

Central Asia Matters

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Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

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About NatStrat

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues.

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The 21st century is upon us. The post-World War II global architecture is becoming unsustainable. The international security and strategic environment is changing. The centre of gravity of global influence is shifting, and new powers are emerging. India is one of them. Despite the odds, India has withstood internal and external challenges to preserve its democratic and constitutional ethos. Its diversity and pluralism have grown while being firmly rooted in its civilisational heritage. As a result, the states of India are more empowered today than before. More than half its population, larger than the combined size of Europe and the US, is under the age of thirty.

The transformation underway in India will unleash powerful impulses beyond India's borders. This will profoundly impact the world's political, social, cultural and economic systems. As India rises and finds its rightful place on the world stage, its unique identity, traditions and value systems will become critical to global peace and stability.

India is looking ahead to mark the centenary year of its post-independence existence. How India thinks will matter. How India acts will matter even more.

The success of India is crucial to humankind. We seek to understand the domestic and external security challenges facing India and what drives India's strategic calculations. We will ask the right questions without fear or favour and provide our views and insights fearlessly.

We will bring an authentic Indian perspective to understanding the world. We aim to make India's voice heard and count in the international community.

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NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology, and economy. NatStrat's research is objective, impartial and rigorous. It upholds the highest standards of excellence and scrutiny.

NatStrat seeks to reach out to decision-makers, policymakers, practitioners and the strategic community within and outside India. It engages with international counterparts and with institutions and scholars across India.

NatStrat produces a variety of material, including research papers, commentaries, monographs and policy briefs. Its contributors are among the most authoritative and experienced professionals with international repute and acclaim. It also promotes new and fresh perspectives by encouraging young thinkers to write and work for it. As part of its activities, NatStrat hosts seminars, round table discussions, lectures, podcasts and interviews.

Foreword

NatStrat's previous handbook published in June 2024 was devoted to the Indian Ocean Littorals. This compilation is focused on another equally important part of India's extended neighbourhood, Central Asia. The two regions of the Indian Ocean and Central Asia define India's maritime and continental fronts. These present different challenges and opportunities and therefore require different responses and policies. Both however are critical for India's long term strategic objectives, and require close attention and engagement.

The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 to Central Asia followed by the establishment of the India-Central Asia Dialogue and Summit process and India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have corrected the earlier neglect of Central Asia. The 30th anniversary of the independence of the Central Asian States in 2021 gave an impetus to India's ties with the region. These are in the process of being modernised as Central Asian states emerge from the shadow of Soviet and Russian influence, seek foreign policy alternatives beyond Russia and China and hope for the return of peace and stability in war-torn Afghanistan.

The establishment of trade, economic, energy and people to people connectivity between India and Central Asia is challenging, but not insuperable. The promise of such cooperation is enormous, as India rises as an economic power, offering a vast market and access to the Indian Ocean. The first step in this journey is the building of awareness and scholarly exchanges.

It is with this aim that NatStrat has chosen to focus on Central Asia. This handbook is a compilation of essays by experts from Central Asian countries, Iran, Japan and Mongolia, besides India for which we are immensely grateful. The handbook provides a kaleidoscope of views and would hopefully be a valuable source of reference material for practitioners, scholars and students.

Pankaj Saran
Convenor, NatStrat

Abstract

India's relationship with Central Asia and Mongolia has deep historical and civilisational roots. Along with India, this region was part of the ancient Silk Road which witnessed the movement of ideas, culture, trade and people between them. Buddhism is one of the biggest examples, exemplifying the cultural nature of ties between India and this vast region.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union and rise of China have impacted this region in a profound way. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) desire to avoid dominance of any single power by following what is generally referred to as their 'multi-vector' foreign policy.

Similarly, Mongolia, sandwiched between Russia and China, pursues the 'Third Neighbour' policy to build and strengthen ties with countries other than Russia and China. In pursuit of their foreign policy objectives in Eurasia, the CARs as well as Mongolia see India's rise as beneficial and a net positive for their socio-economic and cultural development.

Keeping in mind the importance of India's extended neighbourhood, NatStrat invited experts from Central Asian Republics, Mongolia, Iran and Japan to offer their perspectives on geopolitical, security, economic and cultural aspects of India's ties with Central Asia and Mongolia.

Section one contains the Indian Perspectives. In the first article, **'India and Central Asia: A Mixed Record'**, Skand Ranjan Tayal, former Indian Ambassador to Uzbekistan points out that in organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, India comes as a balancer in support of the Central Asian Republics, something that is valued by these countries. However, the increasing inroads being made by Turkey in this region may have negative implications for India's civilisational ties with them and India needs to be more active to build a natural partnership.

In the second article, **'Three Decades of Engaging Central Asia'**, former Indian Ambassador Gitesh Sarma of India Central Asia Foundation argues that India is likely to be a role model for the Central Asian countries

seeking to pursue independent foreign policies against the backdrop of the conflict and confrontation involving Russia, China and the West. India should have realistic expectations about connectivity projects and coordinate its activities with Russia.

In the third article, **'Kashmir's Links with Central Asia'**, Tabasum Firdous of Kashmir University highlights that Kashmir's cultural links with Central Asia are an invaluable asset in India's outreach to Central Asia. She points out that Buddhism travelled to Central Asia via Kashmir and later reached China from Central Asia. Kashmir and Central Asia are also connected through Sufism and architecture. She argues that Kashmir's links with the Central Asian region should be re-energised through India's Connect Central Asia policy.

In the fourth article, **'Afghan Pivot in India-Central Asia Ties'**, Raj Kumar Sharma of NatStrat underlines that the security threats from Afghanistan have impacted India and CARs in a similar way. Given their secular credentials, India-Central Asia cooperation to counter terrorism emanating from Afghanistan is natural and serves as a template for regional cooperation. Sufi traditions need to be revived to counter fundamentalist ideologies.

The second section brings voices from Central Asia. In the fifth article, **'Tokayev's Diplomacy: Without Populism or Illusions'**, Director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Yerkin Tukumov highlights that Kazakhstan has established itself as a respected international mediator. The Syrian peace talks, the resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan, and the settlement of disputes in Central Asia remain at the forefront of Astana's agenda. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and India's multi-alignment have similarities and as two middle powers, India and Kazakhstan should further deepen their engagement.

Abdusamat Khaydarov of University of World Economy and Diplomacy from Uzbekistan in the sixth article, **'Inter-regional Cooperation between Central and South Asia: A View from Tashkent'** underlines that connectivity challenges should not be allowed to

hinder India's engagement with the Central Asian countries whose people have preserved the feelings of openness, friendliness and trust towards India. He argues that Afghanistan is a bridge between Central and South Asia which could become an area for joint efforts between Tashkent and New Delhi to maintain security and stability in the country and its involvement in interregional cooperation.

Sapar Berdiniyazow of Institute of International Relations from Turkmenistan in the seventh article, **'Turkmen-Indian Relations: A Symbol of Cooperation, Brotherhood and Friendship'**, emphasises that in Turkmenistan, Indian culture is treated with great sympathy and love. India is a country that presents the best feelings of friendship and brotherhood. Turkmenistan and India are united by centuries-old relations based on the principles of neighbourliness and equal cooperation. Turkmenistan's favourable geopolitical and geo-economic location contributes to the continuation of the long-standing traditional ties between India and Turkmenistan.

Evgeny Kablukov of the Kyrgyz National University, in the eighth article, **'Kyrgyzstan-India Ties: Moving Towards Further Consolidation'** argues that in recent years, Kyrgyzstan and India have shown mutual interest to actively develop cooperation in the field of industry. This is of particular importance for Kyrgyzstan, given that India has achieved significant success in industrial production, including ferrous metallurgy, mechanical engineering, light and chemical industries and energy.

In the ninth article, **'Tajikistan and India: Possibilities of Further Cooperation'** **Parviz Muhammadzoda** of the **Tajik National University**, suggests that Tajikistan's abundant natural resources in the hydropower sector provide an opportunity for Indian public and private companies to participate in the country's energy projects, including renewable energy. The other areas of potential cooperation between the two countries include health, pharmaceuticals, education, tourism and science and technology.

Ulugbek A. Khasanov of **Uzbekistan's University of World Economy and Diplomacy**, in the tenth article of this volume, **'Migration as a Catalyst for Change: Lessons from India's Diaspora Engagement'**

highlights that India's active engagement with its diaspora is an example for Central Asian countries on how to leverage the diaspora for meeting development goals. He points to the successful creation of institutions such as the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* and argues that the Central Asian countries can do the same through diaspora Ministries, remittances and cultural ties.

The third and the last section brings third country perspectives on Central Asia. **Gansukh Amarjargal, Former Secretary of National Security of Mongolia**, in the eleventh article, **'New Symbol of Mongol and Indian Friendship'**, underscores the point that for Mongols, India is the 'Spiritual Neighbour', a highly valuable strategic partner, and one of the Third Neighbors. Mongolia is economically heavily dependent on its two neighbours. Against this reality, India is helping Mongolia to be independent in the oil production field, thereby proving how a neighbour like India is extending a helping hand to alleviate Mongolia's economic difficulties.

Iran's former Ambassador to Tajikistan, Seyed Rasoul Mousavi in the twelfth article, **'Chabahar and the Imperative of Geography'** emphasises that the port of Chabahar on the Southern coast of Iran enjoys a strategic position, situated at extension of the Indian Ocean without being encumbered by any geographical strait or bottleneck, and thus functioning as a gateway connecting the Indian Ocean to Eurasia and West Asia.

Ryota Saito of Institute for Russian & NIS Economic Studies from Japan in the thirteenth and last article of this compilation, **'Japan's Central Asian Diplomacy'** explains how Japan is strengthening the multi-vector foreign policy of the CARs by reducing their dependence on both Russia and China. Japan is engaged in building an enabling environment for development and connectivity that aims to connect Central and South Asia. Afghanistan's economic integration with Central and South Asia could open a new geopolitical and geo-economic landscape for the region.

Keywords: *India, Central Asia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Japan, Iran, Connect Central Asia, Indian Diaspora, Chabahar.*

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Indian Perspectives

INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA: A MIXED RECORD

Skand Ranjan Tayal



Former Union Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh (R) with former President of Uzbekistan, Mr. Islam Karimov, in New Delhi on August 27, 1991.

Introduction

In 1991, the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) emerged as 'independent' sovereign nations as an outcome of the collapse of the Soviet Union. These nominal 'Soviet Socialist Republics' were ruled by the local branch of the Communist Party of Soviet Union and overnight their leaders as well as the party apparatus re-invented themselves as champions of a national identity with a civilizational, historical and cultural legacy dating back to the Mongols and Turks.

There was cultural affinity with India, a familiarity with Indian ethos through Indian cinema and a lingering legacy of Babur as the conqueror of India. The warmth of the India-Central Asia political relationship was built on this strong foundation and has been nurtured by successive governments and leaders on both sides.

The Soviet Communist legacy of 'atheism' has continued in the CARs, but gradually the Central Asian identity today has evolved into a mix of Central Asian, Islamic and Turkic identity. Buddhism and Zoroastrianism are acknowledged as part of the history of the ancient past, but any religious or civilizational connection with the present is avoided.

While the five CARs continue to have a strong secular Constitution and polity, the Islamic identity is gradually gaining significance. In a Round Table on 'Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy: Towards Peace, Openness and Development' in Tashkent on 25 October 2024, Uzbek First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Bakhromjon Aloyev said that Uzbekistan will focus more on building relations with the Islamic Countries, particularly from the Middle East and Gulf as it had 'shared values' with them.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are exploring their Turkish roots with the assertion of their Turkic identity through membership of 'Organization of Turkic States'. These trends may have a negative impact on CARs robust cultural relations with India.

Quest for Strategic Autonomy

The five CARs have been successful in establishing sovereign constitutional Republics with well-defined boundaries. India helped in this initial nation building process by quick recognition as independent countries in 1991 and inviting the leaders of all five Republics giving them full Presidential honours.

CARs view India as a strong partner in assertion of their 'strategic autonomy'. The domination by the Czarist Russia in the 19th century and then the Soviet Union rankled with them and they zealously guard their freedom of action and decision making. The CARs are clearly not willing to accept any domination by China despite some degree of economic dependence on China of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

In organisations like Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), India comes as a balancer in

support of the four Central Asian members and this role is valued by them. India must remain strongly committed to SCO despite the reality that the organisation is not of much direct benefit to India. The absence of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the SCO Summit in Astana in June 2024 was not well received by President Kassym Tokayev in particular and the CARs in general.

Connectivity

While India is pushing for the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) between India, Iran, Turkmenistan/Afghanistan, Central Asia, the CARs, particularly Uzbekistan are aggressively working to establish a railroad from Termez in Uzbekistan to Kabul and onwards to Peshawar in Pakistan.

President Shavkat Mirziyev of Uzbekistan had organised a big international conference in Tashkent in July 2021 to pursue this proposal. Uzbeks seek India's support for this project despite Pakistan blocking any transit of goods towards India. The Uzbeks argue that one branch of this railroad will go towards Herat and Iran which could be used for Indian freight. To help smoothen the process for connectivity between Central and South Asia, Uzbekistan was invited for the first time in India-Pakistan Track-II dialogue at Manama hosted by International Institute for Strategic Studies.



Meeting of BRICS Ministers of Foreign Affairs, September 2022.

Trade and Investment

Despite significant political support and goodwill in the region, India's investment in CARs has been modest. Trade between India and CARs is a little over USD 2 billion compared to CARs trade with China amounting to USD 90 billion. CARs are also major partners of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with major rail and road connectivity projects already complete in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

India's import of substantial quantities of uranium 'Yellow Cake' from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan has added a strategic dimension to this bilateral trade. Indian investments have been in mining, automobile components, pharmaceutical industry and cotton processing from yarn to fabric.

In 2020, India opened a US\$ 1 billion line of credit for CARs for development projects in infrastructure, IT, energy and agriculture. But the offtake from this facility has not been encouraging because of the comparatively high interest rates and risk averse mindset of India's private sector. Sensing this reality, CARs no longer look to India as a major source of investment and have now turned their gaze towards China, Gulf countries and Turkey.

Digital Highway

With the turbulent Afghanistan and an inimical Pakistan impeding freight traffic between India and Central Asia, avenues need to be explored for digital commerce and provision of services like banking and insurance. India has offered its digital public goods like UPI payment, Aadhar card software and expertise to CARs which needs to be pursued.

India has been helping in capacity building of young Central Asians by establishing IT centres in several CARs. There is a proposal to establish

an 'IT/ITES Task Force' between the IT organisations, IT parks and IT companies of India and CARs to work towards greater digitisation and E-Governance. India is poised to be an important partner in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CARES) Digital Strategy 2030 to upscale CARs digital technological capabilities.

A little explored possibility for collaboration in ITES is the possible joint ventures between Russian, Uzbek and Indian software companies to offer IT services for the Russian market with online delivery from Tashkent or Dushanbe. About 300,000 Russians, many from the IT sector, have moved to Uzbekistan in the last two years to avoid being drafted in war against Ukraine and opened companies in Tashkent and other major cities. Indian software can be customised for Russian consumers with the Russian language skills of low cost Uzbek/Tajik professionals. This would open new employment opportunities for Russian knowing IT experts from CARs.

