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## Reconnecting India and Central Asia

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**Ramakrushna Pradhan\***



### Introduction

Central Asia is a buffer between the two nuclear powers – the Russian Federation and China. Major geopolitical massifs – the Eurasian, Islamic, Chinese, and Indian – intersect here. Central Asia is also the geographical centre of Asia where four world civilizations – Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism – meet. The region is also critically linked to the security of almost all the countries of the world and offers immense opportunities to regional and extra-regional players.

A good part of the India's political history has been shaped by events in Central Asia. The region had been a staging ground for invasions into India. The Central Asian dynamics vis-à-vis Indian strategic thought has been mentioned in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Central Asia was also a bridge for promoting Indian commerce and culture across Asia

through the famous Silk Route.<sup>1</sup> The Indus Valley civilization and Central Asian *Khanates* were closely connected.

India's ties with Central Asia waned during the British Indian Empire around the mid-nineteenth century. Even though relations were revived in the years following independence, they remained tepid. Indian presence in Central Asia was characterized by its closeness to the Kremlin following the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962.<sup>2</sup> It was further strengthened by the Sino-Soviet schism in the ensuing years. India also managed to get a cultural anchor in the region under the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty of 1971.<sup>3</sup> However, its presence in the region remained "muted" and constrained by its ties to the Kremlin.<sup>4</sup> The end of the cold war helped in ushering a far-reaching shift in India's foreign policy discourse away from Nehruvian idealism towards realism and pragmatism towards the region.

*\*Dr. Ramakrushna Pradhan is a Lecturer, Department of Political Science, P. G. Department of Social Science, Fakir Mohan University, Balasore, Odisha, India.*

### **The New Initiative**

India started recognizing the Central Asian Republics (CARs) as an area of strategic importance. India's "Look North" policy in the 1990s is a standing example of this. During a visit to Turkmenistan in September 1995, the Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao made it amply clear that for India, Central Asia is an area "of high priority, where we aim to stay engaged far into the future. We are an independent partner with no selfish motives. We only desire honest and open friendship and to promote stability and cooperation without causing harm to any third country."<sup>5</sup> But the intensity of this "Look North Policy", offering the propositions of "secularism", "democracy", and "literacy" as national strengths that India and Central Asia both share, has waned in recent years. Hardly anybody now remembers the "Look North" policy. When the world powers remained positively engaged in the CARs, India chose to stay away from the region citing domestic compulsions and its economic constraints.

The trend of realism and pragmatism resurfaced in India's foreign policy doctrine of 1997, popularly known as "*Gujral Doctrine*".<sup>6</sup> Public rhetoric to the

effect also gained momentum with the coming to power of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and its proclaimed ambition to make India occupy the global political centre stage.

Until recently, India's relations with the region were viewed through the historical and cultural prisms. But the sudden changes in the international political scenario, emerging geopolitics of Central Asia in redefining the geopolitical map of Asia, the geo-strategic situation in Eurasia, regional security assuming priority in the global political agenda, and geo-economic interests taking over the military aspect in the early 2000s have opened up Central Asia to its neighbours for influence and attraction. India being the proximate player and natural ally could not stay away from it this time, hence tried to venture into the region for reasons of immediate geopolitical and geo-strategic interests.

The entire edifice of India's relations with the CARs was probably laid during this period. India's commonalities with the CARs, close relations and cultural affinity were instrumental in bringing the two sides closer and enabled greater security and economic engagement. Bilateral and multilateral cooperation has been

forged between the two sides in the field of security, economics, energy and strategy. The President of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon visited India from 1-4<sup>th</sup> September, 2012.<sup>7</sup> India's External Affairs Minister also visited Tajikistan in early July 2012.<sup>8</sup>

### **India's Geopolitical Interests**

The several reasons account for India's re-engagement with Central Asia. The first is to give India a substantial footprint on the hydrocarbon map of the region. Second, in view of Pakistan's pursuit of a strident Islamist agenda, India's security interest demands checking the rise of radical Islam as a political force in Central Asia. Third, it is vital to keep a tab on drug trafficking and potential weapon proliferation in this geo-strategically important region. Fourth, to promote India's interests in the commercial arena. Finally, the CARs can provide support for India's emerging regional/global power status; India's permanent membership of the UN Security Council; countering Pakistan's anti-India rhetoric and importantly, it will provide India with a grand stage alongside the US, Russia and China to play a greater role in Asian regional dynamics. India as of now cannot leapfrog to the global high

table without demonstrating effective initiative at the regional level – the Central Asia being an important regional constituent.

