

Geopolitical Dimension of India's Relations with Central Asia

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While locating India-Central Asia relations in a geopolitical framework, five important vectors must be kept in mind. These are: a) India-Central Asia geo-cultural relationship; b) The chaotic geopolitical scenario of Central Asia due to growing Chinese clout in this strategic space, which in turn is generating apprehensions for Russia; c) Russia which used to consider Central Asia as its “soft underbelly” is gradually losing its stronghold. This is more so after a spell of financial sanctions since 2014 against Russian annexation of Crimea; d) Security concerns related to prolonged political instability in Afghanistan and its repercussions on both India and Central Asia and e) In a broader context, the complex geopolitics of post-Soviet space got murkier following the outbreak of Russia-Ukraine War as it spelt out a message to Russia that it can no longer maintain a de facto suzerainty in the “Eurasian heartland”.¹

Largely, some of the factors mentioned above are shaping the geopolitical trajectories of India-Central Asia relations. Strands, like the geo-cultural logic, provide a historical context to the age-old relationship. Similarly, the existing geopolitical complexities shape the dynamic nature of the bilateral relationship. At the same time, geo-economic dimensions give impetus for building a robust strategic partnership between India and Central Asian countries. Moreover, these three above-mentioned strategic arcs often operate simultaneously or interact in isolation in strengthening the existing relationship between India and Central Asian countries over the years.²

Keeping some of the above-mentioned geo-strategic postulates of India-Central Asia relations in mind, the present article has tried to address the following questions:

1. How far have India-Central Asian relations moved over the years from

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the strategic logic of “Extended Neighbourhood” to the “Connect Central Asia” policy framework?

2. Is there a need for a new policy framework to strengthen relations between India and Central Asia, given the current geopolitical realities?
3. Can India augment its geo-economic presence in this part of the world by strengthening connectivity with the land-locked Central Asian countries through the Chabahar port and the Indo-Pacific?
4. To what extent the Central Asian countries can overcome their geopolitical uncertainties by strengthening relations with India?

The present article will test the hypothesis, “the geopolitical fluidity in the Central Asian region over the last 30 years is providing India with an opportunity to strengthen its position in the region.”

Geo-cultural Interactions between India and Central Asia

While looking at India-Central Asia relations, one cannot ignore the geo-cultural aspect. The geo-cultural elements provide a base to locate the relationship in a historical context while ensuring continuity to the existing relations. In the context of India-Central Asia relations, some of the common geo-cultural heritage, like worshipping *Panchamahabut* (Five elements of nature “Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space”) and Buddhism, played a crucial role in strengthening the age-old historico-cultural relations between India and Central Asia. The discovery of Buddhist remnants in Kara Tepe near Termez in Uzbekistan is a testimony to India’s cultural influence there.³ Along with Termez, archaeological excavations conducted at Penjikent (presently in Tajikistan) demonstrate India’s influence in the art, craft and traditions of Central Asia. The discovery of a painting attributing to *Nilakantha* also known as *Natraj* (Lord Shiva) at Penjikent reflects the strong influence of Indian culture in Tajikistan.⁴ Archaeologists have observed that the Ajanta School of Art along with the Bharuch art of India influenced the paintings discovered at Penjikent. Incidentally, Penjikent is a place where one can find the longest-sleeping Buddha. The discovery of Buddhist art and artefacts along with Sanskrit manuscripts in Ajina Tepe is a testimony to India’s influence in Central Asia.⁵ Some of the archaeological excavations in Turkmenistan (Marv) and Kazakhstan also highlight remnants of the Buddhist culture. This testifies to the fact that India has a deeper geo-cultural relationship with Central Asia. The two major revered holy religious scriptures of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have made a detailed

description of Central Asia.⁶ Similarly, the *Matshya Puran*, *Vayu Puran* and *Bramha Samhita* also have certain references to this region. *Matshya Puran* mentions this region is located near “the river Vakshu” (*Amu Darya*).⁷

One may recall here that the geo-cultural linkages between India and Central Asia continued even during the medieval period. The Mughals who came from Central Asia also brought the art and architecture, culture and religion of Central Asia with them.⁸

India's link with Central Asia continued without any major interruption. A British Military Intelligence Officer, Alexander Burnes, observed that in the late eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, “There are around 300 *Hindoos*, living in Bukhara in caravansary of their own”.⁹ The Hungarian Travelogue Arminius Vambery in his travel account highlights the presence of Indians in the Khanate of Bukhara. Vambery states, “*Hindoos* are the worshipper of *Vishnoo*” and dominate the trading activities.¹⁰ In 1765, a report from the Foreign Department of Russia demonstrates that some of the Central Asian cities such as Bukhara, Khiva and Samarkand used to serve as the transit points for Indian traders on their way to Russia.¹¹

