
US - India Strategic Partnership in Central Asia

Saroj Bishoyi*



Introduction

"The South Asian region will benefit from the positive development of the countries of Central Asia. As Central Asia develops, India and others stand to gain a great deal in opening up new markets and trade routes with Central Asia providing Central Asia with options and opportunities from all directions will help those countries in the region to move ahead on a positive and prosperous path.

-Richard A. Boucher, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs

A mix of rich mineral and hydrocarbon resources, ethnic conflict, Islamic resurgence and close proximity to Russia, China, West Asia and South Asia makes Central Asia extremely pivotal as a geo-strategic region. The competing

struggle for influence among various powers there, great and small, and the determination of Central Asian rulers to maintain their utmost freedom by diversifying their security policies are constant factors in regional relationships.

From the late 1990s till 10 September 2001, it appeared that a joint Sino-Russian hegemony was beginning to dominate over Central Asia. But the sudden and perhaps long-term US presence in the region, in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent US war against terrorism, has radically changed the equation. The United States, over the course of its anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan, has gained a foot hold in Central Asia. The Central Asian regimes have also seized on this opportunity to diversify their security relations.

**Saroj Bishoyi is a doctoral fellow at Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi, India.*

The US strategy in Central Asia now calls for balancing security, energy and regional economic cooperation, and freedom through reform. However, to succeed in the region and to achieve its strategic interests, the US needs regional strategic partners who share its goals in the region.

The US administration conceives that India as an emerging power can play an important leadership role in Asia in the 21st century, especially in the South and Central Asia for bringing peace, stability and prosperity through regional cooperation. In fact, India's strategic interests in Central Asia also coincide with those of the United States. India and the US share common threat perceptions of Islamic fundamentalism, narcotics and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. India's move to establish an air base in Tajikistan is adding a new dimension to the geopolitical struggle unfolding in Central Asia. In addition, India wants to develop a new power grid that integrates Central Asian states with those in the Indian subcontinent, an idea that has received strong backing from the United States. It will enhance its overall economic profile in Central Asia. It is evident that India, too, is

quietly positioning itself for a strategic role in Central Asia, albeit at a slower pace than the United States and China. However, the growing relations of India with the governments of the region are conspicuous enough to deserve attention. In fact, a strategic convergence of interests between the United States and India could very well emerge, which, in turn, will help strengthening the regional cooperation.

This paper is an attempt to understand, describe and analyse the US-India strategic partnership in Central Asia and its role in strengthening regional cooperation. It asks and seeks to answer four prosaic, but essential questions: How has the strategic convergence of interests between the US and India brought them closer to each other in Central Asia and how far this partnership can grow? What are the policies that they pursue to achieve their strategic interests in the region? How will this region benefit from this strategic partnership? And, finally, what are the potential problems and challenges that they will encounter in translating their interest-based policies into a ground reality?

The strategic map of Central Asia

has changed almost unrecognisably since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War world, it has become a theatre of a new 'great game' not only because of its strategic location but also due to its natural resources, notably oil and natural gas. Since 9/11, it has also acquired a new layer of strategic interest because of its vantage point vis-à-vis the central security- concern of the region, namely terrorism in its local, regional and global aspects. The new Central Asia, which found itself in the midst of these competing influences on the one hand and in its own concerns for security and internal political stability on the other, naturally looked for support and constructive cooperation from wherever possible. And in this search, amongst other countries, India stood as an attractive direction to relate to.

India is not only a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural resilient society, with vast experience of managing delicate intra-ethnic relations, but also a secular and democratic polity. Central Asia is also an area of vital importance to India not only on account of its geographical proximity and India's historical and cultural links with the region, but also because of the common

challenge they face from jihadi terrorism. Relations, based on a shared commitment to open and progressive societies, secularism and democracy, have been reinforced by similarity of views in the fight against terrorism. Besides, India and countries of Central Asia share concerns with regard to the rising menace of drugs trafficking.

