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India's Strategic Interests in Central Asia in the Post-Soviet Years: Expanding Vistas of Partnership

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Abstract

The five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – became independent in the early 1990s, more precisely after the fall of the Soviet Union. The region has been endowed with abundant availability of natural mineral resources like uranium ore, hydrocarbon deposits, vast hydropower potential etc. that made the region of great significance and prime attention of international powers. Central Asia therefore emerged as a pivot for intra and intercontinental trade and economic linkages. India took keen interests in the region. New Delhi's major concerns with the CARs (Central Asian Republics) include energy security, trade, investment, infrastructure development, fight against Islamic fundamentalism and so on. It is in this backdrop, India's perceptions and policies towards Central Asia has been of immense significance, which has been the subject matter of this paper. The paper has been prepared with the application of historical and analytical methods.

Keywords: Central Asia; India; Strategic; Post-Soviet; Islam.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to independence of Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – in the early 1990s. Central Asia has been endowed with abundant availability of natural mineral resources like uranium ore, hydrocarbon deposits, vast hydropower potential etc. that made the region of great significance and prime attention of international powers. Central Asia therefore emerged as a pivot for intra and intercontinental trade and economic linkages. India took keen interests in the region. New Delhi's major concerns with the CARs (Central Asian Republics) include energy security, trade, investment, infrastructure development, fight against Islamic fundamentalism and so on. It is in this backdrop, India's perceptions and policies towards Central Asia has been of immense significance, which has been the subject matter of this paper. The paper has been prepared with the application of historical and analytical methods.

Since early 1990s, the relations between India and Central Asia have shifted from cultural context to economic or strategic context. After Soviet

disintegration, the Central Asian transformation from a centrally planned economy to a market economy coincided with India's radical economic reforms programme aimed at liberalising a highly controlled mixed market economy. Since 1992, India has been making a successful transition from an excessively inward-oriented economy to a more globally integrated one. Despite having some serious challenges, like energy security, poverty, infrastructure, regional disparities, and internal security, there are strong indications that India has become one of the fastest growing economies of the world today. Similarly, after a period of slow and negative growth, all the Central Asian economies started growing rapidly, especially after 2000. The growth momentum gave the leadership of these countries confidence to push for much-needed economic reforms. Thus several factors have produced excellent opportunities for India and the Central Asia to create new, mutually beneficial linkages in a conducive atmosphere (Sachdeva 2011: 123).

The geo-strategic significance of Central Asia is very much important from India's foreign policy

and domestic policy point of view. Geo-politically Central Asia has been described as 'one of the world's most strategic zones, located between Russia, China and a troubled Middle East – a region coveted both by its larger neighbors and major world powers' (Bal 2004: 38). Central Asia has been endowed with huge natural resources that include significant reserves of oil and natural gas as well as gold, copper, aluminum, iron etc. along with its geographical location, in the heart of Eurasia has attracted immense global attention. External players like the Russia, China, United States and even Afghanistan and Pakistan because of their geographical proximity have to a greater extent affected India's bilateral relations with Central Asia. In this backdrop, the present paper aims to focus on the geo-strategic importance of Central Asia from India's foreign policy point of view. The paper also deals with the nature of involvement of external powers that largely affect India's desire to strengthen its foothold in the CARs.

India's geopolitical horizons widened with the independence of the Central Asian states. Although India does not share a direct boundary with any of the Central Asian states, it considered them as part of its extended neighbourhood. India and Central Asian countries face similar global and regional challenges, such as sustainable development, need for knowledge- based economies, resource exploitation, capacity building, regional integration, connectivity issues and security concerns etc. These challenges require a cooperative approach and shared responsibility (Roy 2014: 126). This apart, energy potentials of the Central Asian region has been an important factor that pushed New Delhi to engage with the region with added flavor.

In order to understand the geo-strategic importance of Central Asia from India's foreign policy perspective, it is necessary to focus on the natural resource potentiality of each Central Asian states in the region. Central Asia's vast oil and gas resources and its strategic location invited severe competition among the external players.

