

3rd India-Central Asia Regional Conference

Tashkent, November 6-8 2003

Ramakant Dwivedi

The 3rd India-Central Asia Regional Conference was jointly organised by the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi and the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies (ISRS) at Tashkent during November 6-8, 2003. Fifty participants from about 20 countries participated in the Conference. Representatives from organisations like the World Bank (WB), European Union (EU), European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) also participated. Uzbek Foreign Minister Mr. Sadik Safoev delivered the inaugural address followed by the keynote address by Indian Minister for External Affairs, Mr. Yashwant Sinha. Head of Military Forces Academy of Uzbekistan, Mr. Feruz Usmanov; Uzbek Deputy Minister of Defence, Mr. Rustam Niyazov; Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Mr. Rustam Kasymov; ambassadors and charge d'affaires from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China, France, Iran, Japan, Russia, Turkey, United Kingdom and United States participated in the inaugural session.

Inaugurating the Conference Uzbek Foreign Minister, Mr. Sadik Safoev, underlined the need of broader cooperation between India and Uzbekistan in economic and technological arenas. He requested the international community to coordinate their efforts in fighting against terrorism, religious extremism, drug trafficking and organised crimes in the Central Asian region. The situation in Afghanistan though improving, it still requires coordinated and concerted efforts on the part of the United Nations and the international community at large to ensure that peace and tranquility are restored there. He appreciated the IDSA-ISRS team work in for organising the Conference. Indian Minister of External Affairs, Mr.

Yashwant Sinha, in his keynote address focused on four areas i.e., historical linkages between India and Central Asia, economic and energy potential of Central Asia, bilateral initiatives between India and Central Asian states and the international security situation. He announced ten scholarships for senior researchers from Central Asian countries every year. These researchers would undertake projects on regional cooperation and security-related issues at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA) New Delhi.

Mr. Ravshan Alimov, Director ISRS, welcoming the participants thanked IDSA Director, Mr. K. Santhanam, for his contribution in organising the Conference. He has further added that this conference would go long way in underlining the strategic importance of Central Asia and provide viable solutions for the security and economic problems that exit in Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. Mr. Santhanam speaking on the importance of the Conference stated that a number of highly significant events have occurred in recent times (e.g. 9/11, the Afghan War 2001, the war against terrorism, Iraq War 2003) and these were shaping the global political-economic-security picture. These events have had their impact on India and Central Asia. This Conference would help in understanding of politico-economic-security issues in the Central Asian region while sharing Indian perception of them. He hoped that the Conference, as a Track II endeavour, would lead to medium/long term inputs of importance to Track I policy making in India and the countries of the region. Also, this would generate fresh ideas and directions for further enhancement and enrichment of India's multi-spectral relationships with the countries of Central Asia.

The Conference was structured in four sessions as follows: -

- | | |
|-------------|---|
| Session # 1 | The Emerging International Security Environment |
| Session # 2 | Energy and Water: Imperatives & Prospects of Regional Economic Cooperation |
| Session # 3 | Transport and Communication Corridors: Imperatives & Prospects of Regional Economic Cooperation |
| Session # 4 | The Current Situation in Afghanistan and its implications for Central Asia |

The well-structured Conference had modest aims. But its highly professional planning and execution (with 28 commissioned papers from experts in and on Central Asia) as well as intense, high level and informed discussions on security and economic matters led to over-subscription of these aims and to heightened awareness of India in the region. Two distinguished and senior Central Asian scholars observed, “This Conference was overdue and goes way beyond cultural diplomacy which we have seen in the past. We have been waiting for India while many other countries are crowding us. Central Asia is incomplete without India being involved, especially in the post-Soviet scenario”.

The event was organised against the backdrop of growing external military presence in Central Asia as well as high external stakes in the region’s energy potential. The backdrop includes the disenchantment of these countries over the attempted use of Pakistan as the “natural arrowhead” for US/Western penetration into Central Asia; more so due to its strong Taliban/Al-Qaida linkages and the export of mullahs preaching undesired fundamentalism in various forms. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) have perceived a threat to their stability from Pakistan’s moves. Further, the economic and technological strengthening of India through the reforms process, coupled with imaginative “political opening out” have bolstered India’s willingness to embark on a major Central Asian engagement, to promote geopolitical pluralism and to contribute progressive growth in indigenous regional/national security capabilities/relationships for stability and prosperity. In this sense, the Conference was well timed; not too early, not too late.

