

India's Aims in Central Asia and India-Afghanistan-Iran Triangular Relationship

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Abstract

India has been making efforts to engage with Central Asia. This is driven by two primary motivations: First, India is eager to diversify its energy supplies as it has recognized that its economic progress is linked with Central Asian hydrocarbon resources; and second, India wants to contain the growth of radical Islamist forces which pose greatest threat to India's security. The strategic location of Central Asia makes it vulnerable to geopolitical manoeuvring involving the United States, Russia, China, Pakistan, and India, with conflicting and contrasting objectives. The Afghan Taliban's resurgence coupled with weakness of the Afghan government has also created fresh uncertainties, while the ISIS continues to demonstrate its growing power.

The triangular relationship among India, Iran and Afghanistan, particularly involving the Chabahar port, has crucial implications for India's aims in Central Asia. The paper explores the interests that motivate India's recent efforts to step up its engagement with Central Asian countries, how the India-Afghanistan-Iran triangular relationship is aimed at serving those interests, and the attitude of other important regional players.

Keywords

Central Asia, Energy Resources, Great Game, Geopolitics, India.

Background

India has significant energy, economic and security interests in Central Asia. However, India's engagement with Central Asia has also been based on strong historical and cultural ties. India was intimately related to Central Asia through trade routes as well as successive waves of invasions on the Indian subcontinent from the mountain passes in the northwest. The consolidation of the British Empire, however, adversely affected the incessant flow of interactions between two regions. Furthermore, what unites South Asia with Central Asia is the popularity and prevalence of a generally more liberal brand of Islamic faith, also known as Sufism. The veneration of Sufi saints has been a widespread characteristic of Islam in both South Asia and Central Asia.

Once India gained independence in 1947, India's relations with Central Asia were shaped by larger dynamics of Indo-Soviet ties,

particularly after Indo-China war of 1962. During the Cold War era, Indian foreign policy had a distinct inward-looking orientation, which confined New Delhi's presence in Central Asia mostly to cultural exchanges. With the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, India gradually moved away from ideological straightjacket to strategic pragmatism, which should have prompted India to revitalize its relations with the post-Soviet Central Asia. But India failed to take advantage of the situation. C Raja Mohan has remarked: "Delhi was well placed to cultivate lasting partnerships with the new republics. India's struggle to reform its economy, reconstruct relations with major powers after the Cold War and reconstitute ties with neighbours meant Central Asia was never high on Delhi's foreign policy agenda."¹ In context of the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Central Asian region, India cannot afford to ignore the strategic importance of this vital region.

New Delhi's desire to reclaim for India the influence and cultural relations it once enjoyed with the countries of Central Asia before the dawn of colonialism can be reasonably realized through Afghanistan and Iran. This dimension will be discussed in detail. India's primary concern and focus of engagement in the Central Asia region is Afghanistan, which reflects both historical links and the intertwining of fate with Pakistan. Since the overthrow of the fundamentalist Taliban regime in 2001, India has pursued a 'soft-power' approach in Afghanistan by steering clear of a military role. India has focussed on providing developmental aid, administrative capacity building, and reviving cultural links. New Delhi, which has emerged the largest donor to Afghanistan in the region and fifth largest bilateral donor², has been trying to position its relationship with Kabul in the context of its energy and trade interests in Central Asia. On the other hand, India's approach to the five Central Asian states is often considered to have been less coherent and lacking in direction.

India's Major Interests: Energy and Security

Central Asia is an increasingly important component of India's diplomatic architecture. India seeks to build stronger political relations and strengthen strategic cooperation with Central Asian states. In order to fulfil its broader objectives, India launched a new diplomatic initiative to actively engage with Central Asian countries in June 2012 with its 'Connect Central Asia' policy, whose framework "is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian countries, both individually and collectively."³ India's

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 landmark tour of the five Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was primarily aimed at breathing new dynamism into the 'Connect Central Asia' strategy. Modi became the first prime minister after Jawaharlal Nehru to undertake a robust regional outreach to Central Asia.

