

India and Tajikistan

Contours of Emerging Relations

Tabasum Firdous

Abstract

The bilateral relations between the Republic of India and the Republic of Tajikistan have developed considerably owing to both nations' cooperation on security and strategic issues. There is today mutual respect, trust and confidence. Many important milestones have been crossed and at each stage a total understanding and convergence of views are evident on all issues of mutual concern. The common views of political leaders of both countries about important issues of International Relations are firm points for enhancing bilateral relations in various fields such as, economy, commerce, politics, science and culture.

Tajikistan was lost in the larger picture of the Central Asia region, which seemed to be perceived as being Uzbek centric. However, India's perception of Tajikistan underwent a qualitative change after the Taliban took over Kabul in September 1996 and is now central to India's strategic interests in the region. As the region has good potential in hydroelectricity generation, power transport, and full chain of cotton processing. There are more future possibilities of developing bilateral relations between the two countries. India and Tajikistan will work closely on developing trade and transport links through Chabar Port in Iran. The paper is a humble attempt to discuss different dimensions of Indo-Tajik Relations.

Keywords

Tajikistan, Foreign Policy, Defense Strategy, Terrorism, Indo-Tajik Relations, Central Asia.

Prefatory (Historical Context)

Among Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan which borders Pakistan, Afghanistan and China has been close ally of India. The relation between the two countries from traditional times had been close and cordial. Both the powers are diplomatically connected always. The two powers show their mutual concern towards each other through various bilateral consecutive mechanisms as foreign office consultations, joint working group on counter terrorism and joint commission on trade, economic and scientific cooperation.

India's relations with Tajikistan have been recorded in the Buddhist annals which means around 2500 years BC. The excavations in Panjikent in modern Tajikistan are dependable record in this connection.

The Zoroastrian temples and Buddhist *viharas* all now converted to *mosques* and *madrasahs* in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan speak of ancient relations with India.

In medieval times, two streams of relations were notable. One is the flow of Buddhist missionaries from India to Central Asia via Tajikistan and the second is the trade and commerce carried along these links. New chapter of Indo-Tajikistan relations opened with the ascendancy of Mughal emperors in India. Rising from Fergana, Babur crossed the Khyber and descended on India. He defeated Ibrahim Lodi and established Mughal rule in 1524 AD which lasted for almost three decades.

Mughal period is the golden age of Indo-Tajik/Central Asian relations. Babar gave prominence to Tur-Tajik generals rather than Iranian generals. The former, however, could not find closeness with the Emperor. Central Asian Sufi ideas, language (Farsi/Tajik) literature (Farsi in particular) became popular in India.

Central Asian architectural designs became very common in India and we have the masterpieces in *Taj Mahal, Jamia Masjid, Homayon Tomb, Qutab Minar, Agra Fort* and so many other architectural monuments. That is why the Tajiks call India the repository of their civilizational fund. Indo-Tajik Sufi connection and exchange of philosophical visits is the golden chapter of this history.

With the exit of Mughal rule and occupation of India by the British colonial power around the end of 18th century severed India's relations with the Central Asian and Iranian regions. Their bilateral relations were frozen under the colonial diktat and that was a sad period of a couple of centuries.

Post Indian Independence Period

India began reviving her age-old relations with her immediate neighbors that included the Soviet Union and its Central Asian Republics (Ahmad, Panda, and Sing, 2012, p.316). However, under Soviet system, it was possible to revive and consolidate relations only through Moscow. India had many irons in fire and obsessed with security issues, she remained confined to Moscow only paying little rather no attention to the CARs except Uzbekistan where she had a mall cultural unit. Nevertheless, official visits of dignitaries were undertaken, and the beginning was made. Relations between India and Tajikistan have traditionally been close and cordial.

