

India's relation with Turkmenistan: Perspectives and challenges

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ABSTRACT

The relation between India and Turkmenistan is very ancient, from the time of Silk Road the relation flourished and reached at its zenith during the medieval times. For a long time Turkmenistan was a pass for long trade and commerce, also it was the region for various Indo-European-Iranian tribes those travelled and shared their cultural capital through this region. Indian culture was spread to this region by the expansion of Buddhism in ancient times and from that period of time the Turks and Indians come together to know each other.

For a long time Turkmenistan was a part of USSR and after its independence from it became a sovereign state on 27 October 1991. From the emergence of Turkmenistan as an Independent state, India is having friendly relations with it. From the Indian point of view Turkmenistan is very important for our energy security as well. The TAPI gas pipeline project is one of the examples of our mutual ties between both of the countries.

In order to strengthen our defence and security in relation to Pakistan and Taliban, Turkmenistan is geo-strategic location for India. In terms of economy and culture both the countries are having strong people to people connect with is a real capital for both of them.

1. Introduction

Turkmenistan, a land locked desert country, is one of the five newly independent states that also include Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It declared independence on October 27, 1991 from Soviet Union. It has 4,88,100 square kilometres of the total area and shares boundaries with Uzbekistan to the north, Kazakhstan to the northwest, has on the west the Caspian Sea and is flanked in the south by Iran and understanding with Russia since early 1992. Russian interest centres on the fact that Turkmenistan is a large country on the southern periphery of the former Soviet Union has great economic potential, rich natural resources and a sparse population. The republic of Turkmenistan, formerly the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, is situated in the south west of Central Asia. The Turkmen are descendants of the Oghuz tribes who migrated to Central Asia in about the 10th Century A.D. By the 15th Century they have emerged as a distinct ethnic group but were divided by tribal loyalties and territorial division between neighbouring powers. From the 15th to the 17th centuries the southern tribes were under Persian rule, while the north was under the suzerainty of the (Uzbek) Khanates of Khiva and Bukhara. In the early 18th century the Persians annexed Khivan and Bukharan territories, but Bukhara regained its power in the latter half of the century and retook Merv and deported its entire population to Bukhara.

2. Strategic importance of Turkmenistan

India attaches great importance to its relations with Turkmenistan. India was one of the first countries to recognize Turkmenistan's independence. In 1993 India opened its resident diplomatic mission in Turkmenistan and since then ties between the two have been developing in a mutually beneficial manner. There are also great commonalities of interest

between the two countries. While India appreciates Turkmenistan's pragmatic foreign policy of 'positive neutrality',¹⁵ Turkmenistan has supported India's candidacy to various international organizations and forums.¹⁶ India has been working towards developing close political and economic ties with this resource rich country. However, given the current status of relations much need to be done as there lays immense potential for cooperation in various sectors for both India and Turkmenistan. The Indian prime minister's visit to Ashgabat in 1995 marked the beginning of a close cooperation between the two countries. Six bilateral agreements were signed during this visit which opened a new chapter in India–Central Asia relations. The number of visits (see Table 4) made by Indian leaders indicates New Delhi's interest in forging close cooperation with Turkmenistan. The momentum of visit was somewhat slow during the period 2000–2004. However, during 2005–2007 India once again made efforts to cement these ties. There were important visits made by MOS (EA) and minister of water resources to Turkmenistan. In fact, the momentum of cooperation got major push during 2008–2010. Similarly, visits by Turkmen leader's side (see Table 5) show an equal keenness on their part to enhance cooperation with India. Many important measures were incorporated in the Turkmen–Indian Memorandum signed on 25 February 1997. However, during 2000–2007 periods, there were no major visits from Turkmen side. The new impetus was given to India–Turkmen ties during the visit of President Berdimuhamedov to Delhi in May 2010. This was an attempt by the current government to consolidate the existing ties between the two countries.