India's economic growth is critically dependent upon uninterrupted supply of energy resources. Presently India imports almost three quarters of its oil from abroad, much of it comes from the West Asian region. Thus energy security is of utmost importance for India's national security and foreign policy. With India projected to become ever more reliant on imported energy, reducing dependence on the West Asian sources and cultivating alternative sources of energy has become a vital concern.

Central Asia contains vast hydrocarbon fields. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are endowed with enormous hydrocarbon reserves, although Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have great energy potential. Moreover, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, being in the Caspian littoral, promise to open the door to other energy-rich Caspian states.⁴ In addition, Central Asia has untapped reserves of uranium, making it attractive for India's civilian nuclear program. India is planning to sign a pact with Uzbekistan on the import of uranium.⁵ Apart from domestic production, India presently imports uranium from Uzbekistan's neighbour, Kazakhstan, as well as from Canada.

Central Asia is thus of prime importance in India's energy security policy. During Modi's 2015 Central Asian tour, India and Kazakhstan signed five key agreements including a defence pact to enhance military cooperation and a contract for supply of uranium.⁶ Over the past few years, the OVL, the overseas arm of India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has sought to make significant investments in Kazakhstan. For instance, Modi launched maiden drilling by OVL in the Satpayev oil block of Kazakhstan in July 2015.⁷ Both the countries are discussing enhancing cooperation in hydrocarbons and nuclear energy sectors. During a meeting of the Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) at Astana in September 2017, India and Kazakhstan discussed "ideas for stepping up the cooperation in energy sector, trade, economic, investment, transport and connectivity, agriculture, information technology, space, healthcare and cultural spheres between the two countries."⁸

Although the Indian Government has begun investing in oil fields in Central Asia, its policy on how to transport this oil to the Indian market is still evolving. Quite apart from the economic benefits from a closer relationship between India and Kazakhstan, the political benefits for New Delhi are equally significant, such as coordinated action to deal with religious radicalism and fundamentalism. In November 2017, Indian and Kazakh armies also conducted a 14-day joint military exercise in India's Himachal Pradesh to strengthen bilateral relations and achieve interoperability between the two armies. This was the second joint military exercise between the two countries; the first edition of 'Prabal Dostyk' was conducted in Kazakhstan in 2016.⁹

An equally significant step towards opening Central Asia to South Asia is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline which is also being supported by Washington. Turkmenistan has world's second-largest deposit of natural gas, and the TAPI would permit it to diversify its exports by delivering energy to South Asian countries.¹⁰ This ambitious pipeline will come from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan, bringing significant benefits to all parties involved. Out of the total 1,814 kilometres, the pipeline will run for 214 kilometres in Turkmenistan, 774 kilometres in Afghanistan, 826 kilometres in Pakistan through Quetta and Multan and finally reaching Fazilka in India. As this ambitious project is seemingly not directed against any country, its realization is less problematic. India has been engaged in protracted negotiations regarding this pipeline, intended to transport 30 billion cubic meters of gas from natural gas fields in Turkmenistan to India. The last ground-breaking ceremony took place in Turkmenistan in December 2015, in which India was represented by former Vice-President Hamid Ansari. There are reports that India is now taking more interest in the project.¹¹

India has felt constrained by its lack of land access to energy-rich Central Asia, hemmed in as it is by China and Pakistan. Here comes the importance of International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) in expanding India's trade and investment links with Central Asia. The INSTC, which includes rail, road, and shipping transport from Mumbai in India via Bandar Abbas in Iran to Astrakhan in Russia and Baku in Azerbaijan, would be a trade corridor having immense potential helping India to develop its economic and strategic importance in Eurasia and Central Asia. Once completed, the corridor is expected to provide astonishing opportunity for high volumes of goods to be transported "not only between India and Central Asia, but also between the European

Union and South Asia, as an alternative to the increasingly volatile and piracy-infested shipping routes using the Suez Canal.”¹² The INSTC can also evolve into a strategic counterweight to “the increasing regional ambitions of China through its One Belt, One Road Initiative.”¹³

