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# DIALOGUE

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# Contents

Editorial Perspective	7
A few words for our Readers	
1. Globalisation and Prospect for India's 'Connect Central Policy'	9
<i>Anwar Alam</i>	
2. Perceptions of India in Central Asia: Bollywood vs. Geopolitics (the Case of Tajikistan)	23
<i>Dr. Muzaffar Olimov</i>	
3. India's Strategic Imperatives for Engaging Central Asian States	33
<i>Dr. Mohammad Monir Alam</i>	
4. On Changing Political Environment of Modern Central Asia	43
<i>Ulugbek Khasanov</i>	
5. India in SCO: Strengthening India's Footprint in Central Asia	53
<i>Dr. Angira Sen Sarma</i>	
6. The Importance of Uzbek-India Relations in Establishing Stability and Peace in Afghanistan	71
<i>Dr. Beruniy Alimov</i>	
7. Regional Reconciliation with the Taliban is Contingent on Prevention of Violence	83
<i>Vaishali Basu Sharma</i>	
8. Kazakhstan Constitutional Reforms: A Way Forward	93
<i>Dr. Punit Gaur</i>	



# Editorial Perspective

## A few words for our Readers

The current issue of “Dialogue” brings to its readers a curated bouquets of articles from authors from Central Asia and India. The articles were curated by Prof Anwar Alam, Distinguished Fellow in Policy Perspectives Foundation (PPF), and convenor of the proposed international seminar. The International Seminar – *India and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities*- will take place from 27th to 29th September 2022.

The ‘Dialogue’ supports and celebrates the PPF initiative to deepen the relations between India and the Central Asian region. It had published special issues on Central Asia on two occasions. The readers received these special issues well. It was, therefore, a natural choice for the PPF to approach ‘Astha Bharati,’ the publisher of ‘Dialogue.’

This led to a consensus between the Astha Bharati and PPF to join hands to permit publication of a special issue of ‘Dialogue’ as a ‘curtain raiser’ on the eve of the seminar on ‘India and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities.’

We hope the readers will welcome this initiative.

**P C Haldar**

*President*

*Policy Perspectives Foundation*

**Prakash Singh**

*President*

*Astha Bharati*





# Globalisation and Prospect for India's 'Connect Central Policy'

**Anwar Alam\***

## **Abstract**

*This paper seeks to understand approach and pattern of India's engagement with Central Asian Republics (CARs). It examines the contemporary approaches and debates surrounding India's policy towards the region of Central Asia and found them unhelpful in exploring multipronged engagement of India towards the region. Contrary to the wide perception of disappointment and 'policy deficit', which one encountered over India's Connect Central Policy in the academia, it argues that despite the absence of physical connectivity, high degree of non-cooperative attitude of Pakistan and 'de-stabilised Afghanistan', India has succeeded in carving a political and economic role in the region with a potential to deepen its relationship in future.*

## **Introduction: The Issue of Approach and Perspectives**

What has been trajectory of India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP) since 2012, when this policy was officially articulated and endorsed? Is there any growing 'convergence of interest' between Central Asian Republics (CARs) and India that could bind the two for a long term? Will India succeed in establishing a robust economic and political presence in the region? What are the constraints and challenges that limits the potential for cooperation between the two? These are old questions and have been vigorously debated among the Indian academia, think tanks and policy makers.

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\* Professor Anwar Alam is distinguished fellow of Policy Perspectives Foundation and also the convener of the International Seminar-India and Central Asia: Challenges & Opportunities.

There are two large discourses with which India's engagement with CARs in general and the above specific questions in particular has been deliberated. First, most analysts saw the growing political willingness on the part of India and CARs to forge closer relationship but certain 'structural constraints' prevented the relationship between the two to grow beyond a 'low level of political and economic engagement'. Important among these structural constraints are the India's lack of physical/land connectivity with the region, the fragile and de-stabilised Afghan scenario, the existence of hostile neighbour, i. e. Pakistan and the land locked geography of most of CARs (except Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan- both have some access to Caspian Sea). Thus, Manoj Joshi, a fellow with ORF, for these structural constraints, finds the Indian involvement in Central Asia a fruitless exercise and cautioned that 'India would be better off deploying its already scarce resources to shoring up its ties with countries in the South Asian or Indian Ocean Region'<sup>1</sup>.

There is no denying that these structural factors do constrain the policy options and efforts of both India and CARs to optimise their potential multi-level cooperation. However, they are not *specific* to Indo-CARs relationship but most countries face a set of structural barriers in pursuance of their foreign policy objectives and most of them are '*Prisoner of Geography*'<sup>2</sup>. Nations with a combination of strong soft power (ability to influence other nations through economic assistance, aids, loans and grants, knowledge industry, democratic governance, technology, export, trade entertainment industry etc) and hard power (military) have managed to overcome such barriers. Israel (a middle power) is one of good examples that has successfully broken with such 'structural barrier'- both physical and mental- and managed to grow steadily.

Second, the paradigm of 'Great Game Theory' has dominantly shaped the intellectual discourse related to the understanding of Central Asia. This theory posits the region was once a 'chess field' of such dominant powers as Imperial Britain and Czarist Russia in 19th century. The former treated the land mass of Central Asia and adjoining West Asia as 'buffer zone' to protect its 'Indian possession' from the 'Russian threat'. To secure this goal the Imperial Britain entered into a web of treaties and agreements with multiple powers in the region. With attraction of natural resources-particularly oil and gas<sup>3</sup> and its geo-strategic location, this scenario is expected to be enacted again in the

region by such global powers as USA, Russia, and China. However, none of these three powers are today in the position of 19th century Imperial Britain, Czarist Russia, or Imperial France to carve out their ‘permanent pockets of influences’ or ‘territorial concession’ in most parts of the world including CAR nations. The ‘American fiasco’ in Afghanistan and Iraq testifies the limit of physical intervention of superior powers in late twentieth and twenty-first century. Similarly, it is difficult to visualise CARs as ‘backyard’ of such regional powers as Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey. The implication of uncritical acceptance of ‘Great Game.

Theory’ is that India cannot play any significant role in Central Asia, given the active presence of USA, Russia, China, European Union, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia too.

A part of the problem with such paradigm is that it treats ‘Central Asia’ as ‘one monolithic block’, which conceals its rich political, cultural, linguistic, historical, economic, and religious diversities, and denies the ‘autonomy’ to these five Central Asian Republics (CARs). A cursory political observation would reveal how each of these five CARs contains multiple ethnic groups and inter-ethnic rivalry has dominantly shaped their inter-state relationship. Incidents such as Tajik civil war in the 1990s; riots and significant protests in many parts of Kyrgyzstan (2005, 2010, 2022), the popular uprising in Uzbekistan (Andizhan, 2005), and massive protests across Kazakhstan (Jan-Feb 2022) have mostly been shaped through inter and intra-ethnic politics. Moreover, there exists a political leadership rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to dominate the region. In fact, most nations hardly conduct its foreign policy on the idea of ‘monolithic treatment of a region’. Rather, foreign policy is transactional in nature and takes into consideration of political sensibilities of the concerned nation, while advancing their economic and political interest in the region.

The dominance of the above two perspectives, despite its inherent problematics, among a large number of Indian intellectuals, area experts and strategic community has cast a ‘permanent doubt’ on the potential of India to play an effective and constructive role in the region of Central Asia. Such assessment of India’s role in the region is deeply problematic and contrary to a good progress that India has made in building a robust political relationship, if not a robust economic engagement, despite the complexity of multiple factors that exists on each side and obstructs the faster growth between the two.

## **Reasons for Low Level Interaction During 1990s**

India was one of the first countries to extend the political recognition to the independence of all five Central Asian Republics (CARs) viz Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan between 1991-1992. The collapse of cold war structure freed many nations including India and newly formed CARs from ideological polarity of international system, which allow them to pursue economy centred foreign policy with relative autonomy. Though the phenomenon of globalisation did offer 'numerous advantages' in terms of political, economic and social developments, the relationship between CARs and India could not progress significantly despite a high level of political exchanges (Appendix 1) during the entire 1990s due to the five important reasons:-

All five CAR nations throughout the greater parts of 1990s had been more focussed on issues related to security challenges including the threat of Islamicist terrorist groups, building state institutions, protection and strengthening of national independence, settling the issue of border, and engaging and negotiating with external powers and companies to invest, explore and market their natural resources, particularly in the field of oil and gas.

The disintegration of USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republic) also terminated the direct and indirect the traditional Soviet subsidy to these former Soviet republics, leaving all newly independent CARs in serious economic crisis.

All CARs were dependent upon the Soviet built infrastructure including pipelines, roads, communication, and security structure. Russian infrastructure continues to constitute the main basis for exporting the Central Asian oil and gas to world market despite a steady penetration by the Chinese and European Union. For instance, outside its extensive rail network Kazakhstan has been able to use the pipeline from Uzen and Atyrau to Samara, its first and main outlet in Russia until 2001. Since then, a second line, the CPC pipeline, has been operating from Tengiz and Atyrau to Novorossiysk and has become the country's major export route, with transport capacities initially twice higher than the former line. As for Turkmenistan, it is connected to Russia through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan by the Central Asia-Centre (CAC) gas pipeline. Hence almost 90% of Turkmen gas was sent to Ukraine via Russia until the mid-2000s. For both economic and political reasons, the Russian Northern routes have long remained essential to Caspian states' export capacities.

The foreign policy of CARs is much more oriented towards Russia, China, and European Union due to their geographical proximity, security structure and influx of capital, which makes them to accord a low priority in investing into relationship with India.

On the other hand, India, throughout the major parts of 1990s, itself was struggling with its massive economic crisis in the backdrop of Gulf crisis (which even saw the Indian government mortgaging 46.91 tonnes of gold to Bank of England and Bank of Japan to raise 400 million \$ in July 1991), process of unleashing the liberalising the Indian economy and the development of Islamist militancy in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir and Taliban in Afghanistan. As a result, during 1990s India lacks sufficient capital—both political and economic—to offer anything concrete to CARs except maintaining a low-level political engagement. India was hardly looked upon by the outside world including CARs as model of development except a civilisational entity with a relatively good record of functioning democracy.

### **Regional Grouping and Economic Churning within CARs**

It is only with the gradual integration of CARs (except Turkmenistan) and India in the global market during the first decade of twenty first century that both developed a framework of ‘convergence of interest’ and ‘cooperation’ to deepen their interaction. While the much debate took place on various aspects of globalisation—connectivity, interdependency, FDI, information technology, mobility, less attention has been paid to the emerging regionalisation of politics and regional economic block, which has proved to be crucial to accelerate the process of development in various regions of the world: EU in Europe, ECOWAS in Africa, ASEAN in South East Asia and more recently the formation of SCO. It is important to underline that process of economic regionalization is taking place more robustly in Asia minus Gulf region and South Asia than other parts of the world. Thus, 60 percent of goods traded by Asian economies are within the region (the highest intra-regional share of any region apart from Europe), 71 percent of Asian investment in start-ups and 59 percent of foreign direct investment (FDI) is intra -regional, and 74 percent of Asian air travellers travel within the region<sup>4</sup>.

Central Asian Republics too witnessed the formation of many economic, political and security regional blocks beginning with formation of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991 on account of its untapped natural resources as well as geo strategic

location. The CIS continued the Soviet era free trade and visa free movement of people for limited period among themselves. In addition to this and membership in WTO (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan), three factors have intensified the process of formation of regional blocking within Central Asia. First, the Chinese's OBOR (One Belt One Road)-the road and sea link-that supposedly aims at linking China with World in all direction -North, South, East and West—all passes through CARs<sup>5</sup> and is at the heart of China's 'new Silk Road' strategy.

Second, the European Union has intensified its economic linkage and infrastructure projects within CARs with a view to diversify its imports of oil and gas in order to reduce its dependence upon the Russian oil and gas. According to a source, 'about 75% of Kazakh oil exports were travelling around or across the Caspian Sea to Europe, primarily to Germany, France, Italy, Greece, and Austria. By using the CPC pipeline via Russia, the BTC, and the Baku-Novorossiysk pipelines through Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan provided almost 7% of EU's oil import needs in 2016'<sup>6</sup>. This infrastructural project is at the heart of Southern Gas Corridor of European energy security strategy. Third, the Russian Federation continues to retain its supremacy in security and economic market of CARs, even while allowing other powers to build infrastructure.

One consequence of growing economic competition and strategic cooperation among external players (Russia, China, EU, Turkey, and Iran) is the mushrooming of regional economic, security and political block in addition to many bilateral and multilateral oil and gas pipeline agreements including TAPI. A few examples of this trend are : SCO (2001) led by China and Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation programme (CAREC), led by the Asian Development Bank with the support of China, and the intergovernmental Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and EU led Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with each of five Central Asian countries.

As a consequence of multi prong economic activity, the inflow of remittances, mostly from Russia and in view of global commodity boom (2000-2008), the GDP per capita in current international dollars in PPP terms has systematically increased in all Central Asian countries. Indeed, during the 2000s CARs had emerged as one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world with average growth rates of 8-10%<sup>7</sup>. They re-established growing trade links with each other, with their big

neighbours and with the rest of the world and intraregional trade between Central Asian countries grew five- fold during 2000- 2008. Though the global economic meltdown in 2008 did hit the Central Asian economies like many economies of the world; however, they continue to grow at relatively slower pace compared to 2000-2008 despite the decline in global commodity price in 2014. This resulted in the drastic reduction of absolute poverty (even surpassing to China and Turkey) and creation of Sovereign Wealth in most of CAR nation. Thus, as per available data, in Kazakhstan the poverty head count at the rate of \$1.90 and \$3.10 a day decline from 6% and 23.1% in 1993 to 0.0 % and 0.3% in 2013 respectively. Figure for Kyrgyzstan indicates for the same period at the rate of \$1.90 and \$3.10 a day reflects a decline in poverty from 44.3% to 3.3% and 63.9% to 23.0% respectively. According to the same source, Tajikistan registered a decline in the poverty head count at the above respective rates from 54.4% in 1998 to 22.6% in 2013 and 86.1% in 1998 to 60.8% in 2013. There is a lack of data with regard to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; though it is widely believed that both countries have a good record of growth. Similarly, all CARs countries witnessed significant improvement in life expectancy and educational output. Over the years the five CARs have not only regained the new political identity but has acquired a new economic and political capital as a part of process of development of 'rest of the world', which gave them a new identity, confidence, and capacity to play an autonomous role in the world affairs.

### **India: Pro Active Phase**

India too has paced up its economic growth since early 2000 and today it has emerged as fifth largest economy of the world on nominal GDP level, leaving behind United Kingdom and third largest economy on PPP basis. It is these economic transformation within India and the region of Central Asia, which is bringing the two together. Central Asian nations have also been looking for viable markets, particularly in economic and security sectors. Along with China, India has emerged as third largest market of hydrocarbon products in the world. On the other hand, India increasingly came to recognise that its future growth is contingent upon the stability of Central Asia- transit route to the European market and an important source of hydrocarbon products. Thus, Shri Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister launched a serious re-connect with CARS since 2015 when he visited CAR countries, even though diplomatic etiquette and political communication between



the two has been alive since the rebirth of CARS in 1991 and the policy of Connect Central Asia was officially launched in 2012. The Modi government had invited the Head of State of all five CAR countries as ‘State Guest on Republic Day’ (26th January 2022), which does reflect a deep political commitment on the part of Indian government to engage with CARs. However, due to COVID, the event was transformed into a virtual meeting on 27th January 2022. The novelty in the approach of the Modi government towards the region of Central Asia is that unlike in past it does not view CARs through ‘Russian lens’, despite recognising the latter’s dominance in regional security order. The Indian government is deeply aware of the ongoing subtle process of ‘de-Russainisation’ with varying degree in most all CAR nations, which is making them more independent and autonomous in dealing with other nations. It is therefore not surprising that most of CARs nation remained neutral vis a vis Russian invasion of Ukraine—neither actively supporting nor opposing; rather critical segments within CARs see the Ukraine crisis as an ‘opportunity’ to free themselves from the Russian domination.

Over the years the Indian government’s pro-active approach towards the region has led to develop a ‘convergence of interest’ and ‘convergence of perspective’ over the issues of common concerns. This includes the issue of regional security, counter terrorism, economic cooperation, joint military operations, strategic partnership, and connectivity. The CARs have demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to these common concerns, which has been gradually institutionalised into Indo-Central Asia Dialogue at the Ministry level since 2019. This ‘structured dialogue’ has proved to very productive in developing mutual confidence and trust between CARs and India. Today both India and CARs (particularly, Uzbekistan, Khazakstan and Turkmenistan) has developed a ‘shared perspective’ on the issue of stabilisation of Afghanistan, which includes even ‘dialogue with Taliban’ and mobilising the humanitarian assistance to help people of Afghanistan’. Earlier in late 1990s India had sought a close military collaboration with Tajikistan as a part of Northern Alliance against Taliban in Afghanistan., which even led India for the first time develop a small military base at Ayni on Tajikistan-Afghanistan border since 2002. The return of Taliban in Afghanistan in the backdrop of withdrawal of US troops in August 2021 has re-centred the agenda of terrorism in the region and in the world; despite the liquidation of most of infrastructure of al Qaida, ISIS, and other terrorist outfits. However, Taliban’s declaration of not

allowing any group to use Afghanistan for the purpose of ‘terrorist activity’ is a welcome sign and there is an emerging regional and global consensus of the need to ‘dialogue and engage’ with Taliban on a set of conditions; lest its political isolation further breed terrorism. India and most of CARs nations are a part of this emerging consensus, which led India to open dialogue with Taliban and reopen its Embassy in Kabul. The Joint Statement of Third Indo-Central Asia Dialogue, which took place on 17-18 December 2021 at New Delhi, underlined this approach:

*“the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, central role of the UN, providing immediate humanitarian assistance for the Afghan people and preserving the rights of women, children and other national ethnic groups.”*

*It further reiterated the strategic significance of UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), “which unequivocally demands that Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning or financing terrorist acts and called for concerted action against all terrorist groups”.*

Further, India has entered into a soft military agreement with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan to strengthen the regional security. It conducted its first ever joint military exercise with Kyrgyzstan at Khanjar in 2011, which is now an annual affair. In 2016, India also held its first joint army exercise with Kazakhstan at Prabal Dostyk. However, India has avoided any ‘military alliance’ like US led NATO or Russia led CSTO and confined itself in the region to joint military exercise, training, education, infrastructure assistance, counter terror cooperation construction of field hospital.