Hon'ble Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi visited Turkmenistan from 10 to 11 July 2015. It was a historic visit given that an Indian Prime Minister had visited Turkmenistan after 20 years. He had tete-a-tete with Turkmen President

followed by delegation level talks and signing of documents on 11 July and thereafter both leaders issued a joint statement. Hon'ble PM also inaugurated the Yoga and Traditional Medicine Centre in Ashgabat, the first of its kind in the region, unveiled a bust of Mahatma Gandhi and interacted with students of Azadi University of Foreign Languages who are learning Hindi.

3. Energy resources

Turkmenistan strategic reserves of natural gas and oil (See Map 1 below) make it an important country in the region. Although there are some differences over the exact quantum of oil reserves it does have substantial natural gas reserves. According to the BP Statistical Review 2010, it occupies fourth position in the world with 8.10 trillion cubic metres (tcm) of proven natural gas reserves (Table 2) and 0.6 billion barrels of proven oil reserves (Table 3). Turkmenistan's domestic consumers have been getting natural gas for free since 1993. Not surprisingly, then it has the fastest consumption growth in the region, averaging 16.1 percent annually from 2000 to 2006, as compared Today, Turkmenistan has become an area of competition for existing and aspiring powers like the US, Russia, EU, China, India, Pakistan, Turkey and Iran. In the current geopolitical context, Turkmenistan has adopted a pragmatic energy policy of diversification of its energy routes. Under the new stated energy policy, Turkmenistan is attempting to engage countries both in Europe and Asia. In mid-August 2010, Turkmenistan announced a new gas export policy which focused on cooperation with Europe, China and the possibility of a greater engagement with South Asia as well. However policy gives marginal preference to Iran and Russia.¹⁸ Given its historical links with Russia it may not be possible for Turkmenistan to ignore Russia but the new energy policy definitely marks a clear shift from the past. In the future, Russia may have to adjust to Ashgabat's policy of diversifying its energy exports to Europe and Asia – independent of Russian influence.

From the Indian perspective, the importance of Turkmenistan's energy resources has to be viewed in the context of its rising demand for energy. India imports 70 per cent of its oil requirements and this is likely to go up to 90 per cent by 2025. India's demand for natural gas for the non-power sector alone is expected to increase from 120 million cubic meters a day (mcmd) to 391 mcmd by 2025.¹⁹ India's gas consumption, at 41.7 billion cum, is 10 times higher than its production which is 31.7 billion cum²⁰ (see Table 1). This enhances Turkmenistan's importance for India in meeting its future gas demand.

India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy 2012 envisages deeper mutual relations with the region and energy linkage is an important component of the policy. India considers TAPI pipeline a 'key pillar' in its economic relations with Turkmenistan. Participating in the ceremony joined by President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani and Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Vice President Hamid Ansari said that TAPI marks 'the first step' towards achieving the vision of 'an economically integrated region stretching from the Bay of Bengal to the Caspian Sea.' The pipeline is expected to be

operational from December 2019. The successful implementation of TAPI project will not only benefit the source country, but will also ensure affordable energy to the other three participating countries, besides economically integrating South Asia and Central Asia. Afghanistan will also earn transit fees and certain amount of gas and can start the process of industrialization along the gas pipeline route, generating employment for the country's youth. The demand for energy in India and Pakistan is estimated to increase and TAPI can become an important source to maintain the growth momentum. The pipeline is backed by the World Bank and considered a win-win project for all stakeholders.

