

**India's Relations with Central Asia: Unsubstantiated Gravitation**

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With the end of the cold war, India rediscovered vast areas in the developing world with which it was previously politically incorrect to develop affinities, either because of their suspected closeness to the United States or because of its restricted accessibility to some areas for their being under Soviet domination. Central Asia is one of these regions, which after the break-up of the USSR brought back to the mind the memories of the age-old ties and seemed to offer new vistas of co-operation for the Indian diplomacy. If one refers, for instance, to Inder Kumar Gujral's approach to foreign policy based on concentric circles, the Central Asian Republics (CARs), along with the countries of the ASEAN and of the Indian Ocean rim, came next in importance to the inner circle of SAARC countries. Of course, there were hitches to the development of a sound relationship with the CARs, mainly imposed by geographical constraints, i.e., both sides are separated from each other not only in a topographical sense by the high mountains of the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs, but also by territories where dividing political issues are not yet settled, whether it be the Afghan ethnic conflict, the contention on Kashmir or the delimitation of the Sino-Indian border. But still there was the historical legacy of interaction between the peoples of India and the Central Asian region, which got only totally disrupted during the early decades of Soviet rule[1]. India could not even be regarded with suspicion because of its past friendship with the USSR since, with the exception of President Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan, the leaders of the present day Central Asia were all part of the former Communist ruling nomenclature and the goodwill that then existed for India could be beneficially exploited. Eight years after the CARs have become independent countries, this paper proposes to assess if the declaration of intentions have turned into unmistakable expressions of fruitful co-operation.

**Banking on past connections**

Central Asia under Soviet rule has been a source of inspiration for progressive Indians who drew comfort from the socialist experiences taking place in that region. One can quote the Marxist thinker, Rajani Palme Dutt, writing in "India Today" published in 1940, that "the rapid advance of the Central Asian Republics cannot but give cause for furious thought to the Indian people" because "nowhere else the contrast colonial policy and the policy of socialism in relation to backward peoples" could be better seen[2]. Central Asia is incidentally part of the Communist history in India because it was in Tashkent that on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1920, M.N.Roy, along with six other comrades, formed the Communist Party of India. The Bengali maverick, who after the Second Congress of the Comintern had been appointed in Moscow as head of the Central Asiatic Bureau of the Communist International, had moved to Tashkent in the hope that the flames of the Bolshevik revolution could engulf the British colonies in Asia. The similarity between the situation in British India and the difficulties, which confronted the Central Asian Soviet Republics

at the outset, when the conditions of the population were even more backward and poverty-stricken, was too enticing for not attracting attention[3].

Nehru, in his writings, was not the last to express his admiration for the work done by the Soviet leaders in the task of bringing about economic development and social progress[4]. Reverting once to his attraction for Soviet Central Asia in the course of a press conference held in 1948, Jawaharlal Nehru declared that “the nationalist movements were of course anti-imperialist, but were also rather vaguely in favour of social change; also there was a great deal of appreciation and even admiration in these countries in regard to the social changes that had taken place in the Central Asian and other parts of the Soviet Union, the progress made there etc., at any rate what we were informed had happened there”[5]. He may probably not have been fully acquainted with the dark side of the reforms: the collectivization of agriculture leading to forcible sedentarisation process and famines, the repression against religious activities, and the subordination of the economic structures of the CARs to the requirement of Russia, hence the disastrous consequences of cotton monoculture. It is nevertheless true that even today, and in spite of the economic hardships, which followed the dislocation of the Soviet Union; all of the CARs have a higher ranking than India in terms of human development, especially in education, welfare, and gender equality[6].