Significantly, trade, commerce, culture and geostrategic location facilitated growing India-Central Asia relations. Many of the Indian freedom fighters, during their struggle against British colonial rule, used Central Asia as a base. In this regard, special mention can be made to the role of Raja Mahendra Pratap and M. N. Roy. As head of the Provisional Government of India, Raja Mahendra Pratap, who was in Kabul in 1919, attempted to solicit the Russian leaders' support in their fight against the British Colonial rulers. Similarly, Raja Mahendra Pratap, with the help of other freedom fighters, played a crucial role in the “formation of a military centre on the Chittrak-Pamir frontier”.¹²

In the post-1917 phase, Central Asia became part of the Soviet Union and India attained its independence from British colonial rule in 1947. However, India's engagement with Central Asia was limited until 1991.

Geopolitical Contours of India-Central Asia Cooperation in the Post-1991 Era

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan attained independence. In this process of consolidating their newly won independence, these five countries of Central Asia tried to forge their partnership

with external powers through a multi-vectoral policy. One can locate India-Central Asia relations in this context. The post-1991 phase provided an opportunity for both India and Central Asian countries to strengthen their relationship in a framework rooted in ancient “civilisational ties”.¹³

The first systemic attempt to strengthen relations with Central Asia was made by the then Prime Minister of India P.V. Narsimha Rao, who visited Central Asian countries in 1993, and again in 1995 except for Tajikistan. During his visit to Uzbekistan in May 1993, Prime Minister offered a credit of US\$ 10 million to Uzbekistan. Similarly, Prime Minister Rao has also visited Kazakhstan. Like in the case of Uzbekistan, India has provided the same amount of credit to Kazakhstan as part of the aid. In 1995, Prime Minister Rao also visited Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan thus providing a foundation stone for setting India-Central Asia relations.¹⁴ In this regard, it is pertinent to mention that Prime Minister Rao, in September 1995 also undertook a similar visit to Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵ The visit provided robustness in forging a new partnership with the Central Asian countries. One noteworthy achievement of India’s engagement with Turkmenistan was the signing of the “Memorandum of Understanding on International Road and Rail Transport and Transit” at New Delhi in April 1995. The Memorandum emphasised, “that a Working Group of Technical Experts could be constituted to undertake and monitor the implementation of the MOU”.¹⁶ This Agreement can be stated as the first step toward India and Central Asia connectivity project through Iran. Later, the International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC) Project gained momentum. One needs to mention here that the Central Asian presidents have also visited India. This signifies India’s position in Central Asian geopolitical calculus. Another important aspect is the attempt made to institutionalise bilateral relations between India and the Central Asian countries. Thus, in the 1990s, despite chaotic geopolitics in Central Asia, India made tactical inroads into the Central Asian geopolitical space.

India’s Policy of “Extended Neighbourhood” and Consolidation of India-Central Asia Strategic Engagement

The “Extended Neighbourhood” policy of India can be considered the first step toward enunciating a comprehensive institutional framework for engaging the Central Asian countries. Articulating the concept of “Extended Neighbourhood” at Almaty in June 2002, the then Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee underlined, “Historically, this extended neighbourhood of ours has been very close to our hearts. It is linked to India through ties of history,

culture and spirituality".¹⁷ Prime Minister Vajpayee's speech, provided a conceptual basis for the future of India-Central Asia cooperation.

India-Central Asia took a new upswing following the post-1999 phase when there was a surge of growing cooperation between India and Central Asia. Connectivity became the key issue for India and Central Asia. The signing of the trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Russia provided the impetus for facilitating such a connectivity process in which Central Asian countries, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan joined subsequently as key partners, and the multi-modal INSTC route became the focal point. Similarly, India, Iran and Afghanistan took initial steps by facilitating connectivity through the Chabahar Port in Iran. As part of the Trilateral Agreement signed at Teheran in January 2003, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed an agreement under which the "Chabahar-Milak-Zaranj-Delaram route" became the main artery of connectivity with Central Asia.¹⁸ As per the Agreement, the Zaranj-Delaram road route located in Afghanistan is to be constructed by India. This road route connects with the Milak route located in Iran. Along with improving Afghanistan's infrastructure facilities, this route also facilitates India's connectivity with Central Asia. The India-Iran Joint Declaration signed in January 2003 further reiterated the significance of the above-mentioned trilateral agreement. As the Joint Declaration highlighted, the route "would facilitate regional trade and transit, including to Afghanistan and Central Asia, contributing thus to enhanced regional economic prosperity".¹⁹

As discussed, the initiation of the INSTC route is the first step towards India's greater emphasis on connectivity with Central Asia. Thus, in post-1999, there is a marked increase in India's engagement with Central Asia both in the geopolitical and geoeconomic spheres. The discovery of new oil and gas fields in the energy-rich Central Asian countries particularly Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have also propelled India to cement its relationship with these countries.