The long history of deep cultural relations between the two regions following the establishment of Mughal Empire of India remains a permanent feature of common relationship. Cultural impulses passed to and fro and manifested visibly in the ecstatic Central Asian response to the Indian films, and the magic they wove on the popular psyche there. The music and the stars of these films took as it were, India into the Central Asian hearts and homes. Visits by Jawaharlal Nehru in 1955, Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966 and Indra Gandhi in the years following - always made it a point to visit some of these Republics to be affectionately greeted by rousing popular receptions (Madan, 1997, p.252). However, after India attained freedom and became a sovereign state, a big change took place in geo-strategies in the region. Although World War II had come to an end, but the era of Cold War set in. The world was divided into two blocs, one led by the Americans and the other by the Russians (Nehru, 1949, p.300). Indian Government pursued the policy of Non-Alignment towards Global powers (Palmer and Perkins, 2007, p.720). Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, an admirer of the socialist experiment, had welcomed the Central Asian representatives to the first Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in March- April 1947 as delegates from the Soviet Republics of Asia. He said about these republics “which have advanced so rapidly in our generation and which have so many lessons to teach us. Wherever I have gone in the Soviet Union I have found a passion for peace. In India we have been devoted to the cause of peace, and even in our struggle we have endeavored to pursue methods of peace. For our own progress as well as far causes that are dear to us, peace is essential” (Nehru, 1949, p.300). Again the Soviet Central Asian republics were adequately represented in the second Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi when Rajiv Gandhi was the prime minister. Formal relations between India and the Soviet Union were established when India became independent in 1947. However, that did not mean that India had established direct relations with the Central Asian Republics. Given the Soviet system of administration and its parameters of foreign policy, direct approaches to the Central Asian states were out of question. It depended on to what extent Moscow was prepared to allow interaction with these Republics. India's relations with the Soviet Union have traditionally been dominated by its security needs. Apart from ideological compatibility, US military aid to Pakistan in the mid-fifties played an important role in the establishment of close friendly relations between New Delhi and Moscow. This meant that

as Pakistan secured diplomatic support from the United States on the Kashmir issue, India secured diplomatic support from the other super power, the Soviet Union (Budhraj, 1979, p.361).

The dismantling of the Soviet Union in 1991 and end of Cold War, as is well known, induced disquieting changes in the world. Importantly, 15 new Sovereign Republics emerge from the former Soviet Union. Amongst these are 5 Republics- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan- all landlocked and lucidly known as Central Asia. Of relevance is the fact that all the five Republics are in India's neighborhood or the extended neighborhood or the near abroad. Accordingly, in the changed situation, it was no surprise that India's close relations and cooperation with the Soviet Union was indeed an advantage and the foreign policy needed a simple shift in focus, from the larger canvas of the Soviet Union to a smaller canvas of renewing and building close relations with each of the new Republics. In Central Asia or the near abroad or the extended neighborhood, the agenda was to establish special relations with each of the five Republics. India's advantage is the geographical proximity, the historical, cultural and the civilizational links. Therefore, renewing and re-establishing links with the region was not hard or tricky. As a result, Prime Minister Narashima Rao took the pragmatic action to establish diplomatic relations with the new Republics of the former Soviet Union, give a special focus to Central Asia and invite their leaders to visit India. Given this pragmatism, Prime Minister Narashima Rao also paid reciprocal visits to meet and interact with all the leaders of Central Asia.

Tajikistan's Special Significance

India has a special reason to evolve a significant policy towards the Central Asian Republic of Tajikistan. A few features stand out. Tajiks are ethnically from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Aryans. Their mother tongue – Tajik – is a branch of Irano-Aryan group of languages and hence drawing extensively from Sanskrit. Tajiks have contributed strongly to the evolution of India's composite culture. The catalyst to that was the *Turanian* segment at the court of the Imperial Mughals of Delhi. Farsi/Tajik poetry and prose produced during the Mughal period bears a strong impression of Tajik culture and way of life. Despite being a home to Sunni-Hanafi Muslims, Tajiks have always loved and contributed to the religious tolerance and behaved in truly secular fashion. India's democratic and secular political system is what the Tajiks want to emulate and establish as the future frame of Tajik

civil society. Tajikistan from East to West stretches for 700 kilometers and North to South it is 350 kilometers with an area of 1,43,000 square kilometers [a little larger than the Indian states of Tamilnad and Tripura combined] (Nuri, 1997; p.268).

The border with China stretches for 414 kilometers, Afghanistan 1206 kilometers, Uzbekistan 1161 kilometers and Kyrgyzstan 870 kilometers- a total perimeter of 3651 kilometers. In the Southeast, Tajikistan is separated from the Indian sub-continent by the Wakhan Corridor [Afghanistan] which is 200 kilometers long and varying from 16 to 65 kilometers in width.

Tajikistan is rich in water resources and has the potential to export hydroelectric energy. It is quite rich in mineral resources as well though hitherto unexploited. Moreover, it is cotton - growing republic. According to Prof. Asimov, Tajikistan, like other CARs, is severely disrupted by the trauma of disintegration of the former Soviet Union. It is in dire need of aid from all available quarters in order to develop and come out of the deep recession travail. It needs help from countries like India in developing its textile industry (Nuri, 1997; p.268).