The Indian team to the Conference was multi-disciplinary and balanced. It had senior scholars, distinguished diplomats, economists, executives from the oil and infrastructure sectors and junior scholars. While the seniors fruitfully engaged reputed scholars and dignitaries from Central Asia and many parts of the world, the juniors had networked effectively with counterparts from the region’s Think Tanks. There was both heat and light, especially on whether a new Great Game to the detriment of Central Asia is being staged.

The Central Asian states have, in recent times, experienced strong overtures both from the West and the East. The Conference gave an attractive, if surprising, glimpse of prospects that the “South” could offer. Team India articulated persuasively, the techno-economic-security potential

of India, which could be, accessed in a cooperative, mutually beneficial, non-exploitative mode of partnership. In many respects, Central Asians view India as a beacon of hope and a route to progress in what they perceive as their “Southern Arc of Instability” involving Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Comments by Central Asian scholars revealed that the political and economic experience of India — including handling of dissent in a secular, democratic setup — appears to be of considerable benefit to the region. They felt that they are “young States” and such sharing of experiences would be useful. The clear visibility of high goodwill towards India and the high esteem in which it is held was heart-warming. This perception needs strengthening by official and non-official networking in the region with bright scholars, economists and industrialists. Our missions would also need similar strengthening with language, economics, and area specialisations.

Many Central Asia decision-makers and scholars present at the Conference were rather unaware of India as a ‘Technology major’ in many areas, including energy and infrastructure. Presentations by Indian executives in this regard were welcomed and they emphasised the need for planned exposure in India and in Central Asia by proper groups to important information-hungry segments.

Enhancing energy security and developing transportation corridors figured quite prominently and naturally. Central Asian scholars clearly recognise the need for diversifying energy export routes towards the South, including India as a destination. The possibility of evolving an inter-dependent ‘energy community’ of suppliers and consumers of energy was briefly discussed. External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha mentioned in his Keynote address that there was sound logic in financial investments for setting up downstream facilities in Central Asia. These could include the commissioning of power plants to transport energy itself instead of raw materials through expensive pipelines. This would be, perhaps, desirable than pumping out the region’s riches and it would also avoid the feeling of exploitation. It could also make economic sense through harnessing of advanced, current technologies.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan would figure more seriously in our political and energy engagement. Prime Minister Vajpayee’s visit to Kazakhstan in June 2002 led to high expectations of production sharing from some Kazakh

oil blocks. These are yet to be realized. We believe that such visits and exchanges need to be followed through effectively on the ground in a sustained manner.

India's air connectivity to landlocked Central Asia has improved considerably in the recent years. After 9/11, Central Asian airlines have stopped flights to Pakistan. But the air traffic between the region and India has notably increased. Tajik Airlines is the most recent one to include Delhi as a popular destination. New transport plans are on the anvil to broaden connectivity with the region. Land and sea connectivity via Afghanistan and Iran are likely to emerge in the future.

Awareness and appreciation of India's approach to water-sharing in the sub-continent made some Central Asian scholars feel that they may benefit from India's experience in arriving at an equitable solution.

Central Asian scholars expressed deep concern over the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan and perceived a threat to their stability from such forces. An integrated approach to re-building Afghanistan, with the participation of Central Asia, may have to be undertaken. At present, foreign military presence in Central Asia is perceived by them as useful for regime stability.

It may be noted that the Conference sessions covered non-military aspects of security in detail since these are of high contemporary importance. In Sessions 2 & 3, the coverage of energy and transport and communication corridors provided an opportunity to highlight the high potential and prospect of mutually beneficial cooperation between India and Central Asian countries. The Conference is a big success in building linkages between Indian technocrats, academicians, experts and entrepreneurs with the Central Asian Think Tanks. This would facilitate sharing of India's developmental experience with the Central Asian countries in a larger manner to mutual benefit than has occurred so far. The process of a desirable 'Teaming relationship' has begun with the announcement of ten scholarships to Central Asian researchers.

Speaking at the valedictory session, Uzbek Defence Minister, Mr. Kadyr Gulamov, appreciated the role of IDSA and ISRS in organising the Conference. IDSA Programme Committee Chairman Ambassador S.K. Bhutani stressed the need for holding more such conferences in future either in India or any of the Central Asian countries.