In the aftermath of the enunciation of the "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" by Prime Minister Vajpayee, significant progress has been made in India-Central Asia relations. In this regard, India signed a number of bilateral agreements with the five countries of Central Asia in diverse fields ranging from energy security to cooperation in science and technology along with boosting security cooperation. Similarly, India got the strategically located Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan in 2002. The Airbase at Ayni gave India a major strategic advantage in both South and Central Asia's geopolitical spectrum.²⁰

Despite the initial hiccup, India made some inroads into this region's energy sector. India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) along with the Mittal Group in 2007 got the upper hand in Turkmenistan's energy sector, followed by, India's ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) acquiring a stake of 25 per cent in the lucrative Satpayev bloc of Kazakhstan.²¹ New Delhi and Astana also took steps to strengthen cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. The same was manifested in the "Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership between India and Kazakhstan" signed in 2009. As the Joint Statement emphasised "immense possibilities of cooperation in the nuclear civil energy sector including in the mining of uranium".²² Kazakhstan being one of the largest producers of Uranium in the world, a joint collaboration between India and Kazakhstan paved the way for strengthening civil nuclear cooperation. Indian energy firm Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) has been boosting its presence in Uzbekistan since 2006.²³ Similarly, in Tajikistan's hydroelectric sector, both the National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) and the Bharat Heavy Electricals Project (BHEL) are active players.²⁴

Besides energy cooperation, India and Central Asia forged cooperation in the domain of science and technology and the health sector. This multi-faceted approach helped India strengthen relationships ranging from energy to science and technology and helped boost connectivity with Central Asia. Also, understanding the common security challenges, both India and Central Asian countries formed a series of Joint Working Groups.²⁵

The Connect Central Asia policy initiated in 2012 provided a new ground for strengthening India-Central Asia relations. The policy document provided a blueprint for different dimensions of India-Central Asia relations. Some key areas that the Connect Central Asia Policy envisaged included health, education, information and technological cooperation. One of the key points of the policy document is that it underlined the need for India's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).²⁶ At the same time, India has also strengthened defence cooperation with the Central Asian countries. For instance, joint military exercises between India and Central Asian countries became routine affairs. It is pertinent to mention that in the post-2000 phase, India cemented its place in the geopolitics of Central Asia. Thus, from the "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" to the "Connect Central Asia" Policy, one can underline that India strengthened its relations with Central Asia. This paved the way for New Delhi for pursuing an assertive role in Central Asian geopolitics.

India's Assertive Role

The post-2014 phase witnessed rising geopolitical complexity in Central Asian affairs. This emanates from three major structural factors: a) The Crimea crisis and its impact on Russia's geopolitical manoeuvrability in Central Asia; b) The growing role of China in Central Asia especially after the enunciation of the One Belt and One Road (OBOR) in 2013; and c) The United States showing relatively lesser interest in Central Asian geopolitics.²⁷

Central Asia's changing geopolitical equation provided both new challenges and opportunities to India. The first major milestone with regard to India and Central Asia relations is the visit of the Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi to Central Asia in July 2015. The visit paved the way for fruitful cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries in diverse fields ranging from technology, and energy, which includes the export of Uranium from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to India, cooperation in the field of the health sector, information technology, etc. During his visit to Central Asia, Prime Minister Modi also pushed the idea of greater connectivity between India and Central Asia and emphasised for bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan.²⁸ During the visit to Kazakhstan in 2015, Prime Minister Modi and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev jointly inaugurated the oil exploration at the Satpayev block in which India has a 25 per cent stake. Similarly, in Turkmenistan, Prime Minister Modi focussed on energy cooperation between India and Turkmenistan.²⁹ Underlining the need for India-Central Asia cooperation, Prime Minister Modi during his address at the Nazarbayev University, Astana, stated, "Both India and Central Asia cannot achieve their full potential without each other. Nor will our people be safer and our region more stable without our cooperation".³⁰

The Post-2015 phase witnessed a flurry of activities aimed at enhancing the connection between India and Central Asia. In this regard, it is pertinent to mention that efforts to strengthen connectivity with Central Asia through Iran were boosted in 2015 when the proposal for cooperation was signed in May 2015. Similarly, during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016, both countries signed an agreement for ten years. This was followed by signing a formal contract to give an institutional shape to the bilateral relationship.³¹ In December 2018, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed another trilateral Agreement under which efforts were made to facilitate connectivity.³² The successful implementation of the Agreement provided India with an opportunity to further its connectivity process with the Central Asian countries through Afghanistan.