The post-Cold War India had its own compulsions to look towards Central Asia. The collapse of the bipolar world and radical transformations in the former Soviet Union had almost shaken the basic foundations and framework of India's foreign policy. Under these developments, India had to find a new perspective and framework to adjust its policy with the changes. Accordingly, India started reorienting its policy towards the US, Europe and Asia. In this period, the sole remaining Super Power, the United States, had emerged as the extra-regional strategic partner of India, both in military and non-military spheres.

The present paper is divided into three broad sections. Section one will focus on the US-India strategic interests in Central Asia; section two will focus on their role in strengthening regional cooperation;

and section three will focus on the challenges that they encounter in their strategic involvement in the region and will relate to the main argument of the paper with its future implications.

US-India Strategic Interests in Central Asia

The US-India strategic partnership is rooted in shared values and is broad in its nature and scope, with both the countries working together towards global action on global issues, including non-proliferation, energy and the environment, and expansion of economic and political freedom. The US views India as a rising global power and partner, one whose interests converge in important respects with those of the United States. The US also anticipates that India will play an increasingly important leadership role in Asia in the 21st century. The US-India strategic partnership in Central Asia has been built around many areas of convergence of interests, both political and strategic. In this section, the present paper focuses on three important areas of US-India strategic partnership in the region. They are security cooperation, energy and regional economic cooperation, and internal reform.

Security Cooperation

The challenge to peace and stability in India and Central Asia is posed by the same Pakistan-Afghanistan based nexus of terrorists and fundamentalists forces represented by the Al Qaeda, the Taliban and their Pakistani mentors, the ISI. It has, therefore, been in the mutual interest of India and the Central Asia countries to fight these problems together. Former Prime Minister of India, A. B. Vajpayee, in one of his visits to Central Asia, had thus denounced terrorism and religious extremism. He said that unfortunately, in recent times, the logic of conflict resolution through dialogue has had to counter a formidable enemy. Its epicentre is in India's neighbourhood. It has emerged as the biggest enemy of peace, security, democracy and multi-religious societies in Asia and around the world. Experience shows that terror respects neither boundaries nor lines of self-control... Asian and global security depends crucially on how unitedly, decisively and speedily we counter this menace.

On 26 April 2006, India and Uzbekistan signed seven agreements, during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to

Uzbekistan, in the fields of energy, business, education, mineral prospecting and stepping up the joint fight against international terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. This undoubtedly increased Indian stakes in Central Asia. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and President Karimov identified drug trafficking, international terrorism, religious extremism and cross border terrorism as common threats faced by their nations. Opium production in Afghanistan accounts for 80 per cent of global output. And drug trafficking in Afghanistan has been the fountain head of terrorist financing in the Central and South Asian regions. The Indian experience in fighting terrorism and insurgencies could be of utility to Uzbekistan given the number of hot spots in the Ferghana Valley and other parts of Uzbekistan. In particular, the Indian experience with the use of Central Police Organisations and paramilitary forces is likely to be of considerable value to Tashkent.

During Tajikistan President Emomali Rakhmonov's five-day visit to India on August 2006, the two countries signed pacts on strengthening cooperation in the fields of energy, science and

technology, foreign-office consultation, and cultural exchange. India also offered to rehabilitate the Varzob-1 hydropower plant in Tajikistan. Two days before the Tajik president's visit, the India-Tajikistan joint working group (JWG) on counter-terrorism met in Delhi. At the JWG meeting, the two sides agreed on bilateral mechanisms to exchange information on various aspects of terrorism, including the financing of terrorism that affect their two countries. India also offered to provide Tajikistan with counter-terrorism training. In the sphere of defence, cooperation is taking the form of a security dialogue and training of armed forces personnel many of whom are presently undergoing courses in Indian defence training establishments.