### **India's Geo-strategic Interests**

Geo-strategy refers to India's long-term strategic management of its geopolitical interests, influences and involvement in the region.

India's security is closely tied to the instability in the region between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The controversial alliance between the Taliban and Pakistan has contributed to terrorist attacks against India on several occasions. Various Pakistan-supported terrorist groups active in Kashmir, such as Lashkar-e-Toyyaba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, received military training in Afghan camps alongside Central Asian militant groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Tajik and Uighur militants.<sup>9</sup> The IMU has close links with the Taliban and the ISI.<sup>10</sup> A UNI report dated 3 April 2000 states that "Afghan and Pakistan trained mercenaries are seeking fresh pastures to exploit their brand of fundamentalism with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan emerging as their new hot spots."<sup>11</sup> To counter these, India's cooperative security

initiatives have already begun with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup>

### **Drug Trafficking and Weapons' Proliferation**

Central Asia previously served as a raw materials base for the Soviet weapon programme, with Kazakhstan holding large reserves of high-quality uranium, while Kyrgyzstan has substantial amounts of nuclear waste. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan hold sizeable uranium reserves and have the potential for its enrichment. This coupled with the absence of special detection equipment at the border and customs checkpoints and rampant corruption have the potential to render the region highly susceptible to a lucrative route for smuggling fissile material. Drug trafficking also poses a major security threat to the region.<sup>13</sup> India needs to pay greater attention to drug trafficking, since much of the money generated is used to fund activities of extremist Islamist terror networks. This is an area where India has a broad overlap of interests with the three other key players in the region – US, Russia and China – with whom it could engage in multilateral cooperation.

### **Great Power Game and India**

The US entered into Central Asia

in the early 1990s with the issues of geostrategy, security, energy and democracy. However, its presence was further strengthened only around 1994 with the focus largely concerned on the oil and natural resources of the region, to administer and control the pipelines originating out of Central Asia and to maintain a balance of power by countering China and restricting Iran. The main objective then was also to take care of the nuclear instability that could emerge if Iran or Pakistan gained access to the Central Asian uranium mines. The US objectives were also to save the region from the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, to strengthen the role of Turkey and block Russian influence in the region.

### **China and Central Asia**

China and Central Asia have been closely intertwined in history and that relationship has begun to re-emerge today. This has further led to booming relationship between the two natural allies in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. China shares 3500 km of border with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In the early years of the CARs' independence China was interested only in the political stability of the region and in preventing Islamic fundamentalism taking roots there. Eventually, to loosen the hold of the US in the region,

China boosted its diplomacy in the region. Nonetheless, China's major interests in the region also include: to get access to the energy resources of CARs and to address its problem of East Turkestan movement in Xinjiang. It initiated in 1996 the formation of *Shanghai Five* with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia to stabilize its borders, to promote peace and cooperation in the region and to develop greater trade relations with the CARs. Uzbekistan joined the organization in 2001 when it was renamed as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China also transformed the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region into a free market zone in 1998 to strengthen cooperation with Kazakhstan and to open up trade routes in the region. Xinjiang has major significance for China beyond issues of territorial integrity and regional harmony, as it has one of the biggest oil-bearing basins in Asia - the Tarim basin. China is also the second-largest consumer of oil in the world after America. China has great interest in gaining access to the rich deposits of hydrocarbon and hydroelectric resources of the region. Beijing is actively taking part in exploring the Aktyubinsk and Mangyshlak oil deposits and building an oil pipeline in the Kazakhstan-Xinjiang region. China is the major energy partner of

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan on the eastern side of the Caspian. China worked to create the world's fastest-built natural gas pipeline, linking Turkmenistan's vast south-eastern gas fields with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's formidable reserves to help slake the second-largest economy's seemingly unquenchable thirst for resources.<sup>14</sup> China now plans to export 65 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas from Turkmenistan annually, more than double that envisioned for the largest capacity version of the Nabucco pipeline. Two strings, or portions, of the Central Asia-China pipeline are already complete, connecting Turkmenistan to China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. A third is already under construction along the original route and a fourth would potentially take an alternative path through relatively stable northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan to China's Xinjiang province and onward to the burgeoning east coast. The pipeline became operational a record 18 months after its original announcement.<sup>15</sup>

### **Other stake holders**

Russia on its part has three major reasons for being involved in Central Asia. One is to protect ethnic Russians in the region. Second, to maintain access to important

resources of the region such as precious metals. Third, to restrict the influence of the external powers in the region in general and the US in particular and also to retain its influence in the region.