4. Importance of Turkmenistan for India

Turkmenistan's importance in the regional context The importance of Turkmenistan needs to be viewed in the context of the complex regional environment in Central Asia and Af-Pak region. New Delhi's policy towards this region has been shaped by its security concerns in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Today, new alignments and partnerships are being forged in the region to address the challenges emerging from Af-Pak region. While the US is looking for an exit strategy from Afghanistan, regional countries are evolving new bilateral, trilateral and multilateral mechanisms to address the challenges posed by this volatile region. Some of these are between: Iran–Afghanistan–Pakistan–Turkey; Iran–Afghanistan–Pakistan–Russia; Afghanistan–Pakistan–Tajikistan; and Tajikistan–Iran–Afghanistan. India is yet not a party to any of these regional mechanisms. In the past, India has very successfully cooperated with Russia, CARs and Iran to address the security concerns in the region. However, in the light of new regional cooperative mechanisms which are being forged it is important for India to develop closer ties with countries in and around Afghanistan to ensure that forces inimical to India's interests do not gain influence in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran are important neighbours of Afghanistan with whom India enjoys friendly relations. Turkmenistan has friendly ties with both Iran and Afghanistan. Turkmenistan in past has played an active role in mediating a settlement in Afghanistan and resolving the problem in Tajikistan. It managed its relations with the Taliban regime by establishing economic relations with them and providing them with gas and oil.⁴² In the current situation, Turkmen president has proposed five initiatives⁴³ for an Afghan settlement. Firstly, Ashgabat is ready to host the UN-sponsored international high-level meeting to address the Afghan problem and develop effective institutions of state power given the neutral status of Turkmenistan.⁴⁴ Also offered is assistance in training Afghan specialists in Turkmenistan, under the UN patronage and programs, of the Afghan personnel for management structures in various sectors. Thirdly, assistance is offered to Afghanistan in developing a transport infrastructure. It plans to construct a new railway on its territory along the Afghan border. This can further be extended into Afghanistan to facilitate the country's regional and inter-regional cooperation.⁴⁵ Fourthly, there has been talks about the need for urgently building the TAPI pipeline which would have significant impact on the economic development of Afghanistan. Finally, it was conveyed that Turkmenistan is ready to consider the matter of increasing the electricity power supply to Afghanistan, as well as expanding

its own energy infrastructure for the purpose of future installation and networking on the Afghan territory. For this Turkmenistan invites the international community represented by the UN to discuss this project. On this issue of crucial importance both Indian and Turkmen views are congruent.⁴⁶

5. The Cultural Connect

Yoga continues to be one of the most powerful links for boosting India's bilateral cultural relations with Turkmenistan. The 4th International Day of Yoga was celebrated at the Yoga & Traditional Centre at Bagtyarlyk Sports Complex in Ashgabat on 17 June 2018 with full enthusiasm. Besides 700 regular Yoga practitioners, members of the Diplomatic Community, Indian Community & students of State Medical University participated in the event. Deputy Minister of Healthcare & Industry of Turkmenistan had graced the occasion on 2018. Of the 2800 registered Yoga practitioners about 2100 are practising Yoga on weekly basis. The two credit course of 'Yoga Therapy' continues to be held at the State Medical University with the help of Indian Yoga teachers.

Gandhi Jayanthi was celebrated with garlanding and laying of flowers on the bust of Mahatma Gandhi located in the Yoga & Traditional Medicine Centre in Ashgabat. A quiz program, a photo exhibition and two documentaries on Mahatma Gandhi were screened in the Embassy premises where 30 students learning Hindi at Azadi Institute of World Languages participated enthusiastically. A video on Mahatma Gandhi and

the recordings of 'Vaishnav Jan to.....' were displayed on the façade of the chancery building.

Ekta Diwas was celebrated on 31 October 2018 with Ambassador administering the National Unity pledge. Later floral tributes were paid to Sardar Patel. The ceremony was concluded with screening of a documentary depicting the life and accomplishments of Sardar Patel.

India was invited to join the 'Ashgabat Agreement' which envisages establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor between the Governments of Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. India has been admitted to 'Ashgabat Agreement' w.e.f. 3 February 2018 on the Establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor with the consent of the Member countries.

The current initiatives taken by the governments of India and Turkmenistan can be sustained only if the government and the private take advantage of opportunities which are opening up not only in energy sector but also in non-energy sector, to make economic engagement mutually beneficial for both the countries. India will have to give more importance to educational and cultural engagement with Turkmenistan. While there exist formal agreements for cooperation between the Indian and Turkmen institutes but there has been very little follow up.

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