There are two specific challenges that obstruct the joint coordination and efforts of India and CARs countries to stabilise Afghanistan and to strengthen the regional security. One sets of challenges comes from Pakistan and another from Turkey under the Erdogan regime. Pakistan wants to deprive India from conducting any meaningful engagement with Afghanistan, Central Asia and West Asia in particular and Muslim World in general. It does not hesitate in using terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy to secure this nefarious anti India goal. On the other hand, Turkey under the Erdogan regime, at least since 2012, has aggressively displayed its ‘Pan Turism’ approach towards the central Asia on account of its Islamist mooring and linguistic-cultural affinity with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and

Uzbekistan. The Erdogan regime now harbours an 'Islamist vision' to compete with Saudi Arabia and Iran for the leadership of the Muslim world. Its 'dealing Islamicist terrorist groups including ISIS and other political Islamist groups (particularly in South Asia) in order to achieve the leadership of Muslim world is well documented. Such states often increase the life of terrorism by providing direct and indirect support to terrorist groups. It is, however, a measure of satisfaction that all five CAR nations on account of their strong secular statist tradition have been vehemently opposed to any form of Islamic radicalisation and Islamicist terrorism and has not hesitated in brutally suppressing the same in their respective countries. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have repatriated 231 and 156 citizens respectively from the Syrian conflict zones. Both along with other Central Asian nations have taken a series of measures against the 'threat of fleeing ISIS terrorists', a good number of which belong to Central Asian countries, or their possible regrouping in Afghanistan in view of return of Taliban in power. Given its experience in successfully tracking down and limiting the influence of the IS domestically, India's agenda in Central Asia includes cooperation to tackle terrorism and radicalization.

It may be noted here that the foreign ministers of the five republics had skipped the OIC meeting in Islamabad to attend the Dialogue in New Delhi in December 2021. Earlier, the National Security Advisors of all these five countries attended the regional meeting on the situation in Afghanistan that India hosted in November 2021. The Third Indo-Central Asia Dialogue strongly emphasised non- interference in internal affairs of Afghanistan and respect for its territorial integrity and sovereignty as brought out in UNSC Resolution of 2593 (2021). This indicates a subtle shift in CARs' approach towards Pakistan, whereby it does not want to give a 'free hand' to Pakistan to play its mischief in Afghanistan in its 'anti- India tirade' and destabilise the region. There is a growing perception within the critical segments of CARs that Pakistan's anti India polemics has potential to jeopardise the prospect of economic gains of Central Asia, which will be accrued to them due to the cooperation of India in South Asia as well as in South East Asia. This partly explains the growing political distancing of CARs vis a vis Pakistan. For the same reason, CARs, except Turkmenistan, has maintained a safe political distance vis a vis the Erdogan regime. It is a measure of success that both India and CARs have succeeded in insulating their Muslim population from Islamicist terror ideology, notwithstanding the participation of a few citizens from these countries

in the global Islamicist terror activities. Moreover, unlike the West, Russia, and China, both India and CARs avoided the mixing up Islam and terrorism in their counter-terror strategies.

In the field of economic cooperation India has not registered, unlike China, a significant trade relationship with CARs. The trade volume remained confined to US \$ 2 billion, unlike China's US \$100 billion trade with CARs. 80-85% of this US \$ 2 billion trade deals involves imports of uranium, oil, and gas from Kazakhstan<sup>10</sup>. Earlier this year, India also signed a uranium supply agreement with Uzbekistan. Many considers India's low volume of trade with CARs a failure in view of China's growing trade volume and investment in the region. However, such comparison is erroneous. Unlike India, China's geographical proximity and land connectivity with CARs provides it a strategic advantage.

### **Conclusion: High Prospect**

Over the years India has secured a good footing in Central Asia through the instrument of Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under cover of TIR Carnets (2017) and Ashgabat Agreement (2018) on International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITTC) and building up Chabahar and Bandarabas-the two Iranian ports to connect International North- South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and to enhance the road and rail connectivity between India and the Central Asian countries. Towards this goal, the Indian government further announced the grant of \$1b Line of Credit during the Third Indo-Central Asia Dialogue in December 2021. The Dialogue even sought to activate the India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC), established in 2020, to undertake the projects related to connectivity. India remained engaged with the process of implementation of Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, though the progress is slow. Uzbekistan has also pushed ahead for a joint plan with India and Iran to enhance connectivity through the Chabahar Port. Once fully operationalised, the INSTC corridor route would be shorter than Suez and the Mediterranean Sea and therefore would be boon to India's industry, overland routes to rich resources of Russia and Middle East, and significant energy supplies at relatively short distances.

### **End Notes**

1. Manoj Joshi, Playing a Lost Game, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/playing-a-losing-game/>, Feb 01, 2022

2. Tim Marshall, *Prisoner of Geography*, Elliott & Thompson Limited 2015.
3. On the whole, they account for more than 2% of the world's oil reserves, and over 10% of gas reserves – relatively small numbers when compared to neighboring or Middle Eastern countries.
4. *The Future of Asia: Asian flows and networks are defining the next phase of globalisation*; Discussion Paper, September 2019, McKinsey Global Institute, p 8; <https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/mckinsey/featured%20insights/asia%20pacific/the%20future%20of%20asia%20asian%20flows%20and%20networks%20are%20defining%20the%20next%20phase%20of%20globalization/mgi-future-of-asia-flows-and-trade-discussion-paper-sep-2019.pdf>
5. Three major belts/roads have been proposed: North, Central and South. The North Belt will go through Kazakhstan and Russia to Europe. The Central Belt will go through Central Asia, Western Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean. Finally, the South Road will stretch from China to Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean.
6. Annie Jafalian, *Globalisation Through Oil and Gas : Central Asia Predicament*, *Nueva Época – año 13, núm. 47 – octubre 2019 / marzo 2020*, available at <https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/tla/v13n47/2594-0716-tla-13-47-368.pdf>, accessed on 12.09.2022 , p. 381, 369-392.
7. Johannes F Linn, 'Central Asian Regional Integration and Cooperation : Reality and Myth' , *The Economics of Post Soviet and Eurasian Integration*, p, 98.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Uuriintuya Batsaikhan and Marek Dabrowsk, 'Central Asia — twenty-five years after the breakup of the USSR', *Russian Journal of Economics* 3 (2017) 296–320, Table 5, p, 315, available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405473917300429>, accessed on 10.09.2022.
10. In 2008, Kazakhstan supported India in obtaining India-specific exemption to allow civil nuclear cooperation with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) countries. The following year, India and Kazakhstan signed an agreement for the supply of 2,100 tonnes of uranium to India until 2014. Two years later, during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Kazakhstan, they signed an agreement for 'Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy. Further, to secure its energy interests, India has also expanded civil nuclear cooperation with the region. In 2015, with their earlier deal having expired, India and Kazakhstan signed a new agreement for the purchase of 5000 tonnes of Kazakh Uranium until the end of 2019. Currently, both sides are negotiating a third agreement, as part of which Kazakhstan is planning to increase its supplies to India to 7500-10000 tonnes.

**Appendix 1**  
**India-Central Asian Countries**  
**High-level Meetings: 1993-2022**

**1. Uzbekistan & India**

<b>From India to Uzbekistan</b>	<b>From Uzbekistan to India</b>
Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, 1993	President Islam Karimov in 1994, 2000,2005 and 2011
Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, 2006	President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2018 and 2019
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2015 and 2016	Defense Minister of Uzbekistan, Maj.Gen. Abdulalam Azizov, 2018.
Minister of External Affairs	Minister of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan,
(Late) Sushma Swaraj, 2019 and 2018	Paulat Bobojonov, 2019
Minister of Defense Rajnath Singh, 2019 and 2022	

**2. Kazakhstan & India**

<b>From India to Kazakhstan</b>	<b>From Kazakhstan to India</b>
Prime Minister Narsimha Rao, 1993	President Nursultan Nazarbayev in 1992, 1993, 1996, 2002, and 2009
Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 2002	Deputy Prime Minister, H.E. Askar Zhumagaliyev, 2018
Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, 2011	Minister of Energy, H.E. Kanat Bozymbayev, 2019
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2015 & 2017	National Security Committee Chairman (Former PM) Karim Massimov, 2021
Vice President K.R. Narayanan, 1996	Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi, 2021
Vice President Hamid Ansari, 2008	
Minister of External Affairs	
(Late) Sushma Swaraj, 2018	
Minister of Defense	
Nirmala Sitharaman, 2018	
Minister of Health and Family Welfare J.P. Nadda, 2018	
Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, 2021	

### 3. Kyrgyzstan & India

From India to Kyrgyzstan	From Kyrgyzstan to India
Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, 1995	President Akaev in 1992, 1999, 2002, and 2003
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2015	President Almazbek Atambaev, 2016
Vice President K.R. Narayanan, 1996	Prime Minister Apas Jumagulov, 1997
Vice President Krishna Kant, 1999	Deputy Prime Minister, Djoomart Otorbaev, 2013
Minister of External Affairs (Late) Sushma Swaraj, 2019 and 2018	Foreign Minister, Mr. Chingiz Aidarbekov, 2019
Home Minister Rajnath Singh, 2017	

### 4. Tajikistan & India

From India to Tajikistan	From Tajikistan to India
Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 2003	President Rahmon in 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2016
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2015	Minister of Economic Development and Trade, 2017
President Ram Nath Kovind, 2018	Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin, 2015
President Pratibha Patil, 2009	Defense Minister Col. Gen. Sherali Mirzo, 2018
Vice President Hamid Ansari, 2013	
Minister of External Affairs (Late) Sushma Swaraj, 2014 and 2018	
Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, 2019 and 2021	
Minister for Water Resources, River	Development and Ganga Rejuvenation Nitin Gadkari, 2018

### 5. Turkmenistan & India

From India to Turkmenistan	From Turkmenistan to India
Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 2015	President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, 2010

# Perceptions of India in Central Asia: Bollywood vs. Geopolitics (the Case of Tajikistan)

**Dr. Muzaffar Olimov\***

## **Abstract**

*The report is devoted to a study of the perception of India by the population of the Republic of Tajikistan in the context of geopolitical orientations and preferences in the period from 2015 to 2022. Based on materials from two surveys (1,000 respondents) conducted in 2015 and 2020, interviews and focus group discussions in 2022, we examine the attitude of Tajikistan's population toward India in an era of global transformation and regional change. The Analysis of data reveals that overall, the popular perception within Tajikistan about India is positive, which provides a good basis for developmental cooperation between the two countries.*

*To do this, we asked how Tajikistan's citizens view various aspects of life in India - its political system, economy, international politics, culture, and the arts. We focused on the following questions: What connects and what separates Tajikistan and India? Do Tajiks view India as an enemy, a friend, or a partner? What sources of information about India do they draw from, and how do they view the prospects for Tajik Indian relations? How has Tajikistan's involvement in China's "One Belt, One Road" integration project, as well as changes related to the events in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Ukraine, affected Tajikistanis' perception of India?*

**Keywords:** *public opinion, perception, culture, geopolitics, security, Afghan factor, Tajikistan, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China*

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## **Introduction. Bollywood vs. geopolitics**

May 3-6, 2022, a festival of Indian cinema with Kareena Kapoor was held in Tajikistan. The festival gathered many fans of Indian cinema and Indian music in Tajikistan. A few days later, on May 27, the 4th round of multilateral consultations of Secretaries of Security Councils on Afghan issues was held in Dushanbe. Secretaries from Central Asia, Russia, India, Iran and China attended. The main topics of discussion were border cooperation, threats of terrorism, problems of internal Afghan politics - women's rights and prospects for an inclusive government. India's role in this discussion was one of the key ones.

Such is the palette of Tajikistan-India relations: from a passion for music, dance and Bollywood to the need to confront terrorism and military threats emanating from their shared neighbor, Afghanistan. How is all this perceived by the people of Tajikistan? What connects and what separates Tajikistan and India? Do Tajiks view India as an enemy, a friend or a partner? From what sources do Tajiks draw information about India and how do they view the prospects for Tajik-Indian relations? How has Tajikistan's involvement in China's "One Belt, One Road" integration project, as well as changes related to the events in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Ukraine, affected Tajikistanis' perception of India?

I will try to answer these questions based on the materials of several sociological studies of the perception of India by the population of the Republic of Tajikistan in the context of geopolitical orientations and preferences in the period from 2015 to 2022. Based on the materials of two surveys (1,000 respondents each) conducted in 2015 and 2020, interviews and focus group discussions in 2022, we examine the attitude of the population of Tajikistan and its elites toward India in an era of global transformation and regional change.

## **Tajik-Indian Relations: History and Modernity**

The history of relations between Tajiks and Indians is very long. It goes back to the commonality of Indo-Aryan peoples in the era of Vedas and Avesta. Kushan Empire united the ancestors of modern Tajiks and Indians in one country. At that time not only the largest Buddhist monasteries operated in the territory of modern Tajikistan, but also Hinduism was widespread. The spread of Islam did not interrupt the ties between the Tajiks and India. They continued, including in the

form of religious and trade migrations within the framework of the Great Silk Road. Stable ties were continued in the early 13th century in the era of the Muslim invasion of India, they further strengthened in the Mughal Empire in India (from 1526 until the beginning of the 18th century)<sup>1</sup>.

Warm relations with India continued into the Soviet era, when there was strong cooperation in science, politics, economics and culture<sup>2</sup>. Thus, India and Tajikistan have a common past, experience of interaction and mutual influence.

Since independence in 1991, diplomatic relations between Tajikistan and India have developed quite steadily. The top leadership of both countries maintains contacts with each other at a good level. The Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation is functioning. It plays a key role in economic cooperation.

The main areas of cooperation are culture, education, economy, cultural, educational, health and tourism ties.

Increasing mutual understanding between peoples forms a platform for international cooperation, and cultural ties are an essential tool in this sphere. The Indian Cultural Center is very active in Dushanbe and enjoys wide popularity among the population; there are various courses in Indian dance, yoga, cultural events, tours of Indian artists, exhibitions and presentations, festivals. At the same time, India systematically organizes tours and trips of Tajik cultural, artistic and scientific figures to India.

Cooperation in education and vocational training is developing dynamically. The opening of a training center in Dushanbe for students of the Muhammad Osimi Technical University (2015) with grant funds from India with their technical equipment is a clear example of successful cooperation between the Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan and the Indian Center for Cultural Relations (ICCR)<sup>3</sup>.

Tajikistan has been receiving hundreds of Indian students for student exchanges over the past decades who are studying at the Abu Ali Ibn Sino (Avisena) State Medical University. At the same time, a very large number of citizens of Tajikistan study in India in various educational institutions, training courses<sup>4</sup>.

A successful example of cooperation is ties in the health sector. It is primarily the import of Indian medicines. They are available in any pharmacy in Tajikistan. It is important that these medicines are most

accessible to people with low incomes. There are currently 120 Indian pharmaceutical companies operating in Tajikistan<sup>5</sup>. Tourism from Tajikistan to India is developing well, although its development is hampered by the instability of direct flights between Dushanbe and Delhi.

A promising direction is cooperation in the water sector, including exchange of experience and knowledge in the implementation of programs related to water management, protection of glaciers, and participation in the Second Dushanbe Conference on Water<sup>6</sup>.

### **Tajikistan-India Relations in the Pandemic**

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, India has supplied Tajikistan with assistance in the form of medicines, vaccines, and consumables<sup>7</sup>. In 2020. The Indian government also arranged for outbound flights to bring Tajik citizens stranded in India and Indian citizens in Tajikistan. Overall, India's assistance during the pandemic is invaluable.

### **Economic relations**

At the moment the total trade turnover between Tajikistan and India is about 40 million dollars a year and it is mainly export of products from India<sup>8</sup>. The level of trade with India is the lowest in Central Asia. According to the general opinion, the trade and economic relations between Tajikistan and India do not correspond to the existing potential opportunities. For example, in 2020 the trade turnover between the two countries was \$39 million. This is 24 times less than Tajikistan's trade turnover with Russia and 14 times less than that with China. Nevertheless, we see a positive dynamics of development of trade and economic relations since 2020. The number of Indian companies operating in Tajikistan is small. Most are limited to pharmaceuticals.