Defence

The scope of co-operation between CARs and India in the defence sector is rather limited. CARs have little cutting-edge technology to offer and would not have the money to buy Indian defence equipment. The focus, therefore, is on joint training and anti-terrorism exercises. The Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan, upgraded by assistance from the Indian Air Force has not come up to expectations in its utility for India.

Future Roadmap

There is an air of stagnation and modest achievements in India-CAR engagement in the last three decades. This needs to be recognized and addressed. Even Bollywood is losing ground and Turkish and Korean films and TV serials are more popular among the youth of CARs.

The Delhi Declaration adopted after the first India-Central Asia Summit

on 27 January 2022 had adopted an ambitious agenda for more trade and investment as well as development Cooperation. It advocated security and defense collaboration particularly to counter 'cross-border terrorism' and financing. It also decided to boost cultural ties and people to people contacts with a proposed visit of 100 youth from

Close economic co-operation and strategic understanding between India and CARs is essential for regional security and prosperity. An effective architecture for India-CAR co-operation is already in place. The task before all the stakeholders is to think of innovative forms of collaboration so that this relationship realises its high potential.



Skand Ranjan Tayal

Ambassador (Retd) Skand Ranjan Tayal joined the Indian Foreign Service (1976). He served in Indian Missions in Sofia, Warsaw, Geneva and Moscow. He was India's Consul General in Johannesburg (1996-98) and Houston (2002-05), and Ambassador of India to Uzbekistan (2005-08). He was Ambassador of India to the Republic of Korea during 2008-11.

Ambassador Tayal was Secretary of the Indian National Commission for UNESCO during 1991-95 and served briefly as the Director in charge of IITs in the Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development. He was Joint Secretary (Consular, Passport and Visa) in the Ministry of External Affairs and the Chief Passport Officer of India during 1999-2002.

He introduced far reaching reforms in the passport issue system including comprehensive computerization, machine printing of passports and Tatkal Scheme for fast track issue of passports. Ambassador Tayal has wide experience in both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy and has authored the book, 'India and Republic of Korea: Engaged Democracies' in 2013.

THREE DECADES OF ENGAGING CENTRAL ASIA

Gitesh Sarma



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the SCO Summit, 2018.

Introduction

In geopolitical terms, Central Asia is strategically located and India's engagement with this region certainly matters. Overall, India's thirty-year engagement with the Central Asian States (CAS), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is satisfactory with room for more work. This positive assessment is notwithstanding that India has an annual trade with the region of around USD 2 billion compared with China's at about USD 100 billion. But such a comparison is misleading because India lacks adequate connectivity.

While there are expectations of more content in the relationship on account of the 'emotional connect'

between the peoples of India and Central Asia, these are difficult to fully meet. Where for centuries travellers, culture, ideas and merchandise had moved seamlessly, such two-way flows were interrupted when the British came to the subcontinent and the Russian Empire expanded into Central Asia.

A challenging territory now lies in between, making shipment of cargoes difficult. The common element coming out is that terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan threaten both India and the CAS. Fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other militant groups connected to Central Asia have operated with

relative impunity from the Af-Pak region.

The major trade corridors in various stages of implementation depend on Iran providing transit facilities. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) links India and Russia with branches to CAS using ship, rail and road routes. The Chabahar Port being developed by India in Iran gives the possibility of access to Afghanistan and CAS bypassing Pakistan.

And the Ashgabat Agreement (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, India, Pakistan and Oman) is an arrangement facilitating the flow of goods between CAS and the Persian Gulf. Such routes take time to mature and there are additional challenges on account of Western sanctions on Iran.

Although Central Asia, based on shared characteristics and history, qualifies to be a distinct region, each of the constituent countries have their individual identities. An important gain is that India today is more familiar with the region and therefore better prepared to deal with them bilaterally and collectively.

Structured Engagement

In January 2022 PM Narendra Modi hosted the first India-Central Asia Summit with the participation of the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This Heads of State meeting was India's first structured engagement with CAS and was preceded by the India-Central Asia Dialogue in January 2019 in Samarkand at foreign minister level.

The key outcomes of Prime Minister Modi's meeting were:

- (i) Summit meetings would take place every two years and a supporting Secretariat (India-Central Asia Centre) would be established in New Delhi.

- (ii) An 'India-Central Asia Parliamentary Forum,' would be created.
- (iii) MoUs were signed for implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in CAS based on Indian grant assistance.
- (iv) Increased training slots were to be provided for CAS diplomats at the Sushma Swaraj Institute.
- (v) Cooperation was proposed in medicine, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, education, IT, BPO, infrastructure, agriculture and agricultural products, energy, space industry, textiles, leather and footwear, gems & jewellery.
- (vi) Connectivity projects were to be given attention, including the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Ashgabat Agreement on International Trade and Transit Corridor. India offered Chabahar for trade and the establishment of a Joint Working Group (JWG) on this port.
- (vii) A Security Council's Dialogue would deal with terrorism, extremism and radicalization.
- (viii) The Summit agreed that the situation in Afghanistan impacted the security and stability of the region. They expressed support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan and respect for its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and on non-interference in its internal affairs. Afghan territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning and financing terror acts.

This institutionalised mechanism can provide continuous oversight over the India-CAS relationship and also supplement the engagement within regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Interestingly, apart from the connectivity challenge, other issues from three decades back continue to be relevant even today.

Russia as the Dominant Power

Russia remains the most influential power in Central Asia even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. It has pushed for the creation of regional structures besides working within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) framework. Some such initiatives are:

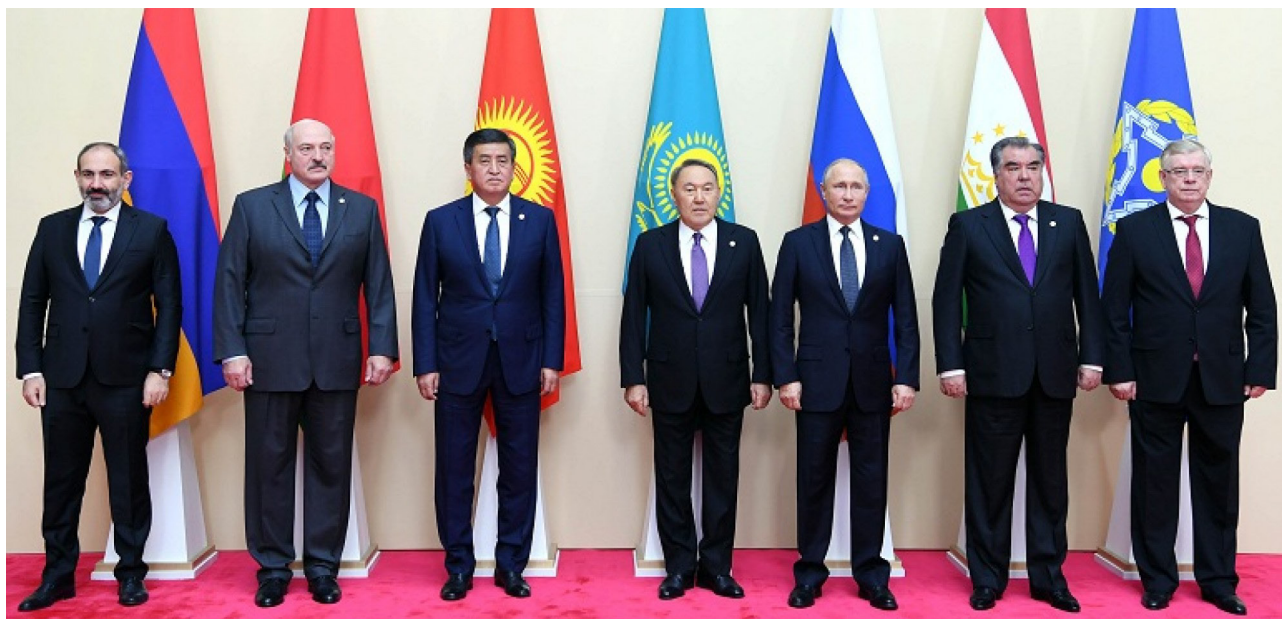
- (i) The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) was founded in 2002 when six countries (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) agreed to create a military alliance.
- (ii) The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) was formed in 2000, followed by a Customs Union in 2010. The founding states of the Eurasian Customs Union were Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan and Armenia and Kyrgyzstan subsequently acceded.
- (iii) The ‘Shanghai Five’ grouping was established by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan in 1996 and, after adding Uzbekistan in 2001, emerged as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The grouping further expanded in 2017 to admit India and Pakistan, Iran in 2023 and Belarus in 2024.

These mostly overlapping regional arrangements help Russia manage Central Asian affairs. But there is scope for countries like China and India to undertake activities in the region, provided they do not threaten Russian dominance, which takes overall responsibility for CAS security. However, in recent times, China has moved beyond economic engagement by taking an interest in security matters in this region with a related presence in Tajikistan.

There are almost ten million migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in Russia. Their remittances (approximately USD 25 billion in 2022) are useful in sustaining CAS economies. Radicalization of this community is a troubling factor for Moscow.

Leadership Matters

CAS has had a tradition of strongmen as leaders and governance usually revolves around them. Post-independence, a new set of leaders have emerged in these countries who are still cast in the same mould as their predecessors and they may look towards Moscow when threatened.



Leaders from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 2018. | President of Russia X.

In Ukraine, CAS leaders have focussed more on the 'regime change' aspect implemented by the West to remove the pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovich. Russia will always closely monitor political processes in CAS given their potential to cause changes in leadership, to ensure that they do not threaten its interests. For example, when violence rocked Kazakhstan in January 2022, it invoked the CSTO mechanism and Russian troops helped to restore order.

Afghanistan

The prospects of spillover of extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan into Central Asia have always been worrisome. Two years after Soviet forces retreated from Afghanistan in 1989, the USSR disintegrated. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan became frontline states in relation to Afghanistan and the other two, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, were exposed too. And in August 2021, when US troops left Afghanistan, their vulnerability came to the fore again.

Broadly, Turkmenistan follows a foreign policy of neutrality and is ready to deal with all Afghan groups. Taliban cooperation can make the TAPI gas pipeline project, being discussed since the 1990s, a reality. Tajikistan has not engaged with the current Taliban regime. It depends on Russia to secure its Afghan frontier. Uzbekistan emphasises its humanitarian presence in Afghanistan while pushing its rail connectivity project to link CAS with South Asia. The Kazakhs and Kyrgyz also follow a humanitarian approach towards Afghanistan. Present indications are that Russia has started the process of removing Taliban from the list of banned terrorist organisations and CAS are likely to follow suit.

China

Many would consider the Chinese territory of Xinjiang as part of Central Asia in historical, cultural and ethnic terms. China is ready to deal firmly with any signs of unrest there. Like India, China has established a summit mechanism with the five CAS countries and held the first meeting

in Xian in May 2023. China has practised 'debt trap diplomacy' resulting in a total debt burden on the CAS of USD 15.7 billion in early 2023. Debt to China accounted for almost 37 percent of Kyrgyzstan's external liabilities in the second half of 2023.

Uzbekistan's largest creditor was China on 1 July 2023, and it owed USD 3.8 billion. CAS today is more cautious in accessing Chinese credit.

While gas pipelines and railway lines create the impression of a long-term partnership, it is more a relationship of dependency and dominance. Countries like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have tried to use natural resources to meet their debt repayment obligations. Attempts to lease land to the Chinese have resulted in street protests in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Legacy Issues

Following the disintegration of the USSR, there were difficulties in relations between CAS countries over such issues as border demarcation, treatment of ethnic minorities, and hydropower projects on transboundary rivers. There were tensions in ties between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for instance. The situation improved after the demise of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 2016, and CAS leaders have been meeting regularly to discuss regional cooperation.

Legacy issues also have had a bearing on ties with India. Tashkent hosted the India-Pakistan peace negotiations after the 1965 war and has tried to equate India and Pakistan. Such hyphenation has, however, ended with India's increased international stature and good relations with the West.

Kazakhstan gave up its claim to Soviet nuclear weapons on its territory following the end of the Soviet Union.

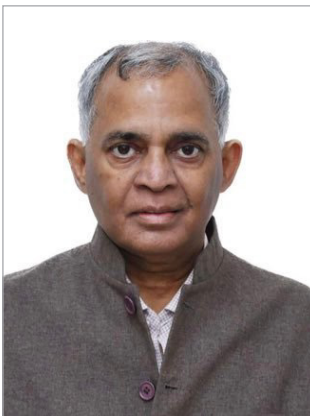
India's nuclear tests of 1998, followed by the NSG waiver in 2008, posed a challenge to the CAS. Article 8 of the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone Treaty of 2006 commits the CAS not to supply nuclear items to any non-nuclear-weapon State, 'unless that State has concluded with the IAEA a comprehensive safeguards agreement.' Since then, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have moved on to export uranium to India.

Prospects

Russia's continued relevance should not be underestimated. Neither should China's success in engaging with the region be overestimated. India's presence in SCO gives comfort to CAS while dealing with Russia and China. Pakistan's

utility would be its perceived ability to influence terrorist groups active in the region. Transit routes through Pakistan territory presently are more about symbolism than anything else.

India is likely to be a role model for CAS for pursuing independent foreign policies against the backdrop of the conflict and confrontation involving Russia, China and the West. India should have realistic expectations about connectivity projects and coordinate its activities with Russia. The sense is that India is on the right track.



Gitesh Sarma

Ambassador Gitesh Sarma (Retd) joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986. He was Secretary (West) in the Ministry of External Affairs during 2018-19 and has professionally dealt with Russia and Central Asia, India's nuclear diplomacy, Pakistan, Quad and Pacific Islands.

He has served as an Ambassador to Uzbekistan and High Commissioner to Australia, Fiji, Pacific Islands and Consul General in Ukraine. He has also served in Indian Missions in Moscow (USSR/ Russia), Minsk (Belarus), Odessa (Ukraine), Hong Kong (UK/ China), Islamabad (Pakistan) and London (UK).

Ambassador Sarma has worked in the Ministry of External Affairs in Divisions related to Europe East and Central Asia and has also served as OSD in the Information Technology Department of Andhra Pradesh, during 2002-03. His current activities include writing articles for periodicals on foreign policy issues. He is also Vice President, India-Central Asia Foundation (ICAF).

KASHMIR'S LINKS WITH CENTRAL ASIA

Tabasum Firdous



An apsidal shrine on the second terrace of the monastery complex. | Manan Shah / World History Encyclopedia.

Introduction

Until the implosion of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia remained isolated from the outside world. Due to its centralised nature, the Soviet system did not allow its constituent Republics to enjoy freedom while conducting its foreign relations.

Much of the world remained largely unaware of the Central Asian Republics (CARs). India was no exception. The rich history of Indo-Central Asian relations, from ancient times to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, remained largely unknown to most Indian intellectuals and many in Russia.

Kashmir and Central Asia Links

Kashmir's relations with Central Asia are well documented and have been a reality from ancient times. Kashmir has a distinction of being a meeting ground for people and ideas in the Indian Sub-continent, leaving a deep mark on its political, economic, social and cultural landscape. The Vedas, particularly the Rig Veda, provide numerous clues about various geographical sites in Central Asia, highlighting the cultural relationship between India and Central Asia. One of the most notable interactions is the dispersal of the Aryans from their Central Asian habitat to the Iranian and Indian regions. Some groups settled in the Kashmir region and prospered over time. Traditions from these ancient Aryans persist among some communities in Kashmir even today.