As far as India's Central Asia policy has been concerned, New Delhi has a much broader agenda. India seeks to focus on the region with an aim to promote cooperation without causing harm to any third country. India has taken keen interests in promoting stability in region, the enhancement of its trade and investment opportunities, solution to the issues of terrorism, drug trafficking and religious extremism, the security of its energy interests in the region and also the contribution towards Capacity-building and so on (Roy 2011: 161).

Great Power Politics in the Region

Central Asia has largely been affected by great power politics since early 1990s. The three regional and extra regional powers namely, Russia, China and the United States have common objectives to be realised: (a) to secure access to the potential wealth of Central Asia; and (b) to move the Central Asian states into their orbits. Access to the region includes entry to the potentially lucrative energy sectors and other economic areas. Influence means drawing these countries into cooperation and mutually beneficial activities (Pirro 2015: 115). It is important to add that the major external players have however adopted different methods, as discussed below, when it comes to interactions with Central Asia.

Role of Russia: Geographical position and the Soviet-era's oil and gas pipeline system have made it easier for Russia to control the principal transit routes for Central Asian oil and gas (Olcott 2011: 66). It is important to note that being a major producer and exporter of energy to global markets, Russia does not so much depend upon Central Asia for energy resources. But the energy sector of Central Asia is important to Russia and therefore it has been increasing its own control over energy resources, which would enhance its own global status as an energy super power. Bilateral relations between Russia and Central Asia, in the post-Soviet years, received more attention than in the past (Kothari 2014: 73). Russia's most important interest in the region is in Central Asian energy

Table 1: Energy Potentials of Central Asian countries

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Total	Share of Central Asian World Reserves (%)
Oil (billion barrels)	30.000	0.040	0.012	0.600	0.594	31.246	2.37
Natural gas (trillion cubic feet)	100	-	-	100	65	265	4.28
Coal (million short tons)	34,502	895	-	-	3,307	38,704	4.16
Uranium (thousand tons U)	817	-	-	-	111	928	17.00
Hydropower (billion tons kilowatt-hours/year)	317	99	27	15	2	460	-

(Sources: Asian Development Bank 2010: 51)

development, with a new focus on gas, as markets expand in Europe and Asia. Together, Russia, Iran, and the Central Asian states hold more than half of the world gas reserves. However, due to its geographical location, it is quite difficult for Central Asia to have direct access to the European and Asian markets. In this context, it is important to note that gas is not as mobile as oil and is destined for regional rather than world markets. Therefore retaining a major role in Central Asian gas production and export is a key issue for Russia's energy industry (Kothari 2014: 76-77). In 2002, Russia promoted Eurasian Gas Alliance to coordinate gas production and guaranteed long-term purchase of Central Asia gas for Russia's domestic market. Russia's energy industry plays the dominant role in Central Asian gas and Moscow's participation is therefore unavoidable in any project.

Economic ties of Russia with Central Asian states come from bilateral arrangements. GAZPROM and other Russian energy giants have entered into the Central Asian energy markets independently or through promotion of joint ventures. LUKOIL - another energy giant from Russia - has seven onshore and three offshore projects in Kazakhstan involving 40% of Kazakh reserves. GAZPROM and LUKOIL have 20% of Uzbek gas products and are developing their production capabilities, which will further increase their shares. However, Russian economic interests in Central Asia are more varied than those of other partners. It has invested in a number of sectors including transport, mining, construction, telecommunications, defense industry and also imports-exports of various goods and commodities with the Central Asian countries (Pirro 2015: 120).

In the security field, Russia has promoted few multilateral organisations like the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) etc. The CSTO has major focus on security policy [1]*. The CSTO has two major projects with Central Asia. First, it wants to arm the central Asian nations with Russian military equipment. Second, the CSTO is also developing a Rapid Deployment Force of 4,000 troops from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Pirro 2015: 119).

Involvement of China: China's entry into Central Asia has been remarkable. Currently it is the world's largest producer of household and office furniture sets, textiles, plastics, cameras, mobiles, stainless steel, computers, televisions and other consumer durable. It continues to primarily target the developed world with exports, although exports

to the developing world are rapidly expanding. China's growing strategic relations with Central Asia countries is one important example. China's huge energy thirst is causing it to undertake a global search for uninterrupted energy supplies to sustain its booming economy. The economic and trade relations between China and Central Asian states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union have witnessed diversified trading channels; expanding economic and technical cooperation and facilitating communications. Beijing has emerged into the complex Central Asian-Caspian chess board with an aim to maximize share of hydrocarbon resources. (Alam 2013: 80).

