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Indian Interests and Policy in Central Asia: Post 2014 Phase

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The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the Central Asian Republics (CARs) in July 2015 gave a powerful stimulus to India's "Connect Central Asia Policy". What was significant was that he visited all the five countries, which amply indicated that all held specific strategic significance for India, in his words "we see an important place for Central Asia in India's future". At stake are India's vital national interests. Its interests lie in a stable and a secure Central Asian region. In fact the CARs are considered as part of India's extended/ strategic neighbourhood. Any destabilization of the region by the forces of religious extremism and terrorism would impact negatively on India's security interests. Indian security interests are widely shared by the CARs. Moreover Prime Minister Modi's image as a decisive leader added to make it a milestone visit in the relationship.

However, India's Central Asia policy has to interact in a region that has witnessed radical shifts in this century. In 2001 the military presence of Western coalition forces in Afghanistan changed the geopolitical map of the region, now it is the withdrawal of these forces by the end of 2014, which has impinged on the security scenario. An inconclusive 'war on terror' has led to a resurgence of violent activities. It has brought about a fundamental change in the geopolitical landscape of the region. Importantly, the withdrawal has complicated Afghanistan's multiple transition process leaving a fragile state to fight a resurgent Taliban. The possibility of the rise of insurgency by the forces of Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan can lead to horrendous prospects of a worsening security scenario and destabilization.

At the broader level there is a sharpening of competition between China on the one hand, and the US and its allies in the European Union (EU) on the other hand. The competition has manifested in the form of strategic initiatives launched by the competing powers. China has viewed the draw down by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as an opportunity to expand its zone of interests in the vast Eurasian landmass. Its flagship project Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) focuses on an overland transport route

connecting China with Europe via Central Asia. The US aims to expand its strategic space in the Asia-Pacific region by launching its 'Rebalancing Strategy; the Pivot of Asia initiative.' Though on the back burner, the US initiative of a New Silk Road Strategy which aims to bring Central Asia closer to South Asia, has not been given up. Russia in its quest for recognition as one of the influential centres in a multipolar world, has sought to reassert its influence in Central Asia. In October 2011 President Vladimir Putin initiated the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) that seeks to bind its members to Russia economically. Among the CARs Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of EEU.

By the turn of the century there was a broadening of India's strategic vision, which included West Asia, the Persian Gulf, Central, Southeast and East Asia. In accordance with the broadening of its strategic vision, there is a paradigm shift in India's foreign policy. India aspired to play a pro-active and an energized role in Asia. This aspiration is commensurate with its growing national strength and rising international profile. With the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, India was able to restore its traditional ties of friendship with Afghanistan. In order to pursue a pro-active policy in Central Asia, the stability and security of Afghanistan was also of equal importance. Consequently there has been greater Indian involvement in Afghan reconstruction as well. However, in the absence of direct connectivity with the CARs or Afghanistan India's Central Asia policy was stymied. At the same time the defeat of the Taliban opened up the possibility for Afghanistan to once again emerge as the hub of trade and transport corridor to Central Asia. Many observers and analysts opine that one of India's enhanced objectives in Central Asia is a subtle competition with China but that is a debatable point. What is important at this juncture is to forge a collaborative approach to ensure the stability of the new democracy in Afghanistan and to meet the common challenge of extremism and terrorism, and narco trafficking.

A favourable factor in India's endeavor for enhancement of ties with the CARs is its rich legacy of historical ties and cultural contacts that dates back to antiquity. The legacy is full of mutual goodwill and friendship. The past has become the bridge to connect the future.

Two Decades of Relations

In the initial years of their independence Indian interests were primarily

rooted in Pakistan's activities in Central Asia. The unexpected independence of the CARs in 1991 coincided with a fratricidal war in neighbouring Afghanistan, which was followed by the seizure of power by the Taliban. Since Pakistan was the main supporter of the Taliban in terms of providing safe sanctuaries, arms training and equipment, and financial support to the insurgents, it began to nurture the ambition of creating a strategic integrated region based on religion. It was Pakistan's quest for 'strategic depth' in relation to India. The strategic integrated region would comprise of CARs and Afghanistan allied to Pakistan. As a consequence India's initial concern was that the newly emergent Central Asian States should not be destabilized by forces of religious extremism and terrorism. India supported a modern, democratic, secular polity in Central Asia, a socio-political and an economic order that they have opted for. The CARs needed peace and stability to carry out their massive transformation process.