Jointly envisaged by India, Iran and Russia in year 2000, the much-awaited Corridor got delayed for 15 years due to the challenges relating to financing and infrastructure development, unsettled conditions in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and international sanctions on Iran. Now things seem to be brightening up as New Delhi has accorded top priority to the INSTC project. A coordination council meeting was held in August 2015 between India, Iran, Russia and 10 other participating nations – Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Oman, Tajikistan, Turkey and Ukraine – in New Delhi that approved draft transit and customs agreements providing the legal framework for moving freight on the ship-rail-road corridor.¹⁴

Central Asia is of vital importance to India not just in terms of energy security but also for reasons of national security. After the disintegration of the USSR, India was interested to see the newly independent Islamic countries to insulate themselves from the toxic ideology of radical Islam as Central Asia has been a fertile recruiting ground for Jihadist groups based in the region. During the era of fundamentalist Taliban, India formed a common front with Iran, Russia and Central Asian Republics against Taliban. Though it has been almost one and a half decade since the overthrow of the Taliban, Afghanistan continues to face the scourge of Islamist extremism and terrorism stemming from the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.

The Central Asian states have been witnessing serious trouble over the spill over of these destructive forces into their region and destabilising their polities. Of late, there are serious concerns in Russia over deteriorating security condition in Central Asia in general and Afghanistan in particular because of the threat of the ISIS or *Daesh*. Similarly, India also views the region as a source of religious extremism and is concerned to check the rise of radical Islamist groups which may present a grave security threat. Given the transnational nature of these groups, including links with the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the ISIS, this has led to a high degree of uneasiness in New Delhi. The fear is that if the re-emergence of jihadist groups is not checked effectively, they will eventually pose a serious threat to India’s security, particularly in Jammu & Kashmir. This concern is exacerbated by the situation in Afghanistan where Pakistan-backed and Taliban-generated insurgency

has undermined India's efforts to contribute in rebuilding Afghanistan into a regional trade hub.

The shared concerns over security are yet to be translated into concrete security cooperation. Central Asian countries have usually relied on an array of overlapping arrangements for their individual security. Bilateral ties have remained central to the regional strategic architecture. Coexisting with such bilateral links, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and its region-wide initiatives have been at the core of the overlapping multilateral security structure. Whereas Russia conducts numerous joint military exercises with Central Asian countries under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), China does to some degree through the SCO. There is very limited direct military collaboration between the India and Central Asian countries.

It is also to be noted that the increased level of uncertainty in Central Asia and Eurasia following the disintegration of the USSR led to a search for new security arrangements that were able to address a series of emerging challenges. The SCO emerged as a major organisation linking Central Asian states with Russia and China. The SCO's model of security cooperation has relied on dialogue, consensus building, and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states. India and Pakistan have joined SCO as full members at the Astana summit on June 8-9, 2017 in Kazakhstan. India's membership was announced by the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who also welcomed Pakistan as a new member.¹⁵ This membership is likely to help India further expand its footprints in Central Asia. Russia, along with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had played an important role in getting a membership for India in the SCO.

India-Afghanistan-Iran Trilateral

Afghanistan is a landlocked country which has been dependent on Pakistan's Karachi port for access to the sea. This advantage has given Islamabad considerable influence over Kabul that it has periodically utilized to pressure Afghan governments. But this situation is going to change when construction of the Chabahar port is completed.

Located on the Makran coast, the Chabahar port assumes special strategic importance for India due to two reasons. First, it is the nearest port to India in Iran, which provides access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Second, it is located less than 150 km west of the Pakistan's

Gwadar port, making it ideal for keeping track of Pakistani or Chinese military activity. Despite the strategic significance of Chabahar for New Delhi, progress on it has been slow.

