

## Reconstructing the Constructed: India's Central Asia Policy

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**Abstract:** Foreign policy is a tool at the disposal of a country to protect and promote its national interests. After the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, India was forced to reconstruct its foreign policy, in particular to deal with the newly emerged Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Historically, India and Central Asia were the two powerful Centres of ancient oriental civilization with great deal of interaction via the silk route which connected both regions and their people. During the Soviet years, India was among a few countries to maintain contact with the Central Asian Region. In the present time, India is trying to evolve similar and strong relationships with the region in order to heighten the political, economic and cultural ties with the Central Asian republics. The paper aims at explaining the concerns and interests that induce India's policy to step up its engagement in Central Asia.

**Key Words:** Central-Asian Region, Strategic Partnership, Reconnect Policy, Security Interests.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Foreign policy is an instrument at the disposal of a country to protect and promote its national interests. "The core of the national interest is continual defence of the territorial integrity and sovereignty, to enhance the economic and social well-being of the people, to promote opportunities for profitable trading relations with other countries, and, exploit the soft power through propagation of the cultural assets. While the national interest would be forever, its content will differ with time and circumstances. It follows that the policy has to be flexible and must keep in tune with changing international, as well as national environment." (Chinmaya, 2009)

The disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics led to emergence of five independent Central Asian Republics - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, in the vast European space. Both geography and history have already combined to keep Central Asia as a landlocked area, with a strife torn turbulent neighbor like Afghanistan in the South and powerful ones, like Russia, in the north, Turkey and Iran in the west and south, and China in the east, as a region with an astonishing mix of geopolitical interests. "From the very ancient period the geographical location of Central Asia has been of decisive importance, particularly for trade. It was a vibrant part of world economy, and foremost corridor connecting east and west and south to north. The great silk route connecting Persia and China with the Roman World also passed through the Central Asian region." (Joy, 2007) The Central Asia has emerged as a distinct region within the mega context of Asia, with its unique geographical & civilization traits. At present oil and gas is a crucial source of energy, so central Asia with its large hydrocarbon reserves and natural gas has become a region of critical strategic importance and an object of an international activity. The strategic significance of Central Asia is evident from the fact that, in one form or another, the 'Great Game' – to gain control over the region has been going on for centuries. The British and the Russians were the earliest contenders, the Americans and the Chinese are the latest entrants to the arena. "The Great Game is a term used by historians to describe a political and diplomatic confrontation that existed for most of the nineteenth century between Britain and Russia over Afghanistan and neighboring territories in Central and Southern Asia." (Ingram, 1980) In 19<sup>th</sup> Century format, "the game pitted Imperial Britain against Tsarist Russia in a struggle for the control of Central Asia. It continued through the 20<sup>th</sup> – century through the Second World War, and then the cold War that followed. During the Cold War, the 'Great Game' entered a new phase, pitching the United States as Britain's successor against the Soviet Union. This went on for almost four decades and it came to an end with collapse of the Soviet Union. In the current phase Russia, trying to regain its lost influence and presence in the region, in strategic contention with the US and competition with Chinese, who have their eyes, set on the region's energy resources. The stakes are exorbitantly high in the new 'Game' – oil and gas reserves, military bases, and transport corridors and, of course, the geopolitical control of the Eurasian heartland." (Joy, 2007) Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1997 stated:

*"Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa. With Eurasia now serving as the decisive geopolitical chessboard, it no longer suffices to fashion one policy for Europe and another for Asia. What happens with distribution of power on the Eurasian landmass will be of decisive important to America's global primacy."*

The collapse of Soviet Union in 1991 Subsequently, India was forced to reconstruct its foreign policy, in particular to deal with the newly emerged Central Asian Republics. For India, the region holds particular strategic importance because of its vast energy reserves and, as in India, has a sizeable Muslim population. There is also the undeniable and growing threat to India from the thriving arms trade, terrorism and drug trafficking in the region. India has strong historical linkages with the Central Asian region and both were two powerful centers of ancient oriental civilization with great deal of interaction. The ancient silk route used to connect India for trade or people to people. During the Soviet period, India was among the few countries which were able to interact with Central Asian Republics. Indian films and music were extremely popular and there were exchanges of literary people, artists and culture. In the present times India is trying to evolve similar and strong relationships with each of Central Asian nations.

