each other’s initiatives in enhancing transport corridors and infrastructure to facilitate movement of goods. President of Turkmenistan appreciated Government of India’s efforts in promoting International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for transportation of goods between India and Central Asia, including Turkmenistan and beyond and conveyed that Turkmenistan would consider becoming party to the above-mentioned Corridor. Prime Minister of the Republic of India Narendra Modi noted that the recently inaugurated Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan- Iran railway line could be a linked corridor of the INSTC to streamline movement of goods and commodities between India and Turkmenistan and beyond.

The Leaders noted that the air connectivity between the two countries could to a certain extent overcome this natural barrier of the lack of direct surface connectivity between the two countries. In this context,

they called for increasing frequency of flight operations between the two countries, including by offering fifth freedom rights for increased viability. The Leaders felt that the potential of direct flight connectivity between the two countries could be better utilized to encourage export of goods from India to Turkmenistan, and agreed to take necessary measures to encourage transportation of cargo through their airlines.

### **Capacity Building and Science and Technology**

The Leaders appreciated the role of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme in capacity building and human resource development of Turkmen nationals and in creating a talented pool of professionals in Turkmenistan across various sectors to meet the developmental needs of the growing Turkmen economy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi conveyed India's readiness to offer new training courses in sectors desired by Government of Turkmenistan. President of Turkmenistan welcomed this proposal.

The Leaders welcomed the successful up-gradation of the India Turkmenistan Industrial Training Centre in Ashgabat with Indian assistance to provide continued advanced training to Turkmen nationals.

The Leaders also welcomed the signing of the Programme of Cooperation in Science and Technology, which would provide added impetus for a framework for cooperation in this important area.

### **Cultural Cooperation**

The Leaders underlined that cultural exchanges have made an important and positive contribution to the development of comprehensive cooperation between the two countries and to deepening the bonds of friendship and mutual understanding between their peoples. The Leaders noted the recent successful Turkmen cultural festival in India in 2014 and Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) 'Namaste Turkmenistan' festival in various parts of Turkmenistan this year and called for similar events to be held in future as well.

The Leaders called for finalizing of the Programme of Cooperation on Culture between the two countries. The Leaders also acknowledged the contribution made by the scholarships offered by Indian Centre for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to Turkmen students in forging stronger bonds at a popular level.

The Leaders acknowledged the commencement of a new chapter in their cultural ties through the inauguration of a Centre of Yoga and Traditional Medicine in Ashgabat. The Leaders underscored the universal value of Yoga and its positive and holistic perspective on health. The Leaders acknowledged that the traditional medicine centre would help combine traditional medical knowledge and practices of India and Turkmenistan,

which would benefit the people. Prime Minister Narendra Modi thanked President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov for his support in declaring June 21 as International Day of Yoga (IDY) at the United Nations and for the extensive celebrations of the first IDY in Ashgabat.

The Leaders welcomed unveiling of a bust of Mahatma Gandhi in Ashgabat, further symbolising the commitment of both sides to work together towards a peaceful world order.

The Leaders agreed to work for the successful conduct of the 5th Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in Ashgabat in 2017, including within the Agreement in the field of Sports concluded during the visit.

### **International Cooperation**

The Leaders reiterated their commitment to strengthen regional as well as multilateral cooperation, including through enhanced interaction in the United Nations and other regional and international organisations of which they are members. They underscored the importance of enhancing the role of the United Nations and its institutions as a universal instrument in addressing global issues and safeguarding sustainable development.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and the Government of Turkmenistan on the 20th anniversary of adoption of Permanent Neutrality at the United Nations and noted that this policy had contributed to peace, development and stability in Turkmenistan and the region at large.

The Leaders acknowledged the urgent need for reform of the United Nations Security Council in the context of strengthening and expanding the role of the United Nations in addressing the pressing contemporary challenges.

The Sides will further strengthen cooperation in a multilateral format within the UN framework, maintain close interaction and coordination in order to create a favourable international environment for the development of the two countries.

### **Looking Ahead**

The Leaders reaffirmed their commitment to work closely on issues discussed and agreed during their official talks to ensure, through existing bilateral mechanisms and other means, concrete outcomes to forge a closer bilateral partnership in the days ahead.

The Leaders agreed that the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has helped consolidate and deepen the longstanding cordial relations between India and Turkmenistan, and in defining a framework for an enhanced mutually beneficial partnership between the countries.