Tajikistan's population liberally estimated is around seven million and it has natural resources that could make it one of the very rich countries in the world, if not, in Asia. The population is small and young. It has the largest natural water resources in the region and the second largest in the former Soviet Union and is only second to Russia. More than 65% of the glaciers in the region are in Tajikistan and together with Kyrgyzstan they control over 90% of the water resources of Central Asia. Other than the extensive water resources, it has large reserves of mercury, brown coal, lead, zinc, antimony and tungsten, silver, gold and an unknown quantity and unpublicized uranium deposits. Unlike in the other four Republics, exploitation of Tajikistan's modest fossil fuel and natural gas resources are currently not economically viable.

The maximum flying time between Dushanbe and Delhi is less than two hours and is about the same flying time between Delhi and Hyderabad or Delhi and Mumbai. Other than the geographic proximity to India, the geo-strategic location of Tajikistan is most relevant (Laruelle, 2012, p.16). Historically, India was closer to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan than to the three other states in the region. However, the Tajik civil war between 1992 and 1997, and more generally the intrinsic poverty of Tajikistan, reduced Delhi's prospects in the country.

Tajikistan's Foreign Policy

In any dialogue on India-Tajikistan bilateral relations, it is important to be familiar with Tajikistan's foreign policy as a background to India's relations with Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's foreign policy is determined by its geo-strategic position and other factors, that is, development of mutual benefit of equal rights and contacts with all states, contribute towards the strengthening of world peace and international security. To this end Tajikistan is a signatory to most international treaties, protocols, conventions etc., and a member of most international and regional organizations. Tajikistan is an active member of the United Nations, Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], Central Asian Economic Alliance [CAEA], Conference on Interaction & Confidence Building Measures in Asia [CICA], Economic Cooperation Organization [ECO], Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO], Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], Organization of Islamic Conference [OIC], International Monetary Fund [IMF], World Bank, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development [EBRD], the Asian Development Bank [ADB], Islamic Development Bank [IDB] and is also a participant in NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and in the Partnership for Peace Program. The list is not complete but is indicative of Tajikistan's aspirations.

Strategic-Cooperation

The appearance of the Taliban in September 1994 presented an alarming dimension to religious extremism and terrorism in the region and with it the need for India to seek cooperation in strategic areas with all friendly countries in the region. Tajikistan on the other hand was in turmoil and in a civil war situation. In this given situation the Government of India, notwithstanding the international tirade against the leadership of President *Rahmanov*, was in empathy with *Rahmanov's* very determined efforts to bring peace and stability to Tajikistan. India's position was indeed very Nehruvian in not condemning the leadership of Tajikistan but to sincerely help the country overcome its genuine difficulties and to strengthen the process of peace and stability. Significantly, Tajikistan today is the only Republic in the region that has opposition political parties with an opposing political view participating in the political system. This vindicated the full support India extended to President *Rahmanov*.

For Tajikistan to fully emerge out of the civil war situation internal stability is very essential and this is being made possible only by

allowing an opposing political view to co-exist with the politics of the country's leadership. Most importantly, the external factor central to the overall stability of Tajikistan is the stability of Afghanistan while Tajikistan is central to stability in Central Asia. Thus, this fact is well acknowledged by strategists in the region and in India.

Tajikistan is emerging a very important country of Central Asia with which India seems to be widening the scope of relationship. The situation and location of Tajikistan are the factors to which India needs to attach much importance. Situated on the northern borders of the trouble-torn Afghanistan, it was clear that the fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan in their movement towards the north would try to set their foot on the contiguous territories of Tajikistan. If fundamentalists secured a foothold in this militarily weak Central Asian state, it might lead to destabilization of the whole of Central Asia. A trouble-torn Central Asia would never make situation comfortable for India. With Taliban outfits operating in Tajikistan and finally attempting to join hands with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, India would lose a strong support to her secular democratic dispensation in the region. Therefore, Tajikistan began to assume importance in India's geopolitical strategy.

Without going into details, India's problems with cross border terrorism has its roots not only across the border but also in Afghanistan. Thus, stability in Afghanistan is also vital for India. To this end, India's strategic cooperation with Tajikistan is indispensable. Exit of NATO forces from Afghanistan may also exacerbate the security situation in Afghanistan, and emergence of Taliban poses a strong threat to both the countries. Therefore, there is lot of scope between the two countries to work together and secure their national and security interests. India cannot ignore the strategic importance of Tajikistan. In November 2003, Indian Prime Minister paid an official visit to Dushanbe. Tajikistan was the second leg of Vajpayee's three-nation trip, which included Russia and Syria. In Dushanbe, a Joint Working Group was established with Tajikistan to combat international terror. Eight treaties have been signed at the conclusion of the summit meeting, which include the agreement to intensify their defense cooperation and to build a highway linking them through Afghanistan and Chabahar port in Iran with the warm waters of the Persian Gulf.