## 2. INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION:

India's relation with Central Asia has a long history. The two regions have shared deep cultural linkages with each other over two millennia in terms of people to people contact, trade, and commerce. "India has been connected closely with Central Asia through the Silk Route from about 3rd century BC till 15th century AD. The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia not only for transportation of goods (silk, textiles, spices etc.) but was an effective channel of exchange of thoughts, ideas, religion and philosophy. Buddhism travelled over this route from India to Central Asia and from there to West China in contemporary Xinjiang region. In medieval times, Babar came from Fergana Valley after losing his kingdom to try his fortune in foreign lands. During the Soviet period culture, music, dance, movies and literature bound the Soviet Republics closely with India. Political contacts grew and expanded with frequent exchange of visits. Visit by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India to Almaty, Tashkent and Ashgabat in 1955 brought the region closer to India. Popularity of iconic Bollywood stars like Raj Kapoor, Nargis, Mithun Chakraborty and others brought India into the homes and hearts of common people of this region." (Sajjanhar, 2016)

India's policy towards Central Asia is conceptualized as comprising of sets of ever widening concentric circles around a central axis of historical and cultural commonalities. The bilateral relations between India and Central Asian countries started off, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, realizing the strategic significance of the region, undertook visits to four of the five newly independent countries within a few years of their freedom — to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1992 and to Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995. From the establishment of formal diplomatic ties with region, India has been trying to yoke the potential of this region but with confined success. The focus CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Programme initiated by the Commerce Ministry to promote trade ties with the region was a step in this direction. ([www.commerce.nic.in/fcis/contents.htm](http://www.commerce.nic.in/fcis/contents.htm))

## 3. INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIAN STATES:

India's relationship with Central Asia states in Soviet times was only cultural and economic; now they had to be reinforced with diplomacy as the security of India was involved.

**3.1 Kazakhstan:** Among the five states, Kazakhstan is economically the most advanced. The Kazakhstan economy is based on its extensive agricultural and mineral resources, apart from its rich reserves of petroleum and natural gas. Its vast steppes support wheat farms and livestock grazing. India's main imports from Kazakhstan are mineral products, leather, and raw materials. India exports vegetable products, tea, foodstuff, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, plastic, woollen goods, machinery and equipment.

"The diplomatic relations between India and Kazakhstan were established in February 1992 during the first visit of President Nazarbayev to India. This was followed by the visit of Prime Minister of India Shri Narsimha Rao in 1993 which gave impetus to bilateral relations. President Nazarbayev visited India in 1992, 1993, 1996, 2002 and 2009. In January 2009, he was the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations. Vice-Presidents of India Shri K.R. Narayanan and Shri Hamid Ansari visited Kazakhstan in 1996 and 2008 respectively. Prime Ministers Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Dr. Manmohan Singh visited Kazakhstan in June 2002 and April 2011. These high level visits have laid a solid foundation for close and friendly bilateral relations between the two countries." (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2016)

The India-Kazakhstan Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) established in 1993 has been the main institutional mechanism in developing bilateral trade, economic, scientific, technological, industrial and cultural cooperation. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas on the Indian side and Ministry of Energy on the Kazakh side are the nodal agencies with respective Ministers as the Co-Chairs. The 12th IGC meeting was held in New Delhi in June 2015. Joint Working Groups and Sub Committees have been established in the areas of Counter Terrorism, Trade & Economic Cooperation, Information Technology, Hydrocarbons and Textiles. A new Joint Working Group on Connectivity was established recently during the 12th IGC meeting in New Delhi.

**3.2 Uzbekistan:** India had close interaction with the Uzbekistan during the Soviet times. Indian leaders often visited Tashkent and other places. Prime Minister, Shri Lal Bahadur Shastri passed away in Tashkent on 11 July 1966 after signing the Tashkent declaration with Pakistan.

The Uzbekistan economy relies heavily on agriculture and agricultural processing. The country is a major producer and exporter of cotton. It also produces gold and has the largest opening mine in the world. The country has substantial deposits of copper, strategic minerals, gas and oil. The major exports from India to Uzbekistan are pharmaceuticals, tea, plant and machinery, surgical items and services while exports of commodities from Uzbekistan include non-ferrous metals, machinery and equipment, agricultural produce, cotton, raw silk, raw wool, aircraft etc.