Prime Minister of the Republic of India Narendra Modi expressed his gratitude to the President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov

and the Turkmen people for the warm welcome accorded to him. He invited the President of Turkmenistan to pay an official visit to the Republic of India at a convenient time. The invitation was accepted with pleasure.

Ashgabat,  
July 11, 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25456/Joint\\_Statement\\_between\\_Turkmenistan\\_and\\_India\\_during\\_the\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_visit\\_to\\_Turkmenistan](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25456/Joint_Statement_between_Turkmenistan_and_India_during_the_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_Turkmenistan), July 11, 2015.

### **List of Agreements/ MOUs signed with Turkmenistan**

1. Memorandum of Understanding on Supply of Chemical Products between the Indian Public Sector Undertaking 'Rashtriya Chemicals and Fertilizers Limited' and the Turkmen State concern 'Turkmenhimiya'
2. Memorandum of Understanding between the Foreign Service Institute of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Republic of India and the Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan
3. Agreement Between the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports of the Republic of India and The State Committee for Sport of Turkmenistan on Cooperation in the field of Sports
4. Programme of cooperation in Science and Technology between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of Turkmenistan for the Period of 2015-2017
5. Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of Turkmenistan on Cooperation in Yoga and Traditional Medicine
6. Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of India and The Government of Turkmenistan on Cooperation in the field of Tourism
7. Agreement between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of Turkmenistan on Cooperation in the field of Defence
8. Indo-Turkmen Joint Statements

July 11, 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25457/List\\_of\\_Agreements\\_MOUs\\_signed\\_during\\_the\\_Visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Turkmenistan](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25457/List_of_Agreements_MOUs_signed_during_the_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Turkmenistan), July 11, 2015

## Annexure 4

### Joint Statement between Kyrgyzstan and India

At the invitation of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic H.E. Mr. Almazbek Atambaev, Prime Minister of India, H.E. Mr. Narendra Modi, paid an Official Visit to the Kyrgyz Republic on 11- 12 July 2015.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Almazbek Atambaev held profound exchange of views on strengthening bilateral relations as well as regional and international issues of mutual interest, in warm and friendly atmosphere.

Kyrgyz Republic and Republic of India (further named as “The Sides”) highly appreciated significant achievements in different areas of cooperation over the past 24 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Sides expressed satisfaction at the steady development of political, trade-economic relations, cultural-humanitarian cooperation, and agreed to elevate the bilateral partnership to a higher trajectory in the days ahead.

Guided by the common aspiration to improve the level of Kyrgyz-Indian relations and further increase of their multi-faceted cooperation and confirming that Kyrgyzstan and India are partners, sharing common fundamental values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and rule of law, The Sides declared the following:

#### **Political cooperation**

The Sides noted that the relations between India and the Kyrgyz Republic are based on historical ties spanning several centuries. The Indian side recognises the achievements of the Kyrgyz Republic in providing political freedom for its citizens.

The Sides decided to enhance contacts at different levels, including regular high-level visits and official exchanges to facilitate closer consultations on bilateral, international and regional issues of mutual interest.

India expressed deep appreciation at the continued institutionalisation of parliamentary democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Both Sides would foster regular Parliamentary exchanges. Kyrgyz side expressed interest in studying the Indian experience of parliamentary system. In this regard, the Sides agreed that Kyrgyz parliamentarians would utilise courses conducted by Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training of India.

The Sides welcomed the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the field of elections between Central Commission on

Elections and Conducting Referendum in Kyrgyz Republic and the Election Commission of India.

### **Cooperation at regional and global level**

Noting common positions on many current international issues, the Sides stressed the importance of deepening interaction between the two countries in the international arena including in the framework of United Nations Organization and reaffirmed the need to strengthen the role of UN. The Sides called for UN reforms, with a view to maintain its leading role in adequately dealing with contemporary challenges and the threats to global peace and stability.

Noting the contribution of India in maintaining peace in the world, the Kyrgyz side reaffirmed its support to the rightful claim of India for permanent membership in an expanded UN Security Council.

The Indian side reaffirmed support of the candidacy of the Kyrgyz Republic for the UN Human Rights Council for 2016-2018.