After the end of Taliban government, the need for India to expand trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia had multiplied but Pakistan refused India overland access to Afghanistan. By building a road from Zaranj on the Afghanistan-Iran border to Delaram, New Delhi got access to Kabul. But it still needed a port to send supplies to Afghanistan and Chabahar was a perfect location to do so.¹⁶ Consequently, Chabahar port's development as India's gateway for overland trade through Afghanistan became imperative. The Vajpayee government signed an agreement with Iran in 2003 for the Chabahar Port. Even as the Delaram-Zaranj road was built, the port deal could not be materialised. Initially India embraced the idea but then lost interest due to two factors. Firstly, the concern about economic viability and security of the project, secondly, Iran was facing international sanctions over its controversial nuclear program. Though, the previous Manmohan Singh government understood the significance of the Chabahar Port, it also feared its adverse impact on the 2005 civilian nuclear agreement.¹⁷ New Delhi's interest in the port project revived from 2012 onwards when Iran agreed to set up a joint working group to operationalize it as part of Afghanistan, India and Iran trilateral cooperation agreement.

Iran was equally reluctant initially. One of the major factors behind Iran's lack of enthusiasm to allow India's presence at Chabahar was the opposition by the Revolutionary Guards, which reportedly uses the port to ship arms to Yemen and other regional militant groups.¹⁸ With the Iran-US rapprochement becoming a real possibility and with economic sanctions on Iran being lifted, the economic prospects of port project also brightened.

This project "created a new transport corridor that ends Pakistan's monopoly on seaborne transit trade to Afghanistan"¹⁹ The Zaranj-Delaram Highway connects 16 of Afghanistan's "34 provinces, stretching from Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar and to Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan province. The highway creates North-South transport corridors linking the Indian sub-continent and the land-locked Central Asia. The new infrastructure enables Afghanistan to access the Arabian Sea through Iran, and raises its potential to stimulate more investment from trade with outside powers like India."²⁰ In May 2016, India signed a historic three-nation deal with Iran and

Afghanistan to develop the Chabahar port and build a transport-and-trade corridor through Afghanistan that could substantially reduce the time and cost of doing business with Europe.²¹

Chabahar is not just a matter of developing a port. Afghan President Ghani's statement captured its significance: "Hundred years from now historians will remember this day as the start of regional cooperation. We wanted to prove that geography is not our destiny. With our will we can change geography." Commenting on the strategic dimension of the deal, Modi termed it a "a new foundation of convergence between our three nations."²²

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed the Chabahar port contract and a trilateral transit trade agreement with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani in May 2016. Tehran's *E'temad* newspaper remarked that the signing of the trilateral agreements "will ring danger bells in Islamabad, China and Riyadh".²³ The project is rightly project as a game changer for India because it would provide connectivity to Afghanistan, Iran and Eurasia, strategically outflanking Pakistan. Moreover, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's interest in connecting Iran's Mashhad with Zahedan, which is next to the Afghanistan border, via an India-built 900-km rail line with the Chabahar Port is also significant as it will open a new gateway to Central Asia and Europe. By joining the INSTC through Mashhad, India can boost its trade connectivity to Russia and Europe via the Baltic states.²⁴

Indian Prime Minister Modi visited Herat in (western Afghanistan) in June 2016 and jointly inaugurated with the President Ghani the Afghan-India Friendship Dam, earlier known as Salma Dam. It was originally built in 1976 before being damaged during the civil wars. It has now been rebuilt by Indian and Afghan engineers, funded by New Delhi. Stressing India's commitment to Afghan peace and development, Modi said that "India will not forget you or turn away... Your friendship is our honour; your dreams are our duty."²⁵ The importance of the Indo-Afghan ties was further underlined by Afghanistan's decision to award Prime Minister Modi its highest civilian honour, Amir Amanullah Khan Award. During his speech after inaugurating the dam, Prime Minister Modi invoked iconic Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, whose home village lies near the dam and who settled down in Ajmer in Rajasthan: "Khwaja Moiuuddin Chishti, the first of the Chishti saints in India, said that human beings must have the affection of the sun, the generosity of the river and the hospitality of the earth."²⁶