The migration of saints, artisans and traders through the ages had a lasting effect on the cultural landscape of this region. For example, the message of Lord Buddha spread from India to Central Asia via Kashmir during the days of the Silk Road. Apart from the Silk Road, there were three other routes that connected Kashmir and Central Asia: via Baramulla and Muzaffarabad, through Gilgit and Chitral and through Tibet and Xinjiang.

Buddhism had an important impact on pre-Islamic Central Asia in terms of culture, art and philosophy. The famous monk from China, Hieun Tsiang, who visited India from 629-645 AD, has mentioned four important Buddhist centres in Central Asia: Shan-shan (Kroraina), Khotan, Kucha, and Turfan. Kashmir was instrumental in introducing Buddhism to Khotan which, later in turn, was central to transmission of Buddhism to China.

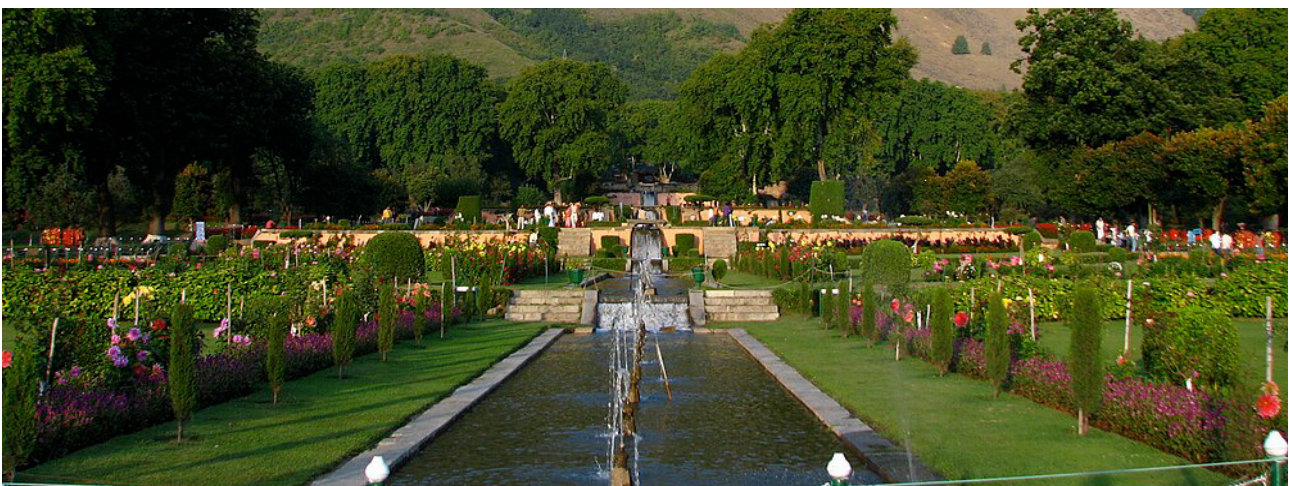
The most significant era of interaction between Central Asians and Kashmiris began with the advent of Islam in Central Asia. This led Muslim missionaries from Iran and Turkestan to travel to Kashmir to propagate the new faith and its traditions. One prominent missionary was Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, known as *Shah-i-Hamadani* among Kashmiri Muslims. He is known to have

brought Sufism to Kashmir via Tajikistan and Iran. Originally from Hamadan in Western Iran, his area of activity was Kulob province in Tajikistan, where he was buried after his death. Hundreds of Iran and Turkestan missionaries followed Mir Sayyid Ali's footsteps in Kashmir. As a result, a solid and lasting connection was established between Central Asian missionaries and Sufi schools in Kashmir.

With the spread of Islam in Central Asia, the region emerged as a great knowledge hub of medieval times, giving impetus to path breaking developments in different disciplines of knowledge alongside religious sciences and architecture.

The woodwork in Kashmir's architecture has a Central Asian imprint, like the *Kadals* (wooden bridges) and *Ziarats* (wooden shrines). In the 16th and 17th century, the Mughals not only developed the specific wooden architecture but also tried to restore stone building art in Kashmir. Mughal Gardens are a group of gardens constructed by the Mughal rulers in Central Asian architecture style. This architecture style has been influenced by Central Asia, especially the *Char Bagh* structure.

Recently, Jammu and Kashmir's Forensic Science Laboratory conducted the first ever genetic study which confirmed the considerable genetic relationship between different districts of Kashmir and Central Asia.



A View of Nishat Bagh, Mughal Garden, Srinagar.

Educational Connections

It was with the establishment of the Central Asian Studies Centre at Kashmir University in 1976, initiated by Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, the then Chief Minister of Kashmir, that new avenues for interaction between academics from Central Asia and Kashmir were revived. In 1982, Muhammad Asimi, then President of the Tajik Academy of Sciences, visited Srinagar for about a week, delivering a speech to a large gathering of students, teachers, researchers, and university officials. The Central Asian media extensively covered this event.

In 1982, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations organised millennium celebrations for the great Central Asian intellectual, philosopher, and physician Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) throughout India in collaboration with the Central government. In addition, the Centre for Central Asian Studies at Kashmir University had the privilege of hosting a five-member delegation led by Professor Asimov during their visit.

Over time, Central Asian countries have achieved political and economic stability. They became members of the United Nations as independent sovereign states. India responded by opening Embassies in all the former Republics, rapidly increasing bilateral interactions.

This shift also initiated a process of educational exchange. Many Kashmiri students pursued admission to various academic and professional institutions in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan. To do so, they had to learn the Russian language, the medium of instruction in Central Asian universities.

Conclusion

Contacts with Central Asia have played a significant role in the development of an Islamic

civilisation in Kashmir that has rejuvenated the prevalent trends in art, architecture, literature and thought. The influx of scholars and literary personalities from the Central Asian region into Kashmir and other Indian centres of culture and learning supplemented indigenous culture and led to the strengthening of the values of co-existence, mutual understanding and tolerance.

In the current context of India's Connect Central Asia policy, there is a need to encourage people to people connections between Kashmir and Central Asia. The Indian Council of Social Science Research should provide more grants and scholarships to research scholars from Jammu and Kashmir who are engaged in research on the Central Asian region. At the same time, flight connectivity between the two regions will also help in further expanding people centric connectivity. Due to geopolitical reasons, the historical connection between Kashmir and Central Asia has weakened somewhat. However, it is an asset that should be preserved through India's Connect Central Asia policy.

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‘AFGHAN PIVOT’ IN INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA TIES

Raj Kumar Sharma



Source Sidhant Sibal X.

Introduction

Afghanistan geographically connects Central and South Asia and has played an important role in India's ties with the Central Asian region. Historically, most of the modern-day areas of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and northern India were part of the Kushan Empire under King Kanishka.¹ However, later, Afghanistan also acted as a springboard in facilitating Mughal Emperor Babur's attack on India in the early 16th century. Due to the competing nature of their expansionist colonial policies, Tsarist Russia and British India were both interested in controlling Afghanistan but they agreed to maintain Afghanistan as a strategic buffer between them.

Later, during the Cold War, Afghanistan remained a buffer between the Soviet Union and South Asia. This status changed in 1979

when the Soviets intervened in Afghanistan to protect the newly formed Communist government in Kabul.

In response, the US and Pakistan actively supported the religion inspired Mujahideen fighters to take on the Red Army in Afghanistan. Thousands of Tajiks and Uzbeks joined the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union.²

In late 1980s, with assistance from Pakistan's ISI, the Afghan Mujahideen were carrying out cross border raids in Soviet Central Asia in order to create unrest in Muslim dominated population of the region.³ The Afghan conflict played an important role in resurgence of Islam in Central Asia, a region in which religious identity was suppressed during the Soviet Union's communist rule.⁴

India and Central Asian countries simultaneously

experienced ripple effects of Afghan terrorism in the 1990s. Foreign terrorists had begun to appear in Jammu and Kashmir in 1989 following the Soviet withdrawal from Kabul.⁵ Pakistan's military and intelligence gave funding and weapons to the Afghan Mujahideens helping them to infiltrate in Kashmir. By 1996, most of the mercenaries were either killed or returned back to Afghanistan to serve the Taliban which had captured Kabul in 1996.⁶

India's Ministry of External Affairs in its 1996-97 Annual Report has noted that New Delhi's bilateral relations with the Central Asian countries were shaped by common concerns and challenges faced by the region while highlighting Taliban's northern advance and seizing of Kabul as a security threat for these countries.⁷ Taliban's ascent to power was seen as 'Pakistan's larger game plan to extend her influence in Central Asia'.⁸ Starting from 1990s, the instability in Afghanistan has impacted India and Central Asia in three phases.

The First Phase: Early 1990s to 2001

In the first phase from the early 1990s to 2001, the Taliban proved to be a security threat for both India and Central Asia. Taliban aided and actively supported terrorist groups which targeted India and Central Asian countries. Afghanistan under the Taliban rule also became a sanctuary for such terrorist groups.

Pakistan was financing the Taliban to take Kashmiri militants under its protection while it also encouraged Osama bin Laden to join hands with the Taliban, since he was also sponsoring bases for Kashmiri terrorists in Khost province of Afghanistan. Taliban leader Mullah Omar had openly supported jihad in Kashmir in 1998.⁹

Similarly, the Taliban became a destabilising factor for the Central Asian countries too. Three Central Asian countries can be termed as frontline states – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as they share a porous border with Afghanistan and are directly impacted by security developments in Afghanistan.

Tajikistan was embroiled in a civil war soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Some Tajik Mujahideen returned from Afghanistan to form the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) to oppose President Emomali Rahmonov's government in Tajikistan. As the Afghan Mujahideen came to power in Afghanistan in 1992, they allowed IRP to operate out of its bases in northern Afghanistan and also assisted its fighters with weapons and training.¹⁰

In December 1999, Pakistan's ISI and the Taliban were involved in the hijacking of an Indian Airlines flight from Kathmandu. Terrorist group, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) used its bases in Tajikistan and some Taliban controlled areas in North Afghanistan to launch raids in south Kyrgyzstan. In February 1999, IMU attempted but failed to assassinate Uzbek President Karimov through six car bombings to establish a Taliban-like regime in Uzbekistan.

IMU terrorists were important for the Taliban and bin Laden as they fought their common enemy, the Northern Alliance. IMU, the Taliban and bin Laden also wanted to overthrow the secular regimes in Central Asia to replace them with an Islamic Caliphate.¹¹ India was deeply concerned¹² because any kind of religion inspired radicalisation in Central Asia directly threatens India's Jammu and Kashmir due to its geographic proximity with the region.

Taliban's rigid and conservative ways of governance have also been a mutual concern for India and Central Asia. Under Taliban rule, Sikhs and Hindus were asked to wear yellow armbands and hang yellow flags outside their homes. Restrictions on women were rampant. Such a model of governance was antithetical to the Central Asian culture and ethos.

Security planners in India have seen Central Asia as a strategic buffer which is an important partner in countering fundamentalist threats. The

Northern Alliance headed by Afghan-Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud fought the Taliban in northern Afghanistan with the support of India, Russia, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

It can be said that India and Central Asia's response to the Taliban was aligned with the regional and international approach which was to isolate and contain them. Hence, neither India nor the Central Asian countries recognized the Taliban government in Afghanistan.

The Second Phase: 2001-2021

The second phase in India-Central Asia ties started when US-NATO forces intervened in Afghanistan following the 9/11 terror attacks on the US. America's war on terrorism received support from both India and the Central Asian countries as it overthrew the Taliban from power. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan even allowed the US to maintain its military bases on their territory to support America's counter-terrorism operations in Afghanistan.

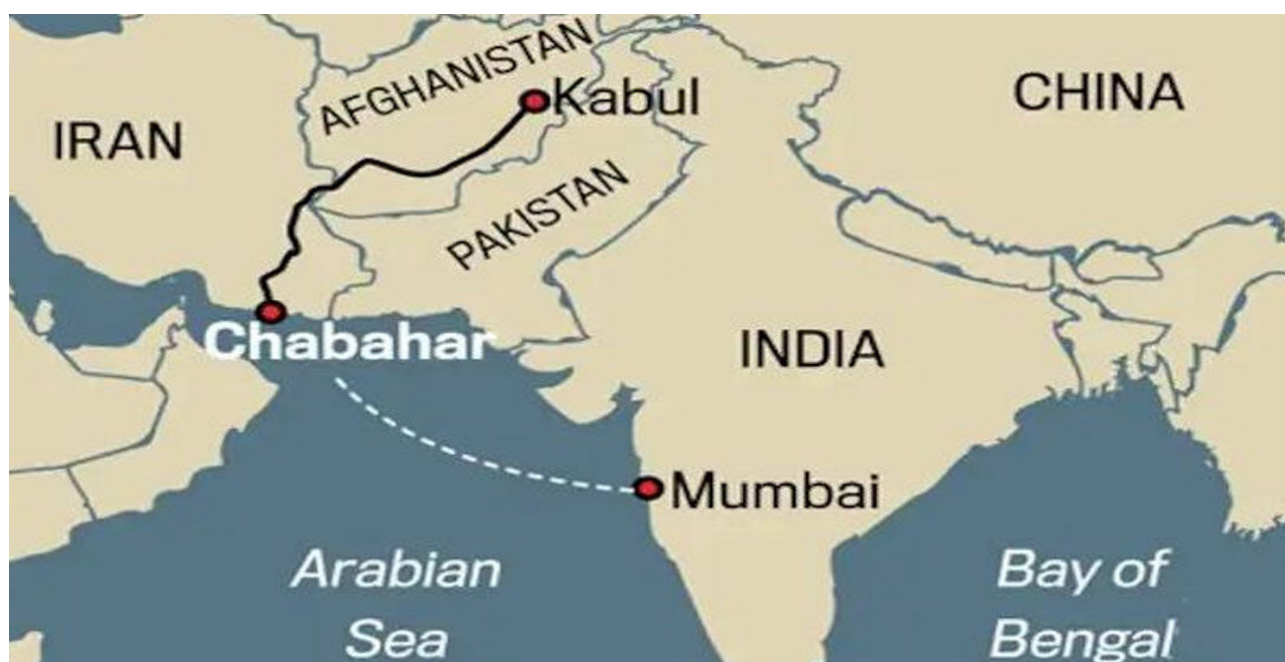
With relative stability in Afghanistan, the scope of India's engagement with Central Asia expanded as New Delhi

looked to strengthen the economic aspects of bilateral ties. In 2012, India announced its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' which sought to find connectivity to the Central Asian region.

The shortest land route from India to Central Asia passes through Pakistan. However, given its perennial strategic rivalry with India, Pakistan has never allowed India transit rights to access the Central Asian markets.

India started to work with Iran via Chabahar port to reach Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. Afghanistan was now seen as a land bridge that would reconnect India and the Central Asian region, constituting a single geopolitical space.¹³ A better security situation in Afghanistan also led India to sign agreements related to the Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline which was also supported by the US as an alternate to Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline.

At the same time, there was gradual increase in India's bilateral security cooperation with the Central Asian countries, especially focusing on



India's Connectivity to Afghanistan & Central Asia via Chabahar port in Iran. | Hans India.

Afghanistan. India established Joint Working Groups (JWGs) on Counter Terrorism with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2003.¹⁴ India and Kazakhstan have also established a similar mechanism to counter terrorism. Security developments in Afghanistan are central to discussions of these meetings.