The Sides expressed satisfaction at their cooperation on regional issues, including in the framework of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Kyrgyz Side welcomed the commencement of the process of accession of India as a full member of the SCO, as decided by the Council of Heads of State-members of the SCO on 10 July 2015 in Ufa, Russia. The Kyrgyz side noted that full membership of India in SCO will be a significant step in increasing the political prestige of SCO and its role in international and regional affairs.

The Sides expressed grave concern at the rising trend of extremism, radicalism and terrorism in the region and whole world. The Indian side highly appreciated the steps taken by the Kyrgyz Government in counteracting terrorism and in retaining the secular character of Kyrgyz society.

The Sides agreed to expeditiously consider signing an agreement on “combating international terrorism and other crimes”.

### **Defence cooperation**

The Sides expressed satisfaction at development of defence ties, which reflect a high level of mutual trust between them. The Sides welcomed exchange of visits at Defence Minister level and the major initiatives that have been taken as well as their ongoing programme of cooperation. Both Sides appreciated the signing of an Agreement between the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the government of the Republic of India on Cooperation in the Defence Sector.

The Sides expressed satisfaction on the second round of joint exercises “Khanjar 2015” between the Special Forces of the Armed Forces of two countries held in Kyrgyzstan in March 2015, which reflected continuity in exercises held in India in 2011. It was decided to hold joint exercises on an annual basis.

The Indian side welcomed the endeavor of Kyrgyzstan to participate in UN peacekeeping operations and expressed full support of India in this regard. The Kyrgyz side expressed its appreciation to the Government of India for training Kyrgyz military officers for conducting various UN Peacekeeping Courses, including by Centre for UN Peacekeeping in New Delhi, as well as for exchange of experience with Kyrgyz Armed Forces on the Level II UN Field Hospital of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Kyrgyz side expressed its gratitude to the Government of India for providing medical equipment for their Level II Field Hospital and for support of India in establishing an Information Technology Centre at the Military Academy of the Armed Forces of the Kyrgyz Republic named after Lieutenant General K. Usenbekov.

Both Sides appreciated the joint expedition between the Armed Forces of two countries, including Indian-Kyrgyz expedition in September 2011 to scale mount Stock Kangri in Ladakh, India and expedition in August 2013 to Lenin Peak in Kyrgyzstan, and called for continuation of such exchanges.

### **Economic cooperation**

Noting that the current level of economic, trade and investment linkages between India and Kyrgyzstan are below potential, the Sides underlined the need for concerted efforts to enhance the economic content of the bilateral partnership.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated President Almazbek Atambaev on Kyrgyzstan’s joining the Eurasia Economic Union. The Sides exchanged opinions on integration process in the Eurasian space. Both Sides agreed to work together for early conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement between the Member States of Eurasia Economic Union and the Republic of India.

Attaching great importance to further enhancing economic cooperation, the Kyrgyz side invited Indian business to invest actively in the Kyrgyz economy and expressed its willingness to render assistance to the Indian investors in their investment activities in the Kyrgyz Republic. The Kyrgyz side welcomed the interest of Indian companies to invest in mining and pharmaceutical sectors in Kyrgyzstan.

The Sides noted the importance of implementation of their bilateral agreements, including the Protocol of the VII session of the Bilateral Inter-

Governmental Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific-Technical Cooperation in New Delhi on 16-17 March 2015, as well as the MoUs on cooperation in the fields of Textiles and Energy.

The Sides expressed satisfaction with cooperation in the Joint Business Council between Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and Kyrgyz Chambers of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), which held its meeting in New Delhi on 2 December 2014. The Sides agreed to take necessary actions for implementation of the mutually agreed outcomes.

The Sides welcomed the commencement of direct flights between Bishkek and Delhi and agreed to encourage greater connectivity in order to enhance trade and tourism between the two countries.

The Sides called to facilitate the establishment of direct business contacts, and positively noted events in the field of pharmaceutical, agriculture, trade and investment, including a specialized pharmaceuticals exhibition by PHARMEXCIL of India with participation of more than 40 Indian companies in Bishkek in March 2015 as well as the participation of representatives of Agrarian Platform from Kyrgyzstan in Aahar 2015 trade fair in New Delhi in March 2015.

