

Post-Soviet Dynamics in Central Asia and India's Perception

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 25 May 2019

Keywords

Post-soviet, Central Asia, perception.

ABSTRACT

Central Asia is a region of geo-political, strategic and economic significance owing to its geographical location and hydrocarbon resources. India as an extended neighbour of CARs has major strategic and economic interests in this region. To gain control over the vast natural resources of the region there is a competition going among USA, Russia and China which forced India to adopt pro-active policy towards Central Asia. On security issues both India and central Asian Republics has convergence of interests which must be accomplished with greater understanding and cooperation. The future prospects for cooperation between Central Asia and India in the field of energy security seem to be very important. Peace and stability in CARs and Afghanistan seems to be the most crucial factor for India's security. There is already a realisation by the world powers of the danger posed by religious extremism and terrorism. Therefore India should take advantage of the situation and cooperate with other world powers to overcome these problems.

In the post-Cold War world, Central Asia has become a theatre of a new 'Great Game' not only because of its strategic location but also due to its natural resources, notably oil and natural gas. Since 9/11, it has also acquired a new layer of strategic interest because of its vantage point vis-à-vis the central security-concern of the region, namely terrorism in its local, regional and global aspects. The new Central Asia, which found itself in the midst of these competing influences on the one hand and in its own concerns for security and internal political stability on the other, naturally looked for support and constructive cooperation from wherever possible. And in this search, amongst other countries, India stood as an attractive direction to relate to. Without a national army and military structure, the Central Asian states feel vulnerable against external threats. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the security dimensions of Central Asia with focus on its implications for India.

Central Asia has been India's door to the outside world and has deeply influenced India's history, culture and polity. While the region south of the Himalayas has largely determined the mainstream features of Indian civilization, Central Asia has continued to exert influence on India in many an important way.ⁱ New Delhi has often described this region as its "extended neighborhood".ⁱⁱ It has always been closely connected with Central Asia and the close contacts continued during the soviet period as well due to India being an ally of the former USSR. Remnants of Buddhist monasteries have been found in many towns of Central Asia. During the medieval period, travelers and merchants further consolidated the bonds of relationship between the peoples of the two regions.ⁱⁱⁱ The region provided the link in the shape of the fabled silk route between China and India and Europe till the discovery of sea routes in the fifteenth century. India and Central Asia has number of common interests and can cooperate in many areas. Their relations, based on a shared commitment to open and progressive societies, secularism and democracy, and improving the lot of the common people have been reinforced by similarity of views in the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking and in many other areas of security.^{iv} The best

course for such societies is an open and liberal secular and democratic political system.^v India has to a large extent succeeded in establishing and experimenting with such a system. The Central Asian leadership, at present seems to be committed to establish such a political system and India can play a positive role in helping the Central Asian republics by offering training facilities to acquaint themselves with a functioning democracy in a developing society.

The dawn of the twenty-first century saw a paradigm shift in India's strategic thinking. It was no longer focused only on south-Asia. India's growing international profile, its economic prowess, and acceptance as one of the leading knowledge powers placed it in the category of a rising power in Asia. Against the broadening of India's strategic perspectives, it was keen to pursue a pro-active policy in Central Asia. India wanted to strengthen its shared commitment to open and progressive societies, secularism and democracy with the CAS, which have been reinforced in the fight against terrorism. India was now deeply concerned about the stability and security of its extended neighborhood. The emergence of ideology linked terrorism, abetment of and support to separatist insurgencies in other countries, economic crises and the spread of small arms are some of the factors that link India's security directly with its extended neighborhood. The declaration of the strategic partnership with Kazakhstan in 2009 amply demonstrates India's energized policy in Central Asia. At the same time, India involvement in Afghanistan began to expand and deepen.^{vi} Today India is the fourth largest contributor of assistance to Afghanistan. Its involvement in the reconstruction effort is tremendous. Indian stakes in Afghanistan is to see the country stable, democratic and independent. Since the nature of threats and challenges in the region are transnational in character Central Asia and south Asia are inter-linked. This only indicates that the salience of Central Asia for India has grown immensely.