It was therefore natural that Nehru had wished to associate the Central Asian Soviet Republics at the first diplomatic initiative of pre-independent India- the Asian Relations Conference – held in Delhi during the spring of 1947. This first contact was not to be followed by others as long as Stalin’s two blocs theory rejected India’s pretension to stay away from the power blocs. Age-old ties with Central Asia were more symbolically than substantially restored when Nehru visited the Soviet Union in June 1955 following Moscow’s reassessment of India’s non-alignment. The Indian Prime Minister had glimpses of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, who accompanied him on his tour, had already unofficially visited Uzbekistan in 1953 with the Indian ambassador, K.P.S. Menon, when restrictions on travel for foreigners were relaxed after Stalin’s death. At the time of Nehru’s visit, Raghavan Pillai, the Secretary General in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, in a confidential report, gave a balanced account on the situation in Central Asia[7]. In an alien land, his first reaction was to draw parallel with the Indian rural reality, narrating that “except in the towns, where there is a fair proportion of Russians, the people here are almost entirely Muslims. The older amongst them have not forsaken their traditional habits of dress and deportment, are hardly distinguishable from the Muslims of the Punjab. Their villages look like ours, with all the familiar appendages, not excluding the cow-dung cakes, which plaster the outer walls. Purdah has practically disappeared, but even the revolutionary Soviet Government has not yet been able to change the face of these age-old villages”. No doubt there was good progress made with industrialisation and with the improvement of towns and he could not but be impressed by the “total absence not only of any discrimination based on colour but of colour prejudice in any form”. Yet, recounting his meeting with the Head of the Academy of Science at Tashkent which “jarred on (his) ears”, he expressed some reservations on the myth of equality for Soviet Asia. “He spoke as though the Uzbeks were a dependent people, not the full equals of the Russians from whom it was their due to receive assistance. I thought of the ancient Tatars who ruled Russia for two hundred years and the lot of the people who now inhabit their original homelands. How history avenges itself! Times had changed, and a new relationship was developing. Nevertheless, I could not help feeling that, though there

had been great improvement since the Czarist days, relations between Moscow and the outlying non-Russian Republics were still not based on term of complete equality”.

From the mid-fifties, Indian dignitaries and ambassadors frequently had a possibility to visit the central Asian region during their official visits or assignments in the Soviet Union[8]. An Indian consulate was open in Tashkent and Alma Ata, and in January 1966, the Uzbek capital was the venue for the negotiations between India and Pakistan, conducted under the patronage of the Soviet Union, to normalise their relations in the wake of the second Indo-Pak war. Hindi films, the principal exponent of the Indian cultural penetration from North Africa to South East Asia, were very popular among the Central Asians. India was a consumer goods supplier to most of the CARs and Indian products had been the most commonly available after Soviet-made goods. New Delhi had come to terms with this limited –albeit privileged, for a non-communist country – access to Central Asia and derived some geo-political benefits from the “neutralisation” of a region in the very heart of the Eurasian landmass. This could explain why the Indian Government, which already burnt its fingers in wrongly assessing the aborted coup in Moscow of August 1991, did not turn any special attention to the profound changes taking place in the Central Asian states, which by the end of October 1991 had all except Kazakhstan, declared their independence. Other countries reacted far more decisively to the re-opening of the Central Asian space, which had been closed to outside influence for about one century. Ali Akbar Velayati, the Iranian Foreign Minister, paid a visit to most of the Muslim States in November-December 1991. At the same time, the then Pakistani Minister of State for Economic Affairs, Sardar-Aseef Ahmed Ali, led a large delegation in a one-month long tour of the CARs and Azerbaijan, during which, apart from concluding agreements for economic and technical collaboration, Pakistan offered credits of \$30 millions to Kazakhstan and \$10 millions to each of the other visited countries[9]. This was followed by the visit of the Pakistani Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in the middle of 1992.