### **Military cooperation between Tajikistan and India**

One of the important areas of Tajik-Indian ties is military cooperation. This area developed most dynamically in the 2000s, which was facilitated by common interests regarding Afghanistan, as well as by the dynamics of change in Afghanistan. As early as 20 years ago, the Indian government provided a grant for reconstruction of the Ayni airport. More than 200 Indian engineers and technicians reconstructed the airfield and equipped it with high-tech equipment. The Indian side also renovated the military hospital in the district center of Farkhor.<sup>9</sup>

This is the hospital where Ahmad Shah Masood was brought after the assassination attempt and where he died. After the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, this military hospital ceased to function. Instead, India set up a 50-bed military hospital in the Khatlon province center of Bokhtar. (Information of the Ministry of Defense of Tajikistan).

It is very important that India helped to form the Armed Forces of the RT and trained soldiers of Tajikistan in educational institutions of the Indian Ministry of Defense. Tajikistan remembers well India's military and technical assistance to Tajikistan in the form of helicopters and other technical equipment in 2012-2013.

Overall, Tajikistan-India military relations are largely symbolic, not long-term or friendly, and are not directed against third countries. Their purpose is to ensure both countries' own security. Cooperation is facilitated by a) absence of contradictions: India and the RT do not have common border and there are no disputable issues and threats; b) common interests: interest in peace and stability in neighboring Afghanistan as well as in combating terrorism, extremism and violence in the region.

At present the situation in Afghanistan makes the neighboring countries remember again about the need to strengthen military cooperation.

The Afghan factor: security and expansion of Pakistan's influence on the region (regional security) According to experts in Tajikistan, the main goal of the Taliban project in Afghanistan is to organize a large "gray zone" similar to Iraq and Syria. It is aimed at reformatting Eurasia. According to interviews with local experts, they believe that the composition and balance of key power centers in Central Asia is already changing. Russia is still the main provider of security in the region. At the same time, the role of China is steadily increasing, including in the military sphere. The regional centers of power, such as Turkey, Iran and Pakistan, are competing fiercely in the region.

As for Tajikistan, it is forced to strengthen its security and defense systems in every possible way, drawing resources from Russia, the CSTO and China. Thus, Tajikistan proposes to create a "security belt" along the border with Afghanistan<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, the competition of global and regional centers of power itself becomes a source of danger. Thus, Tajikistan has become the center of geopolitical squabbles between India and China. There are also problems in the relations between Russia and China regarding Central Asia. These contradictions

have been suppressed under Western sanctions and Russia's drift toward China. But they have not disappeared. We can see their reflection in the events in Gorno-Badakhshan. China, Tajikistan's main creditor and investor, makes territorial claims on Mountain Badakhshan. In the meantime, China's military presence in Badakhshan continues to expand. This causes discontent of many international interests, which we can see in the events in Gorno-Badakhshan. These events once again show that there is a need for international cooperation for peace and that the friendly countries for Afghanistan, such as Tajikistan and India, should be focused on peace and stability in Afghanistan. This will have benefits for us in terms of security, transit prospects, roads, trade links and development<sup>11</sup>.

### **The Image of India in Tajikistan's Public Opinion**

Speaking about the image of India in Tajikistan, it should be emphasized that it is the historical duration, sustainability and diversity of cultural contacts that ensure the benevolent attitude of Tajikistan's population toward India. The population of Tajikistan values above all the culture and art of India, i.e. what is familiar and historically highly valued. At the same time, polls show a profound difference in political cultures and especially in religious differences. Analyzing the materials of an opinion poll in 2015 (1,000 respondents, nationally representative sample), we found that Tajik society in general has a benign attitude toward India, but lacks information. About 11% of respondents know nothing about India except Indian cinema.

The population of Tajikistan holds India's culture, its music, and above all Indian cinema in the highest esteem - almost 38% reported admiring Indian films, 19% admired Indian music, and 17% held India's culture in the highest esteem. India's international policies are also respected by the people of Tajikistan - one in ten respondents exclusively praised India's policies in the international arena. Tajik citizens are less enthusiastic about India's national policy - about 8% of respondents support it. A minority of respondents - 3% each admire the economic system of India and its religious policy.

The political system of India evokes the least sympathy (2%) - apparently because of the very great differences with the Tajik political system.

We asked the question, should Tajikistan seek to establish closer relations with India; should it try to distance itself, or should it continue to maintain the kind of relationship it has now?

The opinion on developing relations with India can be described as moderately positive, with 36% of respondents believing that it is necessary to get closer to India, about 11%, on the contrary, believe that it is better to distance, 41% want to leave everything as it is, and 11% do not know.

We found out the reasons for the negative attitude of some Tajik citizens to India and found that 3 problems cause negativism. These are, first of all, tense relations with Pakistan that threaten the stability of the entire region. Of less importance is the confrontation between Hindus and Muslims in India - 30% were against this. A third issue that causes negativism toward India is India's position on the Kashmir issue. However, it should not be forgotten that only 5% of respondents have a negative attitude towards India.

For this reason we specifically studied Tajikistan's public opinion on the question of India and Islam. We found that only just over 6% of respondents thought India was against Muslims, 83% thought it was not, and 10% did not know. In our cross-sectional analysis, we found that the people who think India is against Muslims are active Muslims who follow world politics and are aware of religious controversies in South Asia. They are the ones who view India unkindly because of the Indo-Pakistani controversy, the Kashmir problem, and Indo-Muslim communalism. The rest have little or no knowledge of these problems, but are convinced that India, with its high culture and tradition of non-violence, cannot infringe on the rights of Muslims.

Speaking about the attitude of the people of Tajikistan toward India, it should be noted that India is not on the list of countries that potentially threaten Tajikistan, i.e., its enemies.

India is improving its foreign policy strategies, including on Central Asia. Thus, it has put forward the "Connect Central Asia and Extended Neighborhood" strategies<sup>12</sup>. These are based on active political, economic and human interaction with Central Asian states. India's willingness to provide grants and loans is a telling example of its intentions and growing capacity. In the case of Tajikistan, grant assistance has been provided before, for example, in the first decade of this century, India provided \$25 million for the reconstruction of the Varzob-1 hydroelectric power plant. But in recent years there are more grants and they are allocated for more serious projects. For example, the Indian government gave \$20 million in 2018 for road construction, and an equal amount more for the next phase of the road project.

In December 2021, India and Tajikistan signed a memorandum on Indian grant assistance for community development projects (HICDP) in Tajikistan. The projects are to focus on socioeconomic development, livelihood support, women's empowerment, child protection, infrastructure for education, health, vocational training, agriculture and agro-industry, micro-irrigation, renewable energy, energy, trade, transport and communications sectors<sup>13</sup>.

In general, economic ties between Tajikistan and India are rather weak.

## **Conclusions So,**

1. The collected materials have shown that a stable dominant perception of India in Tajikistan is the long history of relations between Tajiks and Indians, and cultural ties. The population of Tajikistan appreciates Indian culture and art above all, i.e. what is familiar and historically highly valued.
2. This provides a benevolent attitude of the population of Tajikistan toward India and creates a favorable basis for the development of comprehensive cooperation.
3. Security issues and geopolitical situation are the key factors of Tajikistan-India cooperation at the present stage. They both make us natural allies and at the same time limit the extent of cooperation due to geopolitical turbulence.
4. At the same time, there are stumbling blocks in the development of Tajik-Indian relations: firstly, the deep difference in political cultures; secondly, the very low level of economic relations, which makes public opinion give a low assessment of India's economy; and thirdly, relations with Islam, which are present in three main problems that cause rejection of India - the Indo-Pakistani controversies, Kashmir problem and Hindu-Muslim communalism.
5. Despite this, in general public opinion in Tajikistan views India as an ally and friend. Not a single respondent named India as a potential enemy.
6. The scarcity of sources of information about India should be noted.
7. According to public opinion, the level of Tajik-Indian relations is satisfactory, but has the potential to develop

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# India's Strategic Imperatives for Engaging Central Asian States

**Dr. Mohammd Monir Alam\***

## **Abstract**

*Central Asia has remained theatre of geopolitical contest throughout the 19th as well as 20th century. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the Central Asian states on the vast Eurasian landmass has added a new strategic dimension to the Asian as well as world geopolitics. In fact, the dissolution of the Soviet Union not only altered the international geo-strategic balance but had also created a security vacuum in the Central Asian region. As a result, the region has still witnessed fierce international rivalry and competition to influence these independent states. The weakening of the Russian influence started the new "Great Game". In this changing nature of global and regional rivalry to influence and dominate these states, India cannot be a passive onlooker. Of course, various developments in the first decade of the 21st century and subsequent developments in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international coalition forces; and formation of the new government under Taliban etc. has compelled Indian policy makers to reinvigorate its strategies towards the region. In this backdrop, the present paper analyses India's strategic imperative to engage Central Asian states.*

Central Asia has remained theatre of geopolitical contest throughout the 19th as well as 20th century. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the Central Asian states on the vast Eurasian

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landmass has added a new strategic dimension to the Asian as well as world geopolitics. In fact, the dissolution of the Soviet Union not only altered the international geo-strategic balance but had also created a security vacuum in the Central Asian region. As a result, the region has still witnessed fierce international rivalry and competition to influence these independent states. The weakening of the Russian influence started the new “Great Game.” In this changing nature of global and regional rivalry to influence and dominate these states, India cannot be a passive onlooker. Of course, various developments in the first decade of the 21st century and subsequent developments in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international coalition forces; and formation of the new government under Taliban etc. has compelled Indian policy makers to reinvigorate its strategies towards the region. In this backdrop, the present paper analyses India’s strategic imperative to engage Central Asian states.

### **India and the geopolitical Context of Central Asia**

Historically, the uninterrupted multifaceted relations between India and Central Asia go back to remote antiquity which predate the arrival of the Turkic tribes in Central Asia and older than the Islamic Arab conquest of the region. The political and socio-cultural links between India and Central Asia forged during the ancient and medieval times continued to flourish till during the Soviet regime.<sup>1</sup>

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the intensified geopolitical and strategic context within three great powers- United States, Russia and China has created a situation of instability. In case of India, during transitional phase of independence of these states, despite historical linkages with the Central Asian region, India was slow in responding to the emerging strategic situation. But after a decade of independence of the Central Asian states, the United States’ led war on terrorism in Afghanistan to overthrow Taliban government; subsequent US decisions to reduce the military forces; President Joe Biden decision to completely withdrew the American troops; and finally the formation of the new government under the Taliban in Afghanistan in the wake of withdrawal of entire International Assistance Security Forces (IASF), India has definitely shifted its diplomatic thrust towards the Central Asian region. All these unprecedented developments have forced Indian policy makers to accord high priority and ensure to achieve its strategic objectives in the Central Asian region.

Apart from these new dynamics which were increasingly drawing international attention, the region due to several historical and geopolitical factors, also assumes strategic significance in its own right. The dynamics of change in Central Asia's geo-strategic environment has direct repercussions for India's foreign policy priorities. This change has created new geo-political and geo-economic imperatives for strengthening trade and economic relations as well. As already mentioned, India has accorded modest rather less priority to Central Asia. But despite limitations of geography, India has still worked to preserve its economic interests in the region. India seeks no clash but a compatibility of interests with Central Asia over the period of last thirty years. Moreover, relations between the two regions have developed in a unique and specific way. During the past thirty years, thrust of India's policy towards Central Asia have been to establish dynamic and multi-faced bilateral economic, political, and strategic relations.

India has been an important player working in the background to preserve stability in Central Asia. The geo-political stability in Central Asia has not only a direct impact on India's economic interests in the region, but also has implications on the ongoing insurgency in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. It is in India's interest to be an influential player in the emerging security alignments and changes in the geo-strategic balance in the region. As already mentioned, in the wake of economic dislocation brought by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states has provided immense economic opportunities and potentials for India. Moreover, India's capability to make its economic presence felt in Central Asia need not be underestimated. In fact, all Central Asian states are desperately looking for external buyers for their mineral resources and other finished products for their economic growth. Central Asian people have great opinion of India in the fields of industrial and technical development. Central Asian states can certainly offer several important raw materials. In this regard, abundant, inexpensive, technically skilled local labour force may offer a great advantage to Indian entrepreneurs for setting up joint ventures in Central Asia. Moreover, after September 11; and the Iraq War the geo-strategic developments in the region remained far more conducive to India's active engagement of the region in pursuit of her strategic, economic and security interests.

Keeping in view the changing parameters of the strategic environment and India's strategic interests in the region because of the

close geographical proximity and its future domestic energy security, India must not only sustain its current diplomatic thrust in the region but reinvigorate it to a far higher level.

### **Driving Forces for India's Trade and Economic Engagements**

To understand the present status of India's relationship with the Central Asian states, it is essential to understand India's major interests in the region. These are as follows: —

- Maintaining cordial neighbourly relations and peaceful co-existence while promoting goodwill towards Central Asia; India has never pledged to seek hegemony or power politics in the region but to promote peace and stability.
- Promoting cooperation, mutual benefit and seeking common interest and trade as the important aspect of bilateral relations; India shows its interest to work with Central Asian people constantly to improve the economy, expand the scope and enhance the quality and level of cooperation with mutual benefit.
- While energy reserves of the world are shrinking and the Indian dependency on energy sources especially oil and gas is growing, the vast and untapped resources in Central Asia have attracted India to establish a powerful economic relation in order to ensure its access to Central Asian energy sector.
- Apart from investment in oil and gas explorations and productions, Central Asia can become a huge market for Indian investments and exports in other areas such as agriculture, small scale industrial as well as consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, education, information technology, banking, healthcare, and hotels.
- India's policy towards Central Asia also puts considerable weight to preserve and strengthen its own political and economic interest in the region vis-à-vis other external actors like- China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, and non-state actors like NATO, IMF, World Bank etc.
- At the same time, Central Asian states also need India's economic assistance and policy guidance for its domestic economic growth; cooperation in the development of small enterprises; and also, assistance in exploration of vast untapped hydrocarbon resources in the region.

Against this backdrop, India is committed to achieve this interest by playing a more active role in Central Asia. Moreover, India has the potential to effectively intervene in the complicated geo-politics of the region. In fact, India has already established multi-faceted and dynamic bilateral and multi-lateral relations with all the Central Asian states to achieve its objectives in the changing strategic and international contest in the region because the region's description as an area of great strategic importance to India has always been a part of India's consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, since 1991 volume of India's trade with Central Asian states remained at the insignificant level of \$45 million till 2001 which represents not even 0.5% of the total trade turnover of the Central Asian states.<sup>3</sup> But economic experts have estimated the size of the Central Asian market at \$80 billion annually. Even if India succeeds in getting 5 per cent of the Central Asian market, its exports can amount to \$4 billion. Economic reforms in both India and Central Asia make their economies more open towards each other and improve their financial, technical, and technological infrastructure more efficient to promote bilateral economic relations.

However, to improve bilateral economic and trade relations, India has already adopted several measures. India has offered Central Asian states training in management, consultancy, and construction ventures. To facilitate the connectivity with this region, Government of India has also taken several steps. Now India has air connectivity with all the five Central Asian states. India has already opened new sea and road routes through Iran and Afghanistan, respectively. A trilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which was signed by India, Iran, and Turkmenistan on 18 April 1995, to provide road and rail access for Indian goods to Central Asia through Iran and vice versa is operational.<sup>4</sup> India has already constructed and completed 200 kms of road in Afghanistan linking Zarang and Delaram. This has reduced the distance from India to Central Asia by 1500kms.<sup>5</sup>

But despite all these efforts, India's trade and economic relations with the Central Asian states have remained unsatisfactory in spite of enormous scope for reciprocally valuable relationship. Moreover, the main commodities being exported from India are pharmaceuticals, tea, readymade garments, leather goods, jute manufactured items, cosmetics, cotton yarn, machinery, machine tools, rice, plastic products, machinery and instruments, electronic goods, and chemicals. Imports from the

Central Asian states are restricted to raw cotton, iron and steel, and zinc.

India's Energy Policy and Investment in Central Asian States Economic growth is one of the prime objectives of India's foreign policy makers, which could not be achieved without the sufficient availability of hydrocarbon resources. India's current high rate of economic growth estimated at 7-8 percent with potential to sustain this in the future could be thwarted by energy shortages. This would have a severe impact on national security as well.

To sustain its economic growth, India still needs vast amount of energy resources. Nevertheless, for the short to medium term India will have to rely on an increasing amount of imported oil and gas to meet its energy needs. In this context, as already mentioned, Central Asia can be future source of energy for India. Undoubtedly, India is a big market for energy and the Indian demand would go up over the years. Presently, India's energy needs are met from the Persian Gulf. Given the present uncertainty in the region, it is important for India to diversify its energy sources. Since Central Asia has abundant energy resources, predominantly a gas-producing region with proven gas reserve amounting to 6.6 trillion cubic meters- 2.9 trillion cubic meters (tcbm) in Turkmenistan, 1.9 tcbm in Uzbekistan, and 1.8 tcbm in Kazakhstan<sup>6</sup>, it could emerge as a viable alternative for India.

Focused on becoming a major player in the world energy market, India is already involved along with other major players in the global energy game. This realization has come after high and constantly rising oil prices in the global energy market. At the same time, India's unprecedented growth levels, lack of energy efficient technologies and reliance on energy heavy industries for its development have largely forced India to involve in the geo-politics of global energy particularly Central Asian-Caspian energy politics. Indian oil company ONGC Videsh Ltd. has already 15 percent holding in Kazakhstan's Alibekmola oil fields and a 10 percent holding in the Kurmangazi oil fields. Moreover, India in partnership with Turkey has acquired a foot hold in a \$4.2 billion pipeline project that will bring the Caspian Sea oil to Mediterranean coast.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that India is continuing to expand its investment in Central Asia. It will further deepen its connections to the area in terms of economics, diplomacy, strategic and defense cooperation.<sup>8</sup> As a result, India is stepping up energy diplomacy within the South Asian

region, Central Asia, Russia, and the Middle East and as far away as Latin America and Africa. But despite these efforts, India's requirement for the energy resources for the next two and half decades, it is estimated that the demand will increase double. In the light of this fast-growing demand the government must search all possible sources that could become available to reach the target.