Indo-Tajik relations assume significance essentially owing to three reasons. Firstly, the highway from Chabahar through Afghanistan to Tajikistan (Chabahar-Kabul-Kunduz-Badakhshan) will enable India to

have a transport corridor to the otherwise inaccessible Central Asian Republics. The highway starts from Chabahar, an Iranian port that is being developed. It is close to the Pakistani port at Gawadar being built with Chinese help. This is also seen as a counter-strategy by India to limit Chinese influence in the Pakistani waters close to India and Iran. Secondly, engagements with Tajikistan will help India to strengthen its presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Thirdly, engaging Tajikistan in military collaboration will give added strength to the India's security interests at home and in Central Asia. Tajikistan is the "lynchpin" of India's CCAP because of its strategic location. Its borders are with Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and it is located in close proximity to Gilgit Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Delhi and Dushanbe have shared concerns on terrorism and drug trafficking (Das, 2012).

In terms of geography, Tajikistan is her nearest state of Central Asia. In view of Pakistan's search for "strategic depth" westward and northward, India has been seriously thinking of learning some lesson from the situation that developed in the Panjshir Valley when Ahmad Shah Masud was locked in a grim battle with the Taliban. At that time, India had been reportedly making small war supplies to the forces of Northern Alliance. In the light of that experience and in order to benefit from the ouster of Taliban in Afghanistan, which has scuttled Pakistan's lurking ambition, Indian policy planners made some serious decisions. Indian Defense Ministry's Military Engineering Services has built a runway at an air base called Ainy situated in northeast of Dushanbe. This is India's first ever defense installation in Central Asian Republics. Obviously, this installation could not have come into being without the consent of the Russians and the Americans both of whom are claiming to be the policemen overlooking the activities of the terrorists in this weak Central Asian state. This is just another signal that India is attaching great importance to Central Asia. India is an energy-starved country. But apart from economic objectives, India has also taken into account the strategic element in her Central Asian policy. A military base has been established in Tajikistan. Military and diplomatic sources in New Delhi said that the base, with a handful of defense "advisers" at Farkhor, close to the Afghan border, has been "quietly operational" since May 2003 and that it is the first such Indian military facility outside the country. (Baruah, 2003) India's military presence in Tajikistan, be it in Ayni or in Farkhor, would give India the much-needed depth and range in tackling Pakistan's threats to its interest in Afghanistan. It would also

prove to be a geo-strategic game-changer and give a larger role in South Asia.

Indian P.M. announced that India would also extend assistance for the “infra-structural requirements” of the military training college in Dushembe. “We are cooperating well in the field of defense training. We have agreed to institutionalize contact between our armed forces in specialized areas. Said the Prime Minister.”

Tajikistan has a small army around 47,000 army personnel, and an air force with 19,000 personnel, one of the largest in the region. It flies around 190 fighter aircraft such as MiG 21s, MiG 27s, MiG 29s and Sukhoi 24s, nearly all of which are operated by the Indian Air Force (IAF). But its pilot efficiency has suffered grievously over the past eight years because of under-staffing of its combat squadrons mainly owing to poor training facilities (Baruah, 2003). Obviously, India’s growing presence, especially military presence, in Tajikistan or for that matter any other state in the Central Asian region would not be seen with favour by Pakistan, her arch - rival. The fear of growing Indian links with Kabul and the CAR led Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf to warn New Delhi to “lay off” the region in a televised address to the nation after the United States-led war on Afghanistan began in October 2003 (Bedi, 2002).

India has significantly reinforced its influence in CA following the 2002 collapse of Afghanistan’s Islamist Taliban regime, which was brought down by a US-led coalition. The Tajik leader said in Nov. 2003 that New Delhi was a “strategic partner” for the Central Asian republic and the two countries shared a common stance on fighting, terrorism, drug-trafficking and extremism,”. Vajpayee told journalists in Dushanbe after the talks, “Tajikistan and India have been fighting against terrorism for a long time and they are members of the International – anti-terrorist coalition” (Luthra, 2005). India’s recent diplomatic thrust into Central Asia keeping in view its future energy requirements and strategic positioning, through bilateral visits and trade and understated military agreements with some of the Republics, is also triggered by the security realignments in the region following the Taliban’s ouster. “The ensuing conflict of interest in the area between India’s old ally Russia and the U.S., its new found “long-term, strategic partner,” and nuclear rival China is also fuelling Delhi’s “forward” Central Asian policy (Baruah, 2003).