In the meantime, the Commonwealth of Independent States came formally into existence at Almaty on 21 December 1991 when eleven leaders of the former Soviet republics, including all Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan, signed agreement that guaranteed their separate sovereignties. It took some time for the Indian Government to upgrade its missions in Tashkent and Alma-Ata to the rank of embassies and open a new one in Ashgabad and then in Bishkek and Dushanbe, both in May 1994. Central Asian leaders did not seem to take exception to this rather slow realization of their newly acquired international status whereas presidential and ministerial-level delegations from several important Asian and Western countries were making a beeline for their capital. In fact, the leaders of the Central Asian Republics were seen to be visiting India within months of their becoming sovereign republics, and incidentally, for the Uzbek and Kazakh Presidents, it happened to be their first official visit abroad. President Karimov of Uzbekistan was in India shortly before the declaration of independence of 31<sup>st</sup> August 1991 and a second official visit took place in January, 1994. President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan visited India in February, 1992 (and then in December 1996), President Akaev of the Kyrgyz Republic went to New Delhi in March, 1992 and April 1999. President Niyazov of Turkmenistan also visited India twice, in April 1992 and in February 1997. Because of the fluid political situation, the Prime Minister of Tajikistan could come to India only in February, 1993, followed by the Tajik President, E. Rakhmanov, in December 1995. With the exception of the latter, all the CARs got in return a visit by the then Prime Minister of India, Narasimha Rao, who tried to set in motion a process of

Indian involvement in the evolution of the new republics when he visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in May 1993 and subsequently Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in September 1995. Discussions related to economic and technological cooperation were also held during the exchange of high-level delegations.

The first interest of India was to sustain its presence in the region, which had developed during the Soviet era. Corollary documents were signed to institutionalize the new rapprochement between these countries: India signed a treaty on “Principles of Inter-State Relations and Co-operation” with Uzbekistan and a “Declaration on Principles and Directions of Co-operation” with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. In a neighbourhood where religious fundamentalism, ethnic unrest and trafficking of drugs and arms is recurrent, bilateral visits between India and Central Asian leaders have been time and again the occasion to reaffirm their common allegiance to a secular polity and their opposition to sectarian violence sustained by cross-border and state-sponsored terrorism. Being as much concerned as the Central Asian regimes by ethnic and religious intolerance and extremism, India has a vital interest in the security and the political stability of this region specially since Afghanistan, a traditional geo-strategic gateway to the Indian subcontinent, is largely under the control of unfriendly forces and is no more acting as the buffer state set up by the British after the Central Asian Khanates became Russian protectorates at the height of the Great Game.

The periodically active civil war in the strategically important Tajikistan which started soon after its independence and the risk of religious extremism spilling across its borders to the neighbouring Central Asian states was an eye opener to the threat of de-stabilisation of the post-communist regimes posed by disruptive forces at work in the region. This threat would not have seemed so acute without the proximity of the Afghanistan cauldron where is brewing an explosive combination of Islamic fundamentalism, illicit poppy cultivation and small arms proliferation. Apart from a traditional gun culture, arms are easily available in Afghanistan since billions of dollars worth of military equipment provided by the then two Superpowers found their way to the warring factions in Afghanistan in the eighties. The flow of arms has since been continuously sustained by foreign agencies. Looming large is also the menace of narcotics often related to terrorist activities and organised crime. Being close to the Golden Crescent, India and the CARs share the same concern over drug-trafficking ever since drugs began to transit through India in the 1980s at a time when the Iran-Iraq war and the tough policy adopted by the Iranian regime towards drug traffickers affected the traditional transit route through Iran and Turkey. In the aftermath of the dislocation of the Soviet Union, part of the drug-trafficking got re-routed to the CIS, specially through the 1200 km long Tajik border with Afghanistan of which 800 km belong to the Gorny Badakhshan Autonomous Provinces. The situation in the region has grown critical and Osh has become a centre of drug transit. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are also finding themselves more involved in drug trafficking.

Obviously for India, although Kashmir is situated on the periphery, it cannot be walled off from the political developments, which take place in the Central Asian region. Any advance by Islamic fundamentalist groups in the CARs could invigorate the same elements active in Kashmir. Referring to the centrifugal forces at play in different parts of the world during his visit to Kazakhstan in May 1993, Narasimha Rao expressed his full agreement with the Kazakh President that the right of self-determination should not be allowed to undermine the territorial integrity of a

country, nor separatism be allowed to corrode its unity[10]. On the Kashmir issue, India looks on for a supportive attitude from the CARs both in the Islamic Organisation Conference and in the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO).