The supplying of oil and gas from Central Asia to India is one of the critical issues in Indo-Central Asia energy cooperation. However, the quest for energy security is being impeded by India's tense relations with energy suppliers, energy transit countries and regional energy competitors. There is an incredible long-term potential for the oil and gas industry in Central Asia but the major problem is the transportation, a key obstacle to exporting oil and gas from Central Asia to India. In this regard India has taken its sincere efforts for importing the energy resources from Central Asia to India via various routes.

### **India- Pakistan Rivalry and its Effect on Indo-Central Asian Economic Relations**

The fact is that the Central Asian region has the vast energy resources Kazakhstan with its huge oil reserves, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have the highest hydroelectric resources, Turkmenistan has vast reserves of gas and Uzbekistan is rich in uranium, reserves. The lack of an outlet makes the Central Asian region vulnerable to exporting energy resources to the new markets. The land locked character makes them depend on their immediate neighbour's for access to the markets.

The most dependable and only available energy outlet was through Russia during the Soviet era. The Soviet collapse has rendered it unviable on two counts: it is long, expensive and in addition uncompetitive.<sup>9</sup> According to Arystan Esentnigh, the western markets for Kazakh oil do not offer good prospects, for they are already saturated with petroleum supplies from countries in the West East and Russia. That is why Kazakhstan simultaneously seeks to gain access to markets in Asia.<sup>10</sup> As India's energy requirements are growing at higher rate annually and are projected to reach a staggeringly high level of 270 million tons by 2025.<sup>11</sup> India has been keen to enter into agreements with Central Asian states to meet its future energy needs.

Indo-Pak rivalry and strategic games have limited their ability to orient Central Asia towards trade and economic integration with South Asia. Both India and Pakistan tried to use their influence in Central



Asia to advance their interests in relation to the Kashmir dispute. However, some optimists argue that mutual cooperation would herald a new chapter of 'inter-dependency' in India-Pakistan relations.<sup>12</sup>

As already mentioned, neither India nor Pakistan is an immediate neighbour of Central Asia. But both share a common interest in securing uninterrupted access to the region—opening safe trade route into Central Asia and constructing oil and gas pipelines from there. However, both are pursuing the same goal to the exclusion of each other. Absence of political conflicts and cross border tension would ensure peace and stability in the region. This would help both India and Pakistan to tap the natural resources of the Central Asia region. A rich prosperous and stable Central Asia can be a source of strength to both its South Asian neighbours—India and Pakistan. If they stick to the old stereotypes, they are likely to be marginalized in the emerging international geo-political scenario in Central Asia.

However, after the announcement and subsequent exit of the US military forces from Afghanistan, there is strategic shift of policies on the part of India towards Central Asian states. India's Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi's visit to Central Asia in 2015; holding of the national security advisors of the all five Central Asian states in November 2021 in New Delhi; Foreign ministers meeting in December 2021 and their commitment to 'civilizational, cultural, trade and people to people linkages' with India at the third meeting of the India- Central Asia Dialogue; the visit of former Indian President Ram Nath Kovind to Turkmenistan;<sup>13</sup> and the policy of engaging Central Asian states under the framework of '5+1' format; and hosting of first virtual meeting of the India- Central Asia Summit<sup>14</sup> by involving the heads of states; and holding the "the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan"<sup>15</sup> to analyse the fall out of US withdrawal from Afghanistan etc. suggests that India is more concerned about the stability of the Central Asian region. These visits of high-level leaders and interactions with the Central Asian leaders indicate New Delhi's proactive approach towards the region. Undoubtedly, US withdrawal from Afghanistan without restoring peace and establishing a viable government, has also provided important factor for India's commitment to engage with the Central Asian states.

To conclude, after the US led War on Terrorism and military operation in Afghanistan, India has made huge investment in various developmental projects in Afghanistan, but India never felt to engage directly with the Central Asian states as a single group in any other

format. But changing regional security paradigm and political environment under the command of the Taliban in Afghanistan has forced India to rethink for securing its North-Western frontier. In fact, this objective was achieved through the presence of the US and International Assistance Security Forces (IASF) in Afghanistan; and bilateral and strong engagement with the previous Afghan regimes. But with the sudden withdrawal of international coalition forces under US command, engaging with Central Asian states has become more imperative for India from strategic, trade and security perspective. In fact, from a Central Asian perspective where economic and military capabilities to counter extremism and terrorism is limited, but any cooperation and strategic arrangement with India will provide value to security interests of each Central Asian states.

After the Collapse of the Soviet Union, despite various unavoidable impediments and hurdles, the Indo-Central Asian trade and economic relations have been steadily improving. The bilateral trade turnover has been moving upward. Evidently, the volume of trade, for the time being, is quite modest but it is growing. There is a significant volume of trade between India and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and a relatively low with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The balance of trade also in favour of India in case of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan but unfavorable in case of Uzbekistan. Above all, despite problems of direct connectivity with the region, irrespective of few minor fluctuations, the Indo-Central Asian trade and economic relations have been moving towards a smooth and continuous rising curve, which is expected to grow more in near future.

Thus, keeping in view the above changing parameters of the strategic environment and India's strategic interests in the region because of the close geographical proximity; formation of new political regime in Afghanistan and its indifferent attitude towards India; and strengthening of its future bilateral trade and economic relations as well as domestic energy security, India must not only sustain its current diplomatic thrust in the region but also reinvigorate it to a far higher level.

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# On Changing Political Environment of Modern Central Asia

**Ulugbek Khasanov\***

## **Abstract**

*In modern international relations, Central Asia has been defined as a region that is being rediscovered and opened to the outside world. In Central Asia, the emergence of a completely new system of interactions entails the adjustment of the region's national interests to new realities, their practical adaptation, and the probable consolidation of methods. This can only be accomplished by combining the efforts of two or more states and coordinating their operations. As a result of the new character of Uzbekistan's orientations toward its connections with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, close regional cooperation is beginning to emerge in the region. New regional development patterns are intensifying as essential components of growth in Central Asia, and the new environment has considerably boosted trade and economic linkages between Central Asian countries. As a result, Uzbekistan's trade turnover with the region exceeded \$3 billion by the end of 2017. In the United States, there was a 20% increase. According to Uzbekistan's president, who spoke at the summit of the presidents of Central Asian countries in Astana, the volume of mutual trade will approach \$5 billion US dollars in the next years.*

## **Introduction**

In today's world, many countries, given the devaluation of the stabilizing mechanisms of the international system, tend to pursue pragmatic

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policies based primarily on their interests. Relevant today are the issues of realistic and objective perception of such interests, correlating them to history, geography, economic feasibility, and reality.

The first prerequisite for a successful foreign and domestic policy is a constructive understanding of one's place in the world and in the region, which enables pragmatic formulation and implementation of national development goals. This was true was the nations of Central Asia too. Strengthening cooperation and increasing political trust among the regional actors of enables them to become a more independent, predictable, and sustainable region in world politics.

The rapidly changing situation in the region and the world as a whole adjusts the regional and national development agenda. The main objective of the regional actors' efforts in foreign policy was to strengthen their role in international arena, to create the atmosphere stability, and good neighborhood in Central Asia.<sup>1</sup>

## **E Pluribus Unum**

For all states of Central Asia, the basic and historically established principles of their state identity are based on a balance between secularism and spirituality. In its secular form, the state has been balanced by spirituality and remains resistant to its content. It shows a certain consistency, continuity in the principles of nation building in the region, which is very important for maintaining a constructive balance between statist, secular and traditional values. It should be understood that the Central Asian countries have been able to mobilize internal resources to counter various manifestations of extremism and separatism, despite the prevailing view in the expert community that the region is located on a so-called "geopolitically fragile line" of the world.<sup>1</sup>

January 2022 tragic events in Kazakhstan, caused direct losses in GDP growth of the country, but still the slowdown in economic activity in this country may be leveled soon and as damage is compensated and the situation in the country stabilizes, the economy will return to steady growth by the end of the first quarter of this year.<sup>2</sup> *And the support of regional neighbors in restoring the situation in this country was considerable.*

In Uzbekistan, systematic steps to turn the country into a logistical hub in the heart of Central Asia with a population of over 70 million people (106 million with Afghanistan being included) have a tangible effect.<sup>3</sup> This country has a diversified economy with a rapidly developing

new infrastructure combined with political, macroeconomic stability as well as steady growth. In addition, the European Union has recognized the Republic of Uzbekistan as the 9th beneficiary country of a special system for stimulating sustainable development and good governance within the framework of the unilateral General Scheme of Preferences (GSP+). From April 10, 2021, the EU began to apply preferential tariffs on goods imported from Uzbekistan in accordance with these rules. As a beneficiary of GSP+, Uzbekistan has received additional economic benefits compared to the current standard GSP scheme.<sup>4</sup> The abolition of tariffs on two-thirds of the products of the lines covered by the GSP creates opportunities for export growth from our country to the markets of 27 European countries and will attract additional investments into the country. In addition, the acceptance of Uzbekistan as a beneficiary of GSP+ reflects recognition of the reforms undertaken by the government, supports the country in its economic development and building a more sustainable future, as well as promoting the benefits provided after joining GSP+. Uzbekistan, receiving the main benefits from this scheme and increasing its status, will now be able to increase the number of goods exported to the EU without import duties, to increase them from the previous 3,000 to 6,200 different categories and varieties. Uzbekistan is also working on joining the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The states of Central Asia share the common challenges of transition in reforming political and economic structures. The Central Asian region can be characterized by the fact that despite the crisis of nation-states in other parts of the world, the region is experiencing state-building and the consolidation of sovereignty. According to leading foreign experts<sup>5</sup>, state and society building in Central Asia has specific features which should be considered more thoroughly.

The formation of a new system of relations in Central Asia essentially leads to a transformation of national interests of the states of the region to new realities, and their practical adaptation and possible consolidation of approaches can only be achieved through collective actions of two or more states with joint coordination of actions. Thanks to the new quality of Uzbekistan's bilateral relations with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, close regional cooperation is beginning to take its shape in the region.

The principles of mutual respect and mutual benefit between the states of Central Asia, close adherence to national interests can tackle

universal problems. Moral and ethical components of good relations in the region are much higher than the so-called “trust-building”<sup>6</sup> prevalent in Greater Europe and the West, and this term historically reflects the level of relations between these countries and peoples more deeply.

### **Ex Aèquo et Bono**

As basic components of growth, fundamentally new trends of regional development are intensifying in Central Asia and the level of political trust has increased markedly. The new environment has significantly boosted trade and economic ties among Central Asian countries. Thus, in 2017, Uzbekistan’s trade turnover with the countries of the region exceeded \$3 billion and increased by 20 percent. As the President of Uzbekistan noted at the summit of heads of states of Central Asia in Nur-Sultan, the volume of mutual trade is expected to reach \$5 billion in the coming years<sup>7</sup>.

Between September 2016 and July 2021, negotiations on delimitation and demarcation of common borders in the region have become intensive and continuous, compromises in defining borderlines, including complex and rather contentious areas, have been reached as a result of agreements between the heads of neighboring countries during bilateral working meetings and talks held within the framework of international organizations<sup>8</sup>.

The resilient future and sustainable development of Central Asian countries largely depend on a full-fledged inclusion of neighboring Afghanistan into regional economic processes. Defining a common regional agenda is impossible without taking the Afghan factor into account. Integration of current Afghanistan into regional economic processes has been recognized as one of the priority tasks.

The country’s main approaches to this issue were outlined at the 76nd session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021, as well as at a subsequent number of international forums and conferences. The Central Asian perspective on sustainable development considers that the regional agenda has long been linked to programmatic measures to promote social and economic reconstruction as well as the development of neighboring Afghanistan, which remains an integral part of Central Asia. The states of Central Asia and Afghanistan do not only share a common history, religion, culture, and traditions, but also mutual interests in security and trade. At the same time, a stable Afghanistan can link Central Asian states to markets in Europe and

China by providing the shortest route to ports in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf<sup>9</sup>.

### **Pro Bona Pacem**

The time has come to turn the standard clichéd perceptions of Afghanistan from a source of regional threats and dangers into a strategic opportunity that could give a whole new impetus to the development of broad trans-regional connectivity across the Eurasian space.

Under the new conditions in the region, many regional actors understand the need for direct dialogue with the Government of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan led by the leaders of the Taliban movement to promote a peace process in Afghanistan. This approach aims to achieve the consensus in Afghan national reconciliation and development. Moreover, located in the Heartland of Central Asia and having close relations with its immediate neighbors. This assures regional nations and big powers including the United States, Europe, Russia, China, and others on the necessity to engage in economic aid to war-torn Afghanistan. Tashkent has a direct interest in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan as part of its strategy for sustainable development and capacity building in Central Asia. For example, in 2017 alone, the trade turnover had grown by 15% amounting to about USD 600 million. At the same time, implementation of the adopted “Road Map for Development of Cooperation” will make it possible to considerably increase trade turnover and bring its volume up to 1.5 billion US dollars in the coming years. The sides also reached an agreement to organize long- term supplies of 300 thousand tons of mineral fertilizers from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan, 2 thousand units of agricultural machinery, up to 250 thousand tons<sup>10</sup> of the supply of various cereals and other foodstuffs that are in high demand in the Afghan market. It should be noted that the development of regional relations has always been an important aspect of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy. On the 15th and 16th of July 2021, Tashkent hosted a high-level international conference on “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities” during which the Uzbekistan put forward several regional connectivity initiatives. They were aimed primarily at further deepening the integration of Central Asia and its closest partners in South Asia that are linked to it in economic, social, and cultural-civilizational terms. In addition, the initiative facilitated the establishment of an expert and analytical platform



for multi-format search and discussion on optimal models of inter-regional cooperation of “Central Asia and South Asia” in transport and logistics, energy, trade, manufacturing, investment, technological and cultural as well as humanitarian spheres<sup>11</sup>. The conference concluded with the adoption of the Tashkent Declaration on ensuring peace and security in the region, strengthening cooperation, and further extending good neighborhood ties. In other words, the forums of this format laid the groundwork for consultative meetings, which were initiated in 2017, as an effective platform for constructive dialogue and consistent resolution of common problems relating to Central Asian countries.

Considering this process further, it is worth highlighting some aspects of the Third Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State in Turkmenistan in early August 2021. In continuation of the initiatives outlined during the Tashkent conference a month earlier, it was emphasized, once again, the importance of transport and communication component of cooperation between the countries of the region, and he also drew attention to the geo-economic potential and vast opportunities of the Trans-Afghan corridor “Termez - Mazar Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar”, as well as the road and railway “China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan” in further implementation of joint projects of regional importance<sup>12</sup>, as well as the creation of a regional center for the development of transport and communication systems under the UN, the Regional Council on Transport Communications. At the same time, the Taliban would also be able to acquire the trust of their near neighbors — the CA5 and the world’s top countries. This task would be feasible if Afghanistan’s current political leadership was interested in international recognition, the lifting of international sanctions, the unfreezing of the Central Bank’s state assets, the establishment of a credit of trust, full inclusion in foreign aid programs for economic recovery, and strong assistance from countries like India, China, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and others.

The necessity of initiating joint measures to develop a common energy space and a full- scale launch of the unified energy system of Central Asia has been pointed out. It was pointed out the importance of joint Uzbek-Kyrgyz agreements on the mutual supply of 750 million kWh of electricity and on the construction of two 320 MW hydropower plants in the Zarafshan River with Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has expressed readiness to participate in the Kambarata and Rogun hydropower projects. At the same time, the countries of the region understand the

need to support the transition to a “green economy” in the context of the negative impact of global climate change. Special attention is paid to the joint development of a mechanism for comprehensive measures to combat the spread of coronavirus in terms of adopting a unified information system in the field of scientific and practical cooperation in biomedicine and pharm-industry<sup>13</sup>.

The Central Asian leaders agreed to promote consolidated actions in the international arena on majority issues of regional and global agenda<sup>14</sup>. In particular, they embraced the initiative of the President of Tajikistan to declare 2025 the International Year of Conservation of Glaciers announcing the national program to preserve its Glaciers, called for joint promotion of the initiative of the President of Turkmenistan to develop a UN strategy aimed at implementing measures to develop low-carbon energy, as well as implementing, under UN auspices, an international “road map” to develop hydrogen energy., creating a network of solar power plants and significantly reducing carbon emissions into the atmosphere deserve the introduction into the economy of the entire Central Asian region and it corresponds to the priorities of the Glasgow COP26 Global Conference.

## **Conclusion and Future Expectations**

Generally speaking, coordinated activities of the Central Asian countries in the international arena will not only significantly strengthen the international subjectivity of the region but also make it possible to effectively support and protect the interests of the region. During the meeting, the sides agreed to prepare a “road map” for regional cooperation between 2022-2024. This document takes over all the initiatives brought forward at the meetings and defines the mechanisms and deadlines for their implementation. To establish regional cooperation on a systematic basis, Central Asian leaders intend to sign an agreement on “Friendship, Good Neighborhood and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st century” at the next consultative meeting<sup>15</sup>.