Bilateral military exercises were started between India and some Central Asian countries that include Exercise Prabal Dostyk now renamed KAZIND with Kazakhstan in 2016, Exercise Khanjar with Kyrgyzstan in 2011 and Exercise Dustlik with Uzbekistan in 2019. Military training institutes in India have been training military officers from the Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan.

India has also upgraded its relations to the level of strategic partnership with Kazakhstan (2009), Uzbekistan (2011), Tajikistan (2012) and Kyrgyzstan (2019). Two years before the US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the first India-Central Asia Dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers was held in 2019 in Samarkand where Afghanistan had also participated. This marked the beginning of the '5+1' format form of engagement between India and Central Asia.

The Third Phase: Since August 2021

Afghanistan again sprang back to significance in India-Central Asia engagement after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan on 15 August, 2021. This time, both India and the Central Asian countries are engaging the Taliban without recognizing it. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have even taken off the Taliban from their list of terrorist organisations.¹⁵

The Taliban government has not made any hostile statements against India and the Central Asian countries. Most importantly, it has resisted Pakistan's attempts to link the Kashmir issue with Afghanistan.¹⁶ They have been also conveying their desire and capability to rein in other terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan.

In Central Asia, there is a belief this time that attempts to isolate the Taliban regime could turn it rogue and engagement with the Taliban may be better than isolation. This observation is based on the author's interactions with various Central Asian experts in the last three years. On the other hand, India believes that continued isolation of Afghanistan would create problems for Afghan people and a working relationship with the Taliban should be maintained in order to coordinate assistance for Afghan people.

By contesting Pakistan's attempts to control its policies, the Taliban is showing its autonomous character, which is also one of the primary reasons why India began to engage the Taliban government in this phase. Both India and the Central Asian countries want Afghanistan to be peaceful so that it can live up to its promise of being an economic bridge between South and Central Asia. Since the Taliban looks firmly entrenched in Afghanistan this time, India and the Central Asian countries are betting on engagement with the Taliban to gauge its intentions and explore possibilities of regional cooperation. However, there is more to this than meets the eye.

A UN report in June 2023 had highlighted that the Taliban continues to have a strong relationship with al Qaeda which is allowing al Qaeda to regroup. The report also says that foreign terrorist organisations continue to operate in Afghanistan. While the Taliban may have the will to control foreign terror outfits from attacking regional countries, it may not have the capability to do so. This necessitates further security cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries over Afghanistan. Three important things have happened in this regard after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan.

One, India has started the biennial India-Central Asia Summit process in January 2022. The two



A view from Dara District, Panjshir Province, Afghanistan.

sides also agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on Afghanistan during this summit. Second, India also started to hold meetings with the Central Asian countries at the level of National Security Advisors and the first such meeting took place in December 2022. The second meeting took place in Astana in October 2023. Third, India had also hosted ‘Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan’ in November 2021, in which Russia and the Central Asian countries had participated. Both Pakistan and China had decided to skip this meeting.

India has emphasised the bilateral approach to resolving the situation in Afghanistan since regional mechanisms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) have not been effective due to differences among members over their respective Afghanistan policies. At the same time, Central Asian support to India on the issue of terrorism also helps India’s efforts to isolate Pakistan on the issue of cross-border terrorism.

The Delhi Declaration issued after first India-Central Asia Summit in 2022 highlighted that ‘Afghan territory should not be used for

sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts and called for concerted action against all terrorist groups, including those sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).¹⁷

The Taliban is, however, not only a security but also an ideological threat to the regional countries. Taliban may have dropped their plans to expand beyond Afghanistan but their conservative ideology needs to be countered. The Taliban claims to have been inspired by Deobandi Islam that has roots in India. Deobandi Islamic scholars in India claim that Taliban’s view of Islam is an extreme version that has nothing to do with them.¹⁸

This message needs to be amplified to ideologically discredit the Taliban. One area in which India and the Central Asian countries can directly cooperate is propagation of Sufism as a counter to religious radicalization. The Central Asian countries have a secular outlook, historical Sufi influence and a nomadic psyche which is antithetical to fundamentalism.

India and Central Asia are well placed to promote Sufi tourism, cultural exchange and educational cooperation in order to deal with the threat of terrorism.¹⁹ It is noteworthy that Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi had highlighted the role

of Sufi heritage of Central Asian countries to counter terrorism during his virtual address at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in 2021.²⁰

Conclusion

The security and internal stability of Afghanistan has been central in India-Central Asia ties. Given their secular credentials, India and the Central Asian countries are natural partners in the fight against terrorism that emanates from Afghanistan.

Such cooperation also serves as a regional consensus mechanism to deal with terrorism in the region. There is, however, a need to counter terrorism from an ideological perspective as well in which Sufism can play a major role. India and the Central Asian countries can develop a Sufi tourism circuit that will serve as a basis to counter radical ideologies in the region.

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Central Asian Voices

TOKAYEV'S DIPLOMACY: WITHOUT POPULISM OR ILLUSIONS

Yerkin Tukumov



President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (L) & Prime Minister Narendra Modi. | AFP/PTI/News18.

Introduction

Kazakhstan, like the rest of the world, stands at the turning point of the fifth techno-economic wave. Forecasts suggest that global growth is expected to pick up pace soon. However, we are currently in the most challenging cycle, marked by the struggle to shape a new global order. It is within these complex circumstances that Kazakhstan's diplomacy operates, guided by four fundamental principles.

Today, the world is under the strain of social, economic, and political crises. The social crisis is expressed through the weakening of the middle class and the reassessment of values. The economic crisis reflects the

transition to a new technological paradigm accompanied by uncertain growth. The political crisis is marked by the weakening of global international organisations and the absence of constructive dialogue and trust.

Amid this triple crisis and global uncertainty, Kazakhstan does not have the luxury of several decades to passively observe the external environment – or worse, to preserve the current situation.

At the same time, it is undeniable that the world is suffering from a shortage of positive global governance concepts. In this context, the notion of responsibility for development and the future is both relevant and broad. Today, this is one of

the key ideas promoted by our Head of State, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

The older generation was born and spent most of their conscious lives in the 20th century. We carried the hopes and dreams of our parents, overcame threats, and withstood global upheavals. Now, they are accepting the challenges of the 21st century. Kazakhstan fully understands this responsibility, advocating for peace and cooperation. Children born today will face the challenges of the 22nd century.

We are already responsible for the next century, requiring us to answer many pressing questions: What will tomorrow's world look like? What will we leave for future generations – prosperity or devastation, dreams or wars, happiness or death? The steps we take today will resonate in the future, shaping the path for our grandchildren. That path must be one of peace and prosperity. This is why the President insists that all nations must cool their tempers, lay down their weapons, and stop dividing the world into blocs and poles. This is the path for us and the global community—there is no other alternative.

Therefore, the Head of State's diplomacy, like his entire policy, encompasses a period of global responsibility spanning several generations and has a significant impact on them.

Tokayev's Diplomacy

What does Tokayev's diplomacy entail? In essence, it can be summarised by the word realism, which allows Kazakhstan to view its role without illusions or populism. The President is not trying to seek approval – he does not need it. Instead, he has a historic mission and distinct diplomatic principles to follow. In my view, these are the following four principles.

(i) Balance and Openness

This principle implies that Kazakhstan avoids making unilateral foreign policy choices, as doing so would contradict the country's geopolitical position and national interests.

While serving as Foreign Minister, Tokayev articulated this principle in his work *Under the Banner of Independence* arguing “A multi-vector policy implies an absence of rigid dependence of the foreign policy course on the behaviour of any particular partner, the unpredictability of developments in a given region, or fluctuations in global market conditions.”

The desires of the critics of multi-vector policy have nothing to do with real politics. At the core of Kazakhstan's foreign policy have been, and remain, national interests – balanced relations with our neighbours and major global political and economic centres such as Russia, China, the United States, the European Union and India.

The suggestion to make a definitive choice is a byproduct of populist, almost exalted, simplistic approaches that are inadmissible in diplomacy and have benefited no country. Successful foreign policy also requires balancing internal interests: between the centre and the regions, various ethnic groups, political and economic goals, security, and development interests.

It is axiomatic that foreign policy is an extension of domestic policy. In this context, strengthening public dialogue and engaging civil society in decision-making is the foundation of Kazakhstan's strategy.

The President pays great attention to foreign relations, recognizing that each meeting and visit offers opportunities to strengthen sovereignty, modernise the economy, and attract investments. The boundaries between foreign and domestic policy have almost merged. For example, a visit to China stimulates development in East Kazakhstan and Zhetysay regions, while a trip to Uzbekistan provides a powerful boost to the Turkestan region.



Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

(ii) Respect for Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

For a long time, we were lulled by three decades of global stability. But now, borders have once again become highly relevant. Kazakhstan firmly adheres to the principles of non-interference in other states' internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity.

It is precisely a balanced foreign policy, free from populist slogans, that has allowed Kazakhstan to avoid the land disputes so common today and achieve significant results in resolving border issues with our neighbours.

The President explained the importance of adhering to the principle of territorial integrity as follows: “If the right of nations to self-determination were to be fully implemented across the globe, instead of the 193 countries currently in the UN, there would be over 500 or 600 states on Earth. Naturally, this would result in chaos.”

Therefore, Kazakhstan does not recognize Taiwan, Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, or

other quasi-state entities.

(iii) A Proactive Stance

One often encounters layman arguments questioning why Kazakhstan engages so actively in diplomacy. Why do we hold international forums and summits, participate in global organisations, including the UN Security Council, provide platforms for conflict negotiations, and act as a mediator? After all, this requires the allocation of resources—financial, organisational, and human.

The response to such sceptical questions is the deep dependence of our country's successful economic development on a favourable external environment, security guarantees, and trust-based relations with international partners.

The pursuit of a proactive foreign policy has laid the foundation for Kazakhstan's entry into the ranks of middle powers, whose influence on the global stage has been growing in recent years. One of the key criteria of middle power status is a country's ability to shape the regional agenda and conduct proactive foreign policy.

As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted, small and medium-sized states have historically been responsible for international stability by building bridges between major powers. This has been a consistent focus of Kazakhstani diplomacy, creating new opportunities for national development.

(iv) Indivisible Security

Today, humanity is deeply concerned that the collapse of the international arms control system and the war in Ukraine have sharply increased the risk of nuclear confrontation, effectively triggering a new arms race that has spread across many regions of the world.

According to the Global Conflict Tracker, there are 28 active conflicts worldwide in 2024, divided into three categories: worsening, frozen, and improving. The number of worsening conflicts stands at 17, including the war in Ukraine; 10 are frozen, such as the situations on the Korean Peninsula and in Kashmir. Only one conflict—the Nagorno-Karabakh case—is classified by experts as improving.

We are witnessing a crisis in European security and its institutions, particularly the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Asian security system is still in the process of formation, and the level of distrust among its key players is already growing.

Under these conditions, risks are increasing significantly, with some already materialising in the escalation of regional conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast and South Asia, and Central and North Africa. The vacuum of stability creates an environment for a new surge in terrorist and separatist activity worldwide.

Conclusion

Kazakhstan has established itself as a respected international mediator. The Syrian peace talks, the resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan, and the settlement of disputes in Central Asia remain at the forefront of official Astana's agenda. Not long ago, Almaty became a platform for negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Kazakhstan is also ready to contribute to the swift resolution of the war in Ukraine. These four pillars of Kazakhstani diplomacy make it possible to shape a stable and secure environment both within Kazakhstan and around it.



Yerkin Tukumov

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Earlier, he also served as Minister-Counselor at the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Russia from 2019 to 2022 and as Consul General of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Kazan from 2018 to 2019. From 2010 to 2018, he was the Head of the Analytical Department of the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

His earlier positions include Director of the Central Asia Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan and Deputy Director of the same department in 2008. He was also the Director General of the Central Asian Fund for the Development of Democracy. He is also the author of the book 'Discovering America: A View from Kazakhstan'.

INTER-REGIONAL COOPERATION BETWEEN CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA: A VIEW FROM TASHKENT

Abdusamat Khaydarov



India's Finance and Corporate Affairs Minister Nirmala Sitharaman (L) meets President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev in Samarkand, September 2024. | PTI/The Hindu.

Introduction

The people of Central and South Asia have historically lived in a common political, economic and humanitarian space for a long time which has enriched their mutual cultural ties. This process, however, was disrupted and significantly limited in the mid-19th century as a result of the 'Great Game' - the geopolitical rivalry between British India and Tsarist Russia. But despite the artificial isolation of the two regions for almost a century and a half, the historical memory of the people of Central Asia has preserved the feelings of openness, friendliness and trust towards India, the key country of South Asia.

This fundamental determinant still underlines today's full-blooded bilateral Uzbek-Indian

relations established after the Central Asian republics declared independence in 1991. The emergence of new countries on the political map of the world at the centre of Eurasia, detached from the rest of the world, has largely changed the political landscape of Central and South Asia. Differences in the political systems and economic development models of the Central Asian countries, unresolved long-standing border, water and energy issues and a one-sided approach to resolve the problems without taking into account the interests of neighbouring countries has been responsible for hindering sustainable development both for individual countries and for the Central Asian region as a whole. The global economic crisis and the aggravation of the Afghan conflict further posed challenges for regional security and stability.

Regional Cooperation

This situation continued until the end of 2016, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev was elected as the new President of Uzbekistan, who initiated social, economic and political reforms in the country. These are also reflected in his foreign policy which has inherent principles of tolerance and accommodation for enhancing regional cooperation, integration and development. Central Asia was declared a priority of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and its goal was to improve relations with neighbouring countries through the resolution of all long-standing problems on the basis of mutually acceptable compromises. This course was based on the understanding that the sustainable development of the country and the region as a whole is impossible without joint efforts to solve common problems.

The result of this renewed foreign policy of Uzbekistan has been the creation of a new atmosphere of mutual understanding and cooperation in the region. Today, this cooperation is reflected in the "Central Asia-2040" Concept adopted at the Sixth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of the Five Central Asian States in August 2024. The Concept expresses the common vision of Central Asian countries for the development of regional cooperation in a new format.

Regional cooperation and integration, the growing role in international organisations, efforts to jointly address environmental and social issues, and the diversification of international ties of the countries of the region beyond relations with major neighbours such as Russia and China demonstrate the ability of Central Asian countries to participate in contemporary international relations and the world economy, promoting interregional cooperation, particularly with South Asia.

Centrality of India in South Asia

The key country in this region is the Republic of India, with which the development of relations has always been smooth and seamless, based on a solid legal framework, primarily the "Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership" signed in May 2011. However, Tashkent's renewed foreign policy and positive changes in the region, as well as the summit meetings of the leaders of the two states, Shavkat. M. Mirziyoyev and Narendra Modi in September-October 2018 and January 2019 gave a new impetus to further development of relations in bilateral and multilateral formats.

One of the results of these steps was the successful development of the India-Central Asia Dialogue established in Samarkand at the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Central Asia and India in January 2019. Nevertheless, an objective look at the development of trade, economic and investment cooperation between Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries and India suggests that it is much less than the existing potential suggests. India has long refrained from actively expanding cooperation with Central Asia and Uzbekistan.

In our view, the reasons for this approach include the lack of geographical accessibility between Central Asia and India, which impedes the development of economic relations; India's foreign policy focus on other regions and strengthening ties with neighbouring South Asian countries and strategically important partners in the West; political and economic instability in some countries of the region, as well as the ongoing Afghan conflict, which blocked the connectivity of the two regions. However, these factors have not prevented other leading countries from actively engaging with Central Asian states.