To give a concrete twist to its bilateral relations, India had expressed its willingness to help the newly-independent republics to build the necessary political structures and economic infrastructure needed for the existence of a strong and self-reliant Central Asia, offering to provide experts and to accept diplomatic trainees, and eventually sent humanitarian assistance to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan[11]. India could as well propose to train and modernise their armed forces particularly as all of them used Soviet made-equipment but it may not go down well with the Russians. Ultimately, given the economic primacy in the influence-building process, nothing could be more important than capital flow and trading.

### **Addressing the new economic equation in Central Asia**

India is trying to rebuild its commercial connection, which came to be disrupted with the dislocation of the USSR and the end of the rouble trading area. The Indian Ministry of Commerce has, for instance, identified the Central Asian region as a thrust area for promotion of its trade in the CIS region. To circumvent the scarcity of hard currency, it was decided to extend credits of US \$20 millions each to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, US \$15 millions to Turkmenistan and US \$5 millions each to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with the purpose of catalyzing and promoting new business opportunities in trade, project exports and joint ventures. To review the progress in trade and co-operation, joint commissions have been constituted with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (First sessions in July 1993) and Kyrgyzstan (first session in October 1995). An India Business Centre run jointly by the Ministry of Commerce and the Confederation of Indian Industry has been set up in November 1997 in Tashkent to highlight the economic potential of the five Central Asian Republics and to provide market intelligence to Indian businessmen wanting to trade or invest in the region. Access to the Central Asian markets is often uneasy for want of banking facilities and credits cover to exporters. Indian and Central Asian markets are also separated by long trade routes combining road, rail, shipping, which does not make Indian goods very competitive in Central Asian markets. Expansion of trade is further hampered by political constraints linked to the volatile political situation in Afghanistan and the difficulties that India may face in securing transit rights from Pakistan.

**Table 1: India's trade with Central Asian Republics (in Rs. Lakhs)**

Fiscal Year (April to March)	1993/94		1994/95		1995/96		1996/97		1997/98	
	Imports	Exports								
Kazakhstan	663	847	1262	2562	2664	2869	4461	1559	15686	3269
Kyrgyzstan	0	118	0	0	8	14	0	346	32	3609

Tajikistan	241	345	649	32	1115	1632	286	258	66	415
Turkmenistan	708	479	3344	166	905	392	95	490	13	632
Uzbekistan	431	469	2618	2213	3591	2502	924	2888	921	6471
CARs	2043	2258	7873	49973	8283	7409	5766	5541	16718	14396
Russia	80669	203661	158376	253436	286417	349549	223093	287960	252547	330552
Ukraine	33595	41435	62773	20325	111393	21515	43265	15959	57846	21812
Grand Total	7310101	6974885	8997070	8267340	12267814	10635335	13891988	11881732	15155352	12628576

**Source:** Figures compiled from the Foreign Trade Statistics of India (principal commodities and countries), March 1995, March 1996, March 1997, and March 1998. Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence and Statistics, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, Calcutta.

The absence of convenient surface route means that the main transit route currently being used is via the Russian port of Novorossisk on the Black Sea. After the initial signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in April 1995 on international road and rail transport and transit, high hopes were placed on a tripartite agreement signed between India, Iran and Turkmenistan in February 1997, which was supposed to ease transportation problems. Goods were to be shipped from Mumbai to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and then transported through a rail corridor in Iran linked to the rail network of the former Soviet Union via Sarakhs on the Iran-Turkmenistan border. The low traffic on this route forced Iran and India to sign a new agreement in February 1999 envisaging major transit concessions to bring down transportation costs.

**Table 2: CARs trade relations with selected countries (in millions of U.S. dollars)**

1997	Kazakhstan		Kyrgyzstan		Tajikistan		Turkmenistan		Uzbekistan	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
China P.R.	47	442	46	34	12	8	13	2	68	127
Germany	368	353	37	23	11	8	3	18	483	121
India	20	33	3	....	1	....	1	...	15	2
Iran	9	83	4	6	20	3	60	25	197	40
Korea	130	130	5	...	14	41	1	...	743	...
Pakistan	....	3	10	....	10	...	9	1	43	1
Russia	1966	2157	170	121	99	88	292	142	962	923
Turkey	177	102	50	6	8	3	129	66	232	86
United States	202	139	33	9	20	8	130	2	258	37
Grand Total	4275	6366	713	555	633	586	1201	2551	4839	2881

**Source:** Direction of Trade Statistics Yearbook 1998, International Monetary Fund, Washington, 1998. Datas for Kyrgyzstan are communicated for 6 to 11 months, estimated for 1 to 6 months (...) symbol stands for negligible.