Several important agreements have already been signed between China and Central Asia during a time span of last two and half decades. China has built new infrastructure in CARs which includes two important new energy pipelines: the Atyrau-Alashankou oil pipeline across Kazakhstan; and the China-Central Asia gas pipeline (Cooley 2015: 2). The Construction of Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline was agreed between China and Kazakhstan in 1997. The first section of pipeline from the Aktobe region's oil fields to the Atyrau was completed in 2003. The construction of pipeline from Atasu to Alashankou started in September 2004 and was completed in 2005. The construction of Kenkiyak-Kumol section pipe line was agreed between Kazakhstan and China on 18th August, 2007. This section was completed on 11th July, 2009. The pipeline (length 2,228 km) was developed jointly by the China National petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and the Kazakh oil company Kaz Munay Gas. The current capacity of this pipeline is around 20 million tons per year (Kazakhstan-China oil...)

Beijing has enhanced its engagement in Central Asia through several means like trade, energy deals, military agreements, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and finally the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. Despite many positive developments and fruitful diplomatic engagements in Central Asia, India is still very cautious in matters relating to China. Both countries are still very mindful of basic balance of power considerations even if both officially deny this proposition (Sachdeva 2017).

The Central Asia-China gas pipeline starts from Turkmen-Uzbek border city and runs through central Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan before reaching Horgos in China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous region. Currently the Gas Pipeline has three lines in parallel, each running for 1,830 kilometers. Construction of Line A and

B commenced in July 2008. With pipe diameter of 1,067mm, Line 'A' became operational in December 2009, and Line 'B' became operational in October, 2010. A delivery capacity of 30 billion cubic meters per annum was reached by the end of 2011. Construction of Line 'C' was started in September, with a design capacity of 25 billion cubic meters per annum, 152mm larger than Line A/B. It was completed at the end of 2013. In September, 2013, China signed inter-governmental agreements with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan respectively on Line 'D' project. On August 19, 2014, CNPC and UZbekneftegaz signed an agreement on line D of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline in Uzbekistan. On September 13, 2014, Construction of the Tajikistan section of Line 'D' started. Totalling 1,000km with 840km outside China, Line D has a designed annual deliverability of 30 billion cubic meters, and is routed via Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to China. Upon the operation of Line D, the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline will have an annual deliverability of 85 billion cubic meters, the largest gas transmission system in Central Asia (Central Asia-China...). Analysts estimate that within ten to fifteen years from now, China will consume as much oil as the US is consuming today and import about 75 percent of new global production. Beijing's aggressive policies in the Central Asian-Caspian basin has been a matter of concern to both Russia and the US, which are also putting their efforts to control the oil-rich region (Alam 2013: 80).

Initiatives Undertaken by the US: Since the emergence of the Central Asian states, the United States has taken keen interests towards the Central Asian region. Despite the fact that they are geographically far apart, the USA has developed strong trade relations with Central Asia. The Caspian region is emerging as a notable source of oil and gas for world markets. The U.S. Energy Information Administration has estimated that gas exports from the region could account for 11% of global gas export sales by 2035. The US strategic planners have rightly observed that Central Asia is 'caught between world powers that seek to have them under their control'. US interest and activities obviously clash with Russia and China's strategic interests in the region. China and Russia, as stated above, are vigorously involved in the region and at any cost they are ready to thwart US interests and influence (Baidya 2013:101). It is important to note that the US had established an airbase at Karshi-Khanabad (known as K2) in Uzbekistan in October 2001. However, the same base was vacated by the US on 21st November 2005.(Din 2013: 97).

American involvement in Central Asia is primarily strategic in nature. The US model for Central Asia revolves mainly around security. The US focus on terrorism stems from the ongoing turmoil in Afghanistan – namely the Taliban and al Qaeda – moving into Central Asia and beyond. In fact, the United States had heavily invested in Afghanistan, and its engagements in Central Asian states had been a long-term endeavor. (Blank 2008: 73-74). The US is concerned about the drug trade in the region because of its links with transnational terrorism. Therefore, the fundamental objectives of the United States have been to prevent the spread of terrorism, stop drug trafficking, and gain access to the minerals wealth of these nations. Another major goal has been to keep Central Asia away from Russian influence and allowing them to function as the independent actors (Pirro 2015: 124).

