



Indo-Russian Convergences and Divergences in the Great Central Asia

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Abstract

The direct connections between India and Central Asia were limited during the Soviet period. In the context of the special Indo-Soviet Friendship, New Delhi was practically present in the daily life of Central Asia through cinema, television, music, and cultural exchanges.ⁱ In the years following the Soviet Union, India's presence in the region became symbolic. However, things began to change from the late 1990s when the great powers, namely the United States. The US and China have attempted to enter the region in various ways which have resulted in the birth of the 'New Great Game'. The United States competes for energy and security interests in a politically unstable region. Although not part of this huge rivalry in the game, India has become a great interest in Central Asia, mainly due to its enormous and constantly increasing energy needs.

Key Words: *Taliban, ISIS, EEU, SCO, INSTC, AFGHANISTAN.*

Introduction

Since 2001, it can be seen that Central Asia has been a high priority area for India. India's priority in the region is based on some key issues, challenges, and benefits. India is a growing power that aspires to global acceptance. In South Asia, India faces many challenges that make it difficult to expand its relations with Central Asia. Extremism, Islamic fundamentalism, and terrorism, instability in Afghanistan, the uncertain nature of India-Pakistan relations, China's increased engagement in the region are some of the significant challenges India faces. Although India has problems such as border issues with China, both countries maintain good relations through bilateral talks and economic relations.

Frederick Starr a political scientist conceived the region as a 'Great Central Asia' (GCA) so that it could group with a larger area which includes Afghanistan, Xinjiang, Pakistan, northern Iran, Mongolia, etc. To integrate this region, Starr advanced the idea of the 'Silk Road' strategy with the basic implication that if these areas were integrated into the Western

initiative, this would expose the possible emergence of Russia, China, and Iran as influential actors in the Eurasian Space.ⁱⁱ

Russia concedes Central Asia as a special area of its interests and has historical, economic, strategic, and geopolitical interests in the region. India, on the other hand, has considered Central Asia as part of its extended/strategic neighborhood. India's attempts are discouraged due to the lack of direct transport connectivity with Central Asia. Some changes have also emerged in the understanding between India and Russia about Central Asia, where the above-mentioned factors may have played a role. Russia's objection to India's request to operate Ayni airbase was directed towards its rebellion while India was getting closer to the United States. China and Pakistan have serious protests over India's military presence in Tajikistan because China shares a border with Tajikistan and Pakistan is separated by territory with only a 14km stretch of the Wakhan corridor in Afghanistan. Having disputes with China and Pakistan and having achieved meaningful military cooperation with Tajikistan is pivotal to India's geopolitical strategy in the region, however, it heavily depends on India's maintaining close relations with Russia. Indian interest in the renovation of the Ayni base has so far not materialized. Tajikistan ruled out India basing its military in Ayniⁱⁱⁱ. However, looking at the state of events that have occurred in Afghanistan in recent times, India may have the opportunity to use this airbase for military deployment.

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However, regional geopolitics has changed rapidly as relations between India and the United States have followed a high trajectory, while Russia's relations have greatly improved with China and Pakistan. Russia has been more concerned about the sensitivity of China and Pakistan, as Ayni airbase is very close to its borders, giving India a psychological edge. Therefore, there is no longer any talk of India getting the exclusive leasing rights for the airbase. India and Tajikistan are discussing how the airbase can be jointly put to best use and there may be a possibility that India and Russia will jointly use it in the future.^{iv} Due to the complex contemporary geopolitics in the region, Russia is unlikely to allow the exclusive military presence of any Central Asian country. The division stationed at three locations; near Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa, and Kulob (near the Afghan border). According to a 2012 bilateral government agreement signed between Russia and Tajikistan, Russia's troops would persist at the base until 2042.^v

There is an element of competition in Russia-China relations in Central Asia as Russia continues to support India's energy and trade projects in the region, which allows it to balance China. In its Central Asian policy, India aspires to play an independent role, while Russia has sought to rejuvenate its ties with the region. It may appear that there is a contradiction in the policies of India and Russia towards Central Asia, but it is not so. India's policy is developing and any attempt to increase its engagement with the region will have to factor in the interest of Russia. However, India would like to be recognized as a player in its own right and not as a junior partner. In the changing geopolitical matrix of Eurasia, the approaches of India and Russia have been different. Both countries have adapted to the changing dynamics in accordance with their respective national interests. Indeed, geopolitical stability and security considerations in the region have not changed. These different perspectives offer the opportunity to understand the other's point of view and to chalk out a mutually beneficial strategy.^{vi}