Underlining the fact that more than sixty percent of the population in India and the Kyrgyz Republic works in the agriculture sector, the Sides reaffirmed the importance of meaningful collaboration in the agriculture sector. The Indian side offered to share experience in agro-processing, greenhouse technology, water conservation, and agricultural research in order to enhance productivity and add value to agricultural produce. The Sides welcomed the round table to be held shortly in Bishkek on strengthening cooperation in the Agriculture sector to identify avenues and concrete projects for cooperation in this sector.

The Kyrgyz Side expressed its appreciation to the Indian side for its willingness to consider financing important socio-economic projects of the Kyrgyz Republic on mutually beneficial and acceptable terms. The Sides agreed to determine the conditions of financing in accordance with the National Sustainable Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the period of 2013-2017 and the Mid-term Management Strategy of the State debt of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2015-2017 as well as relevant Indian regulations.

### **Scientific and Technical Cooperation**

Reiterating that, as fellow democracies, both their countries place people at the heart of all developmental activity, the Sides expressed satisfaction over their developing cooperation in sectors such as education and health.

The Sides noted that Kyrgyzstan remains one of the popular destinations for the Indian medical students. Students from Kyrgyzstan study in

India as well and over 1,000 working professionals from a cross section of the Kyrgyz society have utilized the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme. The Kyrgyz side welcomed the decision of the Government of India to increase the number of ITEC slots for Kyrgyz nationals from 85 to 100 this year.

The Sides expressed satisfaction at the successful functioning of the India-Kyrgyz Centre for IT established in the Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transport and Architecture named after N. Isanov in Bishkek (KSUCTA), agreed to work towards upgrading the Centre and consider setting up of similar Centres in other major cities in Kyrgyzstan under Indian grant assistance.

The Sides expressed satisfaction over growing links in the health sector, including regular visits by doctors from super-specialty hospitals in India to Kyrgyzstan, visits of patients from Kyrgyzstan to India for medical treatment and complex surgery at affordable cost and international standards, and the gifting of a Computed Tomography Machine to the National Center for Cardiology and Internal Medicine (NCCIM) by the Government of India in September 2014.

The Sides welcomed the launch of project to establish Tele-medicine links, with the support of Government of India, between highly specialised hospitals of India and six Medical Establishments of Kyrgyzstan: (National Centre of Maternity and Childhood Care; National Center of Cardiology and Internal Medicine (NCCIM); National Centre of Surgery; Osh Inter-Regional Clinical Hospital; Talas Regional Hospital; and Issyk-Kul Regional Hospital), which was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the National Center for Cardiology and Internal Medicine in Bishkek during his visit.

Indian side highly appreciated the support extended by the Kyrgyz Republic to the Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-medical Research Center. The Sides agreed to continue the research activity and welcomed commencement of the second phase during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Indian side thanked the Kyrgyz side for co-sponsoring the resolution in the UN General Assembly about celebration of 21st June as International Yoga Day, which was suggested by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the UN General Assembly. Kyrgyzstan welcomed the offer of the Indian side to establish an AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) Center in Kyrgyz Republic to share India's knowledge in traditional medicine.

### **Cultural and humanitarian cooperation**

The Sides intend to enhance cultural and humanitarian cooperation, including exchange of students. The Sides also intend to strengthen scientific-

technical cooperation between researchers and students in Universities, research and analytical centers and private sector.

The Sides welcomed the signing of Agreement on Cultural Cooperation during the visit and stressed the need to enhance cooperation between the peoples of the two countries in different forms of art, music, dance, theatre, cinema and other cultural manifestations.

The Sides expressed satisfaction over continuing cultural exchanges between the two countries. The Sides stressed importance of organizing further mutual cultural events in Kyrgyzstan and India and expressed interest in joint study of common historical and cultural heritage.

Keeping in view the geographical proximity of the two countries and the potential of increasing tourism, the Sides expressed satisfaction at activities on tourism promotion organized by the Indian Ministry of Tourism in Bishkek in 2014 and the road show organized by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism in New Delhi in 2015. The Sides called for similar events in future.

The Sides instructed relevant departments to put in place a liberal visa regime for a few categories of citizens to promote business and tourism between the two countries.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi appreciated the decision of the Kyrgyz side to install a statue of Mahatma Gandhi in Bishkek city, which was ceremoniously unveiled by the Prime Minister during his visit.

### **Looking Ahead**

Keeping in view the shared cultural and historical linkages as well as the deep trust and mutual confidence between India and the Kyrgyz Republic, the Sides felt that the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi marks a new beginning towards qualitatively enhancing the relationship between India and the Kyrgyz Republic and to strengthen friendship and comprehensive cooperation between the two countries.