Geo-strategic importance of Afghanistan: Apart from the three key players – Russia, China and the United States – importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan in the Central Asian strategic calculus has been of immense significance from India's perspective.

Afghanistan and Central Asia share a common history and have significant ethnic, cultural and linguistic links. Three of the five Central Asian states (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) share a common border with Afghanistan which in total stretches over 2,000km. Transport and connectivity, however, is limited though northern Afghanistan is connected to the Central Asian republics through some roads, rail links, and bridges (Afghanistan and Central Asia: 27). Scholars have argued that as infrastructure linkages improve, trade routes will become more accessible and attractive, placing Afghanistan at the centre of Central and South Asian trade routes. By providing landlocked Central Asian countries with access to trans-Afghan transport corridors that connect to seaports in Karachi, Pakistan, and Bandar-Abbas in Iran, Afghanistan will benefit from both direct and transit trade (Afghanistan and Central Asia: 29).

A number of major regional frameworks currently support regional cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia. These include: SPECA (the UN Special Program for Economies of Central Asia); RECCA (Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan), and CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program) (Afghanistan and Central Asia: 30).

Afghanistan's link to Middle East, Central and South Asia makes it crucial for peace and security in Asia including India. Mohammad Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet, once called Afghanistan 'the beating

heart of Asia' (Safi 2016: 58). Hence, India's objective has been to promote friendship and cooperation with Afghanistan (Shabbana 2016: 159). Afghanistan also happens to be a part of the Asian regional conflict complex which includes the neighboring countries of Pakistan, Iran and the five Central Asian states. Beyond this core, China, India, the Caucasus, Saudi Arabia and also Russia are significant players. All these states have strong transnational linkages with Afghanistan developed during the course of the conflict in the late 1990s. Political, religious, and socio-economic networks connect them with various conflict stakeholders inside Afghanistan. The key to securing Afghanistan is therefore developing a plan to align neighbouring countries politically and economically. As Afghanistan transits to full sovereignty in 2014, the role of regional countries becomes critical to the success or failure of this transition. These issues amidst apprehensions have added a new dimension to India-Central Asia relations and have opened up possibilities of mutual cooperation (Roy 2014: 125-126).

In respect of trans-national drug trafficking, the traffickers take different routes to smuggle Afghan opiates to the outside world. Opiates are smuggled out through its porous borders with neighbouring countries like Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Pakistan. And these smuggling are somewhere directly or indirectly affected the process of building strong relations between India and Central Asia. In connection with the Central Asian countries, it is noteworthy that three of the Central Asian countries namely Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have common borders with northern Afghanistan. Large quantities of drugs are smuggled through these countries for local consumption and for destinations like Kazakhstan and Russia (Dutt 2010: 14). In the case of Pakistan, the Afghan drugs are mainly smuggled into the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA), in which, insurgent groups having affiliations with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda which makes them easier to run the illegal drugs trade throughout the nation and outside the borders. India's security has been largely affected by this trend.

Afghanistan is in fact a bridge for India to Central Asia. When the country becomes stable, India's trade and economic engagement with Afghanistan would get a boost and Kabul can become a conduit in expanding the engagement further with Central Asian countries. Although several initiatives have been taken to expand the trade and economic linkages, New Delhi is primarily looking to increase the energy partnership with Central Asian

countries to meet its growing energy demands. It believes that multilateral engagement in the regional projects, which is economically beneficial for all stakeholders, would be less risky and its success would create interdependence and more opportunities in the future. However, the future of the initiatives would depend on how political and security scenarios unfold in Afghanistan in the coming years. As geopolitical factors outweigh geo-economic considerations in the region, all countries need to take political initiatives to minimize the conflicting nature of regional politics in South Asia (Zafar and Upadhyay 2016: 239).