This cooperation is, however, just the tip of the iceberg. Less visible and more significant is the India-Tajik cooperation at Ayni Air Base, near the Tajik capital Dushanbe. India is constructing three hangars at Ayni, two of which will be used by Indian aircraft. India will station about 12 MiG-29 bombers there. The third hangar will be used by the Tajik air force. The Indian Air Force aircraft under a 2002 defence-cooperation agreement whereby

India has been training the Tajik air force. Stephen Blank, Professor at the US Army War College, in an article 'India: The New Central Asian Player' has pointed out that India's move to establish an air base in Tajikistan is adding a new wrinkle to the geopolitical struggle unfolding in Central Asia. Some of India's strategic interests coincide with those of the United States.

The potential implications of this base, however, go far beyond the Indo-Pakistani rivalry on the subcontinent. First of all, the Ayni base is a tangible manifestation of India's move to project its power in Central Asia, a policy goal formally enunciated in 2003-04. It not only signifies India's determination to play a role in Central Asian security, but its genuine ability to do so. At the same time, the Ayni base represents a major element in India's efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan, and to enhance New Delhi's ability to contain Islamic terrorism both in South Asia and Central Asia. India obviously will not accept being confined to an exclusively South Asian geo-strategic role any longer. The US administration has supported this strategic move of India into Central Asia, as it perceives that this will counter the growing political and

economic influence of Russian and China in this region.

Since 11 September 2001, the United States has also undertaken an ambitious forward strategy in Central Asia in support of the global war on terrorism (GWOT). Three of the five countries- Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan- in Central Asia border on Afghanistan, and all five have provided support to Operation Enduring Freedom in various forms - bases, over-flight rights, and re-fuelling facilities. The US cooperation with these countries is underpinned by the common interest in fighting terrorism and in securing a stable and democratic future for Afghanistan. And this cooperation has been strengthened and made easier by the participation of these countries in military training and exercises through North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) Partnership for Peace. The US-India understanding is also clear on how to tackle the problem of counter proliferation in this region. In this regard, Kazakhstan's role in the former Soviet Union's nuclear missile launch capacity and weapons grade nuclear fuel generation goals made it one of the first countries included under Nunn-Lugar Counter-proliferation assistance.

Kazakhstan's cooperation with the United States under these programmes has set a benchmark. The other four countries are parties to a regional Export Control and related Border Security (EXBS) strategy to control the spread of Chemical, Biological, Nuclear and Radiological (CBRN) weapons. Central Asia's location as a junction for trade also makes it a crossroads for traffickers in weapons of mass destruction, missiles, and related technologies, particularly through their air routes. The Central Asia Republics have also supported the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). The strong stance by these governments in support of PSI will serve as a deterrent to would be proliferators, and will ensure strategically important partners to the United States and other PSI participants in the global efforts to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

As far as terrorism is concerned, the focus seems to be primarily on eliminating the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) that is active in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The IMU, believed to have closed links with al-Qaeda, and committed to establishing a Taliban-like variety of Islam in Uzbekistan, "lost one of its two primary leaders, Jumaboi

Namangani, in December 2001 in Konduz, Afghanistan, when he was killed while fighting with the Taliban."

Energy and Regional Economic Cooperation

Central Asia presents for enhancing energy security by increasing the supply of energy to world markets, adding diversity to supply options and supporting to economic growth, and thus, establishing political stability in these countries and in adjacent areas that do not have significant energy resources. The countries in Central Asia run the gamut on energy wealth. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are endowed with oil and gas resources. Only Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are resource-poor except for hydropower. Oil production increased substantially over the last decade, due to the influx of foreign investment in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. These countries are now providing about 2 million barrels of oil per day to the global market, and will be contributing up to 4 million barrels per day of oil in 2010. Central Asian-Caspian gas production is expected to almost double from 14 billion cubic feet per day in 2005 to 24

billion cubic feet per day in 2010. Data on oil and gas reserves for the Central Asia-Caspian region vary widely depending on the source and are difficult to pin down. The Energy Information Administration (EIA) indicates that proven oil reserves are somewhere between 17 and 50 billion barrels. There have been estimates of resources, not proven reserves, in excess of 100 billion barrels. As more exploration is done in the region and more delineation of deposits undertaken, better reserve figures will be forthcoming. Reserve numbers for gas are equally questionable. Very little exploration has been done to identify offshore reserves.