Although Russia, China and the US are the major geo-strategic players in the region, the influence of Islamic countries such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan should not be underestimated. The competitive rivalry between Turkey and Iran in Central Asia is unique. Both have taken steps to convince the CARs to recognize their respective roles in the region. Turkey has been concerned that Iran may attempt to turn the Muslim nationalities towards theocracy, while Iran is worried that Turkey's active role in the region is aimed at pan-Turkism. This rivalry has been further accentuated with the United States' open support to Turkey and Russo-Chinese backing to Iran. Pakistan on its part has offered political support, economic integration and ideological solidarity to the CARs, hoping to pave the way for a broader strategic unity. The role of Iran, Turkey and Pakistan has been transformed over the years with regard to Central Asia. After the 2001 world trade centre attack the regional politics in the CAR got intertwined with larger national security perspectives of the nations

surrounding Central Asia and Afghanistan. For Iran, greater US involvement brought in mixed results: engagement in Afghanistan by the US forces strengthened the security of Iran while engagement in Central Asia seems to have encircled Iran. For Turkey, rising dynamics of regional politics and the US encouragement helped in underpinning its position in the region particularly in the Pipeline diplomacy sector. For Pakistan, Central Asia is a land of fellow Muslim brothers hence a friendly zone for propagating anti-India propaganda. And she is still pursuing the idea, although not positively reciprocated by the Central Asian democratic secular republics. Importantly, none of them have identical interests in Central Asia except Iran which has larger role in the regional dynamics.

The roles played by powers such as Iran, Turkey and Pakistan in Central Asia will continue to depend, as they do today, partly on their domestic dynamics and problems; and partly on their relationships with one another and the great powers. Given the number of parties involved, the intricate puzzle that is the regional politics of Central Asia is likely to remain for the foreseeable future a web of complex, intricate, and sometimes contradictory relations.

India needs to seize the opportunity by engaging these contradictory powers with each other while keeping an eye on her interests. Iran and Turkey are friendly countries of India while Pakistan is the lone anti-India propagandist that needs to be tamed.

### ***SCO and India***

The SCO has now emerged as a major geo-strategic, security and economic initiative in the entire Eurasia. India's observer membership in the organization seems to be a stepping-stone in the direction of its growing role in the region. Since all the CARs and Russia are in support of India's full membership of the SCO, China is cautiously moving its steps although not opposing Indian entry into the organisation officially rather concerned more for its future role and position vis-a-vis India in the region. Nevertheless, membership in the organization will not merely help India in getting entry into the region but also would enable to propel its interests vis-à-vis China in the region. It would also facilitate India to ensure its economic participation with the greater Central Asian region.

### ***CASAREM***

The Central Asia-South Asia

Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM)<sup>16</sup> is based on the vision of a Greater Central Asia. This in turn is based on the premise that Central and South Asia are, or can become, a single integrated unit committed to economic activity and growth. The countries of the region, and particularly India as the leading force of South Asia, have deep cultural and historical ties and many common concerns such as against terrorism, finding outlets for energy supplies, achieving prosperity through economic cooperation, and moving towards enhanced security and stability. This concept further strengthens the spirit of regional security and regional cooperation.

### ***Military Cooperation***

Militarily, India has had a weak presence in Central Asia. Among the Central Asian Republics, the Tajik-Indian relations are crucial in establishing India's military presence in Central Asia. Ayni air base - what would have been India's first military base overseas was delayed and subsequently cancelled due to Russian instigation.<sup>17</sup> The Ayni air base is located near the Tajik-Afghan border and could potentially be key to securing Indian interests in Afghanistan as a match for Pakistan. Previously, in 2001, India had set up military hospitals that served

wounded Northern Alliance leaders during the fight against the Taliban which helped establish good relations with the Tajiks. Now, talks are floating about re-opening of Indian military hospital and extending Indian presence at the Fakhor Air Base. Given that India's only border with Central Asia near Kashmir is separated by a narrow strip of Afghan land, and is occupied by Pakistan, the Tajik airbase will be absolutely instrumental in gaining military strategic depth and India should continue to pursue that option.

Currently, the Tajik-Indian relations are the only military footprint that India has in the region. The Indian Army Chief's visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in November, 2011 is an indicator of the seriousness with which India is now looking at re-engaging with Central Asia.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the road will not be easy given the past experiences.