The regularity of such processes is confirmed by the views of many respected experts and scholars about positive trends prevailing in our region. In particular, as First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Chairman of the Tashkent International Discussion Club Sodiq Safoev underlined: “This is a huge common asset, a contribution of all countries. We can look into the

future with optimism. This is the main as well as a hugely positive result of the foreign policy of all our states in recent years. Our common task is to give irreversible character to the emerging trends of confidence-building between the countries of the region.”<sup>16</sup> Sodiq Safoev noted that “...the need arises to create a legal and, in the future, and institutional basis for interaction, which will also include research structures. The main factor behind creating the irreversible environment in Central Asia is the strengthening of confidence- building measures. This is not related to declarations or general appeals, but it is important to formulate principles, conceptual frameworks to give depth to confidence-building measures, which include not only state and non-state, but also business structures”<sup>17</sup>. In short, the creation of a new political climate in the region and the adoption of a joint statement demonstrates that the process of regional cooperation is of strategic importance, under which the rapprochement has become an objective reality. The current trend for regionalism creates a healthy and friendly atmosphere, as well as favorable conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation, have been created in Central Asia, deserves high praise, and is fully supported throughout the world.

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# India in SCO: Strengthening India's Footprint in Central Asia

**Dr. Angira Sen Sarma\***

## **Abstract**

*Today, India is engaging with the region at bilateral and multilateral levels. A milestone in our engagement with the region is India's membership in the SCO. It strengthens India's foothold in the region, which is witnessing severe competition among various players trying to carve out their spheres of influence. The paper analyses the prospects and challenges India faces as a member in the SCO. The paper argues that despite challenges, the membership in the SCO is significant for enhancing India's visibility in Eurasia. With membership in the SCO, India for the first time is sharing a common platform with the four CARs and two influential neighbours of the region: Russia and China.*

The historical and civilizational linkages with Central Asia did not reflect in our partnership post-independence of the Central Asian Republics (CARs). A renewed interest to reengage with the region is visible since 2000. A historic development was India's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017. Before the membership, a few developments indicate the mutual interests in promoting stronger ties. In 2009, the former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev became the first President from Central Asia to be invited as the chief guest of the Republic Day function. The visit saw the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between

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India and Kazakhstan. In 2011, 2012 and 2019 SPA was signed with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively. In 2012 India announced the ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ (CCAP), a major policy initiative to re-engage with the region. The CCPA is “a broad-based approach, including political, security, economic and cultural connections”.<sup>1</sup> In addition to improving bilateral ties, the CCPA emphasised on enhancing multilateral engagement through regional bodies like the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), Customs Union, *etc.* The EEC and Customs Union were merged to create the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.

Prime Minister Modi visited the five republics at a time in July 2015; first time that an Indian Prime Minister visited the five republics at one time. The visit highlighted that “each Republic was of strategic importance to India” and “an acknowledgement of their individuality as nation states”.<sup>2</sup> The visit was “significant in terms of re-energizing Indian diplomacy in a strategically important region lying in the Indian backyard”.<sup>3</sup>

A number of institutional initiatives in the past few years highlight the willingness to promote closer ties. The India-Central Asia Dialogue of the Foreign Ministers is a significant institutional mechanism to strengthen the partnership. The creation of the India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC) in February 2020 is a welcome initiative. In the first India-Central Asia Summit meeting (virtually) held on 27 January 2022 Prime Minister Modi stated that the region is “central to India’s vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood”.<sup>4</sup> The five Presidents were invited as the Chief Guests for the 2022 Republic Day celebration, which was cancelled because of the COVID 19 pandemic.

Today, India is engaging with the region at bilateral and multilateral levels. A milestone in our engagement with the region is India’s membership in the SCO. It strengthens India’s foothold in the region, which is witnessing severe competition among various players trying to carve out their spheres of influence. The paper analyses the prospects and challenges India faces as a member in the SCO. The paper argues that despite challenges, the membership in the SCO is significant for enhancing India’s visibility in Eurasia. With membership in the SCO, India for the first time is sharing a common platform with the four CARs and two influential neighbours of the region: Russia and China.

## **SCO: Origin and Growth**

The SCO has emerged as a potent force in the Eurasian region. Initially established as Shanghai 5 in 1996, the Organization became SCO after Uzbekistan joined it as member in 2001. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and China were the founding members of the SCO. After expansion in 2017, there are eight members and three Observer States (Afghanistan, Belarus and Mongolia) in the SCO. The Dialogue Partners include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Turkey, Egypt, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Iran became the ninth member of the SCO in 2022. Article 1 of the SCO Charter reflects the spirit of the Organization. It states that the goal of the Organization is to “strengthen mutual trust, friendship and good neighborliness between the member States”.<sup>5</sup> Established initially to address security issues, SCO today also includes economic issues within its gambit. Today, the SCO members are cooperating in military and counterterrorism exercises. The diverse areas of cooperation is evident in the SCO Charter, which enshrines that member countries will cooperate in diverse areas like “politics, trade and economy, defence, law enforcement, environment protection, culture, science and technology, education, energy, transport, credit and finance, and also other spheres of common interests”.<sup>6</sup>

The highest decision-making body of the SCO is the Head of State Council, which meets annually. The Organization has two permanent bodies. The SCO Secretariat, which is the permanent Executive body of the Organization, was established at Beijing. The other permanent body is the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) based at Tashkent. The Organization structure is as follows: Council of Heads of State, Council of Heads of Government (Prime Ministers), Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Meetings of Heads of Ministers and/or Agencies, Council of National Coordinators, Regional Counter-terrorist Structure and Secretariat.

The SCO in the last two decades of its existence has gradually evolved as a prominent regional organization. With new members, observers and dialogue partners, the SCO today encompasses a large geographical area. As ‘Shanghai 5’ it played a crucial role in amicably resolving the border disputes between China and the independent CARs; these issues had its roots in the Sino-Soviet border problems. In 1996 and 1997, the five members of the ‘Shanghai 5’ signed the “Treaty on



Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions” and “Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions”, respectively, which facilitated the process of demilitarization and demarcation of the borders between China and CARs.<sup>7</sup> Amb. Asoke Mukerji argues that the border agreement provided a favourable “political framework for China’s interest in using the wider SCO region as a stable source of natural resources and a market for its growing economy”.<sup>8</sup>

The pandemic, Afghanistan crisis and the war in Ukraine reinforce the need for multilateral approaches to address the mounting uncertainties in the world. In the present situation, the responsibilities of regional organizations like the SCO to sustain peace and security increases manifold. The SCO has come a long way since its inception in 2001. The way SCO members cooperate to address some of the pressing challenges like stability in Afghanistan, terrorism, regional economic cooperation and connectivity will be of critical importance for the Organization.

### **India and SCO: The Road Ahead**

The first expansion of the SCO took place in 2017 with India and Pakistan joining as new members. Back in 2005, India joined as Observer. The SCO had a moratorium on new membership till 2010. Lifting of the moratorium at the Tashkent SCO Summit in 2010 paved the way for expansion of the SCO. In 2010, India expressed interest in becoming a full member of the SCO. India’s interest in the Organization was reflected in the then Foreign Secretary’s statement in November 2010:

India attaches great importance to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, most of the members of which belong to our extended neighborhood. India has played a constructive and important role in SCO as an observer and has consistently articulated its desire to play an expanded and more meaningful role on the SCO platform. We value the role of the SCO in bringing security, stability and development to our region and stand ready to contribute more to the SCO. The SCO can play a critical role in countering terrorism through collaborative efforts and a greater profile in Afghanistan.<sup>9</sup>

Also, India’s interest in joining the organization is reflected in the ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’, which emphasised on enhancing cooperation through regional multilateral forum like the SCO. At the 2015 Summit in Ufa, SCO decided to admit Pakistan and India as the

new members. With the membership in the SCO, India for the first time became a member of a regional group in the Central Asian region. The SCO gives India a platform to expand ties with the Eurasian region.

India has been actively participating in the SCO deliberations. The 10th Meeting of the Heads of Agencies of the SCO Member States dealing with disaster management was organized on 8 November 2019 in India. A virtual meeting of the Consortium of Economic Think Tanks was held on 20-21 August 2020, which adopted an Action Plan for joint research to improve economic engagement within the SCO region. In November 2020, India for the first time hosted the Council of Heads of Government, the second most important body of the Organization, dealing with trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation. Nurturing cooperation in areas of mutual interests will add meaning and substance to India-SCO partnership. The membership in the SCO is a boost to India's regional initiative to reconnect with the region. Despite challenges, there are ample opportunities. India and SCO can cooperate in regional security and stability, energy, trade, agriculture, connectivity, health, traditional medicine, *etc.*

## **Security and Counter Terrorism Cooperation**

A cardinal principle of the SCO is security as highlighted in the SCO Charter. It says that the members would aim to “consolidate multidisciplinary cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region” and would jointly fight against the three evils of “terrorism, separatism and extremism”.<sup>10</sup> Since its inception, SCO has been keen on strengthening regional security. In 2001, the SCO members signed the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), a permanent body of the SCO was established in 2004 at Tashkent. In the SCO Council of Heads meeting at St. Petersburg in June 2002, the Agreement on the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure was signed. The main purpose of the SCO-RATS is to combat “terrorism, separatism and extremism at the regional and global levels”.<sup>11</sup> The RATS has been conducting annual joint anti-terrorist exercises since 2006.

Greater coordination and cooperation among the SCO members through the RATS is valuable to address the security challenges in the region. Sharing information related to terrorism among the SCO members will be a concrete step for sustaining peace and security. SCO

members need to effectively explore the capacity of SCO-RATS to eliminate terrorism and extremism in the region.

Reiterating SCO's commitment to combat terrorism and extremism in the region, the Dushanbe Declaration of 2021 stated that the "SCO's priorities in ensuring regional security and stability will include combating terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, separatism, extremism, illicit trafficking in drugs, weapons, ammunition and explosives, cross-border organized crime, ensuring international information security, strengthening border security, joint efforts to combat illegal migration and human trafficking, money laundering, economic crimes and corruption".<sup>12</sup> To address the mounting security challenges in the region, the 2021 Dushanbe Summit proposed a number of initiatives like establishing a SCO Counter-Terrorism Centre in Dushanbe as a separate permanent body, SCO Universal Centre to Counter Challenges and Threats to Security within the RATS, SCO Information Security Centre and the SCO Centre against International Organized Crime.

After becoming member, India in 2018 for the first time participated in the SCO Peace Mission Exercise, a significant defence cooperation initiative held biennially for the SCO member states. India took part in an anti-terror drill of the SCO in August 2018 at Chebarkul, Russia. India also participated in the SCO Peace Mission 2021 held at Orenburg, Russia. The SCO summits have been vocal to combat religious extremism and terrorism in the region. In order to take concrete counter-terrorism steps, it is important to have a coordinated strategy against international terrorism. India can take the initiative in the SCO for developing a SCO consensus Document or Draft Convention against international terrorism for adoption by the United Nations.<sup>13</sup>

With *Taliban* back at the helm of affairs since August 2021, there are mounting uncertainties in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan has serious repercussions in the region. At this critical juncture, the SCO is expected to play a proactive role in addressing the crisis. Back in 2005, the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group was established. The primary purpose was to elaborate "proposals and recommendations on realisation of cooperation between the SCO and Afghanistan on issues of mutual interest".<sup>14</sup> However, its activity was suspended in 2009, resuming in 2017. Within the framework of the SCO- Afghanistan Contact group, SCO had organized an international conference on Afghanistan at Moscow in March 2009. There is a need for more such

meetings involving all stakeholders under the SCO platform to promote greater understanding on the Afghan issue. Afghanistan joined the SCO as Observer in 2012. At the 2019 SCO Heads of State Council Meeting at Bishkek, “a roadmap for further steps by the Contact Group” was signed with Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> The meeting also highlighted the need to boost cooperation to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, two major security threats in the region. If the SCO has to emerge as an influential regional body it has to play a more constructive and active role in Afghanistan.

Security related cooperation is an area of utmost significance for India and SCO. Promoting and sustaining regional security is mutually beneficial. India in the 2019 Summit at Bishkek suggested holding an international conference to deal with the menace of terrorism.<sup>16</sup> As member of the SCO, India now has access to RATS. India took the chair of the SCO-RATS in October 2021 for a period of one year. In May 2022, India hosted a meeting within the SCO-RATS framework to promote cooperation and address regional security challenges. Afghanistan featured prominently in the deliberations. Regional cooperation to address the crisis in Afghanistan is the need for the hour.

A roadmap and a common regional strategy to address the crisis in Afghanistan are still elusive in the SCO. Differences among the member countries’ approach to deal with the *Taliban* is problematic. Tajikistan has been vocal against the *Taliban* regime in Afghanistan, while China and Russia are taking a more pragmatic approach to deal with the *Taliban*. India-Pakistan conflict and their equation with the *Taliban* will be a hurdle to a regional consensus. It is of utmost important that SCO comes out with a clear strategy to deal with the Afghan crisis.

### **Socio-Economic Cooperation**

There is a keen interest to build robust socio-economic relations among the SCO member countries. There is immense potential for regional cooperation in trade, transport, energy, agriculture, *etc.* Highlighting the diverse areas of mutual interests, the Dushanbe Declaration of 2021 emphasised on strengthening cooperation in trade, production, transport, energy, finance, investment, agriculture, customs, telecommunications, innovation and other areas of mutual interest, including through the use of advanced, resource-efficient, energy-efficient, green and low-emission technologies, in the interests of improving the well-being and living

standards of the population, and ensuring sustainable development of the member states.<sup>17</sup> The SCO Consortium of Economic and Analytical Centres is created to facilitate trade and economic cooperation; India hosted the first meeting of the Consortium in August 2020 and Kazakhstan chaired the second meeting in July 2021.

To boost economic cooperation among the SCO members, meeting of the Industry Ministers of the member states is initiated. The Second meeting of the Ministers of Industry of the SCO was held in Uzbekistan in July 2022. India intends to collaborate with industrialists of the SCO member countries to explore mutually beneficial opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Regular industrial fairs and exhibitions will help in promoting cooperation among the members. Digital economy including information technology is yet another potential area of cooperation.

## **Energy Security**

There are economic benefits for India in the SCO. The creation of the SCO Energy Club in December 2013 is a welcome step. It opens avenues for India to access the region's rich hydrocarbon reserves. As indicated in the Dushanbe Declaration of 2021, cooperation in the energy sector also includes renewable and alternative energy. The Declaration emphasised on increasing "mutually beneficial cooperation in the energy sector, including the wide use of renewable and alternative energy sources, and support the application of various cost-effective and environmentally friendly technologies that reduce negative environmental impact and promote energy security and the transition to cleaner and greener energy sources in an energy-efficient economy".<sup>19</sup>

Earlier, in 2020, at the Council of Heads of Government Meeting, Uzbekistan mooted the "SCO Green Belt" Programme promoting environmentally friendly technologies.<sup>20</sup> Also, there are proposals for holding meetings of the Energy Ministers of the SCO members. There are suggestions for cooperation between SCO and International Solar Alliance (ISA) in the field of renewable and alternative energy. The ISA, an Indo-French initiative established in 2015 promotes the use of solar energy and reduce dependence on fossil fuels. In January 2020, the SCO Secretary-General Vladimir Norov held talks with senior officials of the ISA. Earlier in 2019, at the SCO Heads of Government Council Meeting in Bishkek, India suggested that the SCO member states join the ISA to "mobilise technology and funds and reduce the cost of solar energy".<sup>21</sup> There are talks of promoting regional electricity

interconnectivity among the SCO members. The SCO Declaration of 2021 suggested boosting “full-scale energy dialogue and practical cooperation among energy producing, transit and consuming states”.<sup>22</sup>

## **Food Security**

Food crisis can pose serious threats to sustainable development. According to UN Report, about 828 million people were affected by hunger in 2021, an increase of about 46 million since 2020 and 150 million since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> The SCO is working towards addressing the issue of food crisis in the region. At the virtual meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SCO Member States in May 2020, a SCO Action Plan for Food Security was proposed.<sup>24</sup> In 2018, the SCO adopted the SCO Programme of Cooperation in Food Security. In 2019, the SCO Permanent Working Group on Agriculture held at Bishkek, noted “Food security is an inalienable component of state and economic security, and the SCO countries need to streamline cooperation in this sphere”.<sup>25</sup> To step up cooperation for food security, the SCO members agreed to hold agricultural exhibitions and seminars.<sup>26</sup> India is committed to cooperate with the SCO in multiple areas. Back in 2017, at the meeting of the Council of Heads of Government of the SCO, India’s former External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj had said “the SCO member states must continue to explore possibilities for intensification of cooperation in areas such as food security, adaptation of agriculture to climatic change, development and implementation of innovative agricultural technologies, joint projects in the field of live stock breeding, crop production and agricultural products processing”.<sup>27</sup> Cooperation in the agriculture sector is a potential area that the SCO members need to harness.