The Salma Dam is expected to help Afghanistan capitalize on opportunities thrown open by operationalisation of the Chabahar port. As Pakistan has refused to allow any Indian goods to travel over land Afghanistan, both the countries are working on strengthening alternative routes, including the launch of Kabul-New Delhi air cargo corridor in June 2017 and Kabul-Mumbai air cargo corridor in December 2017²⁷, as well as the Chabahar sea route. India's first major shipment of 1,30,000 tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan through Chabahar Port was dispatched from western seaport of Kandla in October 2017, launching a trade route bypassing Pakistan. Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj said that the shipment was "a gift from the people of India to our Afghan brethren" as well as the "the starting point of our journey to realize the full spectrum of connectivity from culture to commerce, from traditions to technology, from investments to Information Technology, from services to strategy and from people to politics."²⁸

India's growing interest and influence in Afghanistan was reflected in Prime Minister Modi's announcement of providing Kabul with \$1 billion in economic aid, when President Ashraf Ghani held talks with him in New Delhi in September 2016. During his India visit in October 2017, Ghani asked Pakistan to end its support for terrorist groups, while also talking tough about the issue of connectivity – refusing to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that would provide Pakistan access to Central Asia if Islamabad did not allow connectivity between India and Afghanistan.²⁹ The dialogue at the highest level between India and Afghanistan has been complemented by regular interactions between senior ministers, military officials and civil society representatives. This sends out an unequivocal message that Islamabad's specious objections against Indo-Afghan partnership would not deter New Delhi and Kabul from deepening their partnership.

Geopolitical Imperatives

Presently, Russia, the US, Iran and China are important strategic players in Central Asia, whereas India is a latecomer. Due to historical, economic and geo-strategic reasons, India's approach to Central Asia is intrinsically intertwined with its South Asia policy. This section deals with India's geopolitical equations with the powers that matter for the success of its Central Asian outreach.

Afghanistan-Pakistan Factor

The biggest impediment to peace and stability in Afghanistan is Islamabad viewing its relationship with Kabul through the prism of Pakistan's anti-India obsession. India's approach to Central Asia is thus conditioned by its tensions with Pakistan whose geographic position poses two simultaneous challenges to India. First, India's ability to access Central Asia has been vulnerable because Pakistan's geography, and its calculated policy of obstruction, cuts India off from the region. Second, Pakistan's geographic location astride the politically volatile regions of Central Asia has given it a natural advantage while dealing with Washington and Beijing. Jihadist and anti-India mindset has motivated Pakistan to engage repeatedly in unwanted and unwelcome intervention into the affairs of the neighbouring countries, both Islamic and non-Islamic, with disastrous consequences for all. At the end of the day, this policy may have thwarted Pakistan's ambitions for regional leadership but has not contributed to its regional isolation.

The Taliban's growing ability to penetrate Kabul and launch deadly attacks has created fresh uncertainties, while the ISIS continues to demonstrate its staying power and strength. Afghan security forces, beset by large-scale killings and desertions have been struggling to beat back the Taliban since US-led troops ended their combat mission in December 2014.³⁰ One of the things that India need to be concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan, is the potential for convergence among the various radical groups in Afghanistan-Pakistan region and its repercussions on India's interest.

India's primary concern in the wider Central Asia region is to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan without which India's hope of having smooth linkages with the Central Asian region would hit serious roadblocks. Thus, India remains concerned about who rules in Kabul and wants to make sure that whoever does so is not antagonistic to India's interests. If Afghanistan again falls under the Taliban's sway, it would have a destabilising effect not only for Central Asian societies but also for Pakistan.

As discussed earlier, the opening of the Chabahar port is expected to pave the way for India's increased trade with and influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Most significantly, it is likely to transform Afghan-Pakistani ties. By providing Afghanistan with another outlet to the sea, the Chabahar port is set to reduce Kabul's excessive dependence on Pakistani territory and provide Kabul with leverage in dealing with

Islamabad, particularly on trade matters. Both Taliban and the ISIS are dangerous for India. Therefore, India must launch a dialogue with important regional players to stabilise Afghanistan. The Chinese efforts to include Afghanistan in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project need to nudge India to speed up the ITSTC connectivity initiative. Peace in Afghanistan is as important for India as it is for Iran and Russia. An India-led regional conference on Afghanistan must be planned simultaneously with robust counter-terror partnership with other Central Asian countries within the SCO format.