Defense Cooperation

Tajikistan's Defense Minister, Colonel General Sherali Khairullaev visited India for the first time in December 2001. This visit resulted in the two sides defining the scope and areas of cooperation. The visit was reciprocated by India's Defense Minister, George Fernandes, in April 2002 and this visit gave more body and content to the cooperation. Since April 2002-2017 there have been several delegation visits from both sides of which eight went from India. In short, the instruments for bilateral cooperation and India's assistance program are in place.

The bilateral defense cooperation covers a wide spectrum of bilateral interests and includes notably, sharing of information, material support and joint exercise. Of significance to Tajikistan is India's assistance program on training defense officers, human resource development, English language training, establishment of English language centre, IT centre and the rehabilitation of the military airfield at Ayni, near Dushanbe. India would also extend assistance to Tajikistan to raise and build an effective air force. The Ayni facility thus is the first home to Tajikistan's infant air force.

In addition, India has gifted military liveries for two brigades, aviation suits, computers, language training material, military jeeps and trucks and two Mi-8 helicopters along with spare parts and consumables. As a component of officers training, batches of young military cadets from Tajikistan are undergoing training at the National Defense Academy [NDA] at Khadakwasla. In addition to this training program, Tajik officers will attend the Young Officers Course. Besides these, the Tajik Ministry of Defense will receive a grant of US\$ 0.5 million to renovate and upgrade the Tajik Military Institute. Importantly, India is committed to the upgradation of the defense infrastructure and markedly, the defense cooperation includes making available experts and training of experts to handle strategic material or substance.

Conclusion

India as a rising economic power in South Asia and pursuing the democratic dispensation at home is bound to make deep inroads into the Central Asian States in times to come. The Indian strategy is to make her presence felt in Central Asia as a player in the regional strategy. She also wants the extremist organizations in the region to be denied any chance of radicalizing Central Asian Society. Her presence would add to the process of balancing of power in the region where all the major powers - the US, Russia, China would be meeting. India seems to have

learnt the lesson from the rise and fall of Taliban that she cannot afford to remain complacent with the situation in Central Asia keeping in mind the proximity of the region to her borders in Kashmir. With reference to Tajikistan, India's interests are hinged on economic, strategic, historical, cultural, civilizational and geographical link. Furthermore, it is vital for India that Tajikistan remains stable, secular and friendly. Given Tajikistan's constitution and the multi-party political system, her credentials as a secular state, pose no doubts. Of noteworthy is that Tajikistan is also an emerging democracy in the region as it is the only country that has a legitimate space for opposition political parties with opposing political views vis-à-vis the ruling regime and the ruling party. The space for the opposition political views to co-exist with the politics of the ruling regime gives a strong base for democracy and political stability to take root. However, external factors like instability in Afghanistan and the re-emergence of the Taliban do pose a threat to secularism, political stability and democratic principles in Tajikistan. Instability in Afghanistan or Tajikistan has its repercussions in the two countries. Therefore, India must take cognizance of these facts in its agenda for strategic cooperation with Tajikistan.

References

- Ahmad, A., Panda, J. P. and Sing, P. K. (2012). *Towards A New Asian Order*, Institute of Defence Studies and India: Analysis Shipra Publications, p.316.
- Baruah, A. (2003, 15 November). India Tajikistan to set up JWG on Counter-Terrorism. *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/2003/11/15/stories/2003111502361100.htm>
- Bedi, R. (2002). India and Central Asia, *Frontline*, 1(10).
- Budhraj, V.S. (1979). India and the Soviet Union. In Prasad, B. (Eds), *India's Foreign Policy; Studies in Continuity and Change*, Vikas Publishing House Private. p 361.
- Das, J.P. (2012). India's Connect Central Asia Policy, *Foreign Policy Journal (Online)*. Retrieved from <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/29/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/>
- Laruelle, M. (2012). India and Central Asia, *FPRC Journal*, 10(16).
- Luthra, G. (2005). India Extends Strategic Reach with Tajikistan Base. *South Asian Monitor*. Retrieved from www.southasianmonitor.org/opinion
- Nehru, J. (1949). Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, Vol. 1. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, p 300.
- Nuri, M.H. (1997). India and Central Asia: Past Present and Future, In *Central Asia; Internal and External Dynamics* (Ed) Asaf, K.M. and Barakat. A. , Islamabad, p 268.
- Palmer, N. D. and Perkins, H. C. (2007). *International Relations*, India: A.I.T.B.S Publishers and Distributors, p.720
- Puri, M. M. (1997). Central Asian Geopolitics: the Indian view. *Central Asian survey*, 16(2), p. 252.