Scholars have argued that the continued thrust of the Central Asian countries to integrate Afghanistan economically, would get a substantial boost with the launching of the important inter-regional energy projects. In recent times, efforts have been made to bring energy interdependence - both traditional and renewable - between Central Asia and South Asia, TAPI (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan-India Pipeline) and CASA (Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project) projects are examples of this initiative (Khan 2016: 3).

Several policy initiatives have been undertaken by Central Asian countries individually or jointly to develop their strategic relations with Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, the most important countries in Central Asia, provides substantial economic aid to Afghanistan by delivering tons of food, fuel and equipment to the country besides offering 1,000 university scholarships to students. Kazakhstan's main initiatives are aimed at increasing bilateral trade and investment as well as agriculture, education, infrastructure. Recently, Uzbekistan completed a rail link with Afghanistan, the first in northern Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, another neighbor of Afghanistan in Central Asia, provides financial support to Kabul (Khan 2016: 3). It also supplies cheaper electricity to the country and provides humanitarian assistance to the people. To address the issues of extremism and terrorism, and to stabilize Afghanistan, Central Asian countries are making bilateral and multilateral efforts. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are developing necessary infrastructure including road and rail networks to integrate the Afghan economy with the Central Asian economies (Khan 2016: 3).

As a buffer state, the role of Afghanistan is very much significant to India. To prevent Pakistan's influence in Central Asia, India is also improving its relations with Afghanistan and Iran. India has been providing training assistance to Afghan armed forces, inviting students and scholars, inviting

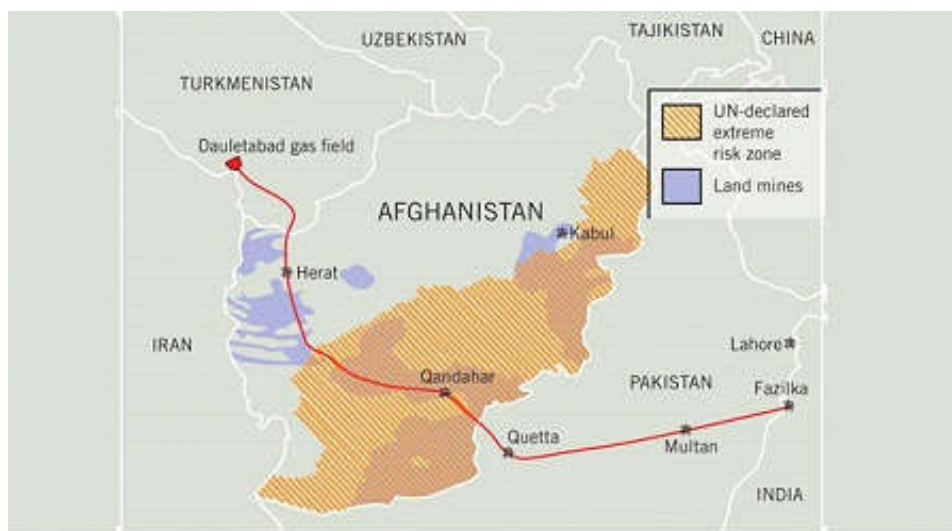
media personnel etc. New Delhi has also been desperately trying to enter into Afghan market for export of goods and IT services, reconstruction and developmental activities and many such ventures (Adnan and Fatima 2015: 191). The Hajigak mine project, Renewal Energy summit (2015), 35th Indian International Trade Fair (IITF, 2015) are important in this context. (India-Afghanistan Relations 2016). On the whole, India's strategic presence in Afghanistan would clear the path for New Delhi to step into the Central Asian region strategically.

Importance of Pakistan: India and Pakistan are two important countries in South Asia, both having nuclear weapon capabilities and many unsettled bilateral issues. Both countries have vested interests in Afghanistan and in the Central Asian region. Pakistan's objectives in Central Asia are determined by its political and security imperatives as well as its economic and commercial gains and countering India's influence and its desire to develop an energy transit-corridor in South-Asia and Asia-Pacific region. Central Asia is seen as an area of natural expansion for Pakistan. Related to Pakistan's ambition to expand its influence is its desire to be the leader of Islamic world (Roy 2006: 802). Albeit this idea has not crystalized, but it has always dominated the thinking of the Pakistani leadership. The emergence of the CARs was perceived by Islamabad as an opportunity to form the world's largest Islamic regional grouping stretching from the Arabian Sea in the South to the Black Sea in the West, and based on a common religion and offering a huge political and economic benefit to Pakistan (Roy 2011: 171).