The Sides expressed confidence that the decisions reached during the visit will give an additional impetus for further progressive development across the entire spectrum of their cooperation.

At the conclusion of his visit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed his deep gratitude to President Almazbek Atambaev, the Government and the people of the Kyrgyz Republic for the warm welcome and gracious hospitality extended during his visit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi invited President Almazbek Atambaev to visit India. The invitation was accepted with gratitude.

Bishkek  
July 12, 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25462/Joint\\_Statement\\_between\\_the\\_Kyrgyz\\_Republic\\_and\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_India](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25462/Joint_Statement_between_the_Kyrgyz_Republic_and_the_Republic_of_India), July 12, 2015.

### **List of agreements signed with Kyrgyz Republic**

1. Agreement on Defence Cooperation to deepen cooperation between India and Kyrgyzstan in matters relating to defence, security, military education and training, conduct of joint military exercises, exchange of experience and information, exchange of military instructors, observers, etc.
2. Memorandum of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation in the field of Elections to deepen cooperation in matters relating to legislation on elections and referendums, modern systems and technologies, rights of elections process stakeholders as well as other issues of election administration. Signing of this MoU would build technical assistance and capacity support for the election commissions in electoral management and administration leading to a further strengthening of bilateral ties between India and Kyrgyzstan.
3. MoU between Ministry of Economy of Kyrgyzstan and Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) on cooperation in the sphere of Standards. The purpose of this MoU is to strengthen and enhance technical cooperation in the fields of standardisation, conformity assessment and sharing of expertise on mutual trade with the aim of exchanging necessary information and expertise between the two parties, which would be mutually beneficial and also lead to a strengthening of bilateral ties between India and Kyrgyz Republic.
4. Agreement on Cooperation in Culture to deepen cultural cooperation between India and Kyrgyzstan in areas such as preservation of cultural heritage, organisation of folk arts, theatre, youth festivals and cooperation in of publishing and translation of literature, sports and physical culture, exchange of archival materials, history, geography, etc.

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25461/List\\_of\\_agreements\\_signed\\_during\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_visit\\_to\\_the\\_Kyrgyz\\_Republic](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25461/List_of_agreements_signed_during_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_the_Kyrgyz_Republic), July 12, 2015.

## Annexure 5

### Joint Statement between Tajikistan and India

The Prime Minister of the Republic of India, His Excellency Mr. Narendra Modi paid a State visit to the Republic of Tajikistan from 12 to 13 July 2015 at the invitation of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Mr. Emomali Rahmon.

1. The President and the Prime Minister held wide-ranging talks on bilateral, regional and international issues. The discussions between the Leaders were warm and cordial and the outcomes of the visit reflected the mutual trust that exists between the two countries.
2. President and Prime Minister expressed satisfaction at the excellent relations between India and Tajikistan. They noted that ties between their countries are based on shared history and cultural affinities between their people. The two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to take all necessary steps to transform bilateral relations into a multi-faceted strategic partnership for the mutual benefit of the people of both their countries.
3. The two leaders welcomed continuing exchanges at Ministerial and senior official levels, which serve to cement bilateral ties. They noted the existing broad legal framework for development of cooperation between the two countries and called for an enhanced focus on implementation of outcomes envisaged under bilateral agreements/MoUs in various areas.
4. The two leaders noted the rising trend of extremism and terrorism in many parts of the world and in their immediate neighbourhood, posing a threat to India and Tajikistan as well as the region. Both sides further emphasized the need for adoption of the “Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism” by the UN General Assembly.

The leaders underlined the importance of a stable and secure environment for economic development and prosperity of their countries. They agreed to continue their active engagement and cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and reaffirmed their determination to act resolutely against organizations and agencies that support terrorism.

Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation at Tajikistan’s efforts at curbing extremism and radicalism and to ensure secular governance, which is a common ideal of both the countries.

5. The Leaders decided to reinvigorate official-level interactions in the framework of the Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter Terrorism

for strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism and instructed that the JWG meet at an early date. They emphasized the need for continued cooperation between their security agencies including information sharing mechanisms to counter the growing menace of extremism and terrorism.