China Factor

India's relationship with China has always "demanded a tightrope act, improving bilateral relations while searching for new ways to balance the rise of Beijing's might."³¹ In the past sixty years, relations between India and China have fluctuated wildly. Such divisive issues as future of Tibet, boundary demarcation, nuclear proliferation to Pakistan, and trade imbalances have fuelled intense debate over how India should deal with China. India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era has been preoccupied with securing a favourable distribution of power in Asia, further developing its relations with the US in light of a rising China.

China's impressive economic growth as well as geographic proximity and shared border with the Central Asian states give it substantial influence in the region. Since China established diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states in 1992, its overall trade with the region has increased over a hundred-fold. India has always been outmanoeuvred by energy-hungry China when it comes to aggressively and successfully securing lucrative energy acquisitions in Central Asia. China has emerged as the main trading partner of four of the five Central Asian countries.³²

China's ability to compete successfully against India is also visible in its consolidation of transport networks with Central Asia that make up its own version of the Silk Road. It is pertinent to mention here that China is aggressively promoting the revival of the celebrated Silk Road trading route through the BRI. Projected as a network of regional infrastructure projects comprising roads, rail links, energy pipelines, and telecommunications ties, the major objective of the BRI, also referred to jointly as the 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR), is to win over neighbouring and other countries in the region through increased

trade incentives and transport connectivity.³³ If successful, the OBOR or BRI would make China a principal economic and diplomatic force in the Eurasian region. Apprehensive of China's real intentions, Modi government has refused to become part of the BRI.

India and Pakistan have become full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Security and counter-terrorism being high priority concerns for all SCO members, Pakistan is likely to feel the heat over its terror links. India's inclusion in the SCO has been viewed as positive news for New Delhi, which hopes to have a greater say in pushing for effective action in combating terrorism. As Indian diplomat Kanwal Sibal writes: "Within SAARC, Pakistan can join the shared rhetoric against terrorism without any pressure to clean up its act, as the only victim of its jihadi policies is India. Within the SCO, Russia, China and all the Central Asian states are concerned about terrorism and Pakistani policies and actions will be under scrutiny."³⁴

However, due to China's close links with Pakistan, India should not have much hope as China has shown its true colours in the Security Council on the issue of Zakiur Rehman Lakhvi and Hafiz Saeed. Beijing is most likely to shield Pakistan on the issue of terrorism against India. Now, even Russia has been cautious of naming Pakistan as a source of terrorism against India. There are apprehensions in New Delhi that India might find itself isolated in an emerging strategic triangle of Pakistan-China-Russia, who are developing a common position on many issues crucial for India's national security.

Iran Factor

Despite both New Delhi and Iran publicizing the narrative of "civilizational ties" being the foundation of their bilateral relations, economic consideration are steering their engagement. Iran's hard bargaining skills have often made things difficult for India's successive governments. The trade in oil and gas constitutes the largest share of Indo-Iranian ties as India is Iran's second biggest oil buyer after China. India was among a few countries which had continued to import oil from Iran despite Western sanctions against Tehran over its nuclear program. But that was not easy. New Delhi faced several challenges in balancing pressure by Washington as Iran pushed for financial clearances in pending oil payments. Despite New Delhi's inability to do so due to sanctions, Iran often threatened India that it could lose stakes in strategically vital projects if it did not defy American pressure.³⁵

However, it has become very clear that India is not going to abandon Iran just because Washington wants. In fact, if the Donald Trump administration shows strategic smartness, Iranian routes could well be utilized for access to Afghanistan. Only India could play such an immense role in facilitating this unthinkable engagement. However, maintaining active diplomatic relations with both Iran and the US would be a tightrope walk, and the Chabahar port's success would eventually depend on India's ability to walk this tightrope. India must continue to convince Iranian leadership not to trust Pakistan as a partner in the fight against terrorism as long as Pakistan's security establishment views violent extremist groups as a means of counterbalancing India and as a safeguard against an American exit from Afghanistan.³⁶