Along with the Chabahar connectivity project, India also joined the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018. This Agreement aimed to further the connectivity between two primary energy-rich regions, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. India can take advantage of the Agreement by joining the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan Rail connectivity, operational since 2014. In this way, India can significantly reach out to both the energy-rich Central Asian countries.³³

With the formation of the India-Central Asia Development Group, trade relations between India and Central Asia are growing. The then External Affairs Minister (EAM) of India, Sushma Swaraj in her address at the India-Central Asia Dialogue held at Samarkand in January 2019, highlighted that “India proposes the setting up of the ‘India-Central Asia Development Group’ to take forward this development partnership between India and Central Asian countries”.³⁴ Trade relations increased substantially in the post-2015 era, as evident in trade data. For instance, the total trade turnover between India and Uzbekistan was US\$ 316.7 million in 2014 and increased to US\$ 442.7 in 2020.³⁵ Similarly, in 2018, the total trade figure with Kazakhstan was US\$ 1.2 billion, the trade figure with Turkmenistan was US\$66.27 million for the year 2018-2019, the total trade figure for the same period with Tajikistan was US\$20.82 million, and with Kyrgyzstan, the trade figure stood at US\$ 32.60 million.³⁶ The trade figure was modest in comparison to China’s bilateral trade with Central Asia. Three major factors are to be kept in mind while locating India-Central Asia trade relations vis-à-vis China-Central Asia trade relations. These are: a) Central Asian countries’ trade relations with China are operating through the prism of unequal partnership. As a result, one can notice that the Central Asian countries are in a disadvantageous position; b) China is using trade to expand its sphere of influence in Central Asia. There have been many apprehensions that China through its One Belt and One Road Project, may pursue a new kind of imperial manoeuvring in Central Asia; c) Over the years, Central Asian countries are also trapped by Chinese debt.³⁷

At the same time, India is also trying to expand its economic presence in the Central Asian space by aligning with Russia. Efforts are going on between India and the Russian-led EEU to institutionalise trade relations. If the institutionalisation of India and the EEU were to take place, India may get an upper hand in the Central Asian market, especially in the two Central Asian countries -Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are members of the EEU.³⁸ Highlighting the significance of India’s membership in the EEU, Sergei Glazyev, the EEU Minister in charge of Integration and Macroeconomics, stated, “Cooperation between the (EEU) Union and India has a huge potential and meets the interests of all stakeholders”.³⁹

Besides bilateral economic interactions, India also engaged with the Central Asian countries at various multi-lateral forums. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings, India, Russia and Central Asian countries took a joint stand on diverse issues. At the SCO summits, Central Asian countries and Russia looked toward India as a counterweight to China.⁴⁰

India also took steps to build a rapprochement with Central Asian countries at various levels. These include the institutionalisation of cooperation between India and Central Asian countries in economic spheres like the India-Central Asia Business Council, conducting regular military exercises with the Central Asian countries, holding of National Security Advisors meetings of India and Central Asian countries and also regular meetings of Foreign Ministers of India and Central Asian countries. These meetings have, largely, helped India and Central Asian countries arrive at a common position on various bilateral and multilateral issues. For instance, at the Second meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, which took place through online mode in October 2020, Foreign Ministers of both India and Central Asian countries “strongly condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reaffirmed the determination of their countries to combat this menace by destroying terrorist safe-havens, networks, infrastructure and funding channels.”⁴¹ In the same meeting, the Foreign Ministers of Central Asia also appreciated India’s position on Afghanistan that “the settlement of the Afghan conflict on the principle of Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process”.⁴²

Even in the post-2015 phase, one can see a surge of bilateral economic cooperation. The formation of the India-Central Asia Business Council after the First India-Central Asia Dialogue resulted in a surge of bilateral trade and economic cooperation. It is pertinent to mention here that India has offered a US\$ 1 billion “loan of Credit” to the Central Asian countries as part of trade relations. Some niche areas where these funds will be used are “health, energy, connectivity and digitalization, development of small and medium entrepreneurship, etc.”⁴³

India-Central Asia Engagement in the Post-2021 Era

While locating India-Central Asia relations in the post-2021 phase, three important geopolitical developments are to be kept in mind. These are a) The withdrawal of the NATO forces from Afghanistan and political instability in Afghanistan following the forceful takeover of power by radical Taliban; b) The growing role of China and Pakistan in propping up radical and terrorist groups in Afghanistan along with support to Taliban to achieve their respective

geopolitical goals; and c) The growing threat to the security of both Central Asia and India due to political instability in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

