

India-Kyrgyzstan Relations: Future Prospects and Challenges

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Key Words : Foreign policy goal, Ancient silk route, Minerals, Hydrocarbons

Central Asia today is of great strategic importance to many countries, and will continue to hold that position in the coming years. In the context of international relations, it is a natural, historically formed buffer zone, and one of the most convenient routes of transit. Further, the region is rich in minerals, especially hydrocarbons. On the downside, it is currently the hub of Islamic extremism. The region's vast potential to compete with existing mineral markets is yet to be exploited.

Likewise for India, Central Asia is important in not merely a civilisational or historical sense, but a geopolitical and economic sense as well. Given the Kashmir issue, it is not feasible for India to be oblivious to political developments in this region. For instance, Pakistan in the North-West continues to be hostile towards India, and it is believed that Pakistan is sponsoring cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. India's national security then lies in peace and stability in the Central Asian region. Tragically though, the region is troubled with religious extremism and terrorism.

Despite its foreign policy goals, both short-term and long-term, India has been under-involved with Central Asian countries. To India, these countries offer great opportunities, which if utilized can help India realize its energy ambitions, especially in the oil and gas sectors. Presently, energy security is a major concern for many nations, including India, and the Central Asian countries, especially Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, are the most promising energy source in the world today. It is for this reason that the importance for this region can no longer be downplayed (Roy, 2009).

Historically, India has had close relations with Kyrgyzstan, which was one of the few Central Asian countries to be part of the Ancient Silk Route. Even much later during the Soviet era, India and Kyrgyzstan had political, economic and cultural contacts, although limited. On one occasion in 1985, former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi visited Bishkek and Issyk Kul lake.

When Kyrgyz Republic became independent on 31st August, 1991, India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with the nation in 1992, and even set up the resident Mission of India in 1994 (India-Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013). In modern times, both countries share concerns on terrorism, extremism and drug-trafficking.

Since 1992, India and Kyrgyzstan have been parties to several international framework agreements pertaining to culture, trade and economic cooperation, civil aviation, investment promotion and protection, and avoidance of double taxation, to name a few. On a more institutional level, foreign office consultations have played a significant role in facilitating greater understanding of views on bilateral and international issues concerning the two nations (India-Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013).

How to cite this Article: Baitha, Subhash Kumar (2015). India-Kyrgyzstan Relations: Future Prospects and Challenges. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, 2 (7&8) : 313-320.

The August, 2015 state visit to Kyrgyzstan has been perceived to be a progress in India's attempts to expand India-Kyrgyzstan relation to a wide range of sectors. Prime Minister Modi even acknowledged that Central Asia in general, and specifically Kyrgyzstan, would come to hold an important place in India's future international relations (PMIndia News 31 August, 2013).

He was hopeful that the countries could reinforce each other's economic progress and sustainable development objectives. In the larger context, cooperation between India and Kyrgyzstan could contribute to integration across different regions of Asia (DNA India News 12 July, 2015).

Diplomatic visits :

India and Kyrgyzstan have already laid a solid foundation for good international relations between them. High level State visits have contributed to positive bilateral ties. During the nearly 15 year regime of former Kyrgyz President Akaev, several former Indian dignitaries visited Kyrgyzstan. Prime Minister, Sri Narasimha Rao (in September, 1995), Vice-President, Sri K.R. Narayanan (September, 1996), Vice-President, Sri Krishan Kant (August, 1999), Minister of External Affairs, Sri Yashwant Sinha (January, 2003), Defence Minister, Sri George Fernandes (November, 2003), Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Sri Murli S. Deora (August, 2007), Defence Minister, Sri A.K. Antony (July, 2011), Minister of State for External Affairs, Sri E. Ahamed (June 2012), Minister of State for Commerce, Dr. D. Purandeswari (July, 2013), Minister of External Affairs, Sri Salman Khurshid (September, 2013), and a 16 member NDC delegation led by Major General Anurag Gupta (11-16 May, 2014) visited Kyrgyzstan (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

At the same time from the Kyrgyz Republic, President Akaev visited India 4 times (March 1992, April 1999, August, 2002, and November, 2003). Vice-Prime Minister, Ms. Mira Jangaracheva (March, 1997), State Secretary, Mr. I.A. Abdurazakov (April, 1997), Prime Minister, Mr. Apas Jumagulov (May, 1997) visited India and consequently strengthened bilateral ties. The Chairman of the Legislative Assembly of the Kyrgyz Parliament, Mr. Usup Mukambaev, led a parliamentary delegation (25th July to 1st August, 1997), a 4-member group of the Kyrgyz parliamentarians visited India (February, 1999), Defence Minister Lt. General I. Isakov (November, 2005), Foreign Minister, Mr. Ednan Karabaev Oskonovich (February, 2008), Defence Minister, Kudaiberdiev Abibilla Alymovich (September, 2011), Defence Minister Maj. General Talaibek Omuraliyev (September, 2013), and Foreign Minister Erlan Abdylidaev (February, 2014) also visited India (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015). A 4-member group from Kyrgyzstan visited India in February 1999, to study Indian agriculture and infrastructure (India Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013).