Hence it was natural for them to look to India for support and cooperation in their gigantic task of transformation. Pakistan's efforts to win over the CARs on the basis of religion were met with mistrust and circumspection. Whereas, India was perceived as a friendly nation with no hidden agenda. It was not surprising, therefore, that the leaders of Central Asia visited India in quick succession seeking cooperation and support. The following statement by President Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan made during his visit to India in 1992 succinctly reflected the prevailing sentiment. In his banquet speech President Akayev had said "Kyrgyzstan is looking to India as an example as it sets about restructuring its economy and socio-political system". Further he said "we categorically reject extremism of any kind. Let it be extremism neither of the communist type nor of religious fanatics"¹. Such an approach undoubtedly eased India's worries for in those early years it looked upon Central Asia as a buffer against Islamic radicalism. Despite the tremendous fund of goodwill exuded towards India, its policy for nearly a decade lacked vigour and robustness. It was primarily a reactive policy.

The defeat of the Taliban in 2001 coincided with a paradigm shift in India's strategic vision which went beyond South Asia. The shift resulted in a fundamental change in Indian foreign policy. Indian policy in accordance with its broadened strategic vision became proactive. The defeat of the Taliban

opened a window of opportunity for India not only to restore its traditional friendship with Afghanistan, but also to reconnect with Central Asia. The changed proactive approach was evident in the Annual Report of the Ministry of Defence (2002-03). It was stated that “Relations based on a shared commitment to open and progressive societies, secularism and democracy have been reinforced by similarity of views in the fight against terrorism. – In the sphere of defence, cooperation is taking the form of security dialogue and training of armed forces personnel”² After the defeat of the Taliban, Indian involvement in the reconstruction of Afghanistan increased phenomenally. However, any attempt at Afghan reconstruction has to factor in developments in Central Asia as well, for they are part of the same geopolitical space. Developments in either the CARs or Afghanistan will impact on each other. In this context a crucial shift occurred; it was the perception of Afghanistan as a ‘land bridge’ to Eurasia including Central Asia. Afghanistan was no longer viewed as a buffer, but a connector of regions. Another factor that began to weigh heavily in India’s interests was Central Asia’s wealth of natural resources including energy resources. Indian dependence on external sources for its energy requirement added to the enormous significance of Central Asia.

As a consequence India’s Central Asia policy became vigorous and proactive. At the security/strategic level apart from the initiation of defence dialogue and training of armed forces personnel, Military Technical Cooperation Agreements were signed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. During former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee’s visit to Tajikistan in November 2003 India agreed to renovate the Ayni Air base. There are Joint Working Groups (JWG) on counter terrorism with Uzbekistan (2003), Kazakhstan (2004) and Tajikistan (2012). The purposes of the JWGs are to coordinate and share experience and information in areas of common concerns. Similarly India is cooperating with Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) a security structure that collates information about terrorists, their movements and shares with its members. India has been sharing its experiences in this regard.

In 2009, India raised its interaction with the CARs to another level by signing Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPA) with Kazakhstan. President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the ‘Guest of Honour’ at India’s Republic Day parade. One

of the achievements during the visit was Kazakhstan's agreement to supply uranium to India. In 2011 the SPA was signed with Uzbekistan, the focus being primarily on transport connectivity due to its central location. During President Hamid Karzai's visit to India in October 2011 a SPA was signed with Afghanistan, and in 2012 with Tajikistan. All these agreements taken together signified India's intention to further energize its role in Central Asian region.

India's engagement with the CARs gained a new momentum with the announcement of its "Connect Central Asia Policy" (CCAP) in 2012. The policy aimed at enhancing India's strategic space and engagement with the CARs. It raised the earlier conceptual framework of extended neighbourhood to connecting with the CARs. Enunciating the policy in the First India-Central Asia Dialogue in Bishkek on 12 June 2012 the then Indian minister of state for foreign affairs had said, "India is now looking intently at the region through the framework of Connect Central Asia Policy which is based on proactive political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian countries both individually and collectively". He elucidated further by saying "We must factor in the regional situation and especially the challenge of rebuilding Afghanistan. – One way is to work towards converting Afghanistan into hub of trade and energy connecting Central and South Asia".³ Security issues in this context are the key to understanding India's CCAP. Consequently high level visits were undertaken to understand Central Asian perspective on regional security and stability.