During the last five years, as is seen in table 1, India's trade with the CARs has steadily increased, but it still does not represent a very significant share of the total trade conducted with the commonwealth of Independent states. Trade with the CARs in 1993/94 represented 1.5% of total goods and services exchanged with Russia; it increased to 5.3 in 1997/98. As a share of India's global trade relations, the CARs amounted to 0.03% in 1993/94 and to 0.11% five years later (Russia accounted in 1997/98 for 2.1% of India's global trade). As a whole, trade exchanges are balanced; even if there is slightly more imports than exports, only in case of Kyrgyzstan, whose imports from India exceeds exports to it. For India, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been the main trading partners, whereas trade exchanges with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan has stagnated if not shown downwards trends. In 1997/98, India's main exports to CARs were: readymade garments of all textile materials, drugs and pharmaceuticals, tea and machinery and instruments, while imports were essentially iron and steel, gold and silver, non-ferrous metals and fibres[12]. All this suggests that India, which was accustomed to doing competition-free business with Soviet Government agencies, has lagged behind in commercially penetrating the domestic markets of the region (see table 2).

The major attraction of Central Asia for foreign business concerns remains the large reserves of natural resources comprising not only oil and gas reserves, but also gold and other precious minerals, non-ferrous minerals, etc. Turkmenistan has, along the Caspian Sea, the third largest reserves of natural gas in the world and huge oil deposits. In this regard Indian presence has been virtually non-existent even if, for instance, Indo-Kazakh co-operation in the hydrocarbons sector, envisages not only for exploration and development activities, but also investment for upgradation and modernisation of the existing infrastructural facilities as well as training programmes in India. The Americans, who combine the advantage of being in a position to offer large investments and of not being a direct neighbour, were the first to realise the geostrategic implications of controlling these enormous resources standing away from the politically fluid Middle East and close to a hydrocarbon-starved Asian market. In Kazakhstan, the Tengiz oil field on the Caspian shore is being developed with the help of US giant Chevron. India is clearly at a disadvantage, compared to the western investors, when it comes to offering foreign capital and may be tempted to look for third country for joint ventures. In December 1998, during the visit to India of the Russian Prime Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, Russia's Lukoil and India's ONGC Videsh, as part of a collaboration agreement on exploration and exploitation, have agreed to look for hydrocarbons in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan in the periphery of the Caspian Sea. Apart from the political problems already mentioned, the possibility for India of importing overland gas and petroleum products from Central Asia still seems distant due to the geological difficulties, and the unavailability of huge capital expenditure required for any pipeline projects. To meet the growing demands for energy, India can always contemplate the import of oil and natural gas tankers from Central Asian through Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) tankers. At the moment, much more visible is the presence of China, in the scene of oil politics, which is in dire need of import of hydrocarbon resources to sustain its high growth rate and its industry is still very dependent on highly polluting coal-based electricity generation. In mid-1997, China's state owned oil companies signed agreements with

Kazakhstan whereby they would develop oilfields in western Kazakhstan and a 3,000 km pipeline would be laid to transport oil to the Eastern Chinese provinces.