Diplomatic relation :

As previously stated, India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan. The two countries share good bilateral political, and cultural relations. Kyrgyzstan is a major state actor in India's relations with the Central Asian countries (Zafar, 2015). In 2012, the year which marked the 20th year of Indo-Kyrgyz diplomatic relations, India announced its Connect Central Asia Policy during the visit of the External Affairs Minister, Mr. E. Ahamed to Kyrgyzstan pursuant to the first India-Central Asia Track-II Dialogue held in Bishkek. Mr. Ahamed, in his inaugural address, declared India's intention to strengthen its ties with Central Asia and with Kyrgyzstan. The objective as stated by him was to initiate an e-Network in Central Asia, to promote telemedicine and tele-education, to establish an Indian-Central Asian University, and to set up a super-speciality hospital and diagnostic centre in Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the Kyrgyz Prime Minister spoke about the "Open sky" project, which provides free movement of aircraft of several airlines in the airspace of Kyrgyzstan (India Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013).

India and Kyrgyzstan share grave concerns over the rising trend of extremism and terrorism worldwide. In July, 2015, the two countries signed four agreements, two of which pertained to increased

defence cooperation, and annual joint military exercises. Apart from these, the countries agreed to consider signing an agreement on “combatting international terrorism and other crimes”, as expeditiously as possible (DNA India News 12 July, 2015). In 2015, the Indian government highly praised the action taken by the Kyrgyz government towards combatting terrorism, and maintaining the secular character of Kyrgyz society (The Hindu News, 13 July, 2015).

As of date, the bilateral defence ties between the two nations continues to remain strong, with a joint exercise, namely, Khanjar 2015, recently having been concluded. Speaking in the context of the India-Kyrgyz defence agreement, Former Indian Defence Minister, A.K. Antony stated that both national governments would work together in holding joint military exercises on an annual basis. He also stated that the defence agreement was signed with an objective of deepening bilateral cooperation in the areas of defence, security, military education and training (DNA India News 12 July, 2015). Further, Antony commented on India’s wide network of research establishments in armaments, physiology, medicine, animal husbandry, nutrition and so on, under defence establishments. He suggested that India and Kyrgyzstan should explore areas for cooperation in research and development in food processing, poultry, animal husbandry, plantation and high-altitude base agriculture, areas that had the potential to help generate rural employment opportunities and eliminate poverty. (Sitanshu Kar, 2011). In addition to these, the intention was to have a close partnership with Kyrgyzstan in the defence sphere, specifically foreign language (presumably English) training, military medicine and preparing for United Nations peacekeeping missions as specific areas of cooperation (Kucera, 2013).

Over the recent years, India has gradually but progressively strengthened its defence cooperation with Kyrgyzstan in the areas of information technology exchange, military exercises and training, jungle warfare, and counter-terrorism. For the year 2011, both nations even worked out a bilateral cooperation plan. In 2015, India offered Kyrgyzstan the opportunity to undertake joint research and production in military and non-military sectors (Defence Now News, 2015). Prime Minister Modi remarked that the agreement on defence cooperation with Kyrgyzstan would provide a framework to expand bilateral engagement, to include defence technology.

Mr Modi underlined that the new agreement (2015) on defence cooperation would provide a “framework to broaden bilateral engagement” which would also include defence technology. He underlined that the agreement was aimed at strengthening bilateral cooperation in defence, security, military education and training (Press Trust of India, 2015).

The latest Foreign Office Consultation with the Kyrgyz Republic was held in Bishkek on the 19th of March, 2015. Representatives from both countries reviewed existing bilateral relations and expressed their intention and commitment to elevate to a higher trajectory, the bilateral relationship by means of regular consultation through their respective established institutional mechanisms. Matters of domestic and global importance such as UN reforms, SCO, counter-terrorism, as well as regional issues in Afghanistan and Central Asia were also part of the discussions (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

In an effort to promote economic relations, 2 MoU’s for cooperation between the Election Commissions of the two countries in the field of Standards were signed on 12th July, 2015. Subsequent to this, a joint statement was released stating that both sides expressed deep concerns over the rising trend of terrorism, extremism and radicalism in the region in specific, and the world in general (DNA India News 12 July, 2015).