Since 1991, India and Pakistan have adopted

various strategies towards the Central Asia region in pursuing their strategic interests. While the CARs seek a greater role for India and have no apprehensions about its involvement in the region, they are very cautious and concerned about Pakistan's links and support to jihadi groups. As compared to India, Pakistan tried to use Islam as a tool to win over the Central Asian states in their initial years of independence as it was formulating its policy towards the region.

In an attempt to oil and gas import, the government of India has been trying to get a strong foothold in Central Asian region. The TAPI gas pipeline project could be termed as one of the most important examples on this matter. Since 2002 there has been a lot of discussion on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. There have been some uncertainties on several fronts: (i) uncertainties over gas reserves in Turkmenistan; (ii) uncertainties over the security situation in Afghanistan; and (iii) uncertainties over the endemic strained relations between India and Pakistan. Despite these difficulties, all parties are considering the proposal very seriously (Sachdeva 2011:54). On 13th December, 2015, the Vice President of India Hamid Ansari, Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and leaders from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan broke the ground for the ambitious USD 7.6 billion TAPI pipeline project which aims to provide gas to energy-hungry India to run its power plants. After signing this agreement Turkmenistan president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow hoped that the project would get operationalized by December 2019. The 1800 kilometre long TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-



Source: Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives

Pakistan-India) gas pipeline - as pointed out in the map below - will have the capacity to carry 90 million standard cubic metres a day gas for a 30-year period. India and Pakistan would get 38 mmscmd each, while the remaining 14 mmscmd will be supplied to Afghanistan (TAPI gas pipeline...).

India's Response

Immediately after the formation of central Asian countries, there started a competition among various politically and economically powerful countries to access and secure the Central Asian hydrocarbon resources. However, India does not look at Central Asian countries the way powerful countries around the world look at the Central Asian resources. With the high growth in Indian economy, the increase in consumption and imports of oil and gas has been rising very fast. In its efforts to diversify the sources of oil imports, India has been looking at the Central Asian countries also (Azhar 2016: 126).

Since 1991, Central Asian countries and India have established bilateral trade and economic relations in several fields like pharmaceutical sector, textiles, metallurgy, chemicals, hydrocarbons, mining, mineral processing, construction and industrial production. Central Asian countries have been one of the largest beneficiaries under ITEC programme and New Delhi has been offering human resource development training. (Rakhimov 2013: 27-28).

Though there had been ancient linkages with Central Asia, India's economic, strategic, security relations with the region remains unsatisfactory. India's strategic relations with the five Central Asian countries got a fresh momentum in the twenty first century more specifically from 2012. During the past few years, New Delhi has stepped up its engagement with the Central Asian Republics with an aim of building long-term partnership, both bilaterally and collectively. The high level visits from both sides- Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to Delhi and President Pratibha Patil's visit to Tajikistan in 2009, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Kazakhstan in 2012** and Uzbek President Islam Karimov's visit to India in May 2011, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's visit to India in September 2012, and India's vice-President Hamid Ansari's visit to Tajikistan in April 2013 followed by External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid's visit to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in September 2013 - all are reflective of growing political, economic and defence ties between India and Central Asia (Roy 2013: 303).

The first India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative organised on 12-13 June, 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, was an important step towards building a long-term partnership with the region. The objective behind this regional conference was to start a regular annual dialogue forum among academics, scholars, government officials and business representatives between India and the CARs, with the aim of providing inputs to governments on both sides (Kothari 2014: 241). The policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, information technology (IT) centers, and e-networks in tele-medicines connecting India with the CARs. The policy also focuses on joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, joint scientific research and strategic partnerships in defense and security affairs and so on (Pradhan 2016: 19-20).