### **Coping with competing geopolitical interests**

After dealing mainly with the bilateral dimension of India-Central Asian relations, one has now to re-situate this relationship in the larger context of the reemergence of Central Asia as a distinct geo-political entity at the doorsteps of South Asia. If India remains a marginal actor in the quest for influence; it can at least draw comfort from the fact that its traditional rival, Pakistan, in spite of its diplomatic activism, has often invited more concern than interest among the Central Asian leaders. For Pakistan, the independence of the CARs, coming after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, was a fillip to its endeavour of historical reconstruction which lay emphasis on the bonds with the Islamic community at large and underplay the sub-continental historical and cultural legacy. Islamabad saw also in the newly independent countries an opportunity to revive the ECO as a kind of Asian Islamic bloc by the addition in November 1992 of the Muslims States of the CIS. But soon it appeared that Pakistani expectations and Central Asian perceptions clashed. Narasihma Rao during his address to Turkmen parliamentarians in September 1995, took delight in saying that “it is tempting to imagine that ethnic or religious affairs can provide a basis for a stable regional grouping and some indeed are drawn to this. However, these are short-term calculations and the logic of history as well as rationality does not favour such narrow calculations and motivations”[13]. The former communist States asserted that they did not accept Islam as a geo-political federative force: Islamic revivalism could be acceptable in the cultural sphere and as a vector of national identity but not be the pretext for intervention in politics. Then, Pakistan’s image was tarnished by its inability to control, and sometimes connivance with the militant Islamic outfits operating on its territory from mosques and madrasas. The Uzbek and Tajik authorities have long been accusing orthodox Wahhabite Islamic extremists — in opposition to the local jadid tradition of modernity – of being at work in their country, notably in the Ferghana Valley, with external supports coming from Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Islamabad’s strategy to control the war-torn Afghanistan, by backing the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban forces and thus open and secure the route to Central Asia across Afghanistan, has had the counter-effect of scaring off the ex-Communist regimes in Central Asia. The fact that the Taliban control about 90% of the Afghan territory has not brought Pakistan close to the vaunted Central Asian markets.

Islamabad, deprived of its strategic position as a frontline State during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, expected to regain some bargaining power as a gateway for Western businessmen to Central Asia and as a counterweight to Iranian influence. Consequently, Pakistan, as a key transit country, offered to co-operate with US companies looking for an alternative to Russian pipeline routes and for a way to bypass Iranian territory. Avoiding Russian and Iranian territories meant either going for an “Eurasian” corridor passing through the unstable Caucasus region or through Afghanistan to Pakistan. To that effect, an agreement was signed in October 1997 for setting up a consortium, which associated Unocal with Delta Oil Company of Saudi Arabia, and also as a junior partner Gazprom of Russia, to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Makhrum Coast of Pakistan via Afghanistan with a possible extension towards India. But ultimately, Unocal chose to pull out of the deal in later 1998. Pakistan could be further edged out by diminishing obstructionism from the US Administration regarding the easier Iranian transit route option and outpaced by Uzbekistan, the regional strongman, as a key strategic partner of the US in the region.

China has certainly been more successful in conducting beneficial political relations with the CARs. A strong determinant was the rise of Islamic ideology filling in the vacuum created by the Soviet retreat, which had a favorable reception among the ethnic groups – all Sunni Muslims – living on both sides of the border: Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs, Dungans (Chinese Hui). China is facing growing Uighur alienation in Xinjiang due to a massive in-migration of Han Chinese from the People's Republic of China since the 1950s, which led to mass migration of disgruntled Uighurs, as well as Kazakhs, to the adjoining Soviet republics. As preventive measures against any ethno-religious separatism, China has favoured a solution to the inherited Sino-Soviet boundary dispute in Central Asia within a joint framework associating Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan as well as Russia. These countries signed in April 1996 an agreement on confidence building measures along the border and further demilitarised their frontiers through another agreement signed one year later. For China, the trading activities with the contiguous CARs is also a way of promoting economic development in its far-west and restive Xinjiang.

With no easy overland accessibility and limited financial resources, the Indian Government can at least solicit partnerships to ensure that its security interests are not compromised and that its economic ties will only prosper. Apart from seeing Iran as a bridge to reach out to Central Asia, India and Iran have a common stake in countering the influence of the Taliban on the gates of Central Asia. During a visit in February 1999 of the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Vaezi, to India, the two sides explored ways to deepen their diplomatic and economic engagement with the region. If the fact of the Americans gaining a strategic foothold in Central Asia under the NATO's Partnership for Peace programme has been met with displeasure in India due to bruised memories of US involvement in Southern Asia, high-level non-official American delegation which visited Central Asia in 1998 expressed the possibility for Indian companies to blend their lower-cost production and marketing expertises with US capital and technology on common joint ventures to enter new markets[14].