As things currently stand military cooperation between Russia and Pakistan going to widen. Pakistanis are optimistic that the volume of defense trade between Russia and Pakistan will increase, as they have pointed out mutual economic benefits for both sides. China plays the role of middleman in Pakistan's relations with Russia for the acquisition of military equipment, particularly heavy aircraft engines. A Pakistani analyst writes that Pakistani markets, which still remain untapped for the Russian arms industry, can be used by Russia for economic gain. Similarly, by eliminating China as an intermediary, Pakistan can gain enormous economic benefits.^{vii}

The shifting phase of Pakistan-Russia relations does not pose any real challenge to India-Russia relations, nor does it indicate any major change in Russia's policy towards its old strategic partner, India. It is important to underline that India-Russia relations are time-tested and strategic as compared to those of Russia-Pakistan. Furthermore, the strong interdependence between India and Russia in the defense sector makes this relationship much more promising. However, these developments indicate a possible reduction of strategic options for India in this region, at least in the short term. Against this backdrop, some Russian experts argued that the Sochi Summit also clouded India's hopes of gaining a strategic foothold in Tajikistan. India, of course, will remain a close partner of Russia, but it will have to learn to live with the new Russian-Pakistani geniality, just as Russia has assimilated its development from India's intertwining with the United States. Russia has

always been very supportive of India's role in the Central Asian region and its full membership of the SCO Both are also part of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects India to the through land and sea routes with Central Asia, Iran, and Europe.^{viii}

The deteriorating of the Afghan situation and the realization that it must deal with Pakistan on its own merits, aside from the Indo-Pakistani link to help protect Afghanistan and Central Asia, and the opportunities provided by the erosion of the alliance between the United States and Pakistan are too important for Moscow to avoid. Therefore, Russia has now determined to deal with Pakistan independently and has recognized that relations will be on a bilateral presidential level as they are with India.^{ix}

While Russia and India see themselves as victims of jihadist terrorism, their perception of the threats is very different. New Delhi is actively involved in strengthening the hands of the Kabul regime, considering the Taliban as the main threat to regional peace. On the other hand, Moscow regards ISIS as a bigger threat than the Taliban. Moscow is even considering the notion of making the Taliban a partner against ISIS. Here, the views of Russia and Pakistan converge, as the Taliban is viewed as part of the solution. Russia's deal with Pakistan and the Taliban is a counterproductive move as seen from the perspective of New Delhi's security interests. It also puts Pakistan back to the centre stage of the peace process in Afghanistan. But the irony is that Pakistan is more part of the problem than the solution. At the present, it is caught up trapped in its political, economic, and security problems. Pakistan's geopolitical tensions with the United States continue to multiply as it has not shown any inclination to curtail its ambitions to expand its influence in Afghanistan while countering the Indian presence there. Pakistan's civilian-led government has faced confronted growing tensions with the all-powerful army which has drastically limited the effectiveness of an already weakened government structure. Although the Pakistani military claims to focus on Islamic terrorists and guerrillas rather than India as the main security threat, the continuing hostility towards Afghanistan and India jeopardizes the significance of this so-called change. Russia's growing engagements with the Taliban and military cooperation with Pakistan have the potential to harm India's strategic interests in the region. That is why, in January 2017, Minister of State for External Affairs of India, M.J. Akbar hoped that Russia would not cause any damage to bilateral relations and strategic partnership

despite Moscow's recent proposals to Pakistan.^x Moscow's decision to side with the Islamabad and Taliban has fundamentally changed peace building efforts in Afghanistan.

New Delhi and Kabul, on the other hand, still consider the Taliban and their Pakistani backer as the main threats to peace and stability in Afghanistan. India is also opposed to the consolidation of the Taliban into the Afghanistan government as long as it does not renounce terrorism. For their part, Afghan analysts and lawmakers suggest that countries in the region, especially Pakistan, have never been honest in their fight against terrorism. Furthermore, they allege that the international community has never pressured Pakistan to remove terrorists from its territory.^{xi}

This major shift in Russian policy in Afghanistan has come in the wake of what has expressed concern about Afghanistan becoming a haven for Islamic State militants fleeing from Iraq and Syria. Speaking at the 'Heart of Asia' conference held in Amritsar on December 5, 2016, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, called the Islamic State as being more dangerous than the Taliban. On December 8, 2016, the Russian ambassador to Afghanistan declared that "our concern is that Daesh not only threatens Afghanistan but is also a powerful threat to Central Asia, but also a potent threat to Pakistan, China, Iran, India and also Russia. We have links with the Taliban to ensure the security of our political offices, consulates, and the security of Central Asia".^{xii}