The CARs welcomed the enunciation of CCAP as there was a wide area of commonality of interests on issues of regional security and stability. Here mention must be made of Vice-President Hamid Ansari's visit to Tajikistan in April 2013. During the visit President Emomali Rahmon stressed the need for a joint consultative effort before the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan. Regional stability was of prime concern to his country".⁴

From the perspective of economic engagement two areas are of crucial strategic importance to both India and the CARs. These are the energy sector and the issue of transport connectivity. It is well-known that Central Asia's energy reserves are high and there is a high possibility of unexplored reserves being equally substantial. India is heavily dependent on external sources for

its energy requirements (approximately 70%). In its quest to diversify its energy sources, Central Asia offers a significant alternative. Being landlocked transporting this vital resource has been a major obstacle for India as well as the energy rich countries of Central Asia. Meanwhile Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would also like to diversify their markets. In this respect the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) a natural gas pipeline project is of enormous significance to all the members. The TAPI project is backed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Once TAPI becomes operational it would certainly be a 'game changer' in the region.

Closely linked with the energy question is the one of connectivity to the region. In the present circumstances the best option for India to reach out to the region is through the Iranian port of Chah Bahar. India has already constructed a road link from Delaram (Afghanistan) to Zaranj on the Afghan-Iran border. From Zaranj there is surface transport connectivity to Chah Bahar. Since Delaram is located on Afghanistan's Ring Road, it is possible to extend the link to Mazar-e-Sharif, and then a 75 km rail link to Uzbekistan is already operational. The Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan surface transport connectivity would not only provide access to India, but more importantly it would facilitate Afghanistan's emergence as the hub of transport connectivity and equally importantly provide access to the CARs to reach the Indian Ocean, thereby strengthening the southern vector of their foreign policies. The 'Heart of Asia' or the Istanbul Process also aims at establishing Afghanistan as the land bridge to Eurasia.

At the political level India's open, democratic and secular credentials have endeared it for the Central Asian States. For there is much to gain from Indian experience and expertise in building democratic institutions. The CARs have been supportive of an issue that is of cardinal importance to Indian foreign policy - support to India's candidature for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. They have also endorsed India's sponsored resolution on Comprehensive Resolution on Terrorism (# 1373) in the UN General Assembly.

India's CCAP was vigorous and robust. However, two factors restricted its effectiveness; one multilateral arrangement had come to occupy the centre stage in regional politics on matters relating to security and economic issues.

There were two such multilateral groupings; the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and it was only at the recent summit meeting of the SCO in Ufa (July 2015) that India was invited as a full member. Secondly lack of direct overland transport connectivity with the Central Asian region has limited India's engagement.

Prime Minister Modi's Visit, July 2015

Prime Minister Modi's visit took place at a time when the regional environment was in a state of flux. It was entering a turbulent phase in the wake of the bulk withdrawal of coalition forces. Afghanistan had undergone its first democratic transition at the political level, but there was no peace in the country due to the increasing violent activities of the Taliban. The Central Asian space was also witnessing a subtle competition among the initiatives launched by the major powers. As mentioned there was the SREB versus the EEU versus the New Silk Road Strategy of the West. It remains to be seen how the expanded SCO, which would include India, shapes its future course of action. Viewed against the backdrop of this evolving scenario, Prime Minister Modi's visit was an opportunity as well as a challenge. It was an opportunity to further enhance India's role in the region by focusing on skill development, economic development, and a challenge to revitalize its CCAP. What made the visit noteworthy was that, all the countries were included in the itinerary. It was an acknowledgement of their individuality as nation states. The Prime Minister put the visit in a right perspective by recalling "Our relationship with the region has ancient roots and has left a strong imprint on both. It now occupies a significant place in India's future".⁵ Similarly in his address at the Nazarbayev University in Astana on 7 July 2015 he highlighted the significance of Central Asia for Eurasia. In his words "Central Asia is at the cross roads of Eurasia. It has been caught in the currents of history and it has also shaped it".⁶

The shared security threats such as combating religious extremism and terrorism, and developments in Afghanistan topped the agenda in all the countries. Prime Minister Modi said, "We have a shared interest in a peaceful and a stable Afghanistan and Central Asia. We have the common purpose in combating terrorism and extremism".⁷ He also mentioned the growing threat

posed by the IS by referring to it as a 'threat without borders'. In Tajikistan he explicitly said "We are both located in the proximity of the main source of terrorism. Combating terrorism and extremism has always been an important and a productive area of cooperation".⁸

In this context upgrading the existing defence cooperation was agreed. In Tajikistan Prime Minister Modi described the ongoing defence cooperation as a 'strong pillar' of our SPA. In this regard two developments must be mentioned. One a substantial defence cooperation agreement was signed with Turkmenistan. The Agreement would provide a framework for intensifying bilateral defence and security cooperation through exchanges of high level and mid-level visits, training and dialogue. It would also enable capacity building and technical cooperation.⁹ Secondly, a decision to hold joint military exercises with Kyrgyzstan on an annual basis was taken. President Almazbek Atambayev noted that bilateral defence ties are strong. He said a joint exercise "Khanjar 2015" has just been completed. "We have decided to hold joint military exercises on an annual basis".¹⁰