“Following Uzbekistan’s independence, relations were upgraded to the level of Embassy through the signing of a Protocol on Diplomatic and Consular matters on 18th March 1992. The subsequent period has been characterized by frequent high-level exchanges. Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Uzbekistan in 1993 and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh on 25-26 April, 2006. President Karimov paid State visits to India in 1991, 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2011. Bilateral relations are managed through a robust mechanism including a Joint Commission, which oversees trade and economic relations. Uzbekistan and India have signed Agreements/MOUs/Protocols/Joint Statements in areas such as trade, investment, education, civil aviation, tourism, science & technology, telecommunications, agriculture and IT.” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2016)

**3.3 Tajikistan:** Relations between India and Tajikistan have traditionally been close and cordial. Exchange of high level visits between the two countries has served to cement bilateral ties. “Tajikistan possesses considerable deposits of gold, Iron, Lead, mercury, tin and coal. Its rivers are a mostly unexploited resource of hydroelectric power generation.” (The CIA World Fact Book, 2011) After the establishment of diplomatic relations, India exports goods like linen, toiletries, medicine, chemicals, tea, coffee, vehicles, and leather and wollen goods. Cotton is the only significant commodity exported by Tajikistan to India at present. “President Rahmon visited India in 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006 and 2012. India and Tajikistan elevated bilateral relations to the level of a “Strategic Partnership”, encompassing cooperation in a wide spectrum of areas, including political, economic, education, health, human resource development, defence, counter-terrorism, science and technology, culture and tourism. Bilateral agreements/MoUs were signed on (1) textiles (2) culture (3) education (4) sport (5) health and (6) labour, apart from agreements with private Indian Companies.” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2016)

**3.4 Kyrgyzstan:** Since the independence of Kyrgyz Republic in 1991, India was among the first to establish diplomatic relations. Both countries share common concerns on threat of terrorism, extremism and drug–trafficking. From the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, the two countries have signed several framework agreements, including on Culture, Trade and Economic Cooperation, etc. Kyrgyzstan’s economy relies mainly on agriculture, which contributes more than a third to its GDP. (Official site of the Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in USA-Economy Section) Cotton, potatoes, sugar, beets, tobacco, vegetables, and fruits are the major produce. India and Kyrgyzstan share moderate trade relations. The major items exported by India are cotton and wool, manmade fibers, leather goods, tea, pharmaceutical products, optical/photographic appliances and medical instruments. The Indian business firms are also showing an active interest in exporting handicrafts and fabrics, garments and textiles, food products etc. “Indo-Kyrgyz trade rose 16% to US\$ 31.22 million in 2011-12. India’s exports to Kyrgyzstan grew over 18% to US\$ 30.55 million whereas Kyrgyz exports to India declined 44% to US\$ 0.67 million.” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017)

“During the almost one-and-a-half decades of former President Akaev’s regime, close bilateral ties were reinforced by several high-level visits; President Akaev visited India four times (1992, 1999, 2002, and 2003); other important visits from the Kyrgyz Republic to India included those of Mr. ApasJumagulov, Prime Minister (May, 1997), Ms. Mira Jangavacheva, Vice-Prime Minister (March, 1997), Mr. I. A. Abdurazakov, State Secretary (April, 1997) etc. From the Indian side, the late K.R. Narayanan and the late Krishna Kant, former Vice-Presidents, visited Kyrgyzstan in 1996 and 1999 respectively. Former PM, the late NarasimhaRao visited Kyrgyz Republic in September 1995. ShriMurli S. Deora, Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas led a delegation to Kyrgyzstan during SCO Summit on 15-16 August, 2007. Defence minister Shri A.K. Antony visited Kyrgyzstan on 4-6 July 2011 to inaugurate Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-Medical Research Centre. Shri E. Ahmed, MoS, MEA visited in 2012. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kyrgyzstan on 11-12 July 2015. The visit by an Indian Prime Minister took place after a gap of 20 years. During his visit four MOUs/Agreements in the field of Defence Cooperation, Culture, Election and Standardisation were signed.” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017)

**3.5 Turkmenistan:** India enjoys close, friendly and historical ties with Turkmenistan. ‘Turkman Gate’ built in Delhi in 1650s bears testimony to this friendship. Prime Minister Nehru visited Ashgabat in June 1955. Indian films and TV serials are popular here with Turkmen people. Similarly, Indian music also holds a special place in the hearts of Turkmen people. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2015)

