

India's Evolving Responses to New Challenges in Central Asia – The Road Less Travelled

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India was historically connected to Central Asia through the Silk Route but with the rise of maritime trade routes, sophisticated naval technologies and geopolitical shifts, there was a decline in its use for purposes of trade and the larger exchange of ideas and culture that characterised early medieval history for a long period of time.

The preference of European colonisers to use sea routes for direct access to Asia through their own ports and the imposition of restrictions and taxes by the Ottoman and Safavid empires rendered the overland routes as a less viable option. As their pivotal role in intercontinental trade diminished, the economies of Central Asian states, which had thrived on the caravan trade, began to decline, affecting the overall infrastructure and security of the Silk Road. The disconnect was further exacerbated due to the separation of Afghanistan and Pakistan from mainland India leading to a physical discontinuity that remains a challenge yet to be overcome.

From looking to connecting

After the disintegration of the USSR, India grappled with a renewed responsibility to connect with the states which had been a part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, on an individual level. This proved to be far more challenging given the sudden power vacuum in the region that later sucked in players like Russia, USA, and China to mark their own presence militarily, politically, and economically.

India engaged in the 'Look North Policy', a far less popular discourse in Indian foreign policy than the 'Look East / Act East policy' came to characterise. This was followed up by the Connect Central Asia initiative in 2012 with high-level visits, bilateral agreements, and joint projects. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to all five Central Asian republics in 2015 marked a symbolic step in reinforcing India's commitment to the region and displaying a reenergised vigour to exploit an under-tapped opportunity.

Recent Challenges

Political Instability

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2021 marked the end of America's longest war and led to significant shifts in the geopolitical and security landscape of Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region. It made the neighbouring CARs (Central Asian Republics) wary of potential spillover effects. Although they have followed different approaches to the Afghan conflict, there has been unanimity among them over the threats posed by Islamist

extremism of Taliban, terrorism, and drug trafficking.¹ They are strengthening their borders and seeking to engage diplomatically to ensure their security interests are protected.

Central Asia is also marred by several instances of internal conflicts and ethnic tensions. In 2022 Kazakhstan witnessed a series of mass protests and civil unrest owing to a sudden increase in the price of LPG, reflecting the growing resentment with the ruling regime. An emergency was declared by its President who requested the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organisation), a military alliance of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan to intervene by deploying troops for peace-keeping purposes. The same year saw protests in Tajikistan in the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan (GBAO) concerning clashes between the Pamiri ethnic minority and the Tajik government. Additionally, there have been border disputes between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the Ferghana Valley underlying the simmering social and economic problems. These issues have further destabilised the region fostering corruption, crime, and terrorism.

Military Confrontations

The war in Ukraine, beginning in early 2022, has triggered a critical security dilemma for the CARs. Since the invasion, Central Asia's leaders have tried to strike a balance. None of them have recognized the territories annexed from Ukraine as part of Russia, but nor have they publicly criticized Putin or condemned the war. They have all agreed to comply with sanctions yet have made no real efforts to stop Russia from using their territory to circumvent the restrictions.² India, similarly, echoing its nonaligned nature, has not outrightly undermined the Ukrainian cause but has been a smart player in the world economy by buying cheap Russian oil and resupplying it to the rest of the world.

The recent developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, located within the borders of Azerbaijan but predominantly populated by ethnic Armenians has spurred further instability in the South Caucasus. A major escalation occurred in 2020, resulting in a six-week war that ended with a ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia. Azerbaijan, a Muslim-dominated country receives support from Turkey and Pakistan while Russia maintaining ties with both, is considered closer to Armenia, a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Despite the ceasefire agreement, the status of Nagorno-Karabakh remains unresolved, with ongoing tensions and sporadic violence. India's stance on the conflict has been neutral and supportive of the OSCE Minsk Group's continued efforts for a peaceful resolution.

The Proverbial Pulao

¹ K. Warikoo, 2016, Central Asia and South Asia, India Quarterly, Vol. 72, No. 1, pp. 1-15, Sage Publications, Ltd. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48505479>

² Temur Umarov, (2023) Why Did Central Asia's Leaders Agree to Attend Moscow's Military Parade? <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89741>

Palau (Kazakh), Palow (Tajik), Palaw (Turkmen), Pilaf (Uzbek), Pulao (India) is a rice and meat dish common to both Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The Great Game has long ended but are there too many cooks spoiling the pulao? Russia, China, Turkey, US, Iran - there are several major powers invested in the region; no other region compares except perhaps the Indo Pacific. Harking back to the Mackinder-Mahan debate between the heartland and sea power, it would be a valuable hedge today to balance both terrestrial and naval prowess rather than prioritising one. Despite the deep inroads made by China in recent years and the continued influence of Russia, India can and must find a place to be an active player in the region.

There is a common phrase in Hindi and Urdu called '*khayali pulao*' which basically translates to 'castles in the air' but more literally means cooking a pulao of thoughts (a dish traditionally cooked for the royalty). Is the prominent role of India in Central Asia just wishful thinking of strategists or does it have any real substance?

Walking the Talk and the Rope

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for moving freight between India, Russia, Iran, Europe, and Central Asia, has weighted implications, particularly for India, in counterbalancing the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative and enhancing its geopolitical leverage in the region. However, it is still under development with its success depending on infrastructural upgrades, political cooperation among the member states, and the resolution of logistical challenges. A key component of the INSTC, the Chabahar Port, located on the coast of Gulf of Oman, provides India with a vital link to the Central Asian countries bypassing Pakistan. This access is crucial for India's strategic interests, trade expansion, and regional connectivity goals.

The country hosted the 2023 virtual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and in the New Delhi declaration outlined the need to counter the challenges of terrorism and extremism along with promoting cooperation in areas such as the digital economy, high technology, and innovation. With the expansion of BRICS to BRICS+ and the inclusion of Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE in the group, India finds itself in a unique club of groupings (G20, QUAD, EAS) which gives it a wider wherewithal to influence the international community on issues of regional and global security.

Conclusion

While India's engagement with Central Asia is growing, it remains lukewarm, calling for more concrete agreements towards cooperation. This involves enhancing connectivity, leveraging common cultural and historical bonds, and addressing mutual security concerns.

The geographical barriers notwithstanding, India has steadily worked to reinvigorate its ties with the region through diplomatic outreach, economic partnerships, and strategic collaborations. These efforts are not just about securing energy resources or countering rival

influences but are also aimed at establishing a stable and prosperous Eurasian space where shared challenges are addressed collectively.

References

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