As has been pointed out, the importance of Central Asia to India is not merely civilisational and historical, but also geopolitical and economic. India is the world's sixth largest consumer of energy. With rapidly growing economy, India is emerging as a major importer of energy and diversification of energy supplies is a key component of India's energy security policy. India now imports 50 per cent of its gas and two-thirds of its oil. By the end of the decade oil and gas imports could account for 80 per cent of consumption. Although a new gas discovery along India's east coast

will help reduce imports, improved access to Central Asia's energy resources could play an important role in meeting India's energy needs, particularly in the prosperous northern India which is far from the sources of energy in India and could be the entry point for energy imports from Central Asia by land. Apart from oil and gas resources of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the hydropower in Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan could be of great interest to India. Access to Central Asian energy is, thus, vitally important for India. New Delhi seeks access to Kazakh oil and gas and involvement in 'mega-projects,' such as a pipeline from Iran-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India, and another linking Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India. Either or both of these pipelines would substantially improve India's reliable access to energy supplies, while encouraging better Indo-Pakistani relations.

In addition, India wants to develop a new power grid that integrates Central Asian states with those of the subcontinent, an idea that has received strong backing from the United States. While India would use a new grid to enhance its overall economic profile in Central Asia, Washington sees the project as

a way to counter the growing economic and political influence of Russia and China in Central Asia.

Growing concerns about energy security have prompted India and the U.S. to launch a new Energy Dialogue that reflects the transformed strategic relationship between the world's two largest democracies. Adequate and reliable supplies of energy at reasonable cost are essential to fuel India's rapidly growing economy. The U.S. and India are becoming increasingly reliant upon oil and natural gas markets to satisfy their energy needs. Both nations depend heavily upon domestic supplies of coal for electric power generation and seek to increase their utilization of natural gas, renewable energy and nuclear power as well as pursue energy efficient practices to ensure a balanced and sustainable energy economy that helps preserve a clean environment. The United States and India recognize that their mutual interests are best served by working together in a collaborative fashion to ensure stability in global energy markets.

During his visit to New Delhi in March 2006, President Bush proclaimed that India in the 21st century would be a natural partner

of the United States. It is this natural partnership that has led to the ongoing US-India Economic dialogue since 2000 and led to the launching of the US-India Energy dialogue, aimed at strengthening energy security. The India-U.S. Energy Dialogue, launched on 31 May 2005, aimed at increasing India-U.S. trade and investment in the Indian energy sector by working with the public and private sectors to further identify areas of cooperation and collaboration and build on the broad range of existing cooperation between India and the United States to mobilise secure, clean, reliable and affordable sources of energy, focusing on (i) oil and natural gas (ii) coal (iii) power and energy efficiency, (iv) new technologies and renewable Energy and (v) civil nuclear energy. India is also increasingly becoming a major U.S. trading partner. From just \$16 billion in two-way trade in 1998, U.S.-India trade has grown to \$26 billion in 2005.

In this regard, the US Assistant Secretary of South and Central Asian Affairs, Richard Boucher has stated, "Our vision includes new energy routes that will ensure the next generation of South and Central Asian entrepreneurs have access to the resources they need to prosper.

We want to give South Asians access to the vast and rapidly growing energy resources in Central Asia, whether they are oil and gas in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, thermal power in Uzbekistan, or hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This vision is within our grasp. Within the next few years, we expect to see private investment lead to the establishment of a 500 kilovolt power line transmitting much-needed electricity from Central Asia across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India". The US-India assistance to Central Asian Countries can foster inter- and intra-regional energy trade, investment, and competition through technical assistance and coordination with relevant international financial institutions. Likewise, diversification of Central Asian economies and the growth of small- and medium-size enterprises outside the energy sector can help create new jobs in the region to extend prosperity. When possible, assistance programmes should increasingly incorporate regional links, whether the focus is roads, energy, education, or even training exchanges to include participants from neighbouring countries.