Turkmenistan’s economy depends on its substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, the country also has deposits of coal, sulphur, magnesium, limestone, gypsum and salt. The Bilateral Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement were signed between India and Turkmenistan in 1995. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Turkmenistan and the Indian-CIS signed an agreement in 1996 to develop co-operation between the economic, commercial and financial organizations of the two countries. Another agreement on the Avoidance of Double



Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion was signed in 1997. The India-Iran-Turkmenistan Trilateral Transit agreement exists since 2000 with the purpose of providing a legal framework for the multi-modal movement of goods via Iran to Turkmenistan and other CIS member-states who may become party to the arrangement. (SRIVASTAVA, 2016) The year 2012 marks the 20th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic ties between India and Turkmenistan. TAPI (Turkmenistan – Afghanistan – Pakistan – India) gas pipeline project has made steady progress since TAPI Summit was held in Ashgabat in December 2010. This project which will elevate bilateral ties to a strategic partnership is expected to be operational in early 2017. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2012)

#### **4. INDIA'S CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA POLICIES:**

Over the past decades, The Central Asian region's has become the site of great power tussles over energy resources. The incentive for a new look at Central Asia was that India was losing its "immediate neighborhood" to China, which developed very good political and economic relations with nearly all of India's neighbors, thereby strategically encircling India. In addition to, China has made deep inroads in the Central Asian republics in terms of investments in the region. In this context, India formulated its Connect Central Asia Policy which is a broad-based approach including political, security, economic, and cultural connections. (Jha, 2016)

The Connect Central Asia Policy was first disclosed by the Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahmed on the occasion of First India-Central Asia dialogue organized on 12-13 June in 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for strengthening India's relations and interests in its extended neighbourhood countries in the region. It aimed at increasing India's engagement with the region both bilaterally and multilaterally, which has been limited in the past decades. (Sarma, 2012) In his keynote speech, Ahmed mentioned that "the policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, information technology (IT) centers, an e-network in telemedicine connecting India to the CARs, joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, joint scientific research, and strategic partnerships in defence and security affairs." The key elements of this policy cover many important issue areas, including political cooperation, economic cooperation, strategic cooperation, regional connectivity, information technology (IT), cooperation in education, people-to-people contact, medical cooperation, and cooperation in regional groupings.

Central Asia is so close and yet so far from India. The betterment of trade and commerce between India and the region would just not be in the arena of pure economics but would enter the domain of Geo-economics. This is because Central Asia is strategically positioned as an access point between Europe and Asia and offers extensive potential for trade, investment, and growth. Since, the region is richly endowed with commodities such as crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, and iron, the increasing importance of the region's oil and gas resources has generated new rivalries among external powers. Despite the limitations of regional connectivity, India is working to invest in the region in the IT and education sectors. Since, India has a big IT sector and very qualified and talented working professionals, India is looking to use its power in this sector to set up a Central Asian e-network linking all five Central Asian states with its hub in India to provide tele-education and telemedicine connectivity. The IT sector has a huge potential and can work as a bridge to bring the region closer.

Through Connect Central Asia policy, India has been trying to make foothold in the region in several ways using its soft power and investment measurements and diplomatic and political negotiations.

#### **5. RECOUNTING OF THE INDIA'S POLICY, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

The Central Asian countries as sovereign nation states were still closely allied to Russia both economically and politically because of compulsions of history and geography. India after weighing pros and cons of the situation decided to take advantage of these positive points; set forging a mutually beneficial relationship which would be keen on promoting liberal and democratic values and helping market economic forces to emerge in tune with forces of globalization. India's formulation of the new policy was rightly. Luckily for India the two important immediate neighbors, Russia and China the two largest countries in Euro-Asia did not feel their strategic or economic interests were threatened by Indian initiative.