American Factor

Last, and perhaps the most important player with regard to India's role in Central Asia is the US, which has had a history of mixed relations with India since independence. With the end of the Cold War, both countries have come closer. India's aspirations to exert greater influence in South Asia, the Indian Ocean region and Central Asia have found favour with the US. Hence, Washington has been supportive of an expanded Indian role in Central Asia, which is also evident in America's strategy for a 'New Silk Road' which would link India with Central Asia. The Trump administration has revived the New Silk Road initiative, first announced by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in July 2011 in a speech in Chennai. Announcing her vision, Clinton had said: "Turkmen gas fields could help meet both Pakistan's and India's growing energy needs and provide significant transit revenues for both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Tajik cotton could be turned into Indian linens. Furniture and fruit from Afghanistan could find its way to the markets of Astana or Mumbai and beyond."³⁷

The US recognizes the benefits of broadening and deepening good relations with India, especially by developing common economic interests through trade and investment. The American involvement in Afghanistan can also be interpreted as having expanded the political, economic and military space available to India in the region. Robert Kaplan rightly says that "As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the 21st century. India, in other words, looms as the ultimate pivot state."³⁸

In August 2017, President Trump criticised Pakistan for offering safe haven to “agents of chaos” and accused Islamabad of taking billions of dollars of American money while undermining American interests in Afghanistan through terror groups. Declaring that the US “can no longer be silent about Pakistan’s safe havens for terrorist organisations,” Trump demanded Pakistan to change its behaviour “immediately.”³⁹ Trump maintained that key decisions in Afghanistan should be taken by military commanders and determined by “conditions on the ground and not arbitrary timetables,” because a hasty withdrawal will create conditions conducive for all terrorist groups, including the ISIS and the al-Qaeda, to thrive.⁴⁰ Trump’s decision has come as a breather for the fragile Afghan government. The increased American military presence could allow the Ashraf Ghani-led Afghan government to focus its energies on the urgent task of governance, supplementing the US initiatives for regime stability.

But most importantly, Trump’s positive comments have made Pakistan jittery. New Delhi’s increased role in Afghanistan is now more consequential. When it comes to India’s warm ties with Afghanistan, it is the prospect of deeper security relations that really rattles Pakistan. During his trip to India in October 2017, the US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson demanded the dismantling of terrorist infrastructure on Pakistani soil. He said that “there are too many terrorist organizations that find a safe place in Pakistan from which to conduct their operations and attacks against other countries,” while assuring New Delhi that “in the fight against terrorism, the United States will continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with India. Terrorist safe havens will not be tolerated.”⁴¹

Although India has told the US that it would not send combat troops to Afghanistan, the scale and scope of India’s security, economic and developmental involvement in Afghanistan is set to expand significantly. Enhanced Indo-US cooperation in Afghanistan is going to change the geopolitical configuration in Afghanistan. The US Defense Secretary James Mattis’ statement on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing “through the disputed territory” of Kashmir was an expression of America’s reservations about the OBOR, of which the CPEC is the most important part in South Asia, as well as a strong endorsement of New Delhi’s position on the CPEC.⁴² But it is rightly pointed out that America’s “geostrategic support provided to India could exacerbate Asia’s security dilemmas. These security

dilemmas are nested in relationships that link China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, as well as China, Japan, and South Korea.⁷⁴³

New Delhi's reluctance so far to play the 'great game' in Central Asia has been dictated by its long-cherished tradition of strategic autonomy. India's evasion of either being seen in close military embrace with America or being identified with America's interests in Central Asia points to the deeply ingrained Indian preference for autonomy in external relations. The success of the Chabahar port would depend a great deal on how India convinces the US not to throw a spanner in India's efforts, in tandem with Iran, to gain access to Afghanistan and thereafter Central Asia.

