

India-Central Asia Relations in Modi Regime

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INTRODUCTION

Each and every nation relies on one another to fulfill their interests and to meet their demands of goods and services. No nation is isolated politically and economically. This cooperation calls for framing of foreign policies to establish the diplomatic ties with other nations. Such cooperation requires that relations be maintained with the international organization and non-governmental actors (Ahmed, Jesmine, 2020: 787).

Foreign policy allows the platform for discussion and negotiation on the political, social, economic and military fronts with the other nations (Khara, Nabin Kumar 2018: 105). Foreign policy has been defined differently by various scholars. Joseph Frankel puts it as decisions and actions involving relations between one state and others. Whereas, Padelford and Lincoln, describe a state's foreign policy, a resultant of the courses of action in order to achieve its objectives and interests. The two main functions of foreign policy are the attainment of conceived goals and putting forth the national interest (Bojang, 2018:2).

Many scholars agree on the fact that foreign policy serves as an area where domestic and international politics cross over and the political environment of the state determines or influences it to a large extent. In some cases, international factors play a major role, whereas in some, domestic developments are more important. *Realist theory* proposes an opposite view on foreign policy and it stresses on the anarchial characteristic of the international environment as an important determinant (Khara, Nabin Kumar, 2018: 109).

India's foreign policy, under Prime Minister Modi,

has seen active engagement on economic and diplomatic front with majority of nations. India's vision has been to foster the internal growth and establish its strong hold in the international arena. Prime Minister Modi has envisioned, that 'India's actions and aspirations, capacities and human capital, democracy and demography, and strength and success will continue to be an anchor for all round regional and global progress. It's economic and political rise is a force for peace, a factor for stability and an engine for regional and global prosperity'. India's Foreign Secretary has emphasized on India's willingness to take up more responsibilities and seek possibilities of rebuilding cooperation and broadening contacts (Ministry of External Affairs India, 2017).

India-Central Asia relation has a long history from the time of "Silk route". The two regions share culture, religion, trade, and commerce with each other since time immemorial. These contacts were further fortified in the medieval ages during Islam and Mughal rule in India, many of which had their origins in Central Asia. Central Asian states were earlier part of the Soviet Union, which had strategic relations with India, so the contacts between the two regions were not lost post-Soviet era (Jha, Martand, 2016).

In 1991, the five Central Asian states (namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) gained independence after USSR disintegration in an unstable political environment. Their main challenge was to replace the system dictated by the Soviet Republic with a new one and handle the economic collapse resulting from the collapse of USSR. The race for natural resources and economic control pushed the area into an international political battleground.

Militarization of Afghanistan on the pretext of “War on Terror” by the United States enhanced their geopolitical significance (Kothari, Raj Kumar, 2018).

India’s bilateral relations with Central Asian countries covers a vast sector like, pharmaceuticals, textiles, metals, chemicals, petroleum etc. Russia, China and the United States are establishing their political stronghold on this landlocked area. Developing powers like Turkey, Iran and Pakistan have a direct influence over this region, which makes it difficult for New Delhi to exert its influence. India’s emerging export industries offers a solution to this problem. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have been one of the largest beneficiaries under the ITEC (India Technical and Economic Cooperation), wherein India offers human resource development training. These countries harbor energy in the form of oil and gas and India needs a reliable access to these resources. Central Asian countries also seek economic ties in the field of agro-techniques and food production. In this context, India’s policies towards Central Asia are extremely relevant (ibid).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the five Central Asian Countries in 2015, soon after coming to power, to re-energize India’s engagement with CARs (Central Asian Regions). This tour brought India back into the consciousness of Central Asia. After this, the recurring visits were organized on building connectivity, export-import, anti-terrorism and cyber security. At present, regional cooperation is the main agenda of India’s policies towards Central Asia (Vivekanand International Foundation, 2020).

India and CARs seek a common goal to prevent Afghanistan from becoming the hub of terrorism and extremism, and to act as connectivity bridge between South Asia and Central Asia. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan strengthened the Joint Working Group with India on counter-terrorism during PM Modi’s visit in 2015 (Roy, Mina Singh and Rajorshi Roy, 2017). Recently, on 13th January 2019, five Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan and India participated in the Central Asian Dialogue in Samarkand, Uzbekistan to discuss connectivity options and stabilize Afghanistan. Second Central Asian Dialogue was held in 2020 to discuss strategic engagement. In November 2019, India and Uzbekistan held their first military exercise in Uzbekistan and also entered into a security cooperation agreement and counter terrorism pact (Marjani, Niranjani, 2020). On defense front, India provides military training to Kazakh,

Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek cadets and is conducting joint military exercises with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Khanjar Series). India has deployed a greater number of defense attachments in Central Asia to boost military and security cooperation.

With permanent membership in SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in 2017, India’s “Connect Central Asia Policy” has gained impetus. Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railways is advisable to promote idea of exporting Indian goods to Russia and Europe (Izimov, Ruslan *et al.*, 2019: 52). Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) at Tashkent under SCO, provided more cooperation to combat extremism and terrorism (Vivekanand International Foundation, 2020). India-Central Asian Business Council has been launched in 2020 to leverage the opportunities in energy, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, agro-processing, education, urban-infrastructure, transport, civil aviation, IT and tourism and promote trade which now stands at USD 2 billion per annum (Reddy, Sangita 2020).

Challenges for India in Central Asia:

China has captured major investment share in Central Asia through its economic growth at unprecedented rate. In order to address and counter this, India formulated its “Connect Central Asia Policy” to enhance ties in political, security, economic and cultural area (Jha, Martand, 2016). Also, to solve the connectivity issues, India entered into International North-South Transport corridor (INSTC), Ashgabat agreement and the development of Chabahar Port in Iran (Marjani, Niranjani, 2020).

Way forward:

India needs to establish, India-Central Asia Forum Summit on the lines of India-African Forum Summit. India’s IT industry is developing at an extra ordinary rate and India can promote exports of software to Central Asia using Uzbekistan as hub. This would help India gain access in Russian markets. India seeks to rejuvenate age old silk route through a “Virtual Silk Route” to trade in innovation and technologies. Central Asia’s climate change induced challenges call for India’s expertise in combating such problems. India’s tourism and medical tourism also offers a promising venue to strengthen regional ties and cooperation. For this, media could play an important role in advertising and creating awareness in Central Asia (Vivekanand International Foundation, 2020). India and

Kazakhstan can jointly promote pharmaceutical enterprises in the region by construction of hospitals, clinics and medical centers (Izimov, Ruslan, *et al.*, 2019:49).

Conclusion:

India Central Asian share strong cultural values but due to influence of neighboring countries like Pakistan and China, the connectivity is a major issue. India was the first country to recognize post-Soviet independence of these nations. CARs share common stands with India on the issues of national security, energy, market, environment, multi-polar world order, UN reforms and cooperation. During PM Modi's regime, India has strengthened the connectivity in route, technological cooperation, counter-terrorism efforts and trade for mutual cooperation and development.

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