### **Geo-Economic Interests**

#### ***Energy***

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated several times that "energy security is second only in our scheme of things to food security."<sup>19</sup> Assured, uninterrupted supply of energy is critical for running India's economic engine. India's

dependence on imported oil is projected to escalate from the current level of 83.5 per cent as of June 2012<sup>20</sup> to more than 90 per cent by 2030.<sup>21</sup> Central Asia has an estimated 4 per cent (270–360 trillion cubic feet) of the world's gas reserves;<sup>22</sup> its oil reserves are pegged at 2.7 per cent (13–15 billion barrels).<sup>23</sup>

The energy resources of Central Asia including the Caspian Sea region will play an important role in India's energy strategy. Central Asian oil and gas are of high quality and are largely untapped. The investment environment is open and friendly.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Central Asia is relatively more stable than the Middle East and African energy-rich countries.

#### ***Economic and Trade Relations***

Although, in economic terms India and Central Asia do not share much satisfactory relationship, India has somewhat meagre presence in Central Asian energy sector and growing presence in the field of pharmaceuticals. Trade in consumer goods is increasing but is constrained by economic barriers, particularly in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. With Tajikistan, India's trade was worth \$10.7 million in 2004–5 and \$32.56

million in 2009–10.<sup>25</sup> A joint venture between India's Ajanta Pharma and the Ministry of Health in Turkmenistan, named Turkmen Derman Ajanta Pharma Limited (TDAPL), provides approximately half of the pharmaceutical needs of Turkmenistan. India has widened information exchange programmes with Turkmenistan, establishing the \$0.5 million Turkmen-Indian Industrial Training Centre as a gift to train Turkmen citizens in basic skills in the manufacture of tools and components, in business practices for small and medium enterprises, and to provide financial, computer, and language training through its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme.<sup>26</sup>

India's trade with Uzbekistan amounted to more than \$121 million in 2004. There are more than thirty Uzbek-Indian joint ventures in Uzbekistan.<sup>27</sup> A significant source of revenue for India is in pharmaceutical sales from Ajanta Pharma and Reddy Labs.<sup>28</sup> The two countries are considering Indian gas exploration in Uzbekistan through India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL).<sup>29</sup>

India's exports to Kyrgyzstan were worth \$22.56 million in 2010–11 and

Kyrgyz exports to India amounted to \$1.2 million.<sup>30</sup> Apparel and clothing, leather goods, drugs and pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals and tea are some of the important items in India's export basket to Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz exports to India consist mainly of raw hides, metallic ores and metal scrap.

Trade between India and Kazakhstan in 2011 was around \$291.50 million.<sup>31</sup> Major commodities of export from India to Kazakhstan are tea, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, machinery, tobacco, valves and consumer items. Major items of import by India are asbestos, soft wheat, steel, aluminium, wool and raw hides. Prospects for cooperation between the two countries in the spheres of oil and gas, civil nuclear energy, metals and minerals, agriculture, public health, information technology, education, culture and defence are promising. The two countries are developing bilateral trade in mechanical engineering and pharmaceuticals and in the defence sector. An agreement between ONGC Videsh Ltd. (OVL) and KazMunaiGaz on Satpayev oil block in the Caspian Sea and an MoU between NPCIL and Kazatomprom envisaging cooperation, including supply of uranium to India among others, was signed in 2009. An MoU for cooperation in the field of space,

an extradition treaty and the protocol on the accession of Kazakhstan to WTO were also signed in 2009. A fresh agreement between OVL and KazMunaiGaz for the purchase of 25 per cent stake in the Satpayev oil block was signed in Astana on 16 April 2011 during the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.<sup>32</sup> Discussions are currently underway for cooperation in the fields of fertilizer production, setting up of a petrochemical complex, a sulphuric acid plant, gold mining, thermal power plants, an Information Technology Park, etc. Agreements in the fields of agriculture, health, culture, science and technology, and education etc. are also being discussed.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare***

A key area of cooperation between India and Central Asia is pharmaceuticals and healthcare. India has a competitive advantage in the global market in this field. Some of the Indian companies exporting pharmaceutical products to Central Asia are Claris Life Sciences, Ranbaxy, Dr Reddys Labs, Lupin Laboratories, Unique Laboratories and Aurobindo Pharma. Some of these companies are planning to set up manufacturing units in Central Asia itself. The pharmaceutical

factory of the Kazakh-India joint venture Kazakhstanpharma is in the process of completion in Almaty.<sup>34</sup>