Understanding the security concerns emanating from Afghanistan India and Central Asian countries at the First Delhi Declaration of the First India-Central Asia Summit, in January 2022 underlined “that there is a broad ‘regional consensus’ on the issues in Central Asia related to Afghanistan, which includes the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, the central role of the UN, providing immediate humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan and preserving the rights of women, children and other national ethnic groups and minorities”.⁴⁵

The further rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan after the violent overthrow of elected Ashraf Ghani government has also put India’s connectivity projects in Central Asia at high risk. It is a fact that all the Central Asian countries agreed to join the Chahbahar Project to end their land-locked status before the coming of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. Even India-Iran-Uzbekistan and Afghanistan formed a Quadrilateral Working Group to operate the Chahbahar Project. There was much hope that the Chahbahar Project would join the INSTC connectivity project. This created a sense of hope for the Central Asian countries.⁴⁶ As External Affairs Minister of India S. Jaishankar in his address at the Plenary Session “Central and South Asia: Connectivity” held in July 2021 at Tashkent stated “building connectivity is an act of trust and must, at the minimum, conform to international law. Respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity are the most basic principles of international relations”.⁴⁷ Chahbahar is the nodal port for India in strengthening connectivity with Central Asia. In this regard, the Delhi declaration of the First India-Central Asia Summit focused on the key issue of linking Chahbahar port and Turkmenbashi Port in the “INSTC Framework”. Iran is also keen to enlist the support of India in the Chahbahar Port on a long-term basis. Even during the visit of Union Minister of Ports, Shipping and Waterways of India Sarbananda Sonowal to Iran in August 2022, he handed over six cranes to the Chahbahar Port.⁴⁸ India can use Chahbahar as the springboard for connecting with the Bandar Abbas port of Iran, along the Turkmenbashi Port located in Turkmenistan.⁴⁹

In addition to the INSTC and Chahbahar project, India being a major Indo-Pacific player can also tap the recent developments in the trade transportation routes through Irtysh and Ob rivers by Kazakhstan and Russia. Since both rivers are connected by the port of Sabetta, which is located on the Arctic Coast of Russia. In this context, India has better connectivity with the port of Sabetta through the Indo-Pacific corridor. This will help in delivering Kazakh oil to India through this port.⁵⁰

Central Asian countries have been relying on both China and Russia - the major players in this region. But the growing competition between Beijing and Moscow in Central Asia propels this region's "five stans" to look towards India. Hence, the geopolitical crisis in Central Asia has brought an opportunity for India to be a major player in the "heartland of Eurasia" in the longer run.

Conclusion

India-Central Asia relations can be located in the prisms of historical geo-cultural continuity, the logic of geopolitical dynamics and the imperatives of geo-economic cooperation. India made a slow entry into the Central Asian region in the initial years of the 1990s but has emerged as an important player in Central Asian geopolitics. This is due to the warmth and goodwill India earned over the years in this geopolitical space. India over the years has been assisting the Central Asian countries in diverse areas ranging from health, education, infrastructural development, communication, energy, and renewable energy. The Central Asian countries also appreciated India's assistance with vaccines during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this regard, it is pertinent to highlight that India's geo-cultural interaction with Central Asia over centuries is the bedrock for the fruition of a greater strategic partnership. At the same time, the Central Asian countries are also keen to harness renewable energy through joint cooperation with India. In this regard, India's initiative on International Solar Alliance (ISA) needs special mention. India can provide technical assistance to Central Asian countries to harness solar energy and green hydrogen. Food security and agriculture are other areas, where India can assist Central Asian countries.

India always pursued cooperative diplomacy in Central Asia. This, in turn, puts India and the Central Asian countries in a win-win situation. In this context, one can underline that India-Central Asia relations can bring peace, stability and development to the "Eurasian Heartland".

Notes:

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- ⁷ K.A Nizami, "India's Cultural Relations with Central Asia during the Medieval Period", Amlendu Guha, *Central Asia: Movement of peoples and ideas from Times prehistoric to modern*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 161-162.
- ⁸ Alexander Burnes, *Travels into Bokhara*, part II, John Murray, London, 1833, pp. 244 and 245; Nalin Kumar Mohapatra, "Regional Processes and Geopolitics of India, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (IATU)", op.cit.
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- ¹² Devendra Kaushik, "India and Central Asia: Renewing a Traditional Relationship". *South Asian Survey*, op. cit.
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