6. The Leaders expressed satisfaction at ongoing defence cooperation, which remains one of the main pillars of partnership between the two countries. The Prime Minister reiterated India's commitment to supporting the development of Tajikistan's defence capacities to enhance stability and security. The President of Tajikistan welcomed India's assistance in capacity building of the Tajik defence forces.
7. Despite being close neighbouring countries, the Leaders noted that trade and economic linkages between India and Tajikistan are not in keeping with their potential. They highlighted the importance of trade and investments in developing a balanced and sustainable bilateral relationship and committed to work together to overcome structural and functional issues hampering economic relations between the two countries. The Leaders mandated the 8th session of the India-Tajikistan Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (JCM), to meet in Dushanbe this year and draw up a concise strategy to deepen trade and investment relations and identify specific steps to facilitate exchanges between the business communities.
8. The Leaders underscored the importance of improving connectivity in the region to realise the full potential of trade and commerce. The two leaders discussed ways and means to explore possibilities of developing an alternate surface route in cooperation with other countries of the region. Tajikistan reiterated its support to the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) which will considerably reduce transit time and cost for transportation of goods between India and Central Asia and beyond and welcomed recent measures to speed up its implementation.
9. Both Leaders recognised that the proposed Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Trade Agreement (PATTTTA) would facilitate trade between Tajikistan and the countries of the South Asian region. They decided that further consultations would be held on the inclusion of India to this arrangement.
10. The Leaders stressed the importance of enhanced air connectivity between the two countries to facilitate trade and economic linkages as well as tourism and greater people-to-people interactions. They called upon relevant authorities in both countries to find constructive ways and means to increase the frequency of flights on the Delhi-Dushanbe sector, including the provision of Fifth Freedom rights for carriers.

11. Underling the importance of agriculture in the economies of both the countries and given India's expertise in the agricultural sector, including research, development and processing of agricultural products, the Leaders agreed to deepen cooperation in agriculture. Tajikistan expressed its intention to facilitate agricultural cooperation with India, and in particular welcomed greater involvement of Indian companies in the agricultural sector in Tajikistan. The Leaders noted that a Workshop on Agriculture was being held in connection with the visit involving officials, experts from research institutions and organisations, private enterprises and business leaders of both the countries. They called for early implementation of the outcomes and agreements reached at the Workshop.
12. The Leaders noted the centrality of energy security for rapid economic development. Tajikistan thanked India for successful up gradation and modernisation of the Varzob-1 Hydro Power Station through the Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL) and National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) as well as various training programmes organised for experts from Tajikistan in the field of hydropower. Highlighting the vast untapped hydropower potential, the President of Tajikistan sought greater Indian engagement in the field of hydropower generation in Tajikistan.
13. The Leaders noted that health sector is an important area of bilateral cooperation. Acknowledging the growing number of people from Tajikistan visiting India for medical treatment, they agreed to expand cooperation in the field of health for the benefit of the people of the two countries. Tajikistan welcomed India's proposal to implement a tele-medicine project in Tajikistan by connecting reputed multi-speciality hospitals in India with hospitals in Dushanbe and other regions of Tajikistan for offering medical consultation and education.
14. The Leaders stressed the importance of education and human resource development in nation building and agreed to enhance cooperation in the education sector through greater exchanges between educational institutions of the two countries. The Leaders also highlighted the importance of better utilization of scholarships offered under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for capacity building in Tajikistan.
15. The Leaders identified cooperation in food processing, mining, pharmaceuticals, textiles, skill development, science & technology, Information Technology, culture and tourism as promising areas for further cooperation. The leaders underlined the importance of closer interactions between the business bodies and investment promotion agencies of the two countries for enhancement of economic engagements.