New Delhi has consistently encouraged Moscow to have an active role in the protection of the CIS external borders, in pursuance of the collective security treaty signed in Tashkent in May 1992. Only Turkmenistan is not a party to the Tashkent treaty but has a bilateral military cooperation agreement with Russia. Bilateral arrangements with Moscow, notably joint air defense agreements, have also been signed by the Central Asian parties to the Tashkent Treaty. Russian troops are deployed in Kyrgyzstan on the border with China, in Turkmenistan on the border with Iran and in Tajikistan on the border with Afghanistan, which lies almost 1500 km from Russian territory. To India's relief, Russian military support contributed to contain the Tajik conflict. Neither India nor Russia would like the region to pass under the influence of Islamic forces, China or the United States.

Another exponent of a Indo-Russian collaborative endeavour in Central Asia is the Indian specialist of Russian history, Madavan K. Palat, who tries to demystify "the Romance of the Silk Road" as nothing more than an Western strategy to promote the idea of an exclusive east-west latitudinal axe linking China to the Mediterranean in which Central Asia would be nothing more than an extension of the Middle East with the same characteristics of oil, Islam and Western domination. In this axial approach, India, as well as Pakistan, would be relegated to the margins of the relations with Central Asia. Much preferable for Indian interests would be the preservation of a

longitudinal axis of India-Central Asia-Russia, based on an Indo-Russian strategic partnership[15]. In this perspective, what is really at stake is not only the Russian Federation's ability to convincingly ensure long-term regional security and stability but also the risk for India of giving the impression of associating itself with Russian overbearing interference in a region that Moscow still considers as its preserve – the so-called “near abroad”. This could be all the more damaging since there is a clear reluctance among the CARs to let Russia play a domineering role in the Central Asian security arrangements. Kazakh forces, along with Kyrgyz and Uzbek troops and a token participation of Russian soldiers, have taken part in September 1997 in a week-long NATO joint military exercise held in Southern Kazakhstan. Central Asian authorities, notably Islam Karimov who all the same played a central role in the signing of the Tashkent treaty of 1992, do not consider NATO's eastward expansion as a threat to their own sovereignty.

Though the setting up of Independent States has opened new prospects of cooperation based on a dialogue, which is not subjected to the political patronage of the Soviet era, India's policy in Central Asia still recognises the need to preserve the links of these new States with Russia, whereas the CARs are struggling to reduce their continued economic and military dependence on Russia.

## **Conclusion**

India's perception of Central Asia has shifted from a secure model of development worthy of emulation during the soviet rule to an area where a fragile nation-building process has to cope with sectarian ideologies and a newly-acquired strategic importance in international politics as a large supplier of natural resources. India's economic and security interests require that the CARs consolidate their recent independence without interference from outside powers in the name of ethnicity or religion. In its relations with the region, India had the unquestionable advantage of starting with a greater amount of goodwill than other countries due to the contacts developed with the erstwhile Soviet Union. In fact, a more visible Indian presence in the region may be favourably perceived particularly as a counterweight to Russia and to offset the expanding Turkish, Pakistan, Iranian and Chinese influences. But the results have been so far disappointing in spite of the fact that New Delhi has no dispute with any of the CARs and that there is a broad convergence of their basic geopolitical interests. The economic importance of Central Asia for India remains marginal in spite of bilateral framework agreements on trade and economic co-operation with all the CARs. One commentator once wrote: “India is one of the few countries which see the Central Asian republics as long term partners in growth rather than a virgin territory to be milked dry. That is why the two sides have been gravitating towards each other rather strongly”[16]. But one must give substance to the loyalties that are timeless.

(Courtesy: Centre for South Asian Studies, Geneva)

## **REFERENCES**

1. Central Asia can be understood as the area including, apart from the CARs, Tibet, Sinkiang (former Eastern Turkestan), Afghanistan, Mongolia and Kashmir (including Ladakh region). Nevertheless, in this paper, we will consider Central Asia as restricted only to the CARs.