Since its Independence, Kyrgyzstan has followed a liberal polity. In 2010, after two revolutions, the country finally achieved a parliamentary democracy. Kyrgyzstan is the only nation in the Central Asian region to have a parliamentary system of democracy and is often called the ‘island of democracy’ (Zafar, 2015). However, Kyrgyzstan’s democratic institutions remain weak due to several national challenges which relate to, but are not limited to, economy, ethnicity, Islam, narcotic drugs and strategic games played by convoluted state actors. Interestingly, Kyrgyzstan is the only country that hosts military bases of both the United States and Russia. The country also retains a strong Chinese

influence, especially on the economy (Stobdan, 2015).

Cultural relation :

The strongest connection between India and Kyrgyzstan is culture. Kyrgyzstan society appears to be moving towards increased spirituality, as many students from the country go abroad to study religion. The most respected Indian seminaries are often encouraged to admit students from Kyrgyzstan, as it exposes them to syncretic Indo-Islamic traditions that are generally more tolerant and inclusive, and allows them to learn in a multi-religious and democratic society. Likewise, India and Kyrgyzstan can consider taking up joint academic research, especially on their shared medieval history (Zafar, 2015).

Much progress in India-Kyrgyzstan relations was made when an agreement on cooperation in the spheres of culture, arts, science, education, sports, and mass-media was signed on 18th March, 1992. In October of the same year, a Cultural Exchange Program (CEP), valid for 1992-1994 was initiated by the two countries. Subsequently, this was extended up to the year 2000 (India-Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013).

Indian culture is much appreciated in Kyrgyzstan. The Centre for Indian Studies that India set up in Osh State University in 1997, has contributed extensively in providing Kyrgyz academicians and intelligentsia an exposure to Indian culture and civilization. In 2014, India conducted two Kathak dance workshops, one in Bishkek (January) and Issyk Kul (July). Later that year on 14th November, India formally inaugurated an India Study Centre. The Centre is run by volunteers and imparts training in Hindi, Yoga and Indian Classical Dances. (Embassy of India, Bishkek 2015). India offered to establish an AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) centre in Kyrgyzstan in order to share India's knowledge in traditional medicine, which the latter readily welcomed (DNA India 12 July, 2015).

From 28th March to 1st April, 2015, a Sitar and Kathak group sponsored by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), and led by Maestro Prateek Chaudhuri visited Kyrgyzstan. The group performed in Bishkek and Osh, and also held a master class at the musical school named after Shubin. The group's performance was well received in both locations, where more than 300 members of the audience in each place participated. In India, the Ministry of External Affairs under aid to Eurasia, sponsored the participation of 19 Kyrgyz artists at the Surajkhand Mela near New Delhi in February, 2015 (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

India and Kyrgyzstan gladly announced the commencement of direct flights between Bishkek and New Delhi, and the countries agreed to work towards enhancing connectivity with a view to promote trade and tourism between the two countries (DNA India News 12 July, 2015). The first direct flight between India and Kyrgyzstan was started by Pegasus Asia Airline from 20th of February, 2015, on the Bishkek-Delhi-Bishkek route. Presently, it runs twice a week (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015). Bishkek is a 3 ½ hours flight from New Delhi. However, bilateral rules pertaining to visa needs further discussion, deliberation and facilitation on both sides. One way in which India can promote Indian tourism in Kyrgyzstan, is by including the latter in its recently launched visa on arrival facility. Likewise, Kyrgyzstan can give Indians a visa on arrival and long-term multiple entry visa (Zafar, 2015). The two countries must negotiate on visa rules, as it is of great consequence in either country. Around 2,400 Indian students are studying medicine in medical institutions in Kyrgyzstan, and several Indian businessmen are engaged in commercial activities in Kyrgyzstan (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

