

Convergence of Indo-Russian Interests in Central Asia

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Abstract

The emergence of Central Asian states created new geographical, strategic and economic imperatives for both India and Russia to reshape their policies towards the region. The Central Asian region has been in a state of constant flux due to developments caused by the external intervention for control over its natural resources, efforts to provide alternate transport routes to most of the landlocked countries of the region. There are various dimensions of the competition that has emerged among major powers. Both India and Russia are very much concerned about the impact of the intensification of US and Chinese role in the region's security, energy and political fields. The emergence of Afghanistan, as hub of international terrorism and religious extremism, has further complicated the issue.

Given the changing contours of the strategic environment; both India and Russia must not only sustain their current diplomatic thrust in the region, but also reinvigorate it to a far higher level. The two powers' desire, for a politically stable Central Asia at their borders, especially after NATO's Afghan pull out; is shared as is their search for trade outlets in their neighbourhood. This paper focuses on Indo-Russian Cooperation and their reassertions in the changing geopolitical environment of Central Asia.

Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has created a new political reality and altered the International Strategic balance in the Central Asian region. Five new Central Asian Republics – Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan emerged, each with its own national identity problems and politics. The geostrategic location of the Central Asian states has made this region extremely pivotal. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) lie at the crossroads of Russia, the Middle East, South Asia and the Far East. Any geopolitical changes in the region inevitably extend their impact on several states in the neighbourhood.¹ The region has witnessed new Strategic dynamics and fierce regional and extra-regional rivalry by powers to establish their control and influence upon the independent states. As the weakening of Russian influence began to be felt, a new "Great Game" was in the offing and Central Asian States were thrown into the vortex of international politics where regional players like China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan sought to influence and engage in the region with the US as a new key player. As a result, even after twenty five years of independence geopolitical order has not been fully stabilized in central Asia.

Apart from vast oil and gas reserves in CARs, there are also the cheap hydel energy reserves. This has attracted the attention of various countries including India. A number

of companies from Russia, United States, Turkey, Iran and others are competing for the right to extract and ship the oil and gas to worldwide markets. In fact today Central Asia has become a critical area in the foreign policy of the West, South and East Asian countries. Russia is trying to build a new cooperative framework; and US and China are no exception to this trend. India is making a serious bid to forge new equations with countries in Central Asia. Countries like Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Pakistan are also making efforts to create a position of influence in this region. India as an emerging regional power in South Asia is naturally interested in any changes occurring within or close to the region; which may have implications for its security.²

The end of cold war and the breakup of Soviet Union in 1991 led to paradigmatic shifts in the international relations arena. However, the past friendship between India and Russia has evolved into a strategic partnership today. The crux of Indo-Russian relations also lies in the compatibility of their vital interests at the regional level of Central Asia. It was this compatibility of geopolitical and strategic interests that worked well for Indo-Soviet ties in the past and argues well now for Indo-Russian ties.

The Central Asian region has been in a state of constant flux due to developments caused by the external intervention for control over its natural resources; efforts to provide alternate transport routes and corridors to most of the landlocked countries of the region; and the propagation of 'forced' democracy in the post-Soviet space. There are various dimensions of the competition that has emerged among major powers. What has complicated the competition is the emergence of Afghanistan as the hub of international terrorism and religious extremism propagated by Taliban. For indo-Russian relations, this regional development presents not only new challenges to their relationship, but new opportunities as well.

Convergence of Interests

Both India and Russia have always considered central Asia an area of great interest in terms of strategic, security and economic linkages. Having lost its superpower status, Russia continues to remain an important player in the changing Central Asian geopolitics. Given the changing contours of Moscow's regional dynamics, accentuated by increasing US and NATO involvement, Chinese influence and active engagement of the European Union in the Central Asian region, it is apparent that both India and Russia cannot afford to be mere onlookers to the developments and changing geopolitical and strategic balance of power in their backyards.³

Religious Extremism and Terrorism

After the disintegration of USSR, India began to look upon the five states of central Asia as part of its "extended neighbourhood". Since the majority of people of Central Asia are Muslim, they began to attract attention; and Indian interest lay primarily in seeing that the secular orientation of the Central Asian states remains intact.⁴ The reason behind this is that India has been battling against extremism and terrorism which has been exacerbated due to the volatile situation in the neighbourhood. Due to Kashmir angle, India cannot be walled off from the political developments which take place in the CARs. Any advance by Islamic extremist groups in the CARs could invigorate similar elements active in

Kashmir. India's concern in the region was further intensified with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the past. If the forces of extremism and terrorism had succeeded in the region, the geopolitics of Eurasia would probably have undergone a fundamental change. Like India, Russia has a specific geopolitical interest in Central Asia, which is to prevent the explosive charge of Islamic extremism, emanating from Afghanistan, from penetrating into the country. Hence, peace and stability in CARs and Afghanistan seems to be the most crucial factor for both India and Russia.

