



ACADEMICIA
An International
Multidisciplinary
Research Journal
 (Double Blind Refereed & Peer Reviewed Journal)



DOI: 10.5958/2249-7137.2021.00980.0

INDIA-CENTRAL ASIAN STATES RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Relations between India and central Asian states have always been in high level, but India's active interaction with the Central Asian States began after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This thesis will discuss all important points, including historical, geographical, security, energy, trading, marketing, policy, interests, importance of areas, challenges and make a conclusion.

KEYWORDS: *energy security, Silk Road, trading routes, geographical proximity, land bridge, East-West Trans-Eurasian transit economic corridors, Chabahar, TAPI pipeline, commercial interests, national security, transport connectivity, JWG, SCO.*

INTRODUCTION

India has had relations with Central Asia since the 3rd century B.C as the nations fell on route to the Legendary Silk Route. The Silk Route not only served as the medium for transportation of goods, silk, textiles, spices etc. but also facilitated dispersion of thoughts, ideas, religion and philosophy. Buddhism found inroads in several of Central Asian cities such as Merv, Khalachayan, Tirmiz and Bokhara etc in form of Stupas and Monasteries. Babur in 1526 came from the fertile valley of Fergana (food bowl of Central Asia) to the dusty town of Panipat and established the mighty rule of Mughals in India. Men of prominence such as Amir Khusrau, Dehlawi, Al-Biruni, Abdur Rahim Khan i Khanan etc having Central Asian routes came and made their name in India. During the Soviet period- culture, music, dance, movies and literature bound the Soviet Republics closely with India. Popularity of iconic stars like Raj Kapoor, Nargis, and others brought India into the homes and hearts of common people of this region. Bilateral relations however suffered considerable neglect in the 25 years after emergence of these countries as independent States in 1991¹.

In the past, India was closely linked to Central Asia through trading routes as well as successive invasions of the subcontinent which swept down from the north-west².

Due to its geographical proximity to Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Russia and India, Central Asia is going to play an important role in the geopolitics of this region³.

Central Asia has the potential to become the most significant trade route linking China, India, Middle East, Russia and the fringe of Europe. As hoped by various concerning nations through the revival of Silk Road, that was once a commercial artery between countries and linked the Ganges and the Yellow River to the river to the Near East and the Mediterranean⁴.

Turning to the importance of Central Asia for India, it has a very wide array of interests in Central Asia covering security, energy, economic opportunities etc. Central Asia serves as a land bridge between Asia and Europe, making it geopolitically axial for India. Security, stability and prosperity of Central Asia are imperative for peace and economic development of India. The region is rich in natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, antimony, aluminum, gold, silver, coal and uranium which can be best utilized by Indian energy requirement. Central Asia has huge cultivable areas lying barren and without being put to any productive use, offering enormous opportunity for cultivation of pulses. Indian agribusiness companies can setup commercial agro-industrial complexes in Central Asia. Owing to higher economic growth, several areas have become attractive for construction business, providing huge scopes to Indian companies engaging in financial services, contractors, engineers, and management specialists. Both India and Central Asian Republics (CARs) share many commonalities and perceptions on various regional and world issues and can play crucial role in providing regional stability. For India to use Chabahar as a vital gateway to access Eurasian markets and optimally operationalize its use, requires a Central Asian state joining the project as a direct stakeholder. Central Asian Regions are fast getting linked to the global market for production, supplies of raw materials and services. They are also increasingly getting integrated into the East-West Trans-Eurasian transit economic corridors⁵.

India has registered significant progress recently through renovation of Chabahar port, development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and becoming a member of Ashgabat Agreement. International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), is multi-modal transportation established in 12 Sep 2000 in St. Petersburg, by Iran, Russia and India for the purpose of promoting transportation cooperation among the Member States. This corridor connects India Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via the Islamic Republic of Iran and then is connected to St. Petersburg and North Europe via the Russian Federation. The INSTC was expanded to include eleven new members, namely: the Republic of Azerbaijan, Republic of Armenia, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Turkey, Republic of Ukraine, Republic of Belarus, Oman, Syria, Bulgaria (Observer). India uses the instrumentality of soft power and its ready acceptability in Central Asia to strengthen bilateral ties⁶.

Indian government efforts to negotiate with Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline has been estimated to cost \$ 7.6 billion to construct. The TAPI project is intended to transport 30 billion cubic meters of gas from natural gas fields in Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan to India⁷. But this project is facing some problems whether international companies will be willing to finance it. Moreover, with the Chinese Prime Minister, Xi Jinping's visit to Turkmenistan in September 2013, there is further speculation that the TAPI project may be held for sometime more⁸.

Recently India's External Affairs Minister (EAM) participated in first India-Central Asia Dialogue in Samarkand, Republic of Uzbekistan. Five countries from Central Asia participated in the dialogue- Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. All the countries participating in the dialogue are also members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It was the first ministerial level India-Central Asia dialogue. Dialogue focused on a number of issues including ways to improve connectivity and stabilize war-ravaged Afghanistan. India has proposed setting up of 'India-Central Asia Development Group' to take forward development partnership between India & Central Asian countries. The group may enable New Delhi to expand its footprints in the resource-rich region amid China's massive inroads and to fight terror effectively, including in Afghanistan. India will host the next India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2020⁹.