At the economic level a substantive area of engagement was in the sphere of energy security and transport connectivity. From the perspective of ensuring energy security the visit to Turkmenistan was a landmark one. Great hopes have been pinned on TAPI a natural gas pipeline project. Describing the TAPI project as a "key pillar" of economic engagement between the two countries, the Joint Statement stated that both the leaders reaffirmed that its implementation would have transformational impact on trade¹¹ The Prime Minister suggested to the Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov that multiple options such as the possibility of a land sea route through Iran for the pipeline should be explored. In December 2015 a follow up action on TAPI was taken when in the presence of the leaders; the 'ground breaking' ceremony was held. The TAPI project is inching forward slowly but surely. The OVL (ONGC Videsh Ltd.) has opened an office in Ashgabat. Deliberations in Kazakhstan on the issue of energy security have shown considerable promise.

Turkmenistan's geographical location adjoining Iran opened up the possibility for India to connect through Iran especially after the vital rail link between Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran became operational a couple of years ago. One of the foreign policy objectives of Turkmenistan is to emerge as a

transport hub connecting east with west and north with south. In view of these positive developments Prime Minister Modi expressed India's keenness to join the Ashgabat Declaration – the Persian Gulf Corridor connecting Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Oman. The leaders also welcomed the first expert level meeting on connectivity between India and Turkmenistan in Delhi in June 2015 and agreed to continue the discussions and interactions under the framework of a JWG for exploring various connectivity options between the two countries. India's planned investments in the Iranian port of Chah Bahar could make outreach to Central Asia as well as Afghanistan more effective.

Apart from focusing on increasing its bilateral content at the economic level, India has expressed its desire to join the EEU to facilitate trade, transit and other economic activities with the region.

In the sphere of culture Prime Minister Modi's remarks were highly commendable and inclusive. In an eloquent speech at the Nazarbayev University in Astana, he traced the common civilizational links and heritage between India and Central Asia. He said "The confluence of Indian and Islamic civilizations took place in Central Asia. We enriched each other not only in spiritual thought, but also in medicine, science, mathematics and astronomy". Further he noted "The Islamic heritage of both India and Central Asia is defined by the highest ideals of Islam – knowledge, piety, compassion and welfare. This is a heritage founded on the principle of love and devotion. And it has always rejected the forces of extremism. Today this is an important source of strength that brings India and Central Asia together".¹²

There is no doubt that the Prime Minister's visit made a lasting impression on the leaders and the people of Central Asia. In order to sustain the momentum generated by the visit, it is equally important to keep the regional dynamics in mind. The Russian factor in Central Asia still continues to be of immense importance. Russian language, education and security cover to three Central Asian states has given it still a substantial presence. Now with India joining the SCO as a full member has opened up the possibility of India and Russia cooperating at the regional level and this cooperation can be a valuable input into cementing India-Russia relations.

Similarly relations with Iran have acquired tremendous significance in the emerging geopolitical landscape; Iran is India's only gateway to Central Asia

and Afghanistan. It is therefore important to build up durable and all round ties with Iran on a priority basis.

Concluding Observations

Prime Minister Modi's visit to the five CARs has been a promising one and has raised hopes. The visit should be followed by vigorous exchanges at all levels so that the momentum generated is not dissipated, but taken forward, implementation should be timely and fast. ■

(The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foundation)

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- ¹ **Indian Express** (New Delhi), 18 March 1996.
 - ² **Ministry of Defence, Annual Report** 2002-03, p7
 - ³ Keynote Address by Minister of state E Ahmed at First India – Central Asia Dialogue, 12 June 2012, **Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India.**
 - ⁴ **The Hindu** (New Delhi), 16 April 2013.
 - ⁵ Media Statement by the Prime Minister, www.mea.gov.in.
 - ⁶ Text of Address by the Prime Minister at the Nazarbayev University, Astana, 07 July 2015.
 - ⁷ **The Indian Express**, 12 July 2015
 - ⁸ n. 5
 - ⁹ *ibid*
 - ¹⁰ **The Hindu**, 13 July 2015
 - ¹¹ *Ibid*, 12 July 2015
 - ¹² n. 6.
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Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi's visit to Central Asian countries