## **Health Sector**

One promising area for strengthening India-SCO engagement is the health sector. The strategic significance of health is well founded. With the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic in 2020, India stepped up its health diplomacy. The pandemic has widened India’s healthcare outreach to the international community, a potential area for India- SCO to collaborate. India’s Foreign Secretary, Harsh Vardhan Shringla in May 2020 at a webinar at MIT World Peace University, Pune on “Health and Multilateral Diplomacy” said that “corona virus pandemic has

delivered a ‘huge shock’ to the global system. We are struggling, individually, as a nation, and as an international community to cope with the shock and its many impacts – immediate and future.”<sup>28</sup> As a member of the SCO, India is keen to cooperate for the sustainable peace and development in the region. India, often addressed as the “Pharmacy of the World”<sup>29</sup> is committed to “strengthen healthy cooperation”<sup>30</sup> in the region. India’s healthcare experts conducted e-ITEC programme for training healthcare professionals and paramedics from various countries after the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic, an area where India can also contribute in the SCO region. Tele-medicine is another area of collaboration worth exploring.

Medical tourism is a propitious area of strengthening India’s engagement with the region. Medical tourists from the Central Asian countries have been visiting India. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar in the India-Central Asia Business Forum held in February 2020 stressed the need to improve connectivity with the region, which will also facilitate in enhancing medical tourism from the Central Asian countries. He stated that India is considering setting up “air corridors” between India and the Central Asian countries.<sup>31</sup>

Another potential area for India-SCO cooperation is collaborating on joint medical research for vaccines and medicines. The first vaccine against COVID-19, *Sputnik-V* developed by Russia was of great significance. The Kazakh Research Institute for Biological Safety Problems is also engaged in vaccine research. Collaboration among the SCO countries for research and manufacturing of medicines and other epidemiology issues will strengthen SCO as a regional body and contribute significantly in addressing the non-traditional threats in the region.

The pandemic has put forward the renewed interest in the use of traditional medicine. Many of the countries in the SCO region have vast treasures of traditional medicines. India at the SCO Health Minister’s Digital Meet proposed the setting up of sub group on traditional medicine within the SCO Health Ministers framework on the basis of the WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy of 2014-2023. The WHO strategy aims to support member States in “developing proactive policies and implementing action plans that will strengthen the role traditional medicine plays in keeping populations healthy”.<sup>32</sup> In July 2020, the SCO Forum on Traditional Medicine was held in the format of a video conference on the ‘Unique role of traditional medicine

in the joint fight against COVID-19'. The Secretary General of the SCO in a webinar conducted by ICWA on 2 September 2020 said: "We look forward to India's active participation in development of the Programme of Cooperation on traditional medicine of the SCO Member State".<sup>33</sup>

## **Connectivity**

Connectivity is a major obstacle for India's engagement with Eurasia. SCO has been keen on improving regional connectivity. The 2019 SCO Summit emphasised the need to enhance regional transport connectivity. Taking note of the vast geographical area covered by the SCO, the Summit also emphasised the need to boost regional transport projects involving the observer states and dialogue partners. The Summit noted: "The Member States emphasise the importance of the further promotion of multilateral cooperation in transport, including the development of new and the upgrade of existing international vehicle and railway routes, multimodal transport corridors, international multimodal logistics".<sup>34</sup>

Regional connectivity is an important agenda in the SCO. Prime Minister Modi in his speech at the SCO Summit in 2016 stated that "connectivity among the countries of the region is crucial to our economic prosperity" and we need "seamless flow of goods, services, capital and people among ourselves".<sup>35</sup> Further he stated that "within SCO, India will be a productive partner in building strong trade, transport, energy, digital and people to people links".<sup>36</sup> The International North-South Corridor and the Ashgabat Agreement addresses India's connectivity problem with the region. A crucial connectivity project connecting India with Eurasia is the Chabahar route connecting India to Central Asia through Iran. To promote regional cooperation and connectivity, the SCO need to take initiatives to include India in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement and further extend it to Central Asia.<sup>37</sup> Regional connectivity is crucial; however, projects like the China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor (CPEC) are problematic. It passes through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, which violates India's sovereignty and is against the basic Shanghai spirit of mutual respect of sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

## **Issues and Concerns**

Membership in the SCO also has its share of complications for India. India's position within the Organisation *vis-a-vis* the two strong members



*i.e.* Russia and China needs to be handled cautiously. Russia and China are the dominant decision makers in the SCO. The power dynamics in the region are visible in the SCO also. Russia is sceptical of SCO becoming a Chinese dominated economic block, threatening Russia's economic interest in the region. Russia has opposed China's proposal of a Free Economic Zone and creation on SCO Development Bank, fearing China's economic dominance in the region. China and Russia played a determining role in the inclusion of new members in 2017. Russia welcomed India's membership, while China supported Pakistan's candidature and opposed India. India will have to deal with China-Pakistan 'nexus' in the SCO. The Central Asian States in the SCO welcomed India's membership. The SCO as a regional group cannot ignore the aspirations and needs of the CARs. India has to be careful not to fail the expectations of the Central Asian countries with which India has shared a friendly relationship for long. The violence in Kazakhstan in January 2022 highlights the prevailing fragility in the region. Kazakhstan requested Russia dominated security bloc, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to quell the unrest. Inviting the CSTO to settle the unrest in Kazakhstan indicates Russia's pre-eminence in the region. The ongoing Russia- Ukraine war has geo-political impact in the Central Asian region also. Will the Ukraine war weaken Russian's position in the region, prompting stronger economic cooperation between China and CARs? Will the crisis see a more active China in the region?

There is growing anti-Chinese opposition in Central Asia. In 2019, a number of anti-Chinese protests took place in Kazakhstan. The protests were primarily to oppose the presence of Chinese illegal immigrants, economic expansion of China, illegal detention of Kazakhs in Xinjiang. Similar protests took place in Kyrgyzstan against the growing Chinese influence. In February 2020, protest took place in the Naryn province of Kyrgyzstan against the construction of a Chinese project, which was later cancelled. A reduced Russian influence in the region because of the war does not necessarily dismiss Russia from the region. Russia's long legacy and its understanding of the domestic politics of the region give it a leverage in the region *vis-a-vis* China.<sup>38</sup> CARs are careful not to displease Russia in the ongoing war in Ukraine, but have sent aid to Ukraine. The SCO has established itself as an influential regional body. However, there are multiple challenges that need to be addressed to enhance its stature in the region as well as globally. One of the crucial

tests for the SCO will be its effective role in addressing the crisis in Afghanistan. There are issues impeding collaborative efforts. Availability of fund for projects is a concern. Greater economic engagement and connectivity is significant for regional cooperation. Efforts need to be ensured that multilateral economic cooperation is not weakened. There are bilateral differences among the SCO members. The organizational structure, however, do not allow bilateral issues to be discussed, a judicious step to allow smooth functioning of the organization. Further, China completing the disengagement process at the Gogra-Hotsprings area in eastern Ladakh before the 2022 SCO Summit at Samarkand is a positive development.

## **Conclusion**

The SCO as a regional organization has made incremental progress. It has been instrumental in maintaining stability in the region. India benefits from joining the SCO. The membership in the SCO gives India a foothold in the region. The Central Asian members have welcomed India's participation in the SCO. The CARs prefer a pro-active India in the region as it tunes with their 'multi-vector' foreign policies. For the CARs, India acts as balance *vis-a-vis* the two dominant pillars in the SCO-Russia and China. India is a "benevolent partner bereft of any political or territorial ambitions in the region", which makes it an attractive partner for the CARs and Russia in the region.<sup>39</sup> As India takes greater interest in multilateral mechanisms to engage with the region, it will also have to revitalise its bilateral ties with these countries, which eventually would help India in the SCO too.

The SCO has to deal with the new global challenges. SCO gives a non-western perspective to global issues concerning the member countries. The western sanctions on Iran and Russia make it imperative to look for alternative payment arrangements for trade. The SCO members can work together to address the challenges arising from western sanctions on Iran and Russia. The SCO has been critical of American unilateralism and has been a strong critique of the presence of the US bases in Central Asia. However, a strong anti-American stand may not be favourable for the Organization in the long run. The CARs would not be comfortable to see the Organization turning into an anti-America platform, which would be against the multi-vector foreign policy approach of these republics. SCO as an anti American platform will be against India's policy of strategic autonomy too. The

region in the past few years is witnessing different formats of engagement, reflecting the complex geo-politics of the region. The US initiated C5+1 format in 2015 to engage with the countries in the region. China, on similar lines started the 5+1 meeting with the CARS in 2020. A nuanced and a balanced approach would be favourable for the Organization.

A stronger and constructive SCO is needed to address regional security challenges. It would be in India's interest to enhance its engagement within the SCO. India takes up the presidency of the SCO in 2022 and as the chair will host the 2023 Summit, a momentous opportunity for India to strengthen multilateral ties with the region and enhance its global stature. The Presidency is an opportunity for India to work with the members for regional security, counter- terrorism, socio-economic cooperation, regional connectivity, *etc.*

A few initiatives from India during its Presidency will give new dimension to the Organization. Earlier, the SCO-RATs had suggested creating a unified register of terrorists and extremist organizations; India as the Chair of the SCO in 2022-23 could take the lead to prepare the unified register. Pakistan's opposition to list the terror outfits emanating from its soil will make consensus difficult, however, India in its Presidency could initiate the process. Further, India as the chair could promote greater cultural cooperation. India as the Chair of the Council of Heads of Government in 2020 hold the SCO-Digital Exhibition of the Shared Buddhist Heritage and translated ten Indian literary classics in Russian and Chinese. India also hosted the first SCO Start up Forum, SCO MSME forum and the SCO Young Scientist Conclave in virtual format. Promoting cultural, entrepreneurial and educational activities like these will go a long way in enhancing 'cultural connectivity', which will further strengthen India's profile within SCO and in the Eurasian region.

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# The Importance of Uzbek-India Relations in Establishing Stability and Peace in Afghanistan

**Dr. Beruniy Alimov\***

## **Abstract**

*It has been more than a year since the return of Taliban in Afghanistan. The political, economic/social situation in this country has not yet changed in a positive direction, rather deteriorated further. Both Uzbekistan and India want Afghanistan's integration into regional cooperation processes. Together, they can play an effective role in contributing to the stability of Afghanistan. However, it should be underscored that without stability on the other bank of Amudarya, it is impossible to achieve security and stable development not only in Uzbekistan but in all Central Asian region. This paper therefore focuses upon the Indo-Uzbekistan cooperation in developing peace and stability in Afghanistan. However, strengthening peace and stability in Afghanistan is also depended upon the inclusion of representatives all national/ethnic and religious groups from all levels of Afghan society in the state administration with respect of human rights, particularly freedom and rights of women.*

**Key words:** *South and Central Asia, regional connectivity, peace and regional stability, zones of influence, Uzbekistan, India, Afghanistan.*

## **Introduction**

Although it has been more than a year since the change of government in Afghanistan, the political, economic/social situation in this country

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has not yet changed in a positive direction. The representatives from all levels of Afghan society should be widely involved in the state administration, human rights should be ensured, especially the basic freedoms of women and rights of all national/ethnic and religious groups in the country. We also call on the current government of Afghanistan to show its firm will to prevent and fight against all forms and manifestations of terrorism, to sever ties with all international terrorist organizations. Both Uzbekistan and India want Afghanistan's integration into regional cooperation processes. But it should be underscored that without stability on the other bank of Amudarya, it is impossible to achieve security and stable development not only in Uzbekistan but in all Central Asian region. We believe that in the process of establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and India can play a very important role in both political and economic sense.

Central Asia is keen to develop a regional cooperation and stability

In our view Central Asian region in a much better position than a few years ago to take an active part in building a North-South economic corridor through Afghanistan. Today there exists a clear, expressed political will at the highest level to develop political, economic and trade cooperation among the countries of the region.

The Joint Statement of the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asian Countries held on 29 November 2019 in Tashkent emphasized that “the tendency of regional rapprochement in Central Asia is a historically determined reality”. [1]

It is an open secret that after two and a half decades of failed policies aimed at ensuring self-reliance and self-sufficiency, trade, economic and investment relations among Central Asian countries are now developing with unprecedented speed. A dynamic, open, and unified Central Asian market offers much better business and investment opportunities for South-Asian partners than the smaller economies of independent countries.

For example, the joint investment in and operation of new large hydropower stations in the upstream countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan with the participation of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with their much larger economies would boost electricity exports to Afghanistan and South-Asia through CASA 1000, while at the same time help Central Asian countries adapt to climate change by increasing their capacity to store water for low-water years.

## **Improving regional connectivity with South Asia**

This is an important fact that this connectivity actions could become a key component of a long-term strategy of Central Asian countries to build balanced, “multi-vector” political and economic ties with all direct neighbors, China, Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan, as well as important partners including the European Union, the US, Japan, South-Korea, Turkey, Pakistan, and India. While some of these neighbors and partners may have disputes or competing agendas, Central Asian countries enjoy good and stable relations with all of them. Central Asia has the potential to become an active promoter of stability, security and economic, trade and cultural cooperation in its broader neighborhood.

### **The new cooperation frameworks**

It should be noted that there are numerous regional and sub-regional organizations offering a suitable framework for developing economic cooperation and integration between Central and South Asia, among them the Belt and Road Initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union, CAREC, ECO, SCO and CPEC.

The history knows well that in contrast to earlier periods of great-power politics, an encouraging sign is the strong political wish of practically all neighbouring countries and partners to see an end to interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. The period of the Great Game with its numerous “proxy conflicts” that sprung up during the last two centuries, should come to an end. Investment in infrastructure, with its long payback period, needs long term stability. Countries that are in the process of investing tens of billions of dollars in such infrastructure want to know that their investment is safe.

In our view the most immediate step should be to provide early benefits to the population of the whole region by the rapid expansion of economic and trade ties. The acceleration of large projects such as TAPI or CASA 1000 should go hand in hand with small steps that take advantage of the opening of transport corridors between Central and South Asia. [2]

Most importantly there are several positive geopolitical and geoeconomic developments in the Eurasian space that can facilitate efforts to strengthen trade and economic ties between Central and South Asia. China, a neighbor of several Central and South Asian countries, has emerged as the economic powerhouse of the world, with a GDP of

nearly USD 15 trillion (USD 25 trillion based on ppp) in 2020. India, with a GDP of over USD 3 billion in 2020 (almost USD 9 billion, based on ppp) is an attractive market and source of investment for the countries of the economic corridor.

### **Other interregional platforms**

Lately the Belt and Road initiative of China provides massive investment in regional infrastructure. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor opens huge opportunities for the Pakistani economy. A peaceful environment, the resolution of disputes among South-Asian countries and the transition from strategic competition to economic cooperation are sine qua non preconditions for the full development of the network of interconnected North-South and East-West corridors. The presence of the representative of the Russian Railways at the Tashkent conference signalled the interest of Russia to participate in the development of such a network, which could then be connected to transport corridors to Europe and China.

The United States of America, having withdrawn militarily from Afghanistan, remains an important economic partner and the source of investment and technology, as well as development assistance for the countries of Central and South Asia. A meeting of representative of the C5+1 countries – the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, and the United States of America – held on the margins of the Tashkent Conference affirmed their commitment to enhancing their engagement through this important regional diplomatic platform and seeking opportunities to strengthen connectivity between the Central and South Asian regions via trade, transport, and energy links.

The C5+1 recognized that increased connectivity supports its shared goal of a prosperous and secure Central Asia. The C5+1 countries reconfirmed their commitment to strengthening the region's security and stability, including through Afghan peace negotiations.

### **Tashkent is the meeting place for all**

Nearly 30 nations engaged with Taliban officials in July 2022 at the Tashkent International Conference “Afghanistan: Security and economic development” that aimed at strengthening the Afghan economy, policy and regional security.

Here is what Uzbek government said: the representatives from all levels of Afghan society should be widely involved in the state

administration, human rights should be ensured, especially the basic rights and freedoms of women, all national and religious groups. [3]

The Uzbek side also calls on the current government of Afghanistan to show its firm will to prevent and fight against all forms and manifestations of terrorism, to sever ties with all international terrorist organizations.

Uzbekistan will continue to actively participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan's economy.

The other conference attendees said too that this task should be the common priority. Because, as they say, "it is through economic development that peace in Afghanistan can be strengthened."

And now Uzbekistan wants Afghanistan's integration into regional cooperation processes. Because if there is no peace in Afghanistan, security and stable development cannot be achieved in Uzbekistan or in the entire Central Asian region.

All Central Asian countries concern about the security, and they still point to Afghanistan as a source of concern. So of course, that is also an important thing to discuss.

### **Afghan crisis in its newest history**

For over a space of millennia the Uzbek and Afghan people lived side by side with one another. We share the common cultural, spiritual and historical values, one religion and the heritage of great ancestors.

It should be underscored that without a stability on the other bank of Amudarya, it is impossible to achieve security and stable development in Uzbekistan and the entire Central Asian region.

In this regard, it cannot but arouse concern that the attention is getting reduced in the world to Afghanistan, which is facing deep socio-economic and humanitarian crisis in its newest history.

We are convinced that today the international community will not repeat the mistakes of the 1990s, shall be able to avoid them and this goal should certainly be achieved.

The international isolation of Afghanistan shall inevitably lead to further deterioration of the humanitarian situation. Thus, it is important not to allow for this since the point is about the fate of millions of people.

At the moment, the Interim government of Afghanistan takes the certain steps in terms of peaceful reconstruction of the country, strives to improve the socio-economic situation, establish the friendly relations

with neighboring countries and the mutually beneficial cooperation with an international community. We must foster and endorse these efforts.

Meanwhile, forming a broad representation of all layers of the Afghan society in state governance, ensuring basic human rights and freedoms, especially of women and all ethnic-confessional groups remain a fundamental condition for establishing a lasting peace in Afghanistan.

