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THE INDIAN STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA: GOALS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

This article is devoted to the analysis of Indian politics in Central Asia. The interests and opportunities of India have been carefully studied. The article discusses the social, political and cultural issues between India and Central Asia. For India, Central Asia is an important geopolitical region leading to major trade routes.

The author examines the current state and prospects of political and economic cooperation between India and Central Asia, joint efforts to address the problems and threats facing sustainable development of the region, which must be addressed in the development of bilateral and multilateral relations - logistics and investment cooperation.

Keywords: Silk Route, diplomatic relations, economic growth, “Connect Central Asia Policy”, Eurasian Economic Community, International North-South Transport Corridor, TAPI, UNSC, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, cooperation, transport potential.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, India has become one of the biggest world economies due to consistently high GDP growth namely, more than 7% per annum[1], development of IT technologies, and the size of the labor market second only to China. Over time, India’s influence will expand to its neighboring regions, including Central Asia. The role of Central Asia for India is not merely cultural and historical, but increasingly also geopolitical and economical.

India has had relations with Central Asia since the 6th century B.C as the nations fell on the route to the Legendary Silk Route[2]. 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.

Central Asia has been a zone of the civilizational influence of India. It turned out that India had close contacts with five states of this region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. After 1991, five states of Central Asia gained independence, India was among the first country to establish diplomatic relations with them. India's political ties with the Central Asian republics have been warm and friendly. Nevertheless, The Republic of India is not a major player in Central Asia.

Moreover, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, New Delhi did not seek to show significant or noticeable political activity in the region. However, the accelerated economic growth, and with it the growth of political influence in the international arena, allow India to change its own foreign policy more and more confidently. Therefore, the new strategic policy of New Delhi in the Central Asian region called "Connect Central Asia Policy" (CCAP), announced in 2012 by the Indian side in Bishkek at the first meeting of the dialogue between India and the countries of Central Asia, is visual[3].

On 12 June 2012 India's Minister of State for External Affairs Shri E. Ahamed outlined some of the elements of India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy as follows:

1. India will continue to build on our strong political relations through the exchange of high level visits. Its leaders will continue to interact closely both in bilateral and multilateral fora.

2. India will strengthen its strategic and security cooperation. India already has strategic partnerships in place with some Central Asian countries. In focus will be military training, joint research, counter-terrorism coordination and close consultations on Afghanistan.

3. India will step up multilateral engagement with Central Asian partners using the synergy of joint efforts through existing fora like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Custom Union. India has already proposed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement to integrate its markets with the unifying Eurasian space.

4. India looks to Central Asia as a long-term partner in energy, and natural resources. Central Asia possesses large cultivable tracts of land and it sees potential for India to cooperate in production of profitable crops with value addition.

5. The medical field is another area that offers huge potential for cooperation. India is ready to extend cooperation by setting up civil hospitals/clinics in Central Asia.

6. India's higher education system delivers at a fraction of the fees charged by Western universities. Keeping this in mind, India would like to assist in the setting up of a Central Asian University in Bishkek that could come up as a center of excellence to impart world class education in areas like Information Technology, management, philosophy and languages.

7. India is working on setting up a Central Asian e-network with its hub in India, to deliver, tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity, linking all the five Central Asian States.

8. Indian companies can showcase its capability in the construction sector and build world class structures at competitive rates. Central Asian countries, have almost limitless reserves of iron ore and coal, as well as abundant cheap electricity. India can help set up several medium size steel rolling mills, producing its requirement of specific products.

9. As for land connectivity, India has reactivated the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). India and Central Asian nations need to join our efforts to discuss ways to bridge the missing links in the Corridor at the earliest and also work on other connecting spurs along the route.

10. Absence of a viable banking infrastructure in the region is a major barrier to trade and investment. Indian banks can expand their presence if they see a favourable policy environment.

11. India will jointly work to improve air connectivity between our countries. India is one of the biggest markets for outbound travelers estimated at USD 21 billion in 2011.

Many countries have opened tourist offices in India to woo Indian tourists. Central Asian countries could emerge as attractive holiday destinations for tourists and even for the Indian film industry which likes to depict exotic foreign locales in its films.

Connections between our peoples are the most vital linkages to sustain our deep engagement. I would particularly like to emphasise exchanges between youth and the future leaders of India and Central Asia. India already has a robust exchange of students. India will encourage regular exchanges of scholars, academics, civil society and youth delegations to gain deeper insights into each other's cultures[4].