Afghan road improvements have dramatically reduced driving times,

thus, increasing regional trade. The opening of a U.S.-funded \$36.5 million Tajik-Afghan bridge with customs and border security facilities on each side, linked to the Tajik national highway system by a Japanese-funded road rehabilitation project, will create a safe and reliable ground transportation link within the region. Central Asia has an abundance of existing and potential oil, gas, and electricity sources that the growing economies of South Asia need. Together with other donors, the US is exploring ways to export electricity from Central Asia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. The US is also supporting to establish multiple, commercially viable pipelines and other new energy transportation routes, because the US believes that diversification of energy transport routes to and from Central Asia increases stability and energy security, not just regionally but throughout the world. The Central Asian states also recognise that it is very much in their long-term economic and security interests to build linkages to the South that complement their existing ties to the North and West. They are used to conducting foreign policy based on the assumption that 'bad things' – drugs, terrorists, instability – come from the South, and must be

stopped. But now, while these threats remain, Central Asians are increasingly looking at South for trade partners, export markets and opportunities for security and law enforcement cooperation.

In October 2005, when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, she observed that their citizens see Afghanistan as a part of Central Asia. They understand they have a huge stake in Afghanistan's future, just as we do. They understand that a stable Afghanistan, anchored in the broader region, will be good for their own future stability. And they see the potential economic benefits of reaching new markets to the South, in Pakistan and India.

Internal Reform

In Central Asia, there is a great deal of democratic deficit in the whole region. Apparently, the key problem for most countries in the region is the total absence of linkage between the people at large and their government. The lack of elite-mass linkages and the socio-political dialogue not only retards socio-economic development, but also encourages traditional conservative formations. This invariably brings

wide-ranging instability and insecurity. It creates a nursing environment for the growth of extremism, both within and around them. The US-India strategy, thus, aims to promote freedom through democratic and economic reform in Central Asia for bringing peace and stability, because political stability and economic prosperity of Central Asia is in the interest of the whole region and can enhance regional cooperation and integration.

They support these programmes in Central Asia which continue to yield positive results in a challenging environment by creating better business environments, reforming education, bolstering independent media, encouraging the rule of law, developing civil society, fighting corruption, developing democratic institutions and electoral processes. So Central Asian countries must make efforts to fight corruption and strengthen rule of law to develop trust and confidence of the people over the governments. Similarly, foreign investors need to feel confident in the rule of law before committing to large and risky ventures.

In Uzbekistan, they are working to strengthen micro finance

institutions to create opportunities for self-employment and allow entrepreneurs to create new jobs. In Tajikistan, they are providing assistance to the important agricultural irrigation sectors. These are examples of programmes that help create improved social and economic conditions. Freedom and democracy, including respect for human rights and religious freedom, provide the path to stability, as well as economic prosperity, in the region. Progress on reform, on both democratic and economic fronts, rule of law, respect for human rights and religious freedom, and the building of civil societies are essential to sustain strong, positive and lasting bilateral relationships with these nations.

The United States supports maintaining and expanding Central Asia's ties to the Euro-Atlantic community, while also looking for new opportunities to the South. The creation of the State Department's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs reflects this expanded view. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice noted in her speech at Eurasian University in Astana in October 2005, "Kazakhstan has the potential to become the locomotive of growth for Central Asia and to give impetus to a 'corridor of reform' extending

southward to Afghanistan and the India Ocean. The United States and the countries of the broader region share an interest in the free movement of energy, people, goods, and information from the Kazakh steppes to the Indian Ocean. We want not only to support economic development along a North-South axis, but also afford Afghanistan access to a wider world, thus becoming a bridge, not a barrier. In this vision, the United States wants to be the convener, facilitator, and engine for change by prying open physical and diplomatic bottlenecks."