Russia, India and CARs share a common interest in blocking the dissemination of radical Islam in this region. Russia and India, both are facing challenge from religious extremism and terrorism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Russia in its south, India in its north and parts of Central Asia has witnessed growth and spread of network of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. Already mechanisms are there, such as India-Russia joint working groups on Afghanistan and on Terrorism, the Collective Security Treaty Organization to fight the menace. These mechanisms need to be further strengthened.⁵

Drugs and Arms Trafficking

Drug trafficking is another problem related to terrorism and one that confronts India, Russia and CARs. Central Asia has been the hardest hit by the explosion in Afghan heroin; and has become an invaluable route for global narcotics trade. According to the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP), about 65% of the hard drugs coming out of Afghanistan pass through Central Asia on their way to the world markets. Central Asia authorities intercept less than 5% of all drugs being smuggled through the region.⁶ Vast amounts of narcotics from Afghanistan and Pakistan are transported to Tajikistan; and distributed and redirected along several routes to Russia and to the west. The problem of drug trafficking has a serious implication for India's security as well. The extremist groups operating in Jammu and Kashmir are using the income generated by drug trafficking. Therefore, India, Russia and CARs have common interest to pool their efforts to address this problem of drug trafficking.

Central Asian region also remains highly vulnerable to the smuggling of fissile material for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Moreover, the border and customs checkpoints in Kazakhstan have no special detection equipment for intercepting nuclear material. This region lies between the major nuclear powers – Russia, China, India and Pakistan. During Soviet period central Asia was the raw material base for its nuclear programme. After the disintegration of the USSR, Kazakhstan has closed its nuclear test range and has committed itself to being a non-nuclear weapon state under the NPT, but it has not lost its potential of being nuclear power. Uzbekistan has world's third largest Uranium deposits. Tajikistan also has Uranium reserves. Kyrgyzstan has a lot of nuclear waste left over as legacy of the former Soviet Union. Thus, in this region there is a threat of the proliferation of WMD. Routes which have been created for other illegal trafficking can also be used for transporting components of WMD⁷. During the annual summits, both India and Russia pay special attention to strengthen bilateral interaction in confronting new threats and challenges of terrorism and narcotics.

Energy Security and Economic Interests

India's interest in securing reliable energy supplies and trade through Central Asia remains substantial. Indian economy requires vast quantities of oil and natural gas in near future to support its growth. At present India is the 4th largest oil and 7th largest gas consumer in the world. The country's oil demand is expected to increase to 200 million tons by 2025. Currently middle-east is the main supplier of hydro-carbon resources to India. New Delhi actively seeks to decrease its dependence on this volatile supplier. Energy rich and proximate Central Asian region is one of the best positioned potential candidates to become alternate energy provider to India. Despite the lack of energy transportation infrastructure to deliver the region's hydro-carbon resources to India, India has already started to establish its presence in the energy sector of the region. India's ONGC Videsh has acquired 25% stakes in Kazakh oil fields and the long stalled Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is gaining traction despite the looming security concerns. Besides, a petrochemical complex and gas based fertilizer plant is under construction. Tajikistan can benefit energy hungry India, as it is the 2nd largest producer of hydro-electricity in the region. Yet it has exploited only 3%-5% of its potential. Indian companies (whether state owned or private) are deeply interested in oil and gas exploration in Kazakhstan's Caspian Sea region and in Uzbekistan, as well as a hydropower project in Tajikistan. India has already invested nearly \$2.7 billion in Sakhalin project on natural gas.

However, Indian economic interests in central Asia is not limited to import of energy resources but also other raw material vital for growth of industrial production, such as iron ore, coal and other minerals. Steel giant Arcelor Mittal already owns metallurgical plants and coal mines in Kazakhstan. Moreover, supplying food to its growing population also tamps India to be interested in vast tracts of land available for large scale commercial farming in Central Asia. Hence, along with hydro-carbon resources, India is interested in cooperation in mining, agriculture, IT, hydropower and pharmaceutical sectors.⁹

The requirement of energy security also postulates not only a continuing positive relationship with Russia; even had the past 65 years not been one of unbroken friendship and second, friendly ties to all the Central Asian States.

Afghanistan factor

Both countries regard Afghanistan as the hub of instability in the South and Central Asian region. Instability in Afghanistan has also adversely influenced peace and security in Russia, India and Central Asian region. India believes that the Kashmiri insurgents have a strong nexus with Afghanistan and in the past received their training in camps in Afghanistan. Russia is apprehensive of an instable Afghanistan; since it may destabilize the Central Asian region as a whole, thereby impacting on Russia itself.

Afghanistan represents both a threat and an opportunity for Central Asian states; and continued instability can be a substantial source for threats from bleeding extremism, terrorism and organized trafficking of drugs arms. At the same time, stabilization and reconstruction could lead to an opportunity for cooperation over electricity, gas, roads, pipelines and hydroelectric power transfers. Afghanistan also has the prospects of becoming a trade and transit corridor between CAR and South Asia. Therefore stable

Afghanistan is in the interest of CARs, India and Russia. In the reconstruction of Afghanistan India, Russia and CARs have a major role to play.