16. The Leaders emphasized the centrality of cultural interactions in further deepening the close bonds between the peoples of India and Tajikistan. They called for active implementation of the Programme of Cooperation between India and Tajikistan on Art and Culture for the period 2016-18 and agreed that relevant organisations hold “Days of Culture” in each other’s country.
17. Prime Minister Modi thanked Tajikistan for its support in declaring June 21 as International Day of Yoga in the United Nations and for successful organisation of events to mark the occasion on 21 June, 2015 in Dushanbe and various regions of Tajikistan. The Leaders noted the role of Yoga and its health benefits and agreed to cooperate further in promotion of Yoga in Tajikistan. They welcomed the proposed AYUSH information cell at the Embassy of India, Dushanbe for sharing information about Yoga and other traditional Indian medical practices in Tajikistan.
18. Prime Minister Modi thanked Tajikistan for installation of a bust of renowned Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore in Dushanbe. The Leaders acknowledged the contemporary relevance of Tagore’s writings and agreed that the symbolic presence of Tagore in Tajikistan will promote harmony between cultures.
19. Considering the huge popularity of Indian cinema in Tajikistan, the Leaders agreed that cooperation in the field of television and radio-broadcasting would further enhance people to people contacts and cultural understanding.
20. Underlining the importance of greater cooperation and more people-to-people interaction, the Leaders instructed their officials to hold Consular Consultations at an early date to discuss liberalisation of the existing visa regime.
21. The Leaders noted that Afghanistan occupies a central position in Asia and reaffirmed their support for peace and security in Afghanistan through an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned process.
22. The Leaders expressed satisfaction at the excellent cooperation between the two countries on multilateral issues and mutual support for their initiatives in the United Nations and other international forums. The Leaders underscored the need to deepen such interaction on issues of interest to both countries and for developing countries as a whole. Tajikistan reiterated its support for India’s candidature for permanent membership of an expanded UN Security Council.
23. Prime Minister Modi thanked Tajikistan for support to India’s membership to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Leaders agreed to work together within the framework of SCO for

economic development, security and stability of the region.

24. The Leaders emphasised that the outcomes and understandings reached during the visit undoubtedly mark a milestone in the development of a long-term strategic partnership between the two countries. The two leaders applauded the deep trust and confidence between the countries and underlined that the strategic partnership between India and Tajikistan is of mutual benefit to their two countries as well as for greater regional stability.
25. Prime Minister Modi expressed deep gratitude to President Rahmon for the warm welcome and the gracious hospitality extended during his visit to Tajikistan. Prime Minister extended an invitation to the President of the Republic of Tajikistan to visit India at an early date. The invitation was accepted with pleasure.

Dushanbe  
13 July 2015

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25467/Joint\\_Statement\\_between\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_Tajikistan\\_and\\_the\\_Republic\\_of\\_India](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25467/Joint_Statement_between_the_Republic_of_Tajikistan_and_the_Republic_of_India), July 13, 2015

### **List of Agreements signed with Tajikistan**

1. Programme of Cooperation (POC) between Ministries of Culture of India and Tajikistan in the field of Culture for the years 2016-18. The POC envisages cooperation in the field of culture through exchange of expertise in protection, preservation and promotion of cultural heritage in both countries, exchange of information and experts and organization of cultural days in each other's countries for greater cultural understanding between the countries.
2. Exchange of Note Verbale (NV) on setting up of Computer Labs in 37 Schools in Tajikistan. The Note Verbale conveys the intention of Indian side to set up computer labs in 37 schools in Tajikistan for supporting Government of Tajikistan's human resource and skill development efforts. The NV also outlines responsibilities of both sides in implementing the project.

Source: [http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25464/List\\_of\\_Agreements\\_signed\\_during\\_Prime\\_Ministers\\_visit\\_to\\_Tajikistan\\_July\\_1213\\_2015](http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25464/List_of_Agreements_signed_during_Prime_Ministers_visit_to_Tajikistan_July_1213_2015), (July 12-13, 2015)

## Annexure 6

### Terrorist and Extremist Organisations Banned in SCO States

#### The Russian Federation (27 outfits as of June 2, 2017)

1	Higher Military Majlisul Shura of the United Mujahideen Forces of the Caucasus	04/03/2003
2	The Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan	04/03/2003
3	“Base” (Al-Qaeda)	04/03/2003
4	Asbat al-Ansar	04/03/2003
5	Holy War (Al-Jihad or Egyptian Islamic Jihad)	04/03/2003
6	The Islamic Group (Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya)	04/03/2003
7	The Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun)	04/03/2003
8	The Party of Islamic Liberation (Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami)	04/03/2003
9	Lashkar-I-Taiba	03/04/2013
10	The Islamic Group (Jamaat-i-Islami)	04/03/2003
11	The Taliban	04/03/2003
12	The Islamic Party of Turkestan (formerly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan)	04/03/2003
13	Society for Social Reforms (Jamiat al-Islah al-Idjtimai)	04/03/2003
14	Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (Jamiyat Ikhyat at-Turaz al-Islami)	04/03/2003
15	House of the Two Saints (Al-Haramain)	04/03/2003
16	Jund Al-Sham (the Army of Great Syria)	16.06.2006
17	Islamic Jihad - Jamaat of the Mujahideen	16.06.2006
18	Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb countries	27.11.2008
19	Imarat Kavkaz (The Caucasus Emirate)	24.02.2010
20	“Syndicate” Autonomous Combat Terrorist Organization (ABTO)	27.11.2013
21	Terrorist community - a structural unit of the organization “Right Sector” Republic of Crimea	30.12.2014
22	Islamic State or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Islamic State of Iraq and Shama	13/02/2015
23	Jebhat an Nusra (Front of Victory) (other names: Jabha al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham (Support Front of Great Syria)	13/02/2015