We call on the current government of Afghanistan to show a firm will and take resolute measures to prevent and counteract terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, break up the ties with all international terrorist organizations.

Such approach shall lead up to consolidation of trust to an Interim government, open the real prospects for a stable development of Afghanistan in an atmosphere of friendship, good neighborliness and mutually beneficial cooperation with its nearest surrounding states and the international community.

The Special resolution adopted recently by the UN General Assembly on strengthening connectivity between the Central and South Asia has also confirmed the most important significance of preserving peace in Afghanistan to ensure the international security.

All of us, the entire international community, must show solidarity with the Afghan people. We should direct our efforts to creating the real prerequisites for Afghanistan to become a peaceful, stable, and prosperous land – free from terrorism, wars, and narcotics.

Our common priority must become a recovery of Afghanistan's economy. It is such an approach, which is considered an important condition for achieving a solid peace in this long-suffering country. In particular, this direction includes its integration into inter-regional economic processes, implementation of the infrastructure and socially significant projects.

At the moment, Uzbekistan is making a tangible contribution to the international efforts on rendering assistance to the socio-economic and humanitarian recovery of Afghanistan, including through promotion of the large trans-regional infrastructure projects.

### **Uzbekistan wants peace and stability Afghanistan**

Uzbekistan is interested in the development of Afghanistan as a peaceful, independent, and prosperous state.

We also maintain a clear position that in the foreseeable future, Afghanistan shall remain an important factor in regional security, directly

affecting the national interests of regional countries, primarily the neighboring states.

As the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev said at the Consultative Meeting of the heads of Central Asian states on July 21, 2022, in Chalpan Atà, Kyrgyzstan, “Today, there are no borders for these threats – they penetrate through mobile phones. Unfortunately, the recent tragic events in Uzbekistan have once again confirmed the presence of destructive forces that are trying to disrupt our plans, sow chaos and instability in our region. In this regard, we support the proposal to launch regular consultations of the heads of the security councils and special services of the countries of the region in these areas. Our highest priority should remain to continue working closely together to promote long-term peace in Afghanistan and its socio-economic recovery,” emphasized the President of Uzbekistan [4].

In this regard, the development of joint approaches to solving the socio-economic problems of Afghanistan at this stage of the country’s development should become a top priority for the states of the region and the world community.

It is necessary to combine our efforts so that the long-sought peace reigns in the long-suffering land of Afghanistan and the conditions for the dynamic post-conflict development are created.

Today it is important to note that despite the lack of managerial experience, financial and economic constraints we can observe the strong desire of the Afghan authorities to improve the situation in the country, to exclude the appearance of various factors that, to one extent or another, can lead to a new wave of destabilization.

We were pleased with the willingness of the Interim Government not to impede the return to the country of political and social circles representatives who left Afghanistan after the August of 2021.

We are confident that these steps will contribute not only to the prompt achievement of national reconciliation, but also to a noticeable decrease in the intensity of the negative attitude towards the new authorities of the country.

Along with this, we believe that the prompt implementation by the Interim Government of the basic requirements of the international community, including the creation of an inclusive government based on broad representation, ensuring the rights of women and national minorities, as well as allowing the Afghan girls to receive a full-fledged

school education is a guarantee of a peaceful future for all the Afghan people.

All neighboring states and international partners are concerned about the threat of an escalation of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan and the risk of economic situation sliding into the abyss of chaos.

It is time to move from words to actions - to help to revive the Afghan economy and to create all the necessary conditions for involving Afghanistan in the regional integration processes.

In order to deliver the humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, we have created a multifunctional transport and logistics hub in the border city of Termez, which is now being actively used by various UN bodies.

On July 18, expeditionary work began on the territory of Afghanistan with the participation of specialists from Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to determine the railway route of the trans-Afghan railway “Termez-Mazar-I-Sharif - Kabul- Peshawar” and a feasibility study of the project.

In addition, Uzbek specialists have completed work on the restoration of the international airport in the city of Mazar-I-Sharif this year.

We believe it is important to continue jointly with Afghanistan to implement such infrastructure projects as the construction of the “Termez - Mazar-e-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar” railroad, the transit potential of which is 20 million tons of cargo annually and the “Surkhan - Pul-e- Khumri” power transmission line.

We invite all the participants of the conference to the presentation of the infrastructure projects on assisting Afghanistan.

We are convinced that the implementation of these projects will not only help the reconstruction of the Afghan economy and make Afghanistan a bridge between Central and South Asia, but also promote the overall process of regional connectivity for the benefit and prosperity of the people of the vast region.

We attach an enormous importance to the training of Afghan youth at the Educational Center in Termez, established at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan.

We are confident that this will accelerate the training of highly qualified specialists for the key sectors of the national economy of Afghanistan, who will be able to make a fair share of contribution to its economic revival.

The defrost of Afghanistan's financial assets abroad is a major factor in rebuilding Afghanistan's economy, addressing the acute issues of social nature currently facing the people of this friendly country, as well as implementing the significant infrastructure projects for the benefit of the whole Afghanistan.

In conclusion, I would like to highlight that only through the joint efforts we can achieve a lasting peace and national harmony in this country.

There is no other way, and the destiny of the people of Afghanistan and its peaceful, bright future will largely depend on our current coordinated actions.

India and Uzbekistan are working together to promote peace and security in the region.

Relations between Uzbekistan and India have a thousand-year history. However, it cannot be said that it is developing now well in line with modern requirements.

In our view, one of the crucial areas is a security. India has been a strategic partner of Uzbekistan since 2011. [5]

If we look at the text of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, we can see that the security clauses and goals are clearly stated in several areas. In particular, the idea of combating religious extremism and terrorism is enshrined in the same strategic partnership agreement. This means that we have common interests and consistent cooperation in this area.

The two sides resolutely condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reaffirmed that international terrorism was a threat to global peace and security.

The sides also discussed the continuing unstable situation in Afghanistan and the challenges emanating from the region, including drug trafficking, and reaffirmed the importance of early establishment of peace and stability in the country.

Of course, instability in Afghanistan, the proliferation and spread of terrorist hotbeds will only have a negative impact on cooperation with other countries through Afghanistan and can hinder the implementation of any projects, slowing down or delaying these projects.

In August 2021, the Taliban came to power for the second time, and we still do not see any signs of stability.



On the contrary, the situation is getting worse; so far, we cannot say that in this country, in this region, there are appropriate, guaranteed conditions for economic cooperation or the creation of transport routes. Therefore, the current situation in Afghanistan has only a negative impact on cooperation between Uzbekistan and India. Until the situation changes in Afghanistan, until peace is fully established, cooperation with India can be carried out in some other way. But anyways the transport links, infrastructure projects are either slowing down or delayed.

Of course, no investor, no entrepreneur will enter the war zone, the conflict zone. He will be cautious about investing his capital and financial shares there. Or avoid it altogether.

Because, as you know, peace for any kind of business, for any investor is the first condition. If there is peace, investments will not disappear as money or water sinks into the sand. Or do not fall into the traps of corruption. We now need guaranteed stability and peace in Afghanistan to implement economic, transport and infrastructure projects between us.

Therefore, it is very important the bilateral meetings on joint fight against terrorism are held regularly.

For example, delegation from Uzbekistan, led by Minister of Internal Affairs, Pulat Bobojonov, met the Indian delegation, led by Union Minister for Home Affairs, Amit Shah, in New Delhi in November 2019.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed issues of mutual interest including bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation, capacity building and training for Uzbek security personnel in Indian institutions, border guarding and disaster management.

Emphasizing on India-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership, the Ministers welcomed increased cooperation between India and Uzbekistan in the area of security cooperation.

Both sides affirmed that the visit of Prime Minister of India to Uzbekistan in 2015 and 2016 and visit by President of Uzbekistan to India in 2018 and 2019 have provided a new impetus to our relationship.

An Agreement on Security Cooperation between the Ministry of Home Affairs of India and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan was also signed by the two Ministers. The Agreement will further

strengthen cooperation between India-Uzbekistan in the diverse fields including counterterrorism, organized crime, and human trafficking.

At the same time Uzbekistan and India have inked some pacts on cooperation in security ties after a meeting between the Defence ministers of the two countries.

Defence Minister of India, who was attending Council of Heads and Governments (CHGs) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as the special envoy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Tashkent, held talks with his Uzbek counterpart. Following the meeting, the two sides concluded a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in the field of Military Medicine between the armed forces of the two countries. Two sides are continuing discussions at the expert level to further enhance their exchanges in this sphere.

The defence ministers agreed that both sides would continue to work together to further raise their level of engagement in the defence sphere in keeping with strategic partnership between Uzbekistan and India.

The direct exchanges related to training, capacity building and education between the armed forces on both the sides has also witnessed a significant upswing.

## **Conclusion**

The Uzbek-India multifaceted relations are very important in establishing stability and peace in Afghanistan. In particular, participation in joint programs to prevent terrorism in the region can have a good effect. In addition, the governments and companies of Uzbekistan and India can take an active role in the implementation of new projects in the economic connection of Central Asia and South Asia. There is a great desire and opportunity for this on both sides.

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# Regional Reconciliation with the Taliban is Contingent on Prevention of Violence

**Vaishali Basu Sharma**

## **Abstract**

*The Taliban has endured through the repeated cycles of conflict. But it never foresaw the mounting challenge to its authority from the ISKP, which has stepped up attacks on minorities and pro-Taliban entities. In a stunning role reversal the Taliban government in Afghanistan today finds itself at the receiving end of terror attacks. While the main concern for Afghanistan's immediate neighbours remains the destabilisation by the export of militant groups from Afghan soil, each of has its own set of reasons for continuing to engage with the Taliban*

*2.0. The reality that in Afghanistan there is no alternative to the so-called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has sunk in, and is reflected in the pragmatic approach to engage with the Taliban. But further engagement with the Taliban mainly hinges upon its ability to contain the ISK and prevent extremist groups from operating in Afghanistan. And only the Taliban's willingness to make concessions will set the conditions for Afghanistan's stability.*

The Taliban's resumption of power in August 2021, has since been sketched as a 'historic inevitability,' even so by recently deceased former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Despite successive interventions and

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through the repeated cycles of conflict since the 1970s, the Taliban has endured. But while the Taliban has returned to the helm in Kabul, with several figures present during its 1990s- era rule, the context has changed, and within Afghanistan they are no longer seen as bringing order to a conflict-torn nation. Facing international sanctions, an asset freeze and without access to nearly 75 % of its budget which came from foreign donors, the Taliban is faced with challenges of governing. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has estimated that as much as 97% of Afghanistan's population could sink below the international poverty line by mid-2022. Amidst such low levels of income, the dynamics of consolidation are aggravated with the rising violence perpetuated by the Islamic State of Khorasan Province (ISKP), a regional affiliate of IS that operates in Afghanistan and opposes the Taliban's rule. August the month which marked Taliban's year in power was smirched by a series of horrific bombings that have killed more than 250 ordinary Afghans in recent weeks, the highest monthly number of civilian casualties over the last year. The Taliban never foresaw the mounting challenge to its authority from the IS-K, which has stepped up attacks on minorities and pro-Taliban entities.

In a stunning role reversal, the Taliban government in Afghanistan today finds itself at the receiving end of terror attacks. In a statement after deadly attacks on a Shia Mosque, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid conveyed via twitter that, "the government "strongly condemns this cowardly act," adding that the attack was the work of "the enemies of Islam" and Afghanistan. The ISKP attacks undermine the Taliban's authority and ability to provide the security expected of a governing force. The United Nations recently reported that the Afghan branch of Islamic State (IS) is one of "the most vigorous and best established" of its regional networks and has urged the Taliban to take "concrete steps" to prevent terrorism and provide additional support to vulnerable communities.

Ordinary Afghans deem the Taliban responsible for the ambient chaos and volatility. In order to consolidate power, the group has to transform itself from an insurgency into a centralised government, prioritising cohesion over any other political objective. As the Taliban braces the realities of governing the faltering Afghan state, it appears to have tempered itself to accommodate certain international actors and display that the country is open for investments. Without diplomatic support, internationally isolated with limited economic resources, the

Taliban is reaching out to countries in the region. And almost all nations in the region have indicated a willingness to engage with the Taliban government, albeit if it is able to control the violence and restrain the ISKP.

### **Pakistan's Security Abates as the TTP Regroups along the Border:**

Afghanistan shares the longest border with Pakistan. And along the south-eastern portion of this notoriously porous border lies Pakistan's North Waziristan, a tribal district and home to the Pakistani Taliban, also known as the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Its operations in Afghanistan's eastern provinces of Paktika, Paktia, and Nangarhar, closer to the Pakistan border continue unabated and the Taliban has not heeded to Islamabad's requests to limit the TTP activities, even demanding a crackdown. TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud has called for an independent state comprising Pakistan's tribal areas. Evidence recently surfaced of the group publicly raising funds inside mosques during the Friday prayers in Jalalabad city and districts in Nangarhar province, indicating the possibility of its breaking the ceasefire with the Pak government. Islamabad, which has extensive relations with the Afghan Taliban leadership, providing its funds, training, arms and ammunition, and on several occasions directly providing combat support has been left nonplussed at the group's rebuff to Pakistan's requests for a crackdown on the TTP activities. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan endorsed the takeover of Afghanistan by Taliban saying the insurgent group has "broken the chains of slavery". Instead, the Taliban asked Pakistan to address the TTP's so-called "grievances." Pakistan carried out airstrikes in eastern Afghanistan. This attack was most likely conducted under Chinese pressure, as the TTP has also been attacking China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) infrastructure and Chinese nationals working in Pakistan. While failing to extirpate any senior TTP leadership, the airstrikes under strikes actually killed dozens of innocent Afghans including children, which has led to anti- Pakistan sentiments. Taliban-appointed Defence Minister Mohammad Yaqoob, son of the Taliban founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, warned Pakistan in late April, that the airstrikes "are not acceptable," "the only reason we have tolerated this attack is because of our national interest, but it is possible we will not be so tolerant in the future." It is unlikely that the strong support that the TTP's enjoys in Afghanistan will change anytime soon, because

ideologically and in terms of the sheer strength of nearly 10,000 TTP fighters in Afghanistan, the Taliban has the ideal ‘ace up its sleeve’ in its dealing with Pakistan. And more practically, in the face of a persistent ISKP threat, the Taliban is not in a position to fulfil any Pakistani demands to rein in the TTP at present. This initial jubilation in Pakistan, at the success of the Taliban further turned to disappointment as the group has also rejected validity of the Durand line as the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US exit, far from suppressing Pashtun nationalism, has reinforced the Taliban’s nationalist posture both on border issues and on Pashtun solidarity.

Despite the deteriorating security relations, Shebaz Sharif’s government has allowed trade of all products to Kabul in the rupee via land routes. Exports to Afghanistan saw a deeper drop since the Taliban took control of Kabul in August 2021 and have picked up since the change in trade regime from dollar to Pakistani rupee, on land routes owing to non-availability of tradable currency through banking channels. Pak-Afghan trade from the Torkham crossing had doubled in the past few months. Almost 250-300 trucks or containers carrying soapstone and coal reached Pakistan daily via the Torkham border. The Taliban government has collected at least USD33.80 million in custom revenue on more than 16 billion Afghanis worth of coal exports in the last six months. Pakistan is keen to facilitate the normalisation of trade and security, as this will ensure not only trade with Afghanistan but exports of rice, medicines, sport gears and equipment, and leather products to Central Asian States via Torkham under the International Trade Route Agreement.

### **China Tries to Lure with Promises of Investment:**

Regular reports emerge of Taliban fighters destroying border pillars in the Wakhan corridor, more as a show of strength and nationalism to Pakistan than China. The Taliban has shrewdly manipulated China’s concerns over Uighur separatists to take forward negotiations on economic and developmental support. The East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that seeks to liberate Xinjiang Province and the Uyghur people from Chinese government control and impose an Islamic ideology. Not overly concerned about infiltration from the border, Beijing has maintained a friendly relationship and is inclined to deal with the Taliban on its own rather than rely on Islamabad. Unofficially, China has been “speaking with the Taliban for many years.” In July, a

month before Kabul officially fell, Taliban leadership welcomed the prospects of Chinese aid and reconstruction: “China is a friendly country, and we welcome it for reconstruction and developing Afghanistan... If [the Chinese] have investments, of course, we will ensure their safety.” Speculation on Chinese investments mounted when several Chinese companies reportedly conducted on-site inspections of potential lithium projects in Afghanistan in November 2021. Apparently, the Taliban were keen that China restart the Mes-e Aynak mine in Logar Province, one of the largest copper reserves in Afghanistan and in the world. But 14 years after two Chinese state-owned companies, the China Metallurgical Group Corporation (MCC) and the Jiangxi Copper Company Limited were awarded the rights to the Aynak mines, extraction is yet to begin. While the Taliban have been keen to re-engage this project, for China the main concern has been security. Same was the case with China National Petroleum Corp. which was interested in revamping the Amu Darya oil and gas project development. For China, security in the Central Asian region where it has extensive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) related investments is a primary concern. A geopolitical understanding with the Taliban with promises of investments is the shrewdest route to ensuring that. China has asked other countries to cooperate with the caretaker government of Afghanistan and says the administration under the “Taliban” is getting stronger, but challenges remain.” But despite Beijing’s overt conviviality with the Taliban, China is wary of the group’s promises to crack down on the Uyghur separatists under the banner of the ETIM. It was reported that after the country’s takeover ETIM fighters were provided safe passage out of Afghanistan and relocated to Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, instead of handing them over to China. For China, any further engagement will hinge on whether the Taliban will honour their commitments, seize ties with ETIM, and take effective measures to resolutely crack down on these terrorist organizations within its territory.