Interaction between Indians and Central Asians did not always leave behind happy memories. K.P.S. Menon, India's ambassador to the Soviet Union between 1952 and 1961, recalled that Timur – whose memory has been glorified by the present Uzbek regime through a state run campaign – swept over Northern India for a few weeks and left ruin and desolation behind. “Nothing could be more terribly laconic”, wrote K.P.S. Menon, “than the entry, which Timur made in his diary regarding the conquest of India: “I then turned my attention to Hindustan. My generals told me that conquest would be difficult, but I thought that it would be easy. Did so.’ Did so! These two words signified massacre, pestilence and famine”. [K.P.S. Menon, *The Lamp and the Lampstand*, (OUP, Bombay), 1967, pp. 207-208]. For further information on past contacts between India and Central Asia, see: *Inde-Asie Centrale, Route du commerce et des idées*, Cahiers d’Asie Centrale, 1/2 (1996), IFEAC/Edisud, 366 p.

2. R. Palme Dutt, *India Today*, (Manisha Granthalaya, Calcutta), 1992 (repr.), pp. 76 & 69.
3. K.P.S. Menon, mentioning Arminius Vambery, an Hungarian traveller who visited Turkestan in the 1860s, wrote that “though the percentage of literacy in British India was low enough in all conscience, British India was once held up as a model for Russia to follow in Central Asia (...) At the end of British rule in India, 87 per cent of the people of India were still illiterate, whereas illiteracy has, under Soviet rule, been practically eliminated”. K.P.S. Menon, op.cit., pp. 205-206.
4. Gilles Boquerat, “Evolution of India’s Perception of Central Asia in the Twentieth Century”, *Strategic Analysis*, 19 (5), August 1996, pp. 746-748.
5. Proceedings of a press conference held in New Delhi, 12 November 1948. *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Second Series, Vol.8, ((Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, New Delhi), 1989, p. 316.
6. Kazakhstan (93), Turkmenistan (103), Uzbekistan (104), Kyrgyzstan (109), Tajikistan (118) come before India (139). *Human Development Report 1998*. UNDP (OUP, Delhi), 1998, pp. 129-130.
7. N. Raghavan Pillai, *A Visit to the Soviet Union: Some Impressions and Reflections*, New Delhi, July 29, 1955. Confidential Report, Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1955, pp. 8-9-10. Public Records Office, FO 371 123587.
8. I.K. Gujral, when he was the Indian Ambassador in Moscow (1976-1980) travelled extensively in Central Asia and came to know the geography of the area like “I know the lines on my own hand”, Interview in *Frontline*, April 4, 1997, p.10.
9. Maqbool Ahmad Bhatti, “Impact of Central Asian changes on South and West Asia”, *Regional Studies*, 10((2), Spring 1992, p.24.
10. Foreign Affairs Record, 39(5), May 1993, p. 139.
11. Addressing a seminar on “Central Asian States and India” held in New Delhi in February 1993, the then Minister of State for External Affairs, R.L. Bhatia, said that he had been “deeply impressed by the evident interest in Central Asia in India’s experience as a functioning democracy”. Considering the authoritarianism of the presidents in most of the CARs, one must come to the conclusion that his interlocutors were either very polite or developed second thoughts on the Indian democracy as a model. Foreign Affairs Record, 29(2), February 1993, p.41 According to figures given by the Association of Indian Universities, the number of Central Asian students registered in Indian universities in 1995/96, though increasing, was negligible: 4 Kazakhs, 1 Tajik and 1 Uzbek. University news, 36 (46), November 16, 1998, p.16.

12. If drugs and pharmaceuticals are major export items for India, one medium sized enterprise, Ajanta Pharma, has also ventured into manufacturing in all the five Republics, setting up plants for life-saving drugs, medicines, things of daily needs like toothpaste, iodine, etc. *The Times of India*, 19 September 1997.
13. Foreign Affairs Record, 41 (9), September 1995, pp. 275-276.
14. *The Asian Age*, 8 July 1998.
15. *The Hindu*, 9 January 1999.
16. *The Tribune*, 16 December 1995.