In these conditions, the isolation of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries from maritime sphere and the need to open new transport corridors in order to strengthen economic security and access to new markets has triggered a new strategic vector of Uzbekistan's foreign

policy announced in July 2021 at an international conference in Tashkent which was dedicated to connectivity between Central and South Asia. In fact, it was a clear signal of the readiness to develop and expand cooperation with the countries of South Asia despite the obstacle of an unstable Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan's Afghanistan Policy

A significant factor has been the change in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. An assessment of the real contemporary situation in Afghanistan has shown that the Taliban managed to stop the civil war that lasted for more than forty years. However, the fall of the republican government and the elimination of virtually all democratic achievements in the country led to the cessation of international financing and the freezing of the country's funds in Western banks. In this situation, Afghanistan found itself in the deepest economic and humanitarian crisis.

To prevent the collapse of Afghanistan, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev called for unfreezing nine and a half billion dollars of Afghan funds and assisting Afghanistan in solving social problems as early as September 2021. A little later, at the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan called for preventing the isolation of Afghanistan as it would be left alone with its problems leading to unpredictable consequences.

Uzbekistan's position on Afghanistan has been repeatedly reflected in statements by official representatives, in particular the Special Representative of the President, A. Kamilov. He has highlighted that first of all, "there is a need to maintain a constructive dialogue with the new authorities of Afghanistan in order to avoid the repeated transformation of this long-suffering country into a so-called rogue state". He has also highlighted "the need to ensure a humanitarian corridor to Afghanistan in order to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe".



Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Abdulla Aripov (L) during his Afghanistan visit in August 2024. The Government Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan also supports the adoption of measures by the international community to lift sanctions imposed on Afghanistan, unfreeze its assets and help rebuild the country's banking system, development of a post-conflict strategy and involvement of Afghanistan in regional economic integration initiatives. At the same time, Uzbekistan expects that "the new Afghan authorities will fulfil their international commitments: the establishment of an inclusive government, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, not providing shelter to terrorist groups on Afghan soil and the cessation of contacts with them, the support of good-neighbourly relations with the regional countries and the observance of fundamental human rights and freedoms, including those of women and national minorities.

India, Uzbekistan and Regional Economic Initiatives

In our view, Afghanistan, which is a bridge between Central and South Asia, could become an area for joint efforts of Tashkent and New Delhi to maintain security and stability in the country and its involvement in interregional cooperation. At the same time, India is expected to use its authority and influence in the United Nations and other leading global forums for enhancing regional cooperation between Central and South Asia.

Today, Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, is undoubtedly of strategic importance to India for several reasons, among which energy security is of paramount importance. This necessitates strengthening India's ties with the states of this region, which are rich in natural resources, especially hydrocarbons. In addition, Central Asia is a promising market for Indian goods and technology and the development of trade and investment ties can contribute to the economic growth of both sides.

Moreover, India is interested in the development of the key International North-South Transport Corridor (NSITC). In this regard, active

utilisation of the Chabahar port with access to Afghanistan can become a key link in this project and will improve access to markets in Central Asia, other CIS countries and Europe.

Another important basis for the development of bilateral cooperation between New Delhi and Tashkent is security and counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics trafficking, which require coordinated efforts.

Security cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries will only contribute to enhancing regional stability. Undoubtedly, both sides are interested in further development of long-term partnership, utilisation of untapped potential, and expansion of cooperation in political, economic, investment, cultural and humanitarian spheres.

At the same time, the strengthening and expansion of bilateral relations and active cooperation in building interregional interconnectivity will face challenges on connectivity issues and logistics. The lack of well-developed banking and financial links and differences in trade policies of the regional countries may pose some obstacles for economic cooperation.

This list of challenges can go on. However, it needs to be emphasised that our Central and South Asian space is incredibly dynamic. Its full potential can be achieved by timely and concerted efforts to strengthen, first and foremost, political dialogue supported by practical steps. And today, speaking about the prospects for the development of interregional cooperation between Central and South Asia, I would like to quote the words of the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi, who once said: "The future depends on what we do in the present".



Abdusamat Khaydarov

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Earlier, he had a long career as diplomat and expert on the Central and South Asian regions. After Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, he served in the MFA leading its Asia and Africa Department and later as Chief Consultant to the Office of the President of Uzbekistan on interstate and foreign economic relations.

From 1996 – 1999, he served as Ambassador of Uzbekistan to Iran and thereafter returned to Tashkent where he served as the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan (1999-2000). He has authored more than 80 publications, monographs and books on Afghanistan, Iran, India and Central and South Asia.

TURKMEN-INDIAN RELATIONS: A SYMBOL OF COOPERATION, BROTHERHOOD AND FRIENDSHIP

Sapar Berdiniyazow



Stamps issued to mark 30 years of India-Turkmenistan ties. | Amazon.

Introduction

By declaring its independence, Turkmenistan established friendly and equal cooperation in international relations. Those relations between Turkmenistan and the Republic of India, which have their origins in the depths of antiquity, are now being enriched with new, influential content.

When we say India, we imagine a wonderful friendly country. Our grandfather and spiritual leader, Magtymguly, who wrote, "You dedicated to the Indians, the most fertile lands" informs us that Turkmen-Indian relations have been important since then. India is a

country that presents the best feelings of friendship and brotherhood.

In this regard, the poems of the poet Gara Seyitliyev immediately come to mind. Bairam Khan Turkmen's wonderful poems, such as the beautiful Taj Mahal, continue to live in our hearts. Well, one can give boundless examples of kind feelings when it comes to India.

The roots of ties between the Turkmen and Indian people were laid in antiquity, from the time of the Great Silk Road. This was the heyday of the great Parthian Empire, the centre of which was the territory of modern southern

Turkmenistan and was one of the main international transport corridors connecting India with the countries of Central Asia, including Turkmenistan.

The deep roots of the relationship are evidenced by archaeological findings confirming that contacts between the Turkmen and Indian people existed for a long time. As it is known, Emperor Akbar's mentor Bairam Khan and his son Abdurahman Khan, the famous philosopher and poet, were Turkmen who served in the Mughal Empire administration in India. The Turkmen Gate in Delhi, built in the 1650s, also testifies to the centuries-old ties between India and Turkmenistan.

In the history of Turkmen-Indian relations, an important event was the visit to Turkmenistan by former Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the most prominent political figures in the world. In 1955, Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi made a tour of the Soviet Union, during which they visited Ashgabat.

The famous Indian writer, traveller and researcher Radha Rayana wrote an excellent book *'An Ancient Kinship India and Turkmenistan'*, which also talks about the deep history of interaction between two friendly peoples and dialogues between Turkmen and Indian cultures of many thousands.

India recognized the independence of Turkmenistan on December 26, 1991. Diplomatic relations between Turkmenistan and India were established on April 20, 1992. On January 20, 1994, the Indian Embassy was opened in Turkmenistan. In January 1995, the Embassy of Turkmenistan in India was opened in New Delhi.

Bilateral Diplomatic Relations

At the moment, the partnership of India and Turkmenistan over the past thirty two years has received an intensive impetus in many areas, including economic, political, scientific and technical and humanitarian aspects. A number of basic intergovernmental agreements, including trade and economic cooperation, cooperation in the field of science and technology, sports, defence, as well as the avoidance of double taxation and a number of others have been signed.

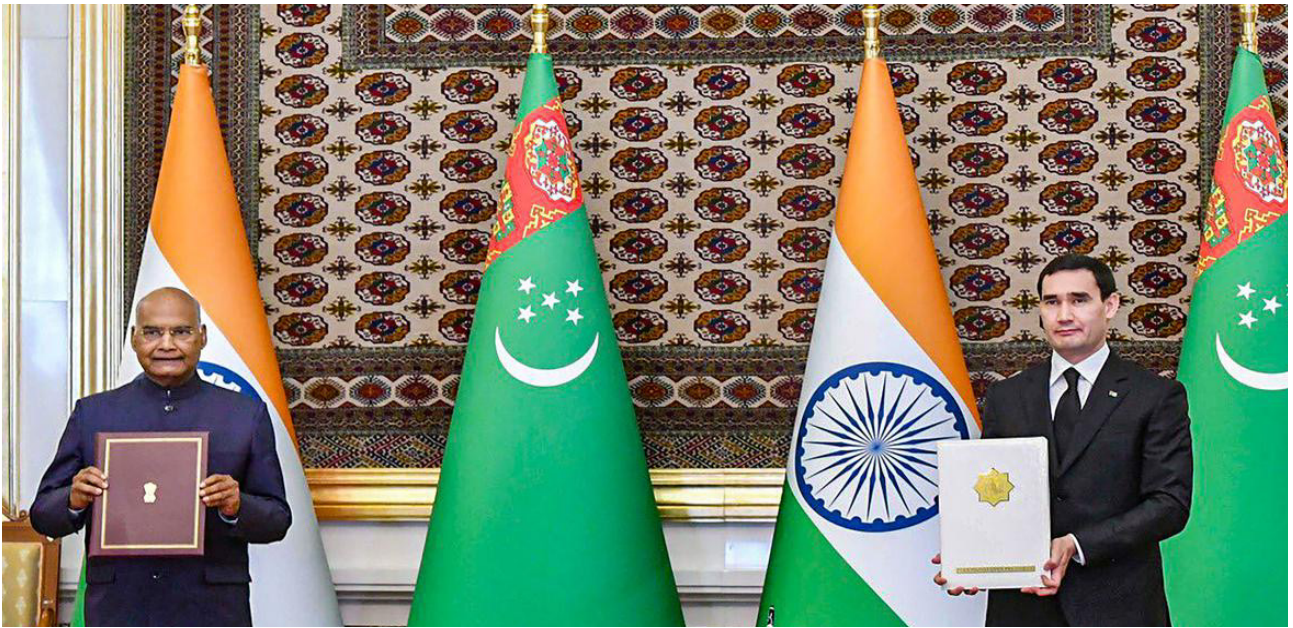
The positive dynamics of bilateral relations contributes to the dialogue, which is supported and is characterised by contacts at the highest interstate and inter government levels, as well as regular meetings and negotiations between foreign policy departments.

In this regard, the visit of the National Leader of the Turkmen People, Chairman Hulk Maslakhaty, Hero of Arkadag, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to India in 2010 stands out. The visit of our esteemed Arkadag to the tomb of Abdurahman Khan in Delhi at the start of the visit was an expression of the boundless respect of our national Leader to our ancestors.

In 2022, former Indian President Ram Nath Kovind became the first President of India to visit Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan follows five strategic directions in its foreign policy:

- (i) Peace, security, stability and sustainable development.
- (ii) Development and promotion of the idea of neutrality on the world stage.
- (iii) Steady increase in diversification of foreign economic relations.
- (iv) Comprehensive promotion of sustainable development.
- (v) The humanization of international relations, introducing into them high standards of morality and justice.



Former President of India, Ram Nath Kovind with his Turkmenistan counterpart Serdar Berdimuhamedo in Ashgabat, 2022. | PTI/The Hindu.

In its foreign policy, India focuses on the development of traditional, ancient relations with the independent states of the Central Asian region, especially with Turkmenistan. Economic, scientific, technical and cultural cooperation between the two countries has become a tradition.

On December 18-19, 2021, the Turkmen delegation led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Deputy Chairman Rashid Meredov, visited New Delhi and was warmly welcomed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of India, Dr S. Jaishankar. The Turkmen delegation took part in the third session of the Central Asia-India Dialogue in December 2021. The meeting, held at the Foreign Ministries level, focused on complex political issues on Afghanistan, as well as trade and regional relations.

At the end of the meeting, the parties agreed to hold an annual meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue with the participation of Afghanistan. The parties also discussed cooperation in the fields of energy, gas and chemical industry, transport, communications, high technologies and agriculture. They expressed interest in further expanding trade and economic cooperation, including the promotion of direct relations between the business community of

Central Asian countries and India.

India is a reliable partner for the countries of Central Asia, including Turkmenistan, on their development path. In this context, the 'Central Asia + India' format is of great importance in which priority areas such as political issues, trade and economic objectives, security, cultural and human activities, as well as the development of parliamentary relations are discussed.

Trade and Economic Ties

Turkmenistan and India are united by centuries-old relations based on the principles of neighbourliness and equal cooperation. Turkmenistan's favourable geopolitical and geo-economic location contribute to the continuation of the long-standing traditions of active interstate relations, the development of trade and economic and humanitarian relations between the Turkmen and Indian peoples.

The Tejen-Sarabs-Mashad railway, which was commissioned during the years of Independence, is a vivid example of the great attention attached to the construction of the Great Silk Road and paved the way for the development of trade and economic cooperation between Turkmenistan and India. At present, this internationally important route gives India ample

opportunity to connect with all countries of the continent.

As one of the world's fastest growing economies, the Republic of India has great scientific and industrial potential and a vast and promising market. Turkmenistan and India attach special importance to cooperation in the fuel and energy sector. In particular, there is a great demand for the implementation of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project to meet the growing demands of the Indian economy.

The construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, which was launched on December 13, 2015, has taken Turkmen-Indian relations to a new level. With a total length of 1,814 kilometres and a capacity of 33 billion cubic metres per year, this pipeline will ensure the sustainable development of the region, energy security and fruitful cooperation between the two countries.

In connection with trade and economic cooperation between Turkmenistan and India, intergovernmental commissions play a huge role. The joint intergovernmental Turkmen-Indian Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological cooperation held its first meeting in October 2003 and its meetings are held alternately every year or two years.

Trade turnover between Turkmenistan and India in 2023 amounted to 305 million US dollars, of which exports from Turkmenistan were 6.50 million while imports from India were 300 million US dollars. As of 2023, 4 enterprises with the participation of Indian capital were registered on the territory of Turkmenistan and 13 investment projects were registered for a total amount of 119 million US dollars.

Turkmenistan and India also have rich experience in long-term cooperation in the field of healthcare and pharmaceutical industry. As a reliable and effective form of cooperation,

Turkmen-India enterprise 'Turkmenderman Ajanta Pharma Limited' has been operating. Frequent flights from Ashgabat to Delhi and Amritsar, which have been linking Turkmenistan and India for many years, are also an indication of active expansion and strengthening of relations.

Cultural Relations

Active cooperation in cultural and humanitarian ties between Turkmenistan and India is distinguished in the field of education. In 2002, an Indian training and production centre was opened on the basis of the Turkmen Polytechnic Institute. As part of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, specialists regularly undergo short-term training in India. Since the inception of the ITEC program, more than 400 Turkmen citizens have been trained to date.

In April 2015, the Yoga Center was opened in Ashgabat with the participation of the Prime Minister of India and the opening ceremony of the monument to Mahatma Gandhi took place. The Indian side highly appreciates the support provided by the government of Turkmenistan to the Traditional Medicine Yoga Center. Today, more than 3,000 citizens of Turkmenistan attend yoga classes.

In Turkmenistan, Indian culture is treated with great sympathy and love. This love came into our hearts first of all through our acquaintance with the art of this great country. The older generation still remembers the first impression of watching such Indian films as Sangam, Shri 420 and Sita aur Geeta among others. And even now many Bollywood films, especially of a historical nature, are popular in Turkmenistan.