From the security perspective, India would like to encourage the development of stable and secular regimes in Central Asia, lest weakened; unstable states with centrifugal

tendencies become bases for terrorist, separatist and fundamentalist elements to strengthen their position, which could line up with counterparts in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In tandem, India's interests coincide with ensuring that any instability and chaos in the region does not lead to a "domino effect", of which there is a serious danger. Besides, from the strategic point of view, the stability of the anti-Taliban set up in Afghanistan might ensure the de-linking of Central Asia from Indo-Pak zero sum game.^{vii} Understandably, such perceived commonalities have opened avenues for increased cooperation between Central Asian republics and India. The support and assistance provided by the Central Asian countries as well as India to the anti-Taliban northern alliance in Afghanistan was an indicator of such a common endeavor to oust the Taliban's from power.

In the changed context of 1991 Indian concerns was that the new states of Central Asia remained secure and stable and the forces of extremism and terrorism has ensconced themselves in the borderlands of Pakistan and has started gathering momentum in Afghanistan as three states of Central Asia, mainly Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan shared a common boundary with Afghanistan in the north. Consequently, developments in Afghanistan have become Central to Indian attempts to re-connect with Central Asia. With the intense power play taking place between Russia, China and the USA and the western countries in the strategic arena of Central Asia, India's soft power approach to address the concerns of CAR nations strikes a positive chord among these nations. India has been cooperating on the issue of security both at bilateral and multilateral levels. It has joint working group (JWG) on combating international terrorism with Uzbekistan and JWG has been having regular meetings to address threats arising from instability and fundamentalism in the region. At multilateral level India as an observer has been supporting the objectives of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which seek to ensure stability in the region, combat terrorism and extremist view points and is keen to play constructive and active role in the SCO. India is also a member of conference in interaction and confidence building measures in Asia (CICA) – a Kazakhstan CICA has been an expression of its multi-vector foreign policy as also an attempt to seek a role for itself in the conflict situations in the region.^{viii}

The emergence of independent Central Asian republics presents both challenges and opportunities to India. Due to Russia's strategic retreat, the relatively benign security environment in the region has acquired a new strategic dynamism. Although Russia has shown some indication of its renewed interest in the region its position remains weak and nebulous and the possibility of other powers, both regional and global, establishing their foothold in the region is growing rapidly. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent changes in the strategic balance has led to a virtual scramble for influence-building in Central Asia. The process of political transition and the final orientation of Central Asian republics will bring a qualitative change in the strategic environment.^{ix} The opening of the region to the outside world has also affected our traditional strong trade relations with the former Soviet Union.

Apart from the Pakistan initiative of strategic depth, there was a religious upsurge in Central Asia. There was a rapid rise in the construction of mosques, and madrassas and people began to observe religious practices with great fervor and devotion. Copies of the Koran were distributed freely. The religious revival was most noticeable in the Fergana valley, the stronghold of Islam even in Soviet period. At the external level it was Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates that played a Central role in the spread of religion in Central Asia.^x However, a distinct feature to be noticed is that Sunni Islam as practiced in Central Asia was liberal, than that in Pakistan and later in Afghanistan. One clear signal that emanates from Central Asia is the continuing aversion of the people to religious extremism and their desire for retaining the multi-ethnic and multi-religious society that they have inherited from the erstwhile USSR.^{xi} The threat of instability caused by the forces of religious fundamentalism and cross border terrorism has impeded the growth of democratic institutions and civil society in Central Asia. Coercive role of the state has grown, as has the authoritarian nature of the leadership, in the name of countering extremists and destabilising forces. Funds have been diverted from social programmes to purchase military hardware and strengthen the security apparatus. Even mines were laid along the borders to prevent extremist infiltration. This affected local trading across the border apart from civilian casualties.

China is potentially one of the most important players in central Asia. Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share a 5,000 km long border with China. The same Turkic peoples live on both sides of the border. The emergence of independent republics in Central Asia created an apprehension in Beijing regarding the demand for independence spreading among its own disaffected Muslim minorities in the politically sensitive and geo-strategically important province of Xinjiang. China felt threatened both by the appeals of Islamic fundamentalism and Uighur nationalism. The Uighur nationalist settled in Kazakhstan have formed the Uighuristan liberation movement for gaining independence from China. The Chinese government adopted tough repressive measures to crush the latent separatist tendency in Xinjiang.