India's initial policy moves were halting and hesitant as compared to Pakistan because India tried to ensure they were in harmony with Russian sensibilities and did not fan Chinese fears. India's foreign policy incorporated new factors and took initiative to serve India's interests better as time progressed. For Indian authorities matters were made somewhat easier by the fact that the change of regimes had not meant a change of government except in Tajikistan. In Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the old government wedded to secularism, with a pro-Russian tilt remained in power. Many in India government were well acquainted with these leaders. The Indian policy makers took advantage of this and unfolded steps to convince these states of usefulness of continuing traditional friendship of the Soviet era with India. India realized that the new states were rich in energy resources, petrol and gas. A mutually beneficial relation would help to solve India's chronic deficiency in these products. Caspian basin held huge reserves which were waiting to be intensively exploited. According to an estimate, "Turkestan has between 17 and three trillion cubic metres of untapped gas, estimated to be world's second largest reserve. Other Asian Republics together have oil

and gas equivalent to that of Qatar, Oman and UAE, put together. They can produce seven million barrels of oil daily, but for the huge investments required.” (International Petroleum Encyclopaedia, 1998) India as one of the largest consumer of hydrocarbons was keen to benefit from the new source of supplies.

Uzbekistan at the heart of Central Asia is the largest populated state had more cultivable land than the rest of the States except Kazakhstan. Their minerals resources were enormous. On the other hand Kazakhstan had a large percentage of Russian population. In the soviet times, Russia had created facilities for launching its space vehicles and storing nuclear weapons on its soil. Russia was afraid that these nuclear arms would fall into alien hands and jeopardize its security. Therefore, it carefully controlled the foreign policy of Kazakhstan.

Turkmenistan had discovered enormous quantities of oil and gas. It was also a corridor to Central and Southern Europe for the neighboring Central Asian States. Its foreign policy aimed at ensuring its neutrality from the entanglements in which the other Central Asian States found themselves.

Central Asia is of vital importance to India not just in terms of energy security but also for reasons of national security. “India sees the region as a source of religious extremism and is concerned to check the rise of radical Islamist groups which may present a terrorist threat. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has been a fertile recruiting ground for such groups, and there are reportedly scores of jihadist groups based in the region. Given the transnational nature of these groups, including links with the Taliban and other militant groups in neighboring countries, this generates a high degree of unease in India. The fear is that if the emergence of jihadist groups is not checked, they will eventually pose a serious threat to India’s security, especially in the contested state of Kashmir.” (Campbell, 2013)

Apart from that India had also to compete with neighbors like Pakistan and China. Pakistan, who invoked solidarity in the name of religion, language and geography, having tasted success in Afghanistan in ousting the Soviets, Pakistan opted for an aggressive foreign policy in the region; it projected itself as the true friend of Central Asian States and was not averse to play the Islamic card in the name of Pan Islamism. Though Pakistan had nothing to offer in economic terms, it sought to grant them access to the Arabian Sea through the port of Karachi or other ports on the Makran coast. It also played upon Central Asia’s historic fear of Shia Iran and offering the land-locked States an access to sea bypassing Iran. Pakistan also sought to put forward itself as a long-standing friend of the People’s Republic of China their next-door neighbor. It claimed it could keep China in good relations which would benefit the Central Asian States as the Soviet shield had been withdrawn.

China the third major player in the region, from a Chinese perspective, there are many scholars who consider Central Asia as China’s *Dingwei* (lebensraum), primarily because of China’s rising economic and energy requirements and Central Asia’s potential to provide them. China has traditionally viewed Central Asia as its special trading area and a region heavily influenced by Chinese culture. Many of history’s more impressive trading centres were positioned in Xinjiang or west of China’s present borders, such as Samarkhand, Urumuqi and Kokand. The trade between the two regions has always been crucial and favored by the two sides. (Milward, 1998) China has started to make its presence strongly felt by increasing its trade and investments in the Central Asian economies and seems determined to dominate the Central Asian Oil and Gas business.

This is an important constraint before Indian policy makers in formulating a long term viable foreign policy towards the Central Asian States. Meanwhile our interests on several counts converge. We can help each other in developing respective economics and fight against terrorism. If India and Central Asia can coordinate their efforts and bypass Pakistan, ‘an unreliable ally’ probably the fate of Asia can be changed. The land from Caspian to the Pamirs can become economically prosperous and forward-looking territory.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

The Central Asia region is vital for India to pursue its interests in region. Two of India’s most important concerns in the region are energy and security. However, most international observers are reluctant to view India as major player yet in the Central Asian theatre and it is usually designated as a secondary power in the region. In such a scenario, it is vital for India to make use of all possible avenues of co-operation to promote its presence and its security and economic interests in the region. Despite the absence of geographic contiguity, it is important to note that the country still remains a player in the region. In addition, India while formulating its policies had to consider Central Asia as a unit at the same time it could not forget the individual concerns of each country as well.

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