As is known from history, India is one of the earliest centres of human civilization. The Hinduwan Gate (Hindi Gate) in Merv, one of the largest and medieval cities of Turkmenistan, the Turkmen Gate built in the centre of the Indian capital, the Qutab Minar in Delhi and the Minaret of Gutluk Temir in Koneurgench are the architectural symbols of the two peoples' culture

and interaction.

Conclusion

In connection with the above, it can be stated that today Turkmenistan and India maintain high dynamics of development of interstate dialogue in the political- diplomatic, trade-economic and

cultural-humanitarian spheres. Turkmenistan creates the necessary conditions for strengthening friendly relations between the two countries, preserving and steadily deepening traditional cooperation.

(Courtesy of India Central Asia Foundation)



Sapar Berdiniyazow

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KYRGYZSTAN-INDIA TIES: MOVING TOWARDS FURTHER CONSOLIDATION

Evgeny Kablukov



India's PM Narendra Modi being briefed about the gifts of medical equipment from India to Field Hospital, Kyrgyzstan in 2015.

Introduction

Central Asia is a vast region. Due to India's (especially Northern India's) geographical proximity with Central Asia from the ancient times till the British occupation of India there was cross-regional and social interaction which led to forging of highly significant linkages. For many centuries Central Asia was an immense reservoir of human energy and skills where many conquerors and many religions left their still unextinguished marks.

Indian links with Central Asia and vice versa have not been completely continuous. For some centuries they were interrupted, sometimes very

significantly, as in the case of the Kushana period, and sometimes, less so. Zia ul-Din Nakhshabi, the author of "Tuti-name" ("Book of Parrot") was born in Central Asia. Al-Beruni came here, learnt Sanskrit and wrote Tarikh-I- Hind (The History of India). Abdurazzak Samarkandi also came here. Ibn Sina and Al-Khorezmi were acquainted with Indian scientific works.

The Silk Route, which connected China, Europe and India, passed through Central Asia including the Kyrgyz Republic. Two-way movement of trade and culture continued during Mughal rule

and thereafter. Alexander Burnes, the British Agent, wrote that turbans of Punjabi white cloth were used by “whole of the natives of Bokhara and Toorkistan” during the 1830s. There were about eight thousand Indian settlers in the 19th and early 20th century in Central Asia. Every market and village in Turkestan had Hindu moneylenders in the 1860s according to an observer. Indians had a monopoly of the book trade there.

The post-1991 era

During the Soviet era, India and the then Kyrgyz Republic had limited political, economic and cultural contacts. Following the independence of Kyrgyz Republic on 31st August, 1991, India was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations on 18th March 1992.

Warm, close and friendly bilateral relations have developed between the Kyrgyz Republic and India over the years. Bilateral ties have been raised to the level of strategic partnership in 2019. The two countries enjoy mutual support, respect, friendship and trust. Kyrgyzstan and India share such common values as development and democracy. Kyrgyzstan and India also have strong cultural ties.

Recently, India-Kyrgyzstan relations have strengthened and expanded in several areas including education, defence, security, trade and investment. They have significant potential for expansion.

The trade turnover between the Kyrgyz Republic and India in 2022 amounted to almost 118 million US dollars but fell to about 96 million US dollars in 2023. The relevant authorities of both countries are analysing the reasons for the decline. One of the reasons is a decrease in sugar imports from India. However, bilateral trade is still well below its potential. Kyrgyzstan and India hope that with the start of several developmental projects with grant

support from India, the volume of trade will increase.

Political Consensus

Kyrgyzstan and India are engaged in an active political dialogue at all levels and closely cooperate at the regional and global levels on important international issues of mutual interest. Both countries are working to further deepen and strengthen mutual cooperation in the United Nations and other international organisations in order to preserve and develop global peace and stability.

The first India-Central Asia Summit (ICAS) was held on 27th January 2022 in virtual mode at the initiative of the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi. All the five Presidents of the Central Asian Republics, including President of the Kyrgyz Republic Mr. Sadyr Zhaparov, participated in the ICAS. A Declaration was adopted at the Summit which has identified multiple areas of cooperation between India and the Kyrgyz Republic. Apart from the India – Central Asia Dialogue mechanism at Foreign Ministers level, the Ministers of Trade and Culture of India and the Kyrgyz Republic meet at regular intervals to take forward cooperation in these areas. Regular meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils to discuss security developments in the region also take place.

Kyrgyzstan and India also share common concerns on the threats from terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking. India and the Kyrgyz Republic are now closely cooperating in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Kyrgyz side has welcomed the membership of the Republic of India in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), noting that this has strengthened the Organisation. India's participation in the SCO also provides additional opportunities for the two sides to engage with each other in multilateral fora.

India chaired the SCO Council of Heads of State for the first time in 2023, and the Kyrgyz



India-Kyrgyz Joint Special Forces' Exercise Khanjar held in Kyrgyz Republic, 2023. | Indian Embassy in Bishkek.

Republic simultaneously chaired the SCO Council of Heads of Government. The Kyrgyz Republic has made significant contributions to the Voice of the Global South Summits that were convened by India in January and November 2023 and August 2024.

Military Cooperation

Work to deepen military-technical cooperation is expanding. Important aspects of bilateral defence cooperation between the Kyrgyz Republic and India include the training of Kyrgyz military personnel at Indian defence institutions, joint exercises, exchange programmes and joint research at the Kyrgyz-Indian Mountain Biomedical Research Centre in Bishkek.

Military cooperation between the two countries in these areas is growing. The first meeting of the Joint Working Group in the field of defence was held in March 2023 in which a number of issues of mutual interest were discussed.

Economic Cooperation

In recent years, Kyrgyzstan and India have shown mutual interest to actively develop cooperation in the field of industry. This is of particular importance for Kyrgyzstan, given that India has achieved significant success in industrial production, including ferrous metallurgy, mechanical engineering, light and chemical industries, energy, etc.

The Kyrgyz Republic is interested in establishing joint ventures of household appliances, medical and laboratory equipment, development of software for Kyrgyz computing complexes and development of technology and supply chains for computer equipment, data storage systems, telecommunications equipment and industrial automation systems which can become possible

areas for the digitalisation of industry. Akylbek Japarov, Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Kyrgyz Republic, recently said that Kyrgyzstan is moving to a large-scale industrialization of the economy with hundred industrial facilities to be built every year.

The Kyrgyz Republic has welcomed the initiative of India to intensify the activities of the Working Group on Cooperation in the Field of Textile Industry by holding its first meeting recently. Work to increase human resources and capital in industrial production is important for Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, the proposal of the Indian side to create Technological Incubation Centers aimed at developing the potential of industrial companies, improving skills in various fields, such as machine tool building, solar energy, robotics, is very relevant and timely.

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan is optimistic about further expanding and strengthening its cooperation with India. The two countries enjoy mutual trust and have a strong cultural basis to their relationship. In coming years, the trajectory of India-Kyrgyzstan relationship will move in a positive direction.



Evgeny Kablukov

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In September 1973 Mr. Kablukov became a student of the Oriental Faculty, Saint-Peterburg State University where he studied history of India and Indian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit). In April 1991, Evgeny Kablukov joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic.

He also worked in the International Department of the Administration of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic from November 1991 to March 1997. In 1999-2001, Mr. Kablukov worked as Head of Oriental History Chair and Vice-Rector in the Bishkek Humanities University. He resumed his work in the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry in March 2001 and retired in 2016. He served in the Kyrgyz Diplomatic Missions in Austria (twice), Ukraine and India.

TAJIKISTAN AND INDIA: POSSIBILITIES OF FURTHER COOPERATION

Parviz Muhammadzoda



Former Indian President Ram Nath Kovind (L) with Tajik President, Emomali Rahmon in Dushanbe, 2018.

Introduction

The Republic of India has a priority position in the foreign policy of the Republic of Tajikistan, and this course is sustainable, long-term and meets the objectives of ensuring the development of both countries. India is one of the important partners of Tajikistan in the region; the two countries are connected by deep cultural and historical ties.

Relations between our countries, the 32nd anniversary of which was celebrated on August 28, 2024, are on the rise characterised by further deepening of mutual understanding and expansion of mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields including defence and security, economy and trade, health, education, culture among others.

Over more than three decades of mutually beneficial cooperation, both sides have made every effort to strengthen the legal and contractual basis of our ties. To date, the legal basis of our cooperation has more than seventy documents, which is a significant achievement. Nevertheless, both sides are working intensively to expand the legal framework of bilateral relations. About twenty bilateral documents in such spheres as industry, energy and tourism are currently at the stage of harmonisation.

Tajikistan attaches great importance to the further development of cooperation between our countries within the multilateral framework covering the United Nations, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in

Asia (CICA), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as within the Central Asia-India mechanism.

Although Tajikistan and India have a lot of potential for development and strengthening of trade and economic cooperation, unfortunately, not all of that potential has been exploited. For example, according to the official statistics of Tajikistan, in 2023, the trade volume of goods and products between Tajikistan and India was only about USD 76 million. The share of India in Tajikistan's total foreign trade is only 0.9 percent.

In this context, taking into account the existing capacities and opportunities, it will be beneficial to address outstanding issues of expanding mutually beneficial cooperation by authorities of both countries. One of the measures in this direction is to attract the attention of Indian investors to the priority areas of bilateral cooperation, in particular, healthcare, chemical and pharmaceutical industry, energy, education and science, new technology, mining, light and textile industry, agriculture, as well as tourism and banking.

Tajikistan—India Energy Cooperation

Strengthening cooperation in the field of energy with India is one of the priority areas. According to the available information, energy security is one of the main priorities of India's domestic and foreign policy, and is related to the country's economic development and social policy.

In this regard, Tajikistan's abundant natural resources in the hydropower sector provide an opportunity for Indian public and private companies to participate in the implementation of the country's prospective energy projects, including the generation of renewable energy.

Cooperation with such Indian companies as BHEL, KEC International, Kalpataru, etc. is a worthy example of our cooperation. However, there are more opportunities for Indian

companies to participate in Tajikistan's energy sector, including the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant, which will increase electricity generation and significantly reduce harmful emissions in the region.

The construction of the Rogun plant will open new opportunities to interconnect the energy systems of both countries in the future and create an energy market in Central and South Asia. Furthermore, attracting investment from Indian companies for construction of hydropower plants "Sanobod" in Rushon district of Badakhshan region (200 MW) and "Charsem" in Shughnon district of the same region (14 MW), as well as the construction of other medium capacity hydropower facilities accord with Tajik priorities.

The establishment of a Joint Working Group on Energy would greatly facilitate cooperation in achieving these goals and provide opportunities to develop additional proposals for cooperation in solar energy. We believe that the integrated utilisation of both hydropower and solar energy will contribute to the diversification of energy sources and ensure the complementarity of these two green energy sources. Tajik experts are negotiating an Indian credit facility for this project.



India Tajikistan Pharma Business Meet in Dushanbe, 2024. | Pharmexcil X.

Healthcare and Pharmaceutical Cooperation

As is well known, India is a world leader in the development of healthcare and pharmaceutical industry. At the same time, Tajikistan has abundant natural sources of medicinal herbs and springs and other healing waters. These complementarities can serve to launch the production and establishment of joint pharmaceutical and chemical enterprises, development of medical tourism and other areas of health between the two countries.

In addition, every year thousands of patients from Tajikistan turn to Indian health institutions for treatment. Therefore, the implementation of joint projects for the construction of modern medical and diagnostic institutions in Tajikistan will be appropriate.

Education, Science and New Technologies

Cooperation in the field of education has been stable and growing. Every year India conducts training courses within the framework of the Economic and Technical Cooperation Program (ITEC) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Recently, the ITEC quota for Tajikistan has been increased from 100 in 2009 to 250, which we highly appreciate.

India ranks third in terms of the number of universities in the world after America and China, and the development of higher education is one of the country's priorities. India is one of the leading countries in the field of Information and Technology. Indian Universities operate on the model of Western countries and provide the experience of the world's leading universities.

Higher education institutions in India focus more on training professionals in the fields of physical and technical sciences, including digital technology, engineering and natural sciences.

Therefore, it is beneficial to promote the opening of branches of Indian universities including IITs, IIITs and private players like Amity University in Tajikistan to train high-level specialists in the field of IT.

India- The IT Superpower

It is true that India is the world's leading information technology (IT) exporter. The implementation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Digital India" and "Direct Benefit Transfer" initiatives have contributed to the rapid development of mobile phone production, digital payment applications and e-commerce in the country. Access to smartphones and the internet enables Indian citizens to use digital services, and this trend is on the rise. Even small businesses have adapted to the digital business landscape.

Given the undeniable experience of the hi-tech centres of Bengaluru and South India in general, it would be desirable to establish more active cooperation in the field of education and innovative technologies. Considering the rich experience of India in the field of information technology (IT), the relevant authorities of Tajikistan should cooperate with the Society of Software Technology Parks of India, the Association of Electronics and Software of Gujarat State "Gesia IT Association", "iCreate" and the National Association of Software and Services Companies of India (NASSCOM) to establish technology parks for software products and information technologies, Science and Technology Parks and Innovation Centres in the Republic of Tajikistan.

This will contribute to the development of the domestic information technology (IT) market, creating highly qualified specialists in the field of information and communication technologies, and attracting Indian IT companies to the Republic of Tajikistan.

Textile, Leather and Footwear Production Cooperation

There are many opportunities for cooperation between the two countries in the fields of textile, leather and footwear production. Indian companies should be invited to the Tajik market for joint production of textiles, leather and shoes.

A bilateral business forum and conference with the participation of the leading companies of the Indian textile industry, such as "Arvind Industries", "Nandan Denim", "Grasim Industries", "Sintex Industries Limited", "Rimtex" and "Lakshmi" should be organised.

Tourism Cooperation

Tajikistan and India have abundant tourism potential. The expansion of cooperation with Indian partners in the field of tourism, especially the implementation of specific projects on the construction of hotels, tourist and entertainment is significant.

Conclusion

In general, it can be concluded that there are still many untapped opportunities for the expansion of cooperation between Tajikistan and India, including within the framework of multilateral cooperation under the "Central Asia + India" platform. Despite the geographical proximity of the two countries, the volume of bilateral trade and investment is not satisfactory considering the available opportunities. One of the main obstacles to the rapid development of economic relations is the lack of direct connectivity - both land transport and air routes.



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MIGRATION AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE: LESSONS FROM INDIA'S DIASPORA ENGAGEMENT

Ulugbek A. Khasanov



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets the Indian diaspora in Paris, July 2023. | pmindia.gov.in.

Introduction

Migration today constitutes a major force at work in the global development dynamic, one that is transforming countries of origin due to remittances and return migration as well as diaspora engagement.¹ We examine the critical role these mechanisms have in a unified diaspora strategy with the example of India which provides one of most cutting edge strategies to be admired and pursued by others.

This analysis of India's success implies that engaging diaspora communities can be an important tool in the development strategies for governments in Central Asia in their efforts to foster economic and social development.

Migration and Development

Migration influences the development in countries of origin primarily through three main mechanisms: remittances, return migration and diaspora engagement. The development consequences of economic remittances are, perhaps, the most well studied facet of migration and development. Remittances help hundreds of millions to a living standard above what traditional development assistance can achieve where migrants come from.²

Migration, apart from providing economic remittances, also helps in the movement of social remittances like knowledge and ideas or

practices, identities and with them social capital.³ With the return migration, local industrial and technological development will be more affected. Migrants, in this sense, can be agents of innovation and change who can harness the knowledge base, competences and risk-taking ethos they develop abroad to help grow their home economies.