At the same time the opening up of the former Soviet Central Asia on its western flank presented unprecedented economic and political opportunities to Beijing. China was not slow to cash in on them. Chinese investment in the economy of Xinjiang has dramatically increased. China wishes to turn it into a base for its enhanced trade and business activity in the new republics in Central Asia. A regular trade fair is organised in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang. A new railway has been laid linking Alma-Ata with Urumqi. The railway line links Beijing to Alma-Ata, Tashkent and Ashkabad.^{xii} China has also moved in a big way to fill the Central Asian markets with the much needed consumer goods.

In the emerging equations in Central Asia, India has been exploring the strategic space between the US, the European Union and NATO on the one side, and Russia and China on the other. Russia remains attracted towards a Euro-centric orientation despite its recent stand-offs with the US and

NATO while working at the same time to preserve its influence in the former soviet republics where western influence may have waned but is still substantial. A segment of Russia's intelligentsia is also of the view that a rivalry between the US and Russia in Central Asia may create conditions for China to emerge as a clear winner in the power struggle. On the other hand, Russia, China and India have been having triangular meetings at the foreign minister level to enhance strategic cooperation.^{xiii} There has been a growing strategic tension between China and India because of Sino-boundary issue. However, the so called Russia-India-China triangle has been viewed by some as an attempt by Russia and China to wean India away from American influence, while others interpret it as India's attempt to move towards its cherished goal of strategic autonomy.

Connecting Central Asia to south Asia cannot come about unless the unstable situation in Afghanistan and across the Durand Line in tribal areas is addressed. Further, Pakistan still remains wedded to the notions of gaining strategic depth in Afghanistan and has also been claiming its 'privileged interests' in Afghanistan. Policies of Pakistan in Afghanistan have been in contradiction to those of the American and NATO forces despite it being a major non-NATO ally. Bringing Taliban back to levers of power in Kabul has been Pakistan's enduring goal after the dislodgement of Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the wake of September 11 terror attacks.^{xiv} Therefore, Pakistan has been pushing for mainstreaming of Taliban in the guise of 'moderate' Taliban while at home it is now gunning for Pakistan Taliban. This gives rise to another dichotomy that while Taliban is not good for Pakistan, its ideology and outlook is good for Afghanistan. Growing power of Taliban in Afghanistan and is posing a heightened threat to security and stability in the region. While presence of the United Front and NATO in Afghanistan is a positive factor to contain the expansion of Taliban threat the capability of these forces to sustain their operations over a long haul remains questionable. Many American and western think tanks including some NATO commanders serving in Afghanistan have taken a pessimistic view of the outcome of the ongoing operation. A regional approach to the issue as suggested by Uzbek President during Bucharest NATO summit to convert the erstwhile six plus three by adding NATO may be another way of addressing the most challenging security threat.^{xv} Meanwhile India needs to pursue a stronger security relationship with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan as also renews its contacts with anti-Taliban forces. It also needs to be noted that India, one of the countries which would be the most affected from a Taliban return to power does not figure in six plus two or three configurations despite its pretensions of a major power or a rising regional power.

One of the main impediments is the non-availability of hard currency and lack of conversion facilities for profit repatriation, albeit the prospects are slowly brightening up. Communication links are also inadequate. Currently, the region is connected by air only, though India has been trying to improve the situation land and sea route option through Iran, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Russia are also being explored though the extension of North- South Transport Corridor as the establishment of new routes through the region could boost

India's trade with Central Asia and Central Europe. However, though several agreements have been signed, they only exist on paper, for instance, the trilateral agreement on the international transit of goods between Turkmenistan, India and Iran signed in 1997 has yet to be operationalised, while the much-talked about North-South Corridor, an agreement which was signed between Russia, Iran and India in 2000, continues to suffers the same fate, with several bottle necks needing clearance before they can become viable.

In spite of all impediments India can play positive role in the Central Asian environment where CARs are hard put to maintain balance between a numbers of major players. Further, in the last one decade or so India's stature in international world order has been gaining salience because of its economic growth and its movement towards the world of real politics. India has also been pursuing policies of restoring its traditional linkages with the region and re-integrating itself with the immediate and extended neighborhood.

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