It is also not yet apparent that India is willing and able to invest the considerable amounts of economic, military, and diplomatic capital required to turn the Connect Central Asia policy into practice. While Indian officials may proclaim Central Asia a priority of Indian foreign and security policy, India is not at present among the major influential powers in the region. Laruelle and Peyrouse conclude that talk of the priority New Delhi gives to Central Asia and efforts to cut a major figure there are more aspirational than actual and "its discursive activity by far exceeds the reality of bilateral relationships"[5].

Furthermore, the steady growths of China's economic and military power and political weight have pushed India to conduct proactive policy in Central Asia. As India's productivity exploded during the last decade, so did its reliance on hydrocarbons to meet increasing energy demand. Considering this potential and Central Asian countries plan to diversify their markets and relations, the cooperation with India is of strategic importance and mutually beneficial.

Central Asia contains vast hydrocarbon fields both on-shore and off-shore in the Caspian Sea. These are home to an estimated 4 percent of the world's natural gas reserves[6], and approximately 3 percent of oil reserves[7]. Most of these resources are found in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, although Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have potential for generating hydro-electric power. In addition, Central Asia has reserves of uranium ore plus the potential for its enrichment; so the region could be tapped as a source of uranium for India's civilian nuclear program, which would in the long term help diversify its energy base[8].

In addition to bilateral opportunities for cooperation, India can take advantage of some useful mechanisms to strengthen its influence in the Central Asian region. The geographical and strategic space which the SCO straddles is of critical importance for India. The SCO would provide a place for India to become a part of the regional cooperation process. India became an observer to the organization at its fifth summit in Astana, Kazakhstan in 2005[9]. Since then, India has subtly indicated its interest in playing a more substantive role in the development of the SCO. It was felt by most members, particularly Russia and Kazakhstan, that the grouping would benefit hugely from India's active association. Therefore, the study of strategic aims, main directions and priorities of India's policy in Central Asian region, as well as the key tools and mechanisms for their implementation are becoming a subject of increasing importance.

As for the landlocked CA countries, the geostrategic location of India—its central position in the Indian Ocean, facing the Aden Gulf and the Arabian Sea and allowing for an exit to the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, is of special value. This geostrategic advantage gives India a particular role in securing peace and stability in the region, closely connected with and directly neighboring Central Asia[10].

The expediency of developing Indian-Central Asian relations in the security sphere is proved, for example, by Tajikistan's being located merely 20 km from Big Kashmir. An Indian military object is located not far from the anti-Indian terroristic groups' bases, in proximity to the territory where China and Pakistan carry out their military and economic cooperation[11]. Cross-border and state sponsored terrorism, emanating out of some neighbouring states have become a major strategic concern for both the regions as terrorism is a potent source of destabilisation, both regionally and internationally.

Currently, India's policy in Central Asia has gone through the stages of formation, institutionalization and some transformation due to external and internal factors. The intensification of India's policy in the region is conditioned by proximity to Afghanistan and threats, such as illicit drug trafficking, terrorism and religious extremism that may spread in the region.

II. RESULTS

The key constraint India faces is the lack of direct access to Central Asia. The unstable situation in Afghanistan and a highly problematic India-Pakistan relation have deprived India from the benefit of relations with Central Asia. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) would be a game-changer if it materializes. However, despite some positive developments like the signing of an inter-governmental agreement, realization of TAPI is still some distance away.

Indian government efforts to negotiate with 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 India[12]. 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 more.

As India takes a way of the Eurasian integration, it attentively monitors changes of political dynamics in Central Asia. After recent replacement of the leadership in Tashkent the nature of regional prospects changes in favor of intraregional cooperation. With leadership of the president Shavkat Mirziyoev of the power of Uzbekistan look more open for activation of the relations of the country in and outside the region. Uzbekistan is the gateway to Central Asia for India. Implementing untapped opportunities of relations between Uzbekistan and India can be stepped up to a new level by expanding cooperation in political, economical, investment, cultural and humanitarian spheres. Nowadays, India is an important foreign policy and foreign economic partner of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan and India support each other's initiatives on the international arenas, including the UN and the SCO. The positions of the parties on current regional and international issues are similar or close. Uzbekistan is a promising partner for India, which is consistently developing and supporting investors.

Currently, there are 145 enterprises with Indian capital in Uzbekistan. Enterprises of these, 58 were created for full foreign capital. In the first quarter of 2018 year, 9 enterprises with Indian capital have been established, indicating an increase in Indian businessmen activity in the country[13]. Intergovernmental agreements on visa exemption for diplomatic passports holders, visa applications, tourism, agriculture, science and technology, space exploration and peaceful uses, combating illicit drug trafficking, psychotropic substances and precursors, and cooperation in health and medical science are signed.