Although Central Asia's occupies a favourable geostrategic location between Europe and Asia, the region is rich in mineral and hydrocarbon resources and offers much reason for intensive engagement with the region. But there persist numerous challenges that need to be addressed. The most obvious challenge is the geography of Central Asia. India's location in the region remains extremely vulnerable because lack of direct geographical access to the region.

In conclusion, there may be several challenges; there are obstructions of physical connectivity due to Pakistan's hostility and Afghan instability for its desultory attitude towards Central Asia. India's current trade volume with Central Asia is minimal, and cannot be increased without substantially improving transport connectivity. Politically, the Central Asian republics are highly fragile and also face threats like terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism etc making the region a volatile and unstable market.

In near future, relations between India and Central Asian countries is going to rise to another high level which has lots of advantages and beneficial sides. Year by year this trend has been shifting considerably in terms of economical, political, social, cultural connections. And now, both sides are working on various new economic projects including road, trade corridors, pipelines, such as International North-South Transport Corridor, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, India-Central Asia Dialogue ("India-Central Asia Development Group"), trade routes with Central Asia, is via the Leh-Yarkand and Leh-Demchuk routes that passes through China. Also, This security challenge has been taken seriously by India when it India established Joint Working Groups (JWG) on terrorism with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It is also one crucial point to consider that India has already been a full member of the Shanghai Corporation Organization (SCO), which can be an effective trend in relations.

India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' was reinforced in 2015, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian head of state to visit all five nations between July 6 and 13. Since then there has been significant progress in cooperation, particularly in the fields of defence, energy and connectivity. This renewed focus on the region can be attributed to the changing geopolitics of the region, particularly the formation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the external security threats to the region. The convergence of China's BRI projects in the region with India's unrealized economic interests there has prompted the latter to adopt a more proactive approach and look at new avenues for economic cooperation. Since China has been able to leverage its geography, finances and population to ensure that its projects can contribute

toward making its dream of a new and improved Silk Road a reality, India is also committed to expanding the scope of its economic relations with the region.

Apart from the bilateral cooperation, India has also focused on multilateral engagement with the region at two levels. The first is through regional connectivity, with a renewed push for long delayed projects starting with Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran, India's gateway to Central Asia, in 2016. During this visit, both sides signed an agreement to develop Chabahar Port, which has now become commercially operational.²⁸ To facilitate transport of goods between India and Central Asia via Iran, India acceded to the Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under cover of TIR Carnets in 2017 and joined the Ashgabat Agreement – which includes Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – in 2018.

Apart from developing trade via the Chabahar port in Iran, India would like to explore setting up “air corridors” between India and five Central Asian nations, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Thursday. The air corridors — similar to what India established in 2018 with Afghanistan — would include regular cargo flights with special clearing and customs facilities to expedite the movement of goods, especially fresh fruit and other agricultural produce, and were currently being discussed by the MEA.

The main spur is the 7,200-kilometer corridor between Mumbai and Saint Petersburg, based on ferry links between the ports along the Russian coast of the Caspian (Astrakhan, Olya, and Makhachkala) and the Iranian ones (Bandar-Anzali, Nowshehr, and Bandar-Amirabad). Indian goods are delivered to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf and shipped across the Caspian for onward rail or road transport to Russia and Europe. The Indian Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations estimates 30 percent cost and 40 percent transit time reductions compared to the Suez route.

“While flying time from Delhi for most of the Central Asian destinations is two hours, it may take two months for containers sent overland from India to reach these places,” Mr. Jaishankar said, speaking at the inaugural of the “India Central Asia Business council” which brought together Indian businessmen and diplomats from five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. “Availability of air corridors can boost trade in perishable goods, agricultural and food products,” he added. The minister also observed that it was a “matter of concern” that a lack of “overland connectivity” — a veiled reference to barriers to transit trade through Pakistan — had kept the total trade between India and Central Asia quite low at approximately \$2 billion per year. India, Mr. Jaishankar emphasised, remains committed to the Chabahar port project in Iran.

“India proposes to overcome this challenge through the Chabahar route. India, Iran and Afghanistan believe that Chabahar will become the fulcrum of connectivity for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan and further north to Central Asian states, and for the landlocked Central Asia to find access to ocean through this port,” he said, referring to the ₹ 100 crore investment the recent Budget has proposed to develop the Iranian port.⁴

Chabahar is key to India's connectivity towards its west, providing routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia while North-South Transport Corridor made up of rail, shipping, and road route currently passes via cities like Bandar Abbas, Bandar Anzali, Tehran in Iran, Baku in Azerbaijan and Astrakhan in Russia.

More than 10 countries are part of the corridor, with more countries keen to join it. Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, both landlocked countries, are keen on joining the connectivity project. Uzbekistan had proposed joining the project during the India-Uzbekistan virtual summit last year.

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