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi's visit to five Central Asian countries from 6th to 13th July, 2015 has been a landmark development in the process of building strategic partnership between the two sides. Many important treaties have already been signed between India and Central Asia after the visit of Narendra Modi to CARs. Some important agreements signed between the two sides are - Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev's decision to sign a major contract for a renewed long term supply of 5,000 Metric tons (MT) of uranium to India during the next five years is the most significant takeaway of the Prime Minister's visit. This apart, India's ONGC-Videsh Ltd (OVL) has made its first breakthrough when Modi launched the drilling operations for oil exploration in the Satpayev block on 7th July 2015 (Stobdan 2015).

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to five Central Asian countries followed by the return visits of the President of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon and Mr. Almazbek Atambayev, the president of Kyrgyzstan to India in December 2016 have boosted up India-Central Asia relations. There are some agreements which have been signed during the state visit of Tajikistan to India (List of Agreements...2016: December 17). These are:

(1) Protocol amending the agreement between India and Tajikistan for the avoidance of double taxation and prevention of fiscal evasion with respect to taxes on income.

(2) Memorandum of understanding between the Committee of television and radio under the Government of Tajikistan and the Prasar Bharati, India for cooperation on Broadcasting in Exchange of Audio Visual Programs.

(3) MoU between financial Intelligence Unit of India and the Financial Monitoring Department under the National Bank of Tajikistan concerning cooperation in the exchange of financial intelligence related to money laundering, related crimes and financing of terrorism.

(4) Announcement of initiation of bilateral investment treaty between the two sides.

The President of Kyrgyzstan Mr. Almazbek Atambayev's state visit to India, 2016 culminated through different agreements/MOU signed between India and Kyrgyzstan. Some of these agreements are tabulated below: (List of agreements...2016: December 20).

1. MoU on cooperation in the field of tourism between the Ministry of Tourism of India and the Ministry of Culture, Information and Tourism of the Government of Kyrgyz Republic.
2. Agreement on cooperation in the field of agriculture and food industry.
3. MoU on cooperation between Foreign Service Institute, MEA, New Delhi and diplomatic Academy of MOFA of Kyrgyz Republic.
4. MoU in the field of cooperation in youth exchange between NCC of India and Military Lyceum of Kyrgyz Republic.
5. Bilateral investment treaty etc.

The point to be noted here is that though Central Asia is not India's immediate neighbour, the region is vital for New Delhi in different ways. India therefore considers the Central Asia as a high priority region in its foreign policy orientation. Both sides have been working hard to strengthen their bilateral understandings in various possible ways but still lot more needs to be done. The fact that India becoming a full-fledged member of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) in June 2017 has also opened up new opportunities before New Delhi. (The Astana Declaration 2017).

Conclusion

The sustained economic growth of India since early 1990s, along with its emergence as one of the largest consumers of oil and gas related products in the world, has provided a new basis to redefine its traditional relationship with the Central Asia region.

India's strategic interest in Central Asia involves energy security and promotion of trade and commerce and infrastructure development

programme. This apart, cooperative security initiatives have also begun with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. The involvement of other external players like the USA, Russia and China in Central Asia has been one of the biggest challenges before New Delhi. India will have to work hard to move forward in a highly competitive environment to make its presence felt in Central Asia. SCO could be right platform to further India's strategic interests in the region.

End Notes

*CST (Collective Security Treaty) came into being in May 1992 later on it became known as CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) in October, 2002. The CSTO is an intergovernmental military alliance which purposes are to strengthen peace and international and regional security and stability and to ensure collective protection of independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of member states, in the attainment of which member states shall give priority to political means. The main task of the organisation becomes coordination and deepening of military-political cooperation, formation of multilateral structures and mechanism of cooperation to provide national security of member states on collective basis, to provide help, including military one to the member state which became a victim of aggression. The main aims and directions of activity of the organisation is coordination and joint efforts to struggle against international terrorism and other untraditional threats to security. For more details see, http://www.odkb.gov.ru/start/index_aengl.htm

**On 15-16 April 2011, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev adopted a 'Road Map' for 2011-2014 to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two countries, signing seven agreements in areas as diverse as energy, cyber-security, space exploration, education, and development of technology etc. (For details see Pandey, Sanjay Kumar. (2013). Energy Cooperation between India and Kazakhstan. In Rashmi Doraiswamy (Ed.) Energy Security: India, Central Asia and the Neighbourhood, pp.86-93. New Delhi: Manak Publications Pvt. Ltd.).

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