Strengthening Regional Cooperation

The US-India strategic partnership also aims at encouraging the integration of the states of the Central Asia into the global economy and world community. In recent years, the United States has attached great importance to its South Asian operation and has been vigorously supporting India as its strategic ally in South Asia. The US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher in his testimonial 'Great Central Asia' strategy pointed out that benefiting from the modern border controls mechanism; commodities can circulate legally

and freely in the areas between Astana and Islamabad. The regional power grid, which is supported by oil and gas resources in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and the water resources in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, can transmit electricity from Almaty to New Delhi. He further said that for historical reasons, Central Asia and South Asia have been isolated from each other and have belonged to different geopolitical plates for a long time.

South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan have also been paying close attention to Central Asia. They have had steady bilateral security and economic cooperation with Central Asian countries. The 'Greater Central Asia' strategy put forward by the United States has provided both India and Pakistan with an opportunity to participate in the issues of Central Asia. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in 2006, Indian Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas indicated that India was seriously considering other options provided by the United States. Earlier, India had announced that it would join the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline project, which is supported by the United States.

In the vision of the 'Great Central Asia' strategy, Afghanistan is an important part, because of its strategic location. On 18 November 2006, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said at 2nd Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan in New Delhi that "peace and prosperity in Afghanistan are of vital interest not only to the people of Afghanistan but for the wider region and the world as a whole. India shares your vision of Afghanistan as a country at the crossroads of Central Asia, West Asia, China and the Indian sub-continent. The admission of Afghanistan to SAARC was, therefore, a natural development. We look upon Afghanistan not only as a valued member of the South Asian fraternity but also as our gateway to the west." The stability, independence, and integration of these states into the larger world are seen as a boost for India's own stability and self-definition. It prevents the region from becoming a power vacuum that would draw Russia, China, Iran, and others into a dangerous competition for influence.

Challenges to US-India Strategy

The US-India strategic partnership

in Central Asia is an ambitious policy. Given the present level of US-India strategic relationship and their respective interests in the region, how far can this partnership grow to achieve their strategic interests in the region? Magnificent as it appears, the 'Greater Central Asia' strategy will still have to face some practical problems in implementation. For historical and cultural reasons, Central Asia and South Asia countries lack basic sense of identification and in-depth cooperation experience. The mutual trust between India and Pakistan is not strong enough for implementing large-scale cross-border infrastructure projects.

The Energy reserve issues of Afghanistan and Central Asia are the two blind sides of the 'Great Central Asia' strategy. Afghanistan is the most critical pawn in the 'Great Central Asia' strategy. Currently, the US and Afghan central government have very limited control over the situation in Afghanistan. Taliban remnants are still remaining. The warlord regimes and drug trade are still major regional security problems. According to the 'Great Central Asia' strategy, most major transport infrastructure and pipelines will pass through Afghanistan. The risks,

thus, are too high. Similarly, an important part of the 'Great Central Asia' strategy is to export the energy from Central Asia to South Asia. However, nobody is sure of the quantum of the total energy reserves in the Central Asian region.

The most serious challenge to the US-India strategic partnership in Central Asia comes from the weaknesses of these states. These countries face a set of daunting developmental challenges unlike those in most other postcolonial countries. These include declining standards of living, health, and education; the growing number of citizens living below the poverty line; ethnic and religious tensions; and the complication of geographic remoteness from the developed world. The very political trends that have guaranteed near-term stability - strong and authoritarian-minded presidents and highly personalized regimes - could easily become a longer-term source of instability.

U.S. objections to India's search for alternative energies are also noteworthy, as the United States wants to restrict India's attempts to develop the India-Pakistan-Iran gas pipeline. The United States believes that the civil nuclear deal will end India's dependence on the oil from

Persian Gulf, even though, despite being the pioneer in a field of nuclear energy, the United States itself is equally interested in maintaining a continued and unhindered flow of oil from the Persian Gulf for satisfying its own needs. That means that the United States is free to look after its interests, but it wants India's hands to be tied.