### ***Investment Potential***

To facilitate trade and investment with this region, Indian policymakers in the last decade have created an institutional framework. The government has set up intergovernmental commissions for trade, economic, scientific and technical cooperation with all the CARs, which have been meeting regularly. These relations have been further institutionalized through joint working groups in various fields, such as information technology, science and technology, hydrocarbons, military-technical cooperation, etc. The Indian government also extends small lines of credit to the CARs to enable Indian exporters to export to these markets without payment risk. In this scheme, about 15 to 20 per cent of the contract value is paid as advance by the importers; the balance contract value is disbursed by India's EXIM Bank upon the shipment of goods. EXIM Bank oversees the recovery of credit. To promote and facilitate trade, double taxation avoidance agreements have also been signed.<sup>35</sup>

There have also been

improvements in terms of cooperation in the banking sector. Canara Bank has links with the Commercial Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs of Tajikistan. The State Bank of India has links with Turan-Alem Bank of Kazakhstan, the Commercial Bank of Kyrgyzstan, the National Bank of Tajikistan, the State Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs of Turkmenistan and the National Bank for Foreign Economic Activity of Uzbekistan. In 2003, the Indian Ministry of Commerce launched a programme named Focus CIS. The first phase focused on the five CARs plus Azerbaijan and Ukraine. Other CIS countries have also been included in the programme, which aims to promote business-to-business linkages, support trade fairs and different promotional meetings and seminars.<sup>36</sup> In 2012, India's Minister for External Affairs, S.M. Krishna, used the phrase "Connect Central Asia" based on the premise of four Cs: commerce, connectivity, consular and community,<sup>37</sup> which seems to be taking the bilateral relations between the two Asian neighbours to a higher level.

India has also signed many agreements with these countries for technical and economic cooperation under ITEC. Thus far, thousands of candidates from Central Asia have come to India under the programme

in such disciplines as diplomacy, banking, finance, trade, management and small industry promotion. Potential sectors for collaboration between India and the CARs broadly are: food sector and agribusiness: processing agro products, machinery and equipment, packaging, fertilizers, irrigation; pharmaceuticals and healthcare: medicines, formulations, medical devices, hospitals; ICT; telecom, technology parks, e-governance, IT training, business processes; textiles; machinery, garments; and energy; power generation and transmission, oil refining, petrochemicals.

### ***India's Connect Central Asia Policy***

The 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP) of India was first unveiled by the Minister of State for External Affairs, E.Ahmed in a keynote address at the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track II initiative organised on 12-13 June, 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.<sup>38</sup> The purpose of this policy is to fast track India's relations with Central Asian Republics. The policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, information technology (IT) centers, an e-network in telemedicine connecting India to the CARs, joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and

tourism, joint scientific research and strategic partnerships in defense and security affairs. During SM Krishna's visit to Tajikistan on 02-03 July 2012, the former Foreign Minister expounded the unfolding policy under the rubric of 'commerce, connectivity, consular and community'.<sup>39</sup> This policy initiative if properly channelized would enable India to attain a centre stage in Central Asia which further would help India to attain its basic objectives of engagement in the greater Central Asian region.

### **Conclusion**

India and Central Asia are strategic neighbours and natural allies. The two regions are geographically proximate, share common history and cultural affinity. As part of its regional geo-strategy, India requires to pursue serious and active bilateral and regional agreements to promote security in the region. It needs to carry forward the goodwill from the close relations it maintained during the Soviet times.

On the economic front, India's engagement with the region will require vigorous involvement by the private sector, with active promotion by the government. The CARs in

their turn will have to work towards creating a more attractive investment environment for the Indian private sector.

In the energy sector, India needs to become a significant player in the equitable exploitation, administration and distribution of the Central Asian energy resources. India must look forward to restart working on the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) and IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) pipeline projects. Besides helping India ensure its energy security, these projects will also enable her to strengthen regional security, peace and cooperation. India must also seek to explore alternative oil and gas transit route along with the existing pipelines. To improve connectivity, India will have to play a proactive role both bilaterally and through regional cooperative mechanisms. In this regard, India will have to factor in both China and Pakistan in addition to its cooperation with Russia, Iran, Turkey and the US. India also needs to establish policy research institutes staffed with researchers having a good knowledge of the Russian language, which is essential for formulation and implementation of long-term business and security strategies. ■

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