Russia Factor

Russia has a large footprint in Central Asia. Its geographic presence in the northeast of that continent entitles Russia to be regarded as the dominant player in Central Asia. Under the leadership of Valdimir Putin, Moscow is engaged in arresting the decline in Russia's international stature and again asserting its power as a major claimant for influence in Central Asia and Eurasia. As Russia's energy-driven economic prosperity is coming under severe stress due to Putin's diplomatic and military gambles, the momentum of Russia-China relationship is shifting in favour of China, with Beijing setting the tone for all major global agendas. Both seem to be demonstrating a remarkable degree of policy coordination, taking their partnership to unprecedented heights.

The geopolitical and security interests of New Delhi and Moscow in this part of the world are compatible when it comes to dealing with the threat of Islamist extremism, terrorism, organized crime, and trafficking in arms and drugs.⁴⁴ Strategically, Russia has invested heavily in simultaneously engaging India and China, but it appears to have been reluctant to approve India's efforts to establish a military foothold in the region which can be explained by Russia's fears of encirclement by the US and NATO. Probably apprehensive that India's foothold at Tajikistan's Ayni airbase would ultimately open the door to American influence, Russia reportedly pressurized Tajik government to deny the deployment of Indian fighter aircraft at the base. With Russian resistance, India's plans went into cold storage.⁴⁵

However, the INSTC, which has been 17 years in the making, is going to be operationalized next year with the first consignment from India to Russia. The project, conceived well before China's BRI, will

help India send goods to Russia and Europe via Iran. India can even consider working jointly with Russia on economically viable projects in the Eurasian region. There is a need for India to understand the strategic role of Chabahar port for evolving an integrated transportation network involving the INSTC. As underlined by P Stobdan, “Chabahar port can be connected with INSTC if the line is further extended till Mashad. In fact, Chabahar-Irانشahr-Zahedan-Mashad can be linked to the existing Eurasian railway line which connects other parts of Central Asia. Similarly, this route can hook onto ongoing corridor plans and programmes like Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA), Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) and other multilateral transport initiatives in the region. India could tie up the loose ends of connectivity projects with Central Asia through both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms.”⁴⁶

However, the biggest challenge from Indian perspective is Russia’s changing policy towards the Taliban. Although, Moscow labels the Taliban a terrorist organization, it has begun to maintain unofficial diplomatic links with Taliban fighters. This policy springs from the Kremlin’s belief that the Taliban can be divided into two main camps; moderate or reconcilable Taliban members can be persuaded to participate in peace talks, whereas the hardline and irreconcilable elements are seeking to undermine Afghan security. Since the Taliban and ISIS are sworn enemies, Russia views Taliban as useful allies against the ISIS. The Modi government must step up efforts to bridge the gap between American and Russian positions on Afghanistan.

Conclusion

India’s Central Asia policy aims to rekindle ancient ties, notwithstanding its dependence on the volatile Afghanistan-Pakistan region. India has been trying hard for the long-term integration of land routes linking it to Central Asia through the planned international North–South corridor, and the opening of the Chabahar port is a key plank of this strategy.

The shifting geopolitical landscape in Central Asia has a number of implications for India’s security and economic interests. At present, India faces many challenges in Central Asia as there is no guarantee that its interests would be protected under changing geopolitical scenario. India’s experiences in Central Asia over the past decade demonstrate the challenges of facing tough competition from China on energy issues and of having different views on regional security with Russia.

India has managed to secure only a shaky toehold in Central Asia when compared with other important players in the region. Deep mistrust still dampens higher levels of cooperation. While India is capable to forge meaningful partnership with Russia, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asian countries, China and Pakistan will continue to constrain India's ability for power projection in Central Asia. Moreover, China shares long borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Due to its growing military and economic cooperation with Central Asia, China has come to be seen posting a direct challenge to India's aims in the region. Lacking direct physical access, India lags behind both Russia and China in terms of trade and security cooperation with Central Asian countries.

India will have to strengthen its partnership with countries like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and adopt a long-term policy towards this region. India's current trade volume with Central Asian region is minimal. The Chabahar route plus INSTC could boost trade volume substantially. However, India's role in Central Asia will depend on how it manages to convert the challenges into opportunities.

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