After the withdrawal of US led NATO forces from Afghanistan India and Russia are concerned about the post-2014 scenario in Afghanistan. India and Russia could play active roles to maintain peace and stability in the fragile nation and its neighbourhood. Both countries have already deliberated on this issue in forums including in SCO, BRICS and RIC. They are currently deliberating on joint projects for peace in Afghanistan. The India-Russia partnership can also provide necessary bulwark to counter menaces of drug trafficking and terrorism in that region.¹⁰ It was Russia and India (along with Iran) who played a key role in tacitly backing the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan which swept away the Taliban from Kabul after the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in the aftermath of 9/11. In case the Taliban were to take over the reins of power in Afghanistan once again; Russia, India and Iran would need to revive their cooperation to back up a grouping in Afghanistan which could serve as an antidote. The stability of Afghanistan is also critical to the safety and security of the planned TAPI pipeline which will bring natural gas from Turkmenistan to India and is scheduled to be operational by 2017.¹¹

India-Russia Cooperation

The commonality of Russia and India's geopolitical interests has paved the way for the relationship to become strong and stable. There are a number of factors common to both India and Russia to cooperate jointly in creating stable Central Asia. On the issue of religious extremism and terrorism, India and Russia share many commonalities: the source of tension, funding, training, drug trafficking, smuggling of arms and weapon proliferation. India by working closely with Russia can check these security threats and guarantee stability that will underpin economic development and safeguard democratization. Four out of five Central Asian States, as part of both CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) and SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) could become strong partners in looking into India's concerns regarding international terrorist activities in its neighbourhood. India-Russia-Tajikistan Military and Security Cooperation, which began in the fight against the Taliban in the 1990s, continues at a new level – joint use of the facility in Ainy in Tajikistan. This facility, especially in collaboration with Russia and Tajikistan, would not only help India in its reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan but also in growing interest in Central Asian energy accompanied by increasing involvement in the region's security.¹²

India is Russia's only partner with which it has no clash of interests in Central Asia. Russia wants India to become a big player in Central Asia as a balancing factor to the growing American and Chinese presence in the region. The presence of India in Tajikistan is not contested by Russia, indicating that Russia does not view India's involvement in the region as a threat to its own interests. Russia has been lobbying for India's admission to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and for close Cooperation on regional security in the Moscow-Delhi-Beijing triangle.¹³

India can get benefit from the growing Russian influence in the Central Asia because Russia remains the most important strategic partner for India. Any other reconfiguration

in the region's geopolitics could adversely affect India's interest. Pakistan and China are not eager to see India in the Central Asian region, but Russia, Iran and Afghanistan remain accommodating friends. Therefore, India should try to increase its connectivity to Central Asia through these countries as all three have land borders with CARs. India should try to counterbalance Pakistan in the region while cooperating with US and Russia.¹⁴ It is already in process of forging its ties both at bilateral and multilateral level with CARs, Russia, Iran Afghanistan and US.

Russia has been developing cooperation with India in energy sector. This cooperation could be extended to the energy sector in Central Asia, including hydropower sector. India has become a major investor in the transitional US-Russian-Japanese energy project in Sakhalin. Russian increasing influence in Central Asia and its dominant control of the pipeline routes implies that only a well-crafted energy partnership will enable India to access these oil and gas reserves to tide over her mounting energy requirements. India and Russia are developing a new transit route through Iran to Novorossiysk for transport of goods between India, Russia and Central Asia. The agreement for Creation and Development of the 'International North South Transport Corridor' (INSTC) officially signed on 12th September 2002 by Russia, Iran and India. This corridor will facilitate easier movement of goods along the corridor connecting India through the sea to Russia; and to Europe. It would reduce transportation time of India goods. Due to decrease in transportation and transit tariffs through INSTC service, Indian goods could become more competitive.¹⁵

Conclusion

Both India and Russia have emerged major players in the Central Asian geopolitical order. The emergence of Central Asian states created new geopolitical, strategic and economic imperatives for both India and Russia to reshape their policies towards the region. After September 11, 2001 despite international competitions with United States as a key actor, Russia is still the preeminent actor in the changing geopolitical order of Central Asia. Currently both India and Russia have managed to occupy an extremely important place within the trade, economic and security structure of Central Asia. Undoubtedly the deepening US Political, Economic and Military engagements across the region have expanded the US involvement there. Other European countries like France, Germany and Britain are also actively enhancing their relations with the Central Asian States. As a result, both Delhi and Moscow are very much concerned about the impact of the intensification; particularly of US role in the region's security, energy and political fields. Given the changing contours of the strategic environment, both Russia and India must not only sustain their current diplomatic thrust in the region, but reinvigorate it to a far higher level. The geopolitical stability in Central Asia has not only a direct impact on India-Russia's economic interests in the region, but also has greater implications on the ongoing separatist movements in Jammu and Kashmir, Chechnya and Dagestan. At the same time, the two powers' desire for a politically stable Central Asia at their borders, especially after NATO's Afghan pullout; is shared, as is their search for trade outlets in their neighbourhoods. By establishing a more meaningful presence in Central Asia, India will be better positioned for the future distribution of energy resources. Therefore, it is

high time that India, Russia and Central Asia states should act collectively to maintain regional stability which has wider ramifications over regional economic development.

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