Participation of diasporas in the development of their home countries is a measure that voluntarily links migration and development. Also, migrants and their offspring seem to rely on an important amount of valuable resources and knowledge that can be mobilised for local development. Besides philanthropy and investment in enterprise development, start-ups and trade networks, diaspora mobilisation can result in more social as well as economic remittances.⁴

Sending countries are placing more emphasis on creating different types of platforms that governments can work through to build partnerships, mentoring programs and ongoing relationships with the diaspora as well.

India's Comprehensive Diaspora Engagement Strategy

India has served as a model for nations in their attempts to engage their respective diaspora communities. India, acknowledging the vast amounts of knowledge, skills, and potential that lay dormant within its diaspora, has, within the last twenty years, put a lot of time, money, and effort into building up good relations with Indians overseas. Even the word diaspora has changed its meaning from just Non-Resident Indian (NRI) and Person of Indian Origin (PIO) to being vital partners in India's development.

In 2004, the Indian government established the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA),⁵ which was a significant step because it showed

that the government was willing to institutionalise these relationships. The MOIA was originally created to provide an organised framework for keeping and nurturing ties with the Indian diaspora, with an interest in welfare and reciprocity in economic and political spheres. One of the major forums for diaspora involvement is the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) or Non-Resident Indian Day. It started in 2003, and it is an annual event that is meant to promote the idea of a "global Indian family".⁶ PBD is now one of the major forums for diaspora interaction, with Indian government officials and PIOs alike participating.

It is a place to talk about the hardships of the Indian migrants as well as their successes. The Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award (PBSA) is presented at this event and honours individuals or organisations led by them for their outstanding achievements in different fields ranging from business to healthcare to education to philanthropy.⁷ The PBSA recognition has also empowered Indian communities overseas to become unofficial ambassadors of India in the sense that they not only add to India's image abroad but also to its development at home.

India has gone a step further in granting political participation to its diaspora by looking into the possibility of parliamentary representation for NRIs. This is still a controversial issue, but it is an indication of India's changing perception of its diaspora, not just as expatriates, but as agents of development.

This thought has been somewhat influenced by the huge remittances that comes into India every year, over USD 89 billion in 2021 alone, making India the number 1 remittance receiving country in the world (*India Received Highest Ever Foreign Inward Remittances in a Single Year of USD 89, 127 million in FY 2021-22*).

In this way, India hopes to provide more political participation for these people who contribute so much to the Indian economy, and in turn, hopes to allow these contributors to have a say in India's government, so that the diaspora and the state can have a type of symbiotic relationship.

Diaspora's Role in India's Development and Global Image

Not only is the idea of a “global Indian family” symbolic but strategic for India. And then there is the issue of the diaspora which is becoming more and more important to India's foreign policy. The country realises that as it tries to elevate itself in the world, it can do this most effectively through expatriates who are well connected and powerful and can help with diplomatic and trade relationships.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly stated that the diaspora plays a crucial role in India's foreign affairs. For example, at the 2024 PBD, Modi praised the diaspora as the embodiment of India's spirit in the world,⁸ which shows the government's increasing recognition of their contribution.

India has done a good job of utilising its diaspora, and other nations can learn from India's experiences. Its strategy combines emotional appeal with practical incentives, enabling its overseas citizens to retain strong ties to their homeland while contributing to their host nations. Not only has this helped India financially, but it has also increased India's soft power, allowing India to be recognized and admired in the world.⁹ India has made mobilising its global population a mainstay of its foreign policy, proving the strategic importance of nurturing a strong diaspora.



Uzbek Americans visiting their native, Samarkand, 2024. | Navbahor Imamova X.

Engaging Central Asian Diasporas: Lessons for Central Asia from India's Diaspora Diplomacy

The Central Asian countries can do some things to keep in touch with their expatriates, as these countries have a lot of migrants living and working abroad as well.¹⁰ We have been thinking of a few ideas along those lines, inspired by India's success at keeping in touch with its diaspora, as given below.

(i) Establish a Dedicated Diaspora Ministry

Ministries along the lines of India's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs will serve to institutionalise the relationship between Central Asian countries and their diaspora. These kinds of ministries could provide legal and medical advice and financial assistance, which will help establish a long-term relationship and trust between the migrants and the land in which they came from.

(ii) Encourage Economic Investment

The Central Asian countries should take a cue from India and issue diaspora bonds or offer some kind of investment incentives to capitalise on remittances for development projects. Central Asians also remit large amounts of money back home, so instead of just sending the money, they should invest it directly into infrastructure or local businesses.

(iii) Create Diaspora Platforms

Just as India has its Pravasi Bharatiya Divas, annual forums where expatriates can meet with government officials and discuss their concerns and achievements would be beneficial for the Central Asian countries. These kinds of events can create a sense of community and let the migrants participate in the national development programs actively.

(iv) Enhance Political Inclusion

Like dual citizenship or some way to vote in local elections, Central Asian countries can keep their diaspora much more attached to their home land. On the lines of India's Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards, Central Asian governments can have a similar template to keep civic and political participation strong among their diaspora.

(v) Promote Cultural Programs

Some sort of cultural/heritage programs like India's Know India Programme (KIP) could be provided to second generation immigrants so that they do not lose touch with their homeland. Scholarships or even some sort of cultural exchange would be really good especially for the younger generation of the diaspora. Such programs can utilise Central Asia's diaspora for the purpose of domestic development as well as for international leverage.

Conclusion

To sum up, migration and diaspora engagement are key elements in development and in keeping in touch with expatriates.

India's case is an example of how to turn diaspora into major development players with the help of committed institutions, political incorporation, and gatherings such as Pravasi Bhartiya Divas.

The Central Asian countries, especially those with high out migration to Russia, can do the same through diaspora ministries, remittances, and cultural ties. Political participation like dual citizenship would make these ties even stronger. Central Asian nations can also exploit their diasporas for economic growth and for enhancing diplomatic engagement, India's case provides a good model for them.

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Ulugbek A. Khasanov

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Third Country Perspectives

NEW SYMBOL OF MONGOL AND INDIAN FRIENDSHIP

Gansukh Amarjargal



Source: Mongolian National News Agency.

Introduction

The Mongols and Indians have deep-rooted spiritual, religious, and cultural relations since antiquity. It has been emphasised by scholars from both countries that the Mongol-Indian relationship has a very old history¹. This ancient history makes our bilateral relationship special and grand.

A prominent Indian scholar Lokesh Chandra² has argued that this long-running relationship originated from the pursuit of enlightenment, and that the 'Soyombhu' emblem on the Mongolian national flag stands as its proof.³ Likewise, many Indian scholars have asserted that our two nations had relations long before the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia, which were further cemented by Buddhism.

Based on such friendship, Mongolia and India established diplomatic relations on 24th December, 1955 making India the first non-socialist country to diplomatically recognise Mongolia.⁴ In 1956, the Embassy of Mongolia was opened in New Delhi and the Indian Embassy was later opened in Ulaanbaatar in 1970.

The Mongolian Embassy in India has immeasurable significance for Mongolia. There was an urgent reason and need for Mongolia to open an Embassy in New Delhi as soon as diplomatic relations were established. Mongolia desperately needed support from developing countries, mainly from the Non-Aligned Movement for joining the United Nations, and New Delhi played an important role in this regard.

New Delhi had many Embassies and Representative Offices at that time. Thus, this city gave us new opportunities in terms of dealing with diplomatic Missions, and therefore, it should be regarded as a leap forward in Mongolia's diplomatic history.

In other words, New Delhi was the only crystal-clear window as well as conduit for Mongolia to the developing world of the Non-Aligned Movement between 1956 and 1990s. That is to say, India has always been a trustworthy old friend, which warmly welcomed and supported Mongolia.

Based on the long-running historical and cultural ties between our two nations and activities of the Mongolian Embassy in New Delhi, and of course, a deep and personal and broad knowledge of Mongolia, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, spoke for Mongolia at the 15th General Assembly at the United Nations.

He said, "...In this connection, I would like to mention another country, Mongolia. When we are, rightly, admitting so many countries to the United Nations, why should Mongolia be left out? What wrong has it done,

*what violation of the Charter? Here is a quiet and peaceful people working hard for its progress, and "it seems to me utterly wrong from any point of principle to exclude it from the great Organization."*⁵ This was an important political statement that introduced Mongolia to developing countries and members of the Non-Aligned Movement.

New Symbol: Spiritual Neighbours

This was how Mongol-Indian diplomatic relations were cemented in the 20th century. This official diplomatic relationship between the two countries was a revival of the two nations' ancient friendship, spiritual and cultural ties. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were enriched by a new value, the value of 'democracy', after the Mongols chose democracy in 1990. This was the beginning of another phase in the history of their diplomatic relations.

Mongolia paid special attention to deepening and extending bilateral relations with India when the country was emerging as a democratic society with a free market economy. The "ITEC" programme of India played a major role in training highly skilled workers through the Art and Production Polytechnic College in Ulaanbaatar and the Information Technology



Statue of Kushok Bakula Rinpoche. | Hindol Sengupta X.

Center at the Mongolian University of Science and Technology.

Likewise, the Government of India started offering scholarships to Mongolian students in Indian universities. This was a source of significant support for Mongolia to build human resources compatible with a free market economy. In 1988, the Jawaharlal Nehru University opened courses on Mongolian Studies where the Mongolian language was taught. This was a unique initiative that indicated the bilateral relations of the two countries were strong and dynamic.

Kushok Bakula Rinpoche

Furthermore, relations between the two countries received a huge fillip during the official visit of Mongolian President N. Bagabandi to India in 2001 with the permission given by India for the Mongols to build a temple in Bodhgaya, where Guru Shakyamuni Buddha attained full enlightenment. In this connection, one has to acknowledge the tremendous efforts and activities of Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, who served as India's Ambassador to Mongolia for over ten years from 1990 to 2000.

During the period of his service, he supported dozens of young Mongol monks to study in India. He also encouraged many Indian organisations such as Vipassana Meditation Center, Yoga Center, Shri Shri Ravi Shankar's Centre, and several Indian restaurants which began their activities in Ulaanbaatar. This broadened the scope of cooperation between the two countries.

The Embassy of India opened Hindi language courses in Ulaanbaatar while the National University of Mongolia opened Sanskrit language classes for Buddhist philosophy students. Kushok Bakula Rinpoche established the Pethub Monastery as an excellent example for the monk community in Ulaanbaatar and it is still functioning well today.

In those days, the two countries also made significant political decisions to deepen bilateral

relations. One street in Ulaanbaatar was named after Mahatma Gandhi, whose statue was erected there while one in New Delhi was named after Ulaanbaatar. In 2020, Buddha, an Indian drama series, was dubbed in Mongolian and released on Mongolian National Broadcasting TV. Today, this drama serial is one of the most favourite dramas of the Mongols, and is broadcast every year.

It is my pleasure to acknowledge that all of this progress is made due to the tireless activities of Indian Ambassadors in Ulaanbaatar. Indian Ambassadors always have high respect and dignity in the Mongolian political arena. Since then, highest level political visits between the two countries have taken place continuously and thereby numerous significant agreements and contracts were established.⁶ For instance, the two countries have signed over 60 agreements since 1990.⁷

Since 1990, the two countries have been developing their bilateral relations as "Spiritual Neighbours." Today, relations have been raised to the level of a strategic partnership that was established in 2015. The ruling political party in India, Bharatiya Janata Party, which cherishes Indian cultural and historical ties, has acted as a driving force for deepening bilateral relations and cooperation. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 visit, which was the first by an Indian Prime Minister to Mongolia stands as evidence.⁸

Visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi

India projected this visit as a celebration of sixty years of diplomatic relations between the two countries while also marking the 25th year of Mongolian democracy. India also emphasised its full support for Mongolian democracy during the visit.⁹ Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined the basic principles of Indian policy towards two

countries' relations, explained the concept of "Spiritual Neighbours" and spoke about our shared tradition of ancient ties. He expressed his official gratitude to the Mongols for cherishing and preserving the manifold precious elements of Indian culture.

Let me quote some remarks from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech at the Honorary Session of the Mongolian Parliament. He said:

"...It is a great honour to speak to the Great Hural. It is a special privilege to do so in the 25th year of democracy in Mongolia. You are the new bright light of democracy in our world",

"...I bring the greetings of your 1.25 billion spiritual neighbours",

"...There is no higher form of a relationship; no bonds more sacred than this. We in India are honoured that you think of us this way",

"Today Indians and Mongolians are telling the world that the bonds of hearts and minds have the strength to overcome the barriers of distance."¹⁰

The Mongols were deeply impressed by these words. In doing so, Prime Minister Narendra Modi identified our country as the new bright light of democracy in the world. These words were immensely encouraging to us. As a confirmation of our spiritual neighbours' relations, he stated "There is no higher form of a relationship; no bonds more sacred than this." This statement forms the theoretical basis for our new bilateral relations and cooperation.

Making Mongolia energy independent

It was in this way that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mongolia in 2015 opened a new page in the history of the two countries. India also announced its decision to grant a \$1 billion credit line to Mongolia for building an oil refinery plant.¹¹ Today, the "Mongol Refinery" state-owned LLC, which is an ongoing project to build an oil refinery plant in Mongolia by an Indian loan with favourable conditions, is shining as a new symbol of cooperation between the two countries.



Indian and Mongolian teams at the Dornogovi oil refinery. | Engineers India on X.

The importance of having the oil refinery is invaluable for us. Mongolia is, economically, heavily dependent on its two neighbours. The clearest example is oil products. Our Indian friends are helping us to be independent in the oil production field. This is how our spiritual neighbours are extending their helping hand to alleviate our economic difficulties.

Another oil refinery plant with a capacity of 1.5 million tons per year is planned to be built in Altan Shiree Soum, Dornogovi Province of Mongolia. A groundbreaking ceremony was done by the President of Mongolia U. Khurelsukh and His Excellency Rajnath Singh, Union Minister of Home Affairs, India on 22nd of June, 2018, and is scheduled to be completed in 2027. There is no country other than India that can fund projects in such a strategically important sector to free Mongolia from foreign dependence and influence. I regard this decision as a reflection of Indian political thinking not only at the regional but also world level. It has been sixty-nine years since Mongolia and India officially established diplomatic relations in 1955. Today, the relationship between the two countries is at the strategic partnership level, which is the highest form of relations.

For us, the Mongols, India is the Spiritual Neighbour, a highly valuable strategic partner, and one of our Third Neighbours.¹²

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Gansukh Amarjargal

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He served as a legal advisor to the Speaker of the Parliament of Mongolia from 2014 to 2016. He has also served as the Minister of Roads and Transportation of Mongolia from 2012 to 2014 and as Deputy Minister of Roads, Transportation and Urban Development of Mongolia from 2008 to 2012.

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CHABAHAR AND THE IMPERATIVE OF GEOGRAPHY

Seyed Rasoul Mousavi



Representational Image. | Maritime Gateway.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the world has been subject to many transformations. Geopolitical and geoeconomic trends at global and regional levels have undergone significant developments. One of these has been the discrediting of the globalisation paradigm. Globalisation was a dominant ideology till the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today in the post-pandemic world, we must not forget how those who advocated globalisation and international cooperation shut their doors during the pandemic. They monopolised and secured exclusive rights to life saving drugs and pharmaceuticals thereby blocking

access of these to the poor and needy nations. While it may be still early to thoroughly evaluate the impact of the COVID pandemic on international relations, there is no doubt that the pandemic has left a definitive impact on the current era.