Agriculture is a major, promising sector for cooperation between the two countries. This is because of two reasons: first, Kyrgyzstan has large tracts of available land and Kyrgyz farmers generally do not use fertilizers. This creates opportunities for organic farming and produce, which has increasing demand in the nearby health-conscious Europe, and to an extent, India. Second, as the topography of Kyrgyzstan and that of the state of Jammu and Kashmir in India is similar, there is a

potential to explore joint saffron cultivation and floriculture, as practiced in the former (Zafar, 2015). Moreover, more than 60% of the population in both of these countries works in the agriculture sector. In this respect though, India has already made headway by offering to share its experiences in agro-processing, greenhouse technology, water conservation, and agricultural research. This was done with an aim to enhance productivity and add value to agriculture produce (DNA India News 12 July, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan's fastest growing sectors are the tourism, and hospitality sectors. The country has several natural tourist locations, such as the world famous Lake Issyk Kul. Although surprising, this small country of 5.5 million people has attracted more than 3 million tourists in the year 2013 alone. The Kyrgyzstan government has recognised this economy boosting potential, and as rightly given priority to this sector. The Indian hospitality sector on its part, can invest in creating tourist infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan. Indian travel agencies and healthcare providers can explore the possibility of tourism and health services in the natural environment around Issyk Kul.

The Indian film industry could benefit from access to the pristine, scenic beauty of Kyrgyz landscapes at affordable rates and close-by locations, to shoot Indian films, commercials and TV serials. Through this, the industry can lower the cost of film production significantly, and expand the Indian audio-visual market in the Central Asian region.

Therefore, it is evident that India and Kyrgyzstan share friendly relations, and the latter is given priority in India's engagement with the Central Asian region through its Connect Central Asia policy. The suggested measures can be undertaken without the need for much investment and can play a crucial role in connecting with the region and deepening existing political, commercial and cultural relations (Zafar, 2015).

Educational relation :

The availability of adequate infrastructure, low costs, and relatively relaxed norms in Kyrgyzstan attract a large number of foreign students every year, with the students being primarily medical students. The courses are mostly taught in English, and this is an added incentive. Roughly 2,000 Indian students are enrolled in medicine courses in Kyrgyzstan. The population to doctor ratio in India is abysmally low. Hence, Indian educational institutions can be encouraged to utilize the medical infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan, in order to teach Indian medical students studying there. The cost of studying a 4-year course in medicine in Kyrgyzstan, on an average, costs an Indian student about 15-16 lakh INR, the same as, or in most cases, lower than the cost in India (Zafar, 2015).

The Indian government offered to set up an IT development centre in Kyrgyzstan. In furtherance of this, an MoU was signed in Bishkek on 20th March, 2006. On 15th August, 2007, the Indian Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Murli S. Deora formally inaugurated the Indo-Kyrgyz Centre for Information Technology, set up by the Indian implementing agency, HMT in Bishkek (India-Kyrgyzstan Relations, 2013).

The cornerstone of India's economic involvement in Kyrgyzstan is undoubtedly technical assistance under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Program, particularly in terms of human resource development. Under the ITEC, Kyrgyzstan had initially been allotted 60 slots on an annual basis for civilian training. The number of slots was subsequently raised to 85 in 2014-2015. This decision was welcomed by Kyrgyzstan. (KSUCTA). More than 1040 professionals from Kyrgyzstan have received training in India since 1992 (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan is one of the most popular destinations for Indian medical students. Kyrgyzstan sends many of its students to study in India as well and around 1,000 working professionals from a cross-section of the Kyrgyz society have utilised the ITEC programme. Both nations expressed their satisfaction over the increasing links in the health sector, including regular visits by doctors from super-speciality hospitals in India to Kyrgyzstan, and visits by Kyrgyz patients to India for medical

treatment. The leaders of both countries gladly announced the launch of a project to establish Tele-medicine linkages, between highly specialised Indian hospitals and 6 medical establishments of Kyrgyzstan, all with the support and assistance of India. Around the same time, the Indian government highly appreciated the support extended by its counterpart in Kyrgyzstan, to the Kyrgyz-India Mountain Bio-medical Research Centre. The Indian Prime Minister then gifted medical equipment to Kyrgyzstan's Field Hospital and visited the Research Centre (DNA India News 12 July, 2015).

Economic relation :

Kyrgyzstan is keen on boosting cooperation with India in various spheres. According to reports from Kyrgyzstan, the priority spheres of cooperation with India are tourism, training of specialists, developing small and medium-sized businesses, the processing and mining industries and information technology. In order to strengthen and support bilateral trade and economic relations, the Indo-Kyrgyz Joint Commission on Trade and Economic and Science and Technical Cooperation, and the Joint Business Council were established. Since their establishment, they have had several meetings. There are several potential areas for Kyrgyz-Indian joint cooperation: food processing, information technology, tourism, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, cosmetics, engineering goods, electronics, banking service, and mining (Mavlanov, 2006).