### **India & the Path of Humanitarian Assistance:**

In a clear signalling to Islamabad, that it is not a mere proxy of Pakistan, the Taliban have been making an effort to outreach India. After the Taliban’s return to power, India not only sent 36000 MT wheat to Afghanistan through Pakistan, but also dispatched medicines and COVID-19 vaccines to the country. The Taliban has indicated eagerness that India revive its development projects in Afghanistan. In a pragmatic



move India has sent a technical team in June, a tentative move towards reopening its embassy in Kabul. Ideas on reopening a section of the embassy in Kabul were doing the rounds while a regional summit on Afghanistan organised by Delhi was held in November 2021. Indicating progressive improvement of ties, on August 15, as India celebrated its 75th Independence Day and the Taliban completed the first year of its rule, Delhi upgraded the head of its “technical mission” to the level of a mid-ranking diplomat. Taliban’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Abdul Qahar Balkhi stated on twitter that, “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan welcomes India’s step to upgrade its diplomatic representation in Kabul. Besides ensuring security, we will pay close attention to the immunity of diplomats and cooperate well in (its) endeavours.” While it is certain that India will continue its humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people even under Taliban governance, further cooperation in terms of Indian investment, will depend largely upon the physical security of the Indian community there. A deadly attack by the ISKP on June 18 targeting the small Afghan Sikh community at Kart-e-Parwan gurdwara in Kabul was in many ways a warning to India by the extremists. Whether the Taliban can guarantee the security of minorities like the Sikh, Hazara, Tajik, Shia, and others from the ISKP remains the key question.

### **Tajik Extremists Complicate Scenario:**

With Tajikistan, the Taliban’s relations are quite complex. Tajiks have traditionally constituted the core of the Northern Alliance, and even today the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan being led by the son of Ahmad Masood, son of the Lion of Panjshir and his namesake has taken refuge in Dushanbe. The persecution of Tajiks in the name of quelling the military resistance in the north is an ever-present concern for Tajikistan. For Tajik President Emomali Rahmon the main concern remains primarily the destabilisation of Central Asia by the export of militant groups from Afghan soil, and strife by the influx of Afghan refugees. There is indication of clear cooperation between the Taliban and the Jamaat Ansarullah (JA) is an al Qaeda-linked terrorist organization that emerged in Tajikistan in 2006 as a Tajik-focused offshoot of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). It appears that the Taliban placed five districts in the northern province of Badakhshan under the control of Mahdi Arsalon, a Tajik national and commander of JA. Tajik authorities say Arsalon and more than 200 Tajik citizens are in the ranks of the Taliban, forming a group known as the “Tajik

Taliban.” In a provocative move a watchtower was built on the Afghan-Tajik border, directly across the river from Tajikistan’s Darvaz district, with the inscription “M. Arsalon,” written in graffiti and manned by members of the “Tajik Taliban” has become a matter of concern Tajik officials.

The Taliban has tried to reassure Tajikistan, the Taliban government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said, “We will not allow Afghanistan to [be used by groups to] threaten neighbouring countries,”... “If the Tajik side has any issues or concerns, if they talk to us officially, God willing, they will be satisfied, and we will remove the threats.” But undercutting the Taliban’s assurances, the ISKP has been launching rocket attacks from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, jeopardising security along the border areas. To further complicate the security situation, indications are that numerous Tajik separatists are aligned with the ISKP. Capitalising on the June 18 suicide bombing at Kabul’s Sikh temple, ISKP recruiters have claimed that the attack was carried out by a Tajikistan national known as Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki. And that al-Tajiki trained the Afghan suicide bomber who killed more than 50 people at a Shiite Mosque in Peshawar on March 4. A report published by the United Nations Security Council warned that ISKP “has increased its presence in northern and eastern Afghanistan. It also includes fighters from Central Asia, who have increased activities in the north.” It is indeed a complex situation where Dushanbe wants the security and integration of ethnic Tajiks, Afghanistan’s second- largest ethnic group, and also wants the Taliban to clamp down on the ISKP, whose ranks many Tajik nationals have joined.

### **Uzbekistan Campaigns for Cooperation with Taliban:**

Unlike Tajikistan, Tashkent has been better disposed towards the Taliban regime. In a recent message President Sherkat Mirziyoyev urged the Taliban, “to demonstrate firm will and take decisive measures to prevent and counteract terrorism in all its forms and manifestations, and to break off ties with all international terrorist organizations.” Last month Uzbekistan hosted an international conference on Afghanistan that was widely attended. It has been campaigning the international community to unfreeze the assets of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Tashkent has its eyes set on what Mirziyoyev has called the “Project of the Century,” a trans-Afghan railway line that would connect Uzbekistan to the Pakistan ports on the Arabian Sea. For now, Uzbekistan is all set to begin work

on construction of a power line that would allow Uzbekistan to up its electricity exports to Afghanistan.

### **Iran Quietly Works its way with the Taliban:**

In changing geopolitics realities over the years, the sectarian hatred between Iran and the Taliban have been evaporating, paving the way for a stable long-term alignment glued by and centered on political Islam. So, the return of the Taliban to power last year was not a completely unfavourable situation. In fact, Iran and Taliban ministers have settled issues related to water and energy cooperation. Unlike the previous US-backed administration under which water from the Helmand river was regularly diverted to Godzareh, Iran has now reached an agreement with the Taliban dispensation and will henceforth receive its share of 820 million cubic meters per year. In June the Taliban signed a deal with an Iranian firm to purchase 350,000 tonnes of oil. It appears that Tehran and Kabul have agreed to facilitate trade and transit of petroleum products, establish a gas pipeline for energy imports and build refineries in Afghanistan

As the Taliban offence mounted in 2021, thousands of former Afghan commandos fled to Iran. But for lack of information from either Afghanistan or Iran on these soldiers, the concern springs largely from the Americans. Despite sporadic border clashes often break out between the Taliban and Iranian guards, Iran's interior minister recently ruled out the possibility of blocking the border stressing the need for peaceful negotiations.

### **From Neutral to Supportive - Turkmenistan:**

During the Taliban regime in the 1990s, Turkmenistan was conferred a UN-recognised status as a neutral state. This time, however, Ashgabat has been vocal in support of Afghanistan to become part of the global economy. Turkmenistan's deputy foreign minister recently argued that reintegrating Afghanistan into the global economy "will have a positive impact on ensuring the security and stability of both the country itself and the region as a whole."

If ever realised, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline holds the possibility of supplying 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of Turkmen gas to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. While TAPI remains an unlikely proposition, for now, the Taliban government

has reached a deal with Turkmenistan to import 1,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas.

### **The Way forward for Taliban is Security and Concession:**

Almost all nations in the region appear to favour engagement with Taliban ruled Afghanistan over isolation but have stopped short of recognizing a regime that is an international pariah. On the other hand, Ashgabat, Beijing, Islamabad, and Moscow have even formally accredited Taliban-appointed diplomats. In fact, Turkmenistan was the first nation in Central Asia, since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, to receive a Taliban-appointed Afghanistan ambassador. Interestingly at the Afghanistan conference in July when Uzbek President Mirziyoyev concluded that, “common priority should be the restoration of the economy of Afghanistan, which is an important condition for achieving durable peace in this long- suffering country,” all countries including the US were in agreement. Afghanistan’s interim foreign minister, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, defended the Taliban’s governance record stating that the group had managed to assure security inside Afghanistan, reduce corruption “practically to zero” and “for the first time in the history of Afghanistan” proclaim a “policy of tolerance.” He said that the Taliban’s ambitions extend to their former antagonists, and urged the West, especially Washington, to establish direct ties.

According to Central Asian research groups, there are at least 20 militant groups still have roots or bases in Afghanistan, an accusation the Taliban vehemently deny. China has promised the Taliban regime economic and development support in exchange for restraining any Uyghur militant groups in Afghanistan. The kind of financial support that the Taliban urgently needs, will only begin to come if the group can display sincere intentions to control these extremists operating from Afghan soil. Unlike post 9/11, this time there will be no international coalition to counter the Taliban regime. The reality that in Afghanistan there is no alternative to the so- called Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan has sunk in and is reflected in the pragmatic approach to engage with the Taliban. Nevertheless, in order to be able to forge legitimate connections with international actors and secure a steady stream of legal income, the Taliban will have to become the net security provider in Afghanistan. A major departure from its earlier insurgent role is a disruptor of peace. Unless it is able to suppress the ISKP which has been claiming a drumbeat of violence, the fledgling Taliban government

in Kabul has no prospect of gaining international legitimacy or investment.

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# Kazakhstan Constitutional Reforms: A Way Forward

**Dr. Punit Gaur\***

*Kazakhstan is Central Asia's largest country, roughly the size of Western Europe. It is the second-most populous country after Uzbekistan, with a population of 19 million. Kazakhstan is also the largest economy among the five Central Asian Republics mainly due to its natural resources – oil, natural gas, uranium, and various metals. Kazakhstan provides approximately 45 percent of the global uranium output.<sup>i</sup> Since its independence, the country has maintained economic and political stability. There was a smooth transition of power from the first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to the current President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in March 2019. Subsequently, Tokayev was elected as Kazakhstan's President with nearly 71 percent of the vote in June 2019. However, due to economic and political reasons, the country witnessed mass protest in early January 2022. The government took immediate economic measures to give relief to the people. After stabilising the situation with the help of “peacekeeping mission” by CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation) forces and their subsequent return, the comprehensive constitution reform was proposed by President Tokayev in an Address to the Nation in a joint session of parliament on 16th March 2022.*

President Tokayev while addressing the 31st session of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan stated, “To build the new Kazakhstan, we need to completely reform the individual and public values system”.<sup>2</sup> The Proposed amendments are changing a super-presidential form of

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government to a presidential one; robust parliament; revamping the constitutional court; abolition of the death penalty; and strengthening mechanisms for defending citizens' rights. Referring to the referendum in the country, which is required for constitutional amendments, President Tokayev said: "I trust that amending the constitution through a referendum will be strong evidence of the will of the people."<sup>3</sup>

The referendum took place on 5th June 2022. It purposed 56 changes, including 33 fundamental law provisions, constituting one-third of the country's Constitution. According to Kazakhstan's Central Election Commission, nearly 77.18% supported the constitutional amendments, while 19% voted against amendments. The total turnout was 68.06%. In his post-referendum Address, the President said, "A significant historical event took place in our country. Our country has entered a new stage of development...The result of the referendum has become a clear symbol of political renewal. Our citizens showed high responsibility and patriotism. We have demonstrated that we are united in building a New, Fair Kazakhstan".<sup>4</sup>

### **Limiting the powers of the President**

The proposed amendments limit the President's powers and restrict him from being a political party member. This restriction also extends to chairpersons and judges of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and other courts, chairpersons and members of the Central Electoral Commission, and the Supreme Audit Chamber of the Republic. The amendment bans the President's close relatives from holding senior positions as political civil servants and in the quasi- public sector. President's power regarding local authorities has also been reduced and transferred to the *akims* (governors) at the regional level, substantially strengthening the role of the *maslikhats* (local representative body).<sup>5</sup>

Purposed amendments excluded the clause mentioned in Article 46 about the status and powers of the First President of Kazakhstan, which is determined by the Constitution of the Republic and the constitutional law. This law on the first president pledges complete immunity to first President Nazarbaev and members of his immediate family. The amended constitution removes immunity granted to the immediate family members of the first president.<sup>6</sup>

## **De-centralisation of Power**

Several proposed measures give more power to the parliament and make it more representative by substituting the ‘proportionate system’ of elections with a diverse ‘majoritarian-proportional’. It also contains an essential decentralisation of power with competencies given to regional and local authorities. The *Majilis* (lower house) would consist of 98 deputies instead of 107 through a mixed electoral system.vii Thirty percent of deputies would be elected by territorial districts directly instead of party lists. Rest seventy percent of *Majilis* deputies would be elected by proportional elections. Now, voters will also have the right to recall them. The presidential share to nominate deputies in the *Senate* (Upper house) has also been decreased to 10 from 15. Share of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, which used to send nine deputies to the *Majilis*, has now been reduced to five deputies only.viii It is considered that a mixed electoral structure would better address the rights of all citizens and reflect voters’ interests. At the same time, the combination of proportional and majoritarian systems would also increase the activity of deputies, and they would be more responsive to the citizens.

According to proposed amendments, now, *akims* of regions, cities of ‘republican significance’ and capitals would be appointed by the President on the recommendation of two candidates forwarded by the deputies of the *maslikhats* of the region or city. The introduction of a fully majoritarian system for electing deputies to district and city *maslikhats* would make the deputies more accountable to the people. In addition, in the new amendments, the President would have no power to nullify or suspend the Acts of *akims* of regions, cities of republican significance and the capital. The President will now have no power to remove *akims* of districts, cities, or rural districts.<sup>6</sup>

## **Reforms in Elections and Political Party**

Through amendments, the changes to the legislation will be made to increase prospects for expanding the party system in the country, including streamlining registration measures for political parties. The amendments reduce the registration qualification required for parties from 20,000 to 5,000 people. Furthermore, only 700 individuals instead of 1,000 would be needed for citizens’ initiative groups to create a party. Electoral reforms included the need to form a unified electronic



voter database that would thwart the possibility of double voting. It would also set restrictions on donations made to election funds and safeguard the financial transparency of all electoral campaign participants, including candidates, observers, and the media. These reforms would help strengthen the democratic traditions and establish a new political culture based on mutual accountability and trust between deputies and voters.<sup>10</sup>

### **Administrative-Territorial Reforms:**

The President had first proposed the administrative-territorial changes during his annual Address to the Nation on 16th March 2022. The President proposed the formation of two new regions - Abai and Ulytau regions, with their regional centres in the cities of Semey and Zhezkazgan, respectively. The Almaty region was also reorganized in two different regions – Almaty Region and Zhetisu Region. Now, the administrative centre of the Almaty region is Kapshagai, and, for Zhetisu Region, it is Taldykorgan, which earlier was the administrative centre for Almaty.<sup>11</sup> The President also proposed naming Kapchagai after Dinnukhamed Kunayev, a Soviet- era politician who headed the Kazakh SSR from 1964 to 1986.

President Tokayev said, “The creation of a separate region has not only economical but also spiritual and cultural significance.”<sup>12</sup> He also said that these changes were introduced to “optimise public administration, simplify commuting to and from the regional centre, and better regulate internal migration.”<sup>13</sup>



Source:<https://astanatimes.com/2022/05/president-tokayev-introduces-three-new-regions-in-kazakhstan/>

## Protecting the Rights of Citizens

The Constitutional Court that existed in the early 90s had the right to cancel laws, decisions of the Supreme Council, decrees of the President, and decisions of the Cabinet of Ministers. Citizens had the right to apply directly to it to protect their constitutional rights.

However, Constitution Court was changed into Constitutional Council by the first President of Kazakhstan with reduced power.<sup>14</sup>

The Constitutional Council has now been recreated through new amendments as the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court consists of 11 judges, six appointed by the parliament (three of each of the chambers) and four by the President. Furthermore, the President will appoint the chairman with the approval of the *Senate*, which aims to ensure balance in this supreme judicial body. The chairman's term should not be exceeded more than six years, and he may not be appointed as a judge of the Constitutional Court more than two times in a row. Citizens will now have the power to appeal directly to the court.<sup>15</sup>

The Constitutional Court would have the power to review the norms of laws and by-laws for compliance with the Constitution. If any unconstitutionality of normative acts or their parts is revealed, the Constitutional Court has the right to cancel such acts or their norms. The constitutional law would determine the competence, organisation, and procedure for the activities of the prosecutor's office.<sup>xvi</sup> It should strengthen systemic human rights activities and supreme supervision over the observance of the rule of law in Kazakhstan. The amendments also abolish the death penalty.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, proposed amendments consolidate the Commissioner for Human Rights status at the constitutional level. The ombudsman will deal with the reinstatement of violated human and civil rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the ombudsman is granted immunity through his independence and is now not accountable to state bodies and officials. Moreover, the commissioner for human rights during his tenure cannot be arrested without the consent of the Senate.<sup>17</sup>

President Tokayev stressed that a significant part of amendments is protecting human rights. He said, "The creation of the Constitutional Court, the consolidation of the status of the Commissioner for Human Rights at the constitutional level, the absolute ban on the death penalty

- all these steps are aimed at comprehensive observance of the rights and freedoms of citizens.”<sup>19</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The constitutional reform would form a balance of relations between the branches of power. The reforms would also increase political competition, equal conditions for developing all political parties, and independence and neutrality in decision-making for the citizens. Amendments to the Constitution also aim to modernise and improve the electoral process. The result of the constitutional reform should be the expansion of local/state administration and self-government powers, carried out by local representatives and executive bodies responsible for the state of affairs in the relevant territory.

The proposed amendments would be a way forward to Kazakhstan’s transformation to a qualitatively new model for the formation and interaction of government institutions. The reforms are initiated for a new political culture, enhancing the media’s competitiveness, and consolidating the civil society institutions’ role. Revamping the administrative-territorial structure of Kazakhstan, decentralising and delegating more power to local governments would, to an extent, meet the demand of citizens’ aspirations.

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