24	All-Russian public movement “People’s Militia named after K. Minin and D. Pozharsky”	13/02/2015
25	Ajr from Allah Subhanu u Tagliaal SHAM (Blessing from Allah the merciful and merciful Syria )	05/04/2016
26	The international religious association “AUM Shinrikyo” ( Aum Shinrikyo , AUM , Aleph )	10/25/2016
27	Mujahideen of Jamaat At-Tawhid Val-Jihad	02/06/2017

### Kazakhstan (21 outfits as on September 3, 2015)

1	Al-Qaeda	15/10/2004
2	The Kurdistan People’s Congress	15/10/2004
3	The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	15/10/2004
4	The East Turkistan Islamic Movement	15/10/2004
5	Asbat al-Ansar	15/03/2005
6	The Muslim Brotherhood	15/03/2005
7	The Taliban Movement	15/03/2005
8	Boz Gourde	15/03/2005
9	Jamaat mujahideen of Central Asia	15/03/2005
10	Lashkar-e-Toiba	15/03/2005
11	The Social Reform Society	15/03/2005
12	Aum Shinrikyo	17/11/2006
13	The Islamic Party of Turkestan	17/11/2006
14	Jund al-Khilafah	17/11/2006
15	The East Turkestan Liberation Organization	05/03/2008

### Kyrgyzstan (20 outfits as of today)

1	Al-Qaeda	
2	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	
3	The Taliban	
4	Jabhat al-Nusra	
5	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	
6	Hizb ut-Tahrir	
	Others	

### Tajikistan

1	Al-Qaeda	
2	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)	
3	The Taliban	
4	Jabhat al-Nusra	
5	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan	
6	Hizb ut-Tahrir	
7	Islamic Party of Turkestan	
8	<u>Khaar Dimna</u>	
9	Tochikistoni Ozod	
10	Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT)	29/01/2016

### China

1	East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)	
2	Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), new name for ETIM	
3	East Turkistan Liberation Organization (ETLO)	
4	Uyghur Liberation Organization (ULO)	

### Uzbekistan (24 + outfits are banned)

1	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)	
2	Islamic Movement of Turkestan (IMT) new name for IMU	
3	ISIL, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	
4	Hizb ut-Tahrir	
5	Islamic Jihad Union (IJU)	
6	Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP)	

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Central Asia is the northern frontier of the Islamic world hitherto unaffected by fundamentalist wave. The Soviet developmental legacy still remains as a bulwark against potential extremist threats emanating from Pakistan and Afghanistan. However, behind the secular settings a major shift to a far more religious pattern of society is underway in the region.

Over the years, India has been taking renewed interest in enhancing its strategic presence in Central Asia, but it is yet to capitalise on various opportunities and potentials. India's full membership into the SCO now opens up an opportunity for a closer engagement with region but New Delhi still lacks a political-strategic clarity.

This book is an attempt to provide an overview of the political and strategic process at work in Central Asia since its emergence in 1991 and the intricate issues that impinge on India. The book is mostly about identifying critical points that are important for evolving a sound Central Asia policy in India.

The book does not in any sense purport to be an academic endeavour on Central Asian studies but merely a narrative, as well as, an analytical account and a result of author's own self-education and understanding gathered through extensive interactions with wide sections of people in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, especially with the think tanks, academia, government officials and the diplomatic community. The chapters in book are capsulated to provide analyses of the impinging issues that shape the dynamic interplay between Central Asia's internal polity and its external outlook. The book contains aspects critical for enhancing India's strategic presence in the region.



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