In view of this, it can be said that though the integration of India in the field of nuclear energy is a welcome move, India needs to tread cautiously to protect its interests. Outside the burgeoning partnership with the United States, India also has its own agenda and interests in Central Asia. As with China, energy is an important consideration for India and New Delhi has long been interested in developing a North-South energy corridor that would bring gas from Turkmen and Kazakh fields to South Asia. Obviously, issues related to stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan will need to be resolved before major pipeline projects can be undertaken.

The Way Ahead

However, the challenges and contradictions notwithstanding, the newly emerged Central Asia

provides immense strategic and economic opportunities for both the US and India, and their policy makers are trying to harness these opportunities. The results of their efforts may not be fully satisfactory. Much of the role that the two countries can play in strengthening regional cooperation to achieve their strategic interests would depend upon the following factors.

The key challenges for the states of the region themselves, for their neighbours and for the US and India will remain how to maintain stability, encourage economic growth and integration, and promote pluralism and democratisation. A stable region will have a positive impact on Russia, China, the West Asia and the South Asia. It would remove a source of potential friction and competition. Thus, the most farsighted US-India strategic partnership towards the region cannot be sustained without greater cooperation with all the interested parties. Coordination of efforts and, where possible, pooling of resources would have an important multiplier effect on assistance, exchanges, and technical advice.

The United States should not allow itself to fall into the trap of viewing involvement in Central Asia

through either a Cold War paradigm or Great Game construct that encourages a zero-sum interpretation of geopolitical developments. The opening of the Russian/CSTO base at Kant or the institution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO) counter-terrorism exercises are not inherently counter to U.S. interests and should not be viewed as such. Both China and Russia have their own interests in seeing this region stabilised and in supporting the defeat of Islamic extremism. Pushing back Chinese and Russian security initiatives is, thus, counterproductive. On the contrary, there might actually be diplomatic benefits (in Central Asia itself and on other regional and global issues where the United States seeks support from Moscow and Beijing) to engaging the CSTO and SCO more actively.

NATO could be one conduit for exploring combined exercises with Russian forces in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; the planned SCO anti-terrorism centre in Tashkent could be one avenue for exploring U.S. cooperation with the SCO. For the United States, therefore, continuous dialogue with regional actors, as well as with Russia, China, key members of the European Union, Japan and India, is required to

coordinate policies and prevent crises.

The prospects for a continued US-India strategic partnership appear promising. The changing perception of the Bush administration about India's capabilities, and its desire for both states to work together for the maintenance of peace, security, and economic growth has allowed India and the United States to move in the right direction for a better future. The similarity of threat perception as already mentioned - of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and the desire to develop close cooperation to confront common challenges to peace and security - has allowed India and the United States to keep their differences aside and walk together towards a better relationship. The Bush administration's policies of favouring democracies, acknowledging India as a rising power and a responsible state with advanced nuclear technology, has provided a new outlook for the US-India strategic partnership in this new era.

The US-India strategic partnership in Central Asia is formidable but, at the same time, it is not unassailable. Pursuing a balance among the core areas of strategic interests such as

security, energy and regional economic cooperation, internal reform and regional integration, offers the best chance of success. Accomplishing this goal will require wise use of their limited resources.

The most important aspect of India's role in Central Asia is its own strength and resilience. There is need for India to make full use of its cultural identities and historical links with the region. There is still greater need for India to deploy adequate economic resources to back its diplomacy. Whatever has been done so far in terms of assistance, trade and investments is not very impressive. It is true that India suffers from the connectivity

hurdle in harnessing full potential of Indo-Central Asian co-operation but there is also much scope for India to improve economic management of its diplomacy. It is incumbent upon Indian diplomacy to think of all possible options in overcoming the economic constraints and connectivity hurdles. India needs to play a proactive role in the prevailing geopolitical situation in Central Asia. After all, the region has been rightly termed as "extended neighbourhood" in the Indian strategic calculus. And, New Delhi has tremendous goodwill, compared to any other major player in the region, thanks to its well-earned image of being always a benign neighbour. ■