The recent geopolitical changes have induced some differences in India-Russia relations at the regional level, as there has been a gradual rapprochement between Russia and Pakistan over the past decade. There has been an active diplomatic engagement between the two countries since Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov visited Islamabad in April 2007, the first by a Russian prime minister. The Russia-Pakistan relations have gained momentum since 2009 when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari met six times between 2008 and 2012.^{xiii}

President Zardari became the first Pakistani leader to visit Russia. Pakistan's relations with the United States were on decline due to the fiasco of the assassination of Bin Laden and Pakistan was being cornered in international affairs. The timing of Zardari's visit to Moscow hinted towards some of the development of a Russia-China partnership towards Pakistan. There are some small differences between India and Russia on how to deal with terrorism emanating from Pakistan. So far, India has been trying to isolate Pakistan on the

issue of terrorism and Russia had already supported India in this effort. However, Russia now wants to involve Pakistan and fight terrorism with its help.^{xiv}

Russia does not want to see the Taliban to control Afghanistan. However, Moscow at the same time recognizes the territorial conquests of the Taliban and prefers the group to ISIS. Indeed, an influential part of Russian policymakers has come to see the Taliban as a useful partner in their fight against ISIS. President Putin has long worried about the radical jihadists of the former Soviet Republics who going to fight for ISIS in Syria or elsewhere. Now, the danger of ISIS militants returning to the post-Soviet states of Russia and Central Asia has come to haunt Moscow. With their movement facilitated by a wide ethnic and linguistic network, Russian-speaking Islamist fighters can travel with relative ease across geographically contiguous terrain. Although fewer than 1,000 of the approximately 8,500 Russian-speaking Salafist jihadist fighters have returned to Russia or Central Asian states, they do so as force multipliers as they have acquired frightening skills on the battlefields.^{xv} For these reasons, Russia sees ISIS as a particular threat in a way that the Taliban is not.

Turkmenistan intends to develop its own gas fields independently. But TAPI and India-Pakistan-Iran (IPI) are also part of a larger global power game. So far, the US has opposed the IPI and instead supported the TAPI pipeline, which Russia has opposed. The US still has its eyes on the TAPI project and wants US companies like Chevron and Exxon to get the contract. Chevron also has an office in Ashgabat. Russia had previously opposed TAPI because it wanted Turkmen gas supplies to its domestic market and be exported to Ukraine via the Russian pipeline. However, the geopolitical and corporate games around the pipeline projects changed after the Ukrainian crisis and the resulting confrontation between Russia and the West.^{xvi}

Russia will be indispensable for India's success in Central Asia. Whatever means India adopts in Central Asia will be progressively important if Russia is taken into consideration. The two nations have mostly similar interests in Central Asia. Today there is an ideal opportunity for joint financing companies. India can re-establish a portion of its lost ties through new territorial discussions similar to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). It can step up its exchange, financial, and business ties with Central Asia through joint efforts.

India is moving forward to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union. The visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Russia and the

Central Asian states could accelerate the feasibility of the studies going underway to assess whether or not India should sign the Free Trade Treaty with the EEU. Based on the study conducted, there is a possibility that India is considering to sign a pact with EEU. The joint study group was initiated by the government to study the benefits of linking trade and investment with the Central Asian States. There is viability that agreement will be on the card soon. Russia had extended the invitation to join the EEU and, to this object, a joint declaration was signed for the establishment of a joint study group between India and the EEU, during Minister of Commerce and Industry, Nirmala Sitharaman's visit to Russia on June 03, 2017. India wants to improve its trade with all trade blocs. It doesn't want to limit its trade too limited areas. India is moving towards strengthening its relations with the Central Asian States, which have huge oil and gas reserves and are an important link with Afghanistan. While considering the possibility of signing a Free Trade Agreement with the EEU, India would also have the opportunity to keep check terrorist activities in the region. It would give India the opportunity to strengthen its trade links with the region and would also reflect growing regional growth with the Asian continent.^{xvii}

Conclusion

In the current scenario, Russia may be moving closer to China after Western sanctions, but Moscow's action may also have an opportunistic aspect. Moscow will never be able to ignore India for the simple fact that there is every possibility that Russia and China will clash in Central Asia in the future.

Although Russia has reluctantly accepted the inevitability of Central Asia's continued integration with China's distribution arteries for the delivery of oil and gas, it has taken great care to ward off any Central Asian gas competition with its sales in Europe, especially as regards the proposed Nabucco pipeline project, which planned to bypass Russia as an alternative route to bring natural gas from the Caspian to Europe. However, the expansion of trade and the consequent economic reorientation of post-Soviet Central Asia towards China is nevertheless a source of concern, not least because it has allowed Beijing to drive a hard negotiation with Moscow over its gas sales. Russia is now a competitor in economic relations with Central Asia rather than a neo-imperial conqueror.^{xviii}

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