In the year 2014-2015, the value of Indo-Kyrgyz trade was US\$ 38.53 million. Indian exports to Kyrgyzstan was pegged at US\$ 37.76 million, whereas Kyrgyz exports to India was US\$ 0.77 million. Clothing and apparel, leather goods, drugs and pharmaceuticals, fine chemicals, and tea form the bulk of the export basket to Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz exports to India are raw hides, metaliferous ores, and metal scraps, to name a few. (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015). Presently, Kyrgyzstan has the capacity to supplement India's food security and mineral resource requirements. (Zafar, 2015). The textiles sector is another sector in the two countries that is set to receive a boost towards cooperation. An MoU was signed by India and Kyrgyzstan on the 17th of March, 2015. The MoU seeks to strengthen bilateral cooperation in 3 fields: Textiles and Clothing, Silk and Sericulture, and Fashion. The Kyrgyz Minister for Textiles stated that the Indian Minister for Textiles had assured India's cooperation in strengthening the relationship between the nations. The Energy and Industry Minister of Kyrgyzstan underlined the fact that out of India's total exports to his country, 50% were from the textiles sector. After the conclusion of the MoU, the two countries agreed to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) to explore issues of cooperation within the scope of the MoU, and the action plan required to facilitate bilateral trade and investment (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

After Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasia Economic Union, which was inaugurated on 1st January, 2015, Prime Minister Modi congratulated Mr. Atambaev on the achievement. In the talks that followed this, opinions on the integration process in the Eurasian space were exchanged. Both sides agreed to cooperate towards bringing about an early conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement between the member states of Eurasia Economic Union and India. Kyrgyzstan invited Indian businesses to actively invest in its economy and expressed its willingness to extend its support to the Indian investors in all their investment activities within its territory (DNA India News 12 July, 2015). The 7th meeting of the India-Kyrgyzstan Inter Governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation was held in New Delhi on 16-17th March, 2015. In this meeting, representatives from both India and Kyrgyzstan discussed issues of bilateral cooperation in the areas of agriculture, transport, industry, culture, tourism, education, and technical cooperation (Embassy of India, Bishkek, 2015).

On 12th of July this year, both nations adopted a joint statement and signed several documents, namely, the Agreement between the Kyrgyzstan government and the Indian government on cooperation in the military field, in culture, art, youth, sports, and media; an MoU between the Ministry of Economy and the Bureau of Indian Standards, and an MoU of cooperation in the field of elections between the Central Commission for Elections of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Election Commission of India (The

Embassy of Kyrgyz Republic in India, 2015).

World view :

Traditionally, India political ties with Kyrgyzstan have been warm and friendly. Kyrgyz leaders have been largely supportive of the Indian stand on Kashmir and have welcomed the peace negotiations. Kyrgyzstan has also sided with India over its bid for a permanent seat at UNSC and has shown support for India's role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). (India-Kyrgyzstan Relations 2013). Prime Minister Modi often sought the support of Atambaev for the early completion of UN reforms. The Kyrgyz government expressed its appreciation to the Indian government for conducting various UN Peacekeeping courses, especially by the Centre for UN Peacekeeping in New Delhi, for training Kyrgyz military officers, and for the exchange of experience with Kyrgyz Armed Forces on the Level II UN Field Hospital of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Kyrgyzstan. Representatives from both nations stated that they sought a peaceful and secure neighbourhood at a time of challenges in our region, and that they had shared interest in combating extremism and terrorism, that has become a threat without borders (DNA India News, 12 July 2015). Kyrgyz President Atambaev, during a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Modi in Bishkek on 12th July, 2015, remarked that relations between Kyrgyzstan and India would rise to a new level. According to him, India was one of the global centres of the world, and that it was a great honour for Kyrgyzstan to cooperate with it (The Embassy of Kyrgyz Republic in India, 2015).

Challenges :

Kyrgyzstan was shaken by 2 successive revolutions in 2005 and 2010. The revolutions hindered Kyrgyz economic progress, and disturbed its social fabric. The consequence was many untoward incidents, displacements and deaths in the country, especially in South Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is a small economy, relatively, of US\$ 7 billion. Lack of investments and funds, under-exploitation of natural resources and limited access to advanced technologies impede its faster economic growth. The city of Bishkek has attempted to develop business friendly environments and is inviting foreign investments into the country by seeking the partnership of neighbouring countries. India is a fast growing economy, and the two countries can share their expertise and experience in order to achieve shared progress. Despite all the cordial relations in the various spheres, elaborated above, India-Kyrgyzstan economic engagement seems below its potential. Trade has been impeded due to the absence of direct land connectivity, and circuitous routes cause delay and escalate costs as compared to Central Asia's trade with other regional countries (Zafar, 2015).

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