In addition, Memorandum of Understanding are signed on the development of relations in military education, law and justice, and pharmaceuticals. Among the signed documents is the Memorandum of Understanding on the establishment of the Uzbek-Indian Business Council, as well as the Memorandum of Understanding on establishing partnerships between Andijan Region and the State of Gujarat, Samarkand and Agra, as well as the establishment of a Free Pharmaceutical Zone in Andijan.

India doesn't only take in students from Central Asia, however; educational exchange has gone in both directions, as thousands of Indian students came to Central Asia to pursue medical degrees. In recent years, the number of Indian medical students in Central Asia has shot up impressively. As of 2018, embassies in the region estimate anywhere from 900 students in Tajikistan to 4,500 in Kyrgyzstan. Exact numbers are difficult to pin down, however, given poor enforcement of enrollment caps and monitoring of approved campuses[14].

It is possible to draw a logical conclusion that in the medium term for India it will be strategically favorable to try to strengthen own positions in the Central Asian region. Nevertheless, the direction of the Indian foreign policy in Central Asia will be caused by crossing of mutual interests and diplomatic relations with the leading global powers. The most significant dialogue has to be adjusted, first of all, with Russia and China for which the region represents vital value. My opinion that, perhaps, the accession to SCO that would allow the South Asian power to advocate more surely the interests on the continent would become the ideal scenario for New Delhi.

Anyway, besides a possibility of the entry of India into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, questions of the Indian-Pakistani relations will remain key factors of foreign policy activity of India in Central Asia that will depend in no small measure on the relations of New Delhi with Beijing and also conflictogenity level in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. That is the possibility of more active inclusion of India to the region is rather high, but, however, the question remains still open.

Aside from the advantages a more engaged India offers Central Asia, for India, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan's continued support for India's bid for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its lobbying for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) serves as a welcome indication that many in the region wish to see India play a significantly bigger role. India's efforts to capitalize on such attitudes will almost certainly bode well for its broader strategic and development cooperation aspirations.

The role of India has to be directed to protection of the states of Central Asia rich with oil against internal and external threats. It will demand strengthening of safety and military cooperation with these countries. Central Asia still considers India the potential partner in the fight against terrorism threat. India developed the fact enough that it signed a number of agreements with the countries of Central Asia concerning terrorism. Both parties understand need of closer cooperation for the solution of problems of terrorism. Central Asia, in particular, looks for the help from India in the fight against this threat.

India is attracting Central Asian states in several ways.

Firstly, the moderate foreign policy of India allows for good relations with the United States and Russia. This is very important for the multi-lateral foreign policy-makers.

Secondly, the countries of the region, worrying about the strengthening of China's influence, look at India without fear.

Thirdly, it can be used to soften the influence of the United States, China and Russia.

Fourthly, India can be a good gateway to the sea for Central Asian countries. In general, cultural and historical India is much closer to the region than China.

III. CONCLUSION

It follows from the foregoing analysis that India's strategic approach lies in the "development of strong ties with the countries of Central Asia along the energy and security vectors". However, India's experiences in Central Asia over the past decade demonstrate the challenges of competing with China on energy issues and with Russia on matters of regional security. Thus far, India has managed to secure only a tenuous foothold in Central Asia when considered alongside other major players in the region.

Central Asia's future has to be seen from the perspective of the evolving Asian regional balance of power. A significant emerging trend there involves the consolidation and convergence of democratic forces represented by India, the U.S., Japan and Australia, and by the alternative trilateral form without Australia. This brings a strong Rimland orientation, the min concern of which is the security of sea lines of communications. Second is the geostrategic consolidation of the Asian landmass, encouraged by cooperation between Russia and China and the unleashing of political and economic forces attempting to gain influence through bilateral and regional mechanisms.

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ИНДИЙСКАЯ СТРАТЕГИЯ ДЛЯ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ЦЕЛИ, ВЫЗОВЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ

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Аннотация

Данная статья посвящена анализу индийской политики в Центральной Азии. Интересы и возможности Индии были тщательно изучены. В статье рассматриваются социальные, политические и культурные проблемы между Индией и Центральной Азией. Для Индии Центральная Азия является важным геополитическим регионом, ведущим к основным торговым путям.

Автор рассматривает современное состояние и перспективы политического и экономического сотрудничества между Индией и Центральной Азией, совместные усилия по решению проблем и угроз, стоящих перед устойчивым развитием региона, которые необходимо решать в рамках развития двусторонних и многосторонних отношений - логистического и инвестиционного сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Шелковый путь, дипломатические отношения, экономический рост, политика "Соединить Центральную Азию", евразийское экономическое сообщество, международный транспортный коридор Север-Юг, ТАПИ, СБ ООН, шанхайская организация сотрудничества, транспортный потенциал.

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