If we look at the political, economic, security and strategic developments of the Indian Ocean Region through the prism of politics and international relations theories, there are a wide spectrum of theories such as Mahan's "the influence of sea power" theory, Huntington's economic hegemony theory, structural realism theory, Michel Foucault's theory of discourse undermining power and neo-realism, functionalism and constructivism theories.

Each one of these theories can be used to interpret developments in the Indian Ocean Region and the surrounding environment. But, today in the wake of the Ukraine war, we can say that the world has washed its hands off universal theories and has once again returned to geography based theories in which location and geography drive foreign policy choices. Such an approach presents a much better explanation of policies and events in the wider Indian Ocean Region

What happened in Afghanistan following the US withdrawal marked the end of the “End of History” theory. On the other hand, the breakout and continuation of the Ukraine war has put a full stop to all the “universal” theories. We now face a new world that requires us to reconsider the definitions of power, unity, convergence and cooperation.

Importance of Indian Ocean

In the world of politics and international relations, both in theory and in practice, we have moved from universal theories to regional theories, and for this reason, we can say that the importance of the Indian Ocean Region is increasing day by day. The Indian Ocean is significant for several reasons:

- (i) **Trade Routes:** It serves as a crucial maritime trade route, connecting major economies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. A substantial portion of global trade, including oil and gas shipments, passes through this ocean.
- (ii) **Natural Resources:** The Indian Ocean is rich in resources, including fisheries, minerals, and oil reserves. These resources are vital for the economies of surrounding countries.

- (iii) **Strategic Location:** The Ocean’s location makes it a strategic military and geopolitical arena. Countries like India, China, and the United States are increasingly focusing on the Indian Ocean for security and influence.
- (iv) **Biodiversity:** The Indian Ocean hosts diverse marine ecosystems, including coral reefs and unique species, which are essential for global biodiversity and environmental health.
- (v) **Climate Regulation:** This Ocean also plays a role in regulating climate patterns, influencing monsoons and weather systems in the region.
- (vi) **Tourism:** The Indian Ocean is home to many tourist destinations, including islands like the Maldives and Seychelles, which contribute significantly to local economies.
- (vii) **Cultural Exchange:** Historically, the Indian Ocean has facilitated cultural exchange among various civilizations, contributing to the rich cultural tapestry of the region.

Overall, the Indian Ocean is vital for economic, environmental, and geopolitical reasons, making it an area of significant global interest. Therefore, we need to put forward new concepts that match new ground realities.

The subject of security has always been relevant when speaking of the Indian Ocean. Global and regional powers have consistently attached special importance to the Indian Ocean maritime routes and the security of energy and trade of commodities by consumer countries conducted via the sea routes of this ocean.



India-Iran contract signing for operation of the Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar, Iran 2024. | PTI.

Chabahar Port and Eurasian Connectivity

Due to developments in the Atlantic and Eurasian spheres, the dynamism generated as a result of projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, new initiatives in respect of land routes in West Asia and connectivity between West Asia and Central Asia is being felt in the strategic straits of the Indian Ocean.

In this context, the oceanic port of Chabahar on the Southern coast of Iran is privileged with a strategic position, situated at extension of the Indian Ocean without any geographical strait or bottleneck, and thus functioning as a new gateway connecting the Indian Ocean to Eurasia and West Asia.

Four years ago, a group of Iranian scholars conducted research titled, “Explaining the role and geo-political function of Chabahar in the light of developments in the Indian Ocean.”

They reached the conclusion that “Chabahar as a geographical point is capable of generating geopolitical impact as it provides access for Eurasia and Central Asia to the surrounding environment of the Indian Ocean and can be a junction between various land and sea routes and an important intercontinental trading hub.”

Conclusion

The port of Chabahar in the three areas of port operations, Special Economic Zone and the hinterland provides a full range of opportunities and privileges, the operationalisation of which is capable of generating enormous dynamism in terms of regional development. Chabahar can facilitate and shorten time and distance of access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and the Black Sea, from three directions along the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

In conclusion, it is worth relooking at the map of the Indian Ocean to appreciate how the strategic port of Chabahar is both a gateway to landlocked lands in the region and a getaway from the straits located in the vast Indian Ocean.



Seyed Rasoul Mousavi

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JAPAN'S CENTRAL ASIAN DIPLOMACY

Ryota Saito



Central Asia + Japan Dialogue in Dushanbe, 2019. | mfa.kz/The Astana Times.

Introduction

On August 9, 2024, then-Prime Minister of Japan Kishida cancelled his tour of Central Asia and Mongolia. This decision was made to prioritise response to the earthquake that struck Japan. Consequently, the first-ever summit between Japan and the Central Asian countries, which was to be held in Astana to mark the 20th anniversary of the "Central Asia plus Japan" dialogue initiated by Japan in 2004, was also called off.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been heightened attention on the Central Asian countries. European nations have been dispatching high-ranking

politicians and government officials to the region, and both the United States and China have conducted summits with the leaders of the five Central Asian countries. The motivations behind these actions are clear: Western nations aim to diminish Russia's "sphere of influence", while China seeks to exploit Russia's waning presence to bolster its economic ventures in the region.

It appears that Central Asia is currently experiencing the "third wave" of interest and intervention from foreign actors, reminiscent of the "first wave" of concern over "power

vacuum" and external engagement immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the "second wave" that followed the War on Terror post-9/11. Japan had hoped to capitalise on the "Third Wave" with then-Prime Minister Kishida's visit to Central Asia.

However, having experienced two previous "waves" of external interest, it is imperative for us, as external actors, to maintain a composed and measured stance. Following both the first and second waves, it was ultimately Russia and China, the "former suzerains" and regional powers, who asserted their influence in Central Asia, while the presence of other countries in the region remained limited.

This trend seems to hold true even for Turkey, which has ethnic and linguistic ties to the region, and South Korea, which has actively promoted its companies and has their ethnic diaspora in the region.

What Benefits Can Japan Derive from Central Asia?

From an economic standpoint, the ties are extremely limited, and Japan's primary approach will likely continue to be its involvement as a donor. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, various narratives about Central Asia circulated in Japan: "The Silk Road Reopened", "Abundant Natural Resources" and "A New Frontier".

However, it has become evident that none of these narratives have been fully realised in practice. The logistical developments from the 20th to the 21st century have made maritime routes far more cost-effective compared to land routes (transport by automobile, locomotives, or camel caravan), putting landlocked Central Asia at a significant disadvantage in terms of logistics.

While it is true that Central Asia is rich in natural resources, these logistical challenges have prevented it from becoming a major source of resources for Japan. For instance, Kazakhstan, an oil-producing country, recorded its highest crude oil export to Japan in 2018 at 1.889 million

kilotons. But this amount of export accounted for only 1.1% of Japan's total crude oil imports that year.

Additionally, Japanese corporate presence in Central Asia remains limited. In many Central Asian countries, a significant proportion of the Japanese residents are embassy staff or employees of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and their families.

On the other hand, Japan has established a significant presence in Central Asia as a donor. For example, from 1991 to 2018, Japan provided \$ 627 million in aid to Kazakhstan, ranking third in terms of aid including international organisations. In Kyrgyzstan, Japan provided \$680 million in aid, ranking sixth including international organisations and fourth among bilateral donors.

In Tajikistan, Japan's aid amounted to \$383 million, placing it sixth including international organisations and third among bilateral donors. In Uzbekistan, Japan provided \$1.62 billion in aid, ranking first even including international organisations. Such support has been directed not only towards infrastructure projects but also towards human resource development.

In some Central Asian countries, government officials who studied in Japan under JICA's aid programmes (JDS) have later been appointed as Ministers, Vice-Ministers, and Deputy Ministers in their respective Ministries.

Given the increased importance of Central Asia to Western countries after February 24, 2022, as previously mentioned, the Japanese government is also starting to place more emphasis on the region. In April-May 2022, Japan sent its Minister for Foreign Affairs to Central Asia ahead of other major Western countries.

Additionally, Japanese companies are increasingly expanding into Central Asia. This surge in interest is not only due to the heightened focus

on Central Asia but also because Japanese companies can leverage their professionals trained in Russian language skills for their operations in the region. This "third wave" presents a valuable opportunity to enhance the role of private actors in Japan's engagement with Central Asia.

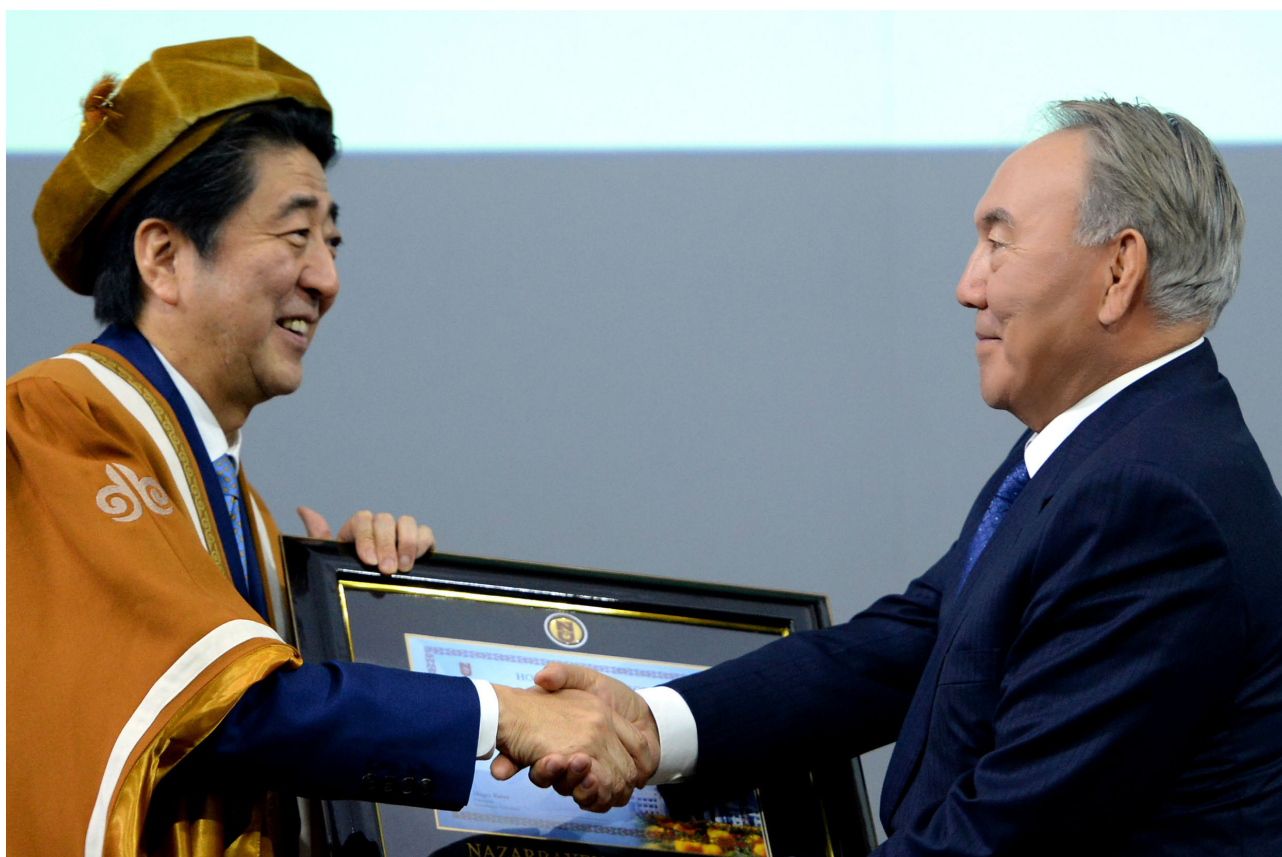
Although then-Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's planned visit to the region was ultimately cancelled, the Central Asia + Japan Business Forum took place in Astana around the same time. In lieu of attending, Kishida sent a video message emphasising Japan's growing interest in Central Asia, characterised by its rich resources and potential for economic growth.

During the Forum, discussions were organised into three key sessions: 1) Carbon Neutrality, 2) Connectivity Development, and 3) Investment in Human Resources and Finance. Each of these

topics holds significant relevance not only for the local context but also for Japan and the international community. However, considering Japan's potential participation in Central Asia, the prospects for carbon neutrality may be challenging, particularly as China continues to dominate the renewable energy sector in the region.

Connectivity

Turning to the theme of Connectivity Development, particularly in logistics, recent geopolitical tensions have complicated the use of logistics routes through Russian territory due to reputational risks. Additionally, increased conflict risks and piracy threats have made navigation in maritime routes around the Middle East more difficult, placing significant strain on global logistics networks.



Former Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev (L) with former Japanese PM, Shinzo Abe in 2016. | akorda.kz.

The Middle Corridor

Amidst this backdrop, the "Middle Corridor," which connects East Asia and Europe via Central Asia, has garnered attention. Local governments along this corridor are rapidly advancing infrastructure development, and the Japanese government has begun to reference this initiative in its diplomatic engagement with Central Asia.

However, potential challenges remain, including discrepancies in railway widths between former Soviet states and other countries, complex customs procedures, and the inherent cost disadvantages of overland transport compared to maritime shipping. Evidence from the interview survey conducted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) among Japanese firms based in Istanbul this year indicates that the "Middle Corridor" currently has a limited presence in transportation for their business.

One potential proposal to consider is the promotion of South-North routes in addition to the East-West "Middle Corridor". In Central Asia, Uzbekistan has been particularly proactive in this regard. Notably, in 2011, Uzbekistan constructed a railway connecting the border town of Hairatan with the crucial transportation hub of Mazar-i-Sharif in northern Afghanistan.

Furthermore, in Uzbekistan, JICA supported the electrification of the railway between Karshi and Termez in 2012, aimed at enhancing the efficiency of goods transport from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan. For Central Asia, the South-bound routes are not only appealing from a logistics standpoint but also for connecting with the economic opportunities in South Asia beyond Afghanistan.

While it may be challenging for the Japanese government to engage directly in the logistics development of these routes due to issues surrounding the recognition of the Taliban

regime, it can facilitate an enabling environment for such development which aims to connect Central Asia and South Asia.

The Japanese government is already implementing projects in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) focused on border management and drug enforcement between Central Asia and Afghanistan. Additionally, support is being provided to customs authorities in the Central Asia region.

By continuing, strengthening and expanding these initiatives, Japan may be able to help mitigate safety concerns related to the reintegration of Afghanistan into regional logistics networks. If Afghanistan is economically integrated with Central and South Asia in the future, it could open a new geopolitical landscape for the region.

Conclusion

The "new geopolitical conditions" present significant opportunities for Central Asia to become a more open region for external actors, not only public but private. Japan, by leveraging its accumulated experience and resources, might consider efforts to connect the Central Asia framework with neighbouring regions such as South Asia.



Ryota Saito

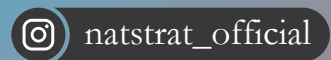
Dr Ryota Saito holds a PhD from University of Tsukuba (Japan). Currently, he is an Assistant Researcher at Institute for Russian & NIS Economic Studies, Japan Business Association ROTOBO. His research interests include contemporary Central Asian studies, especially international relations, security studies and development.

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