

Strategic Determinants of Indian Diplomacy With respect To Central Asia and Impact thereof on India's Energy Logistics

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ABSTRACT: Amidst an observed absence of required diplomatic thinking in respect of Central Asia, the relationship between the two sides has witnessed a series of interactions at various diplomatic and ministerial levels in the recent past. All the interactions between India and Central Asia during last 4-5 years or so have witnessed active deliberations upon the issues of bilateral significance. A demonstrated shift in the focus was noticed in the relations between the two sides in the past two-three years especially considering the need for mutually beneficial ties. The diplomatic focus can be seen to have recently shifted from bilateralism to multilateralism widening the scope for India and Central Asian relations. The major issues of security of the logistics supply lines along the designated routes consequent upon a forward looking diplomacy with special emphasis upon the concern of combating the international terrorism highlighting the role of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in respect of same, professionally & proactively addressing the most basic issue of medical services in the CARs by India, favourable diplomatic engagements to facilitate faster development of infrastructure at Chabahar Port region with active Indian initiative, enhanced participation by Indian Private & Public sectors in creation of facilities for smooth energy logistics and most importantly-the strategic need to establish a fine balance between the emerging China and belligerent Pakistan's influences in Central Asia have assumed precedence over all other significant aspects of Indian diplomatic approach towards Central Asia in the recent past. Considering the inevitable need to objectively address the strategic interests of India, it is crucial to empower the Indian diplomatic cadres and re-organise the same with a fine balance between regular career diplomats and representatives from various relevant sectors of economy & culture, so as to equip them to handle the Indo-Central Asian relationship more effectively and take it to the new heights. The guiding factor is to ensure that the Indian diplomatic thought process remains re-structured and aligned with balanced participation of domain specific expertise and adopts a multipronged, utterly professional and comprehensive approach of the Indian diplomacy for strengthening the Indo-Central Asian ties.

Key words: Strategic, bilateralism, multilateralism, security, terrorism, peace, multipronged, epidemic, synergy, logistics, empowerment, cadres

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Central Asian relationship witnessed a series of visits to India by the Uzbek president Islam Karimov in the past in 1991, 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2011, former President of India Smt Pratibha Patil to Tajikistan as a chief guest on its National Day from 06-08 September 2009 which was the first ever visit by an Indian President to Central Asia.

This apart, the informal working group on energy security consisting of Indian MEA officials, various connected ministries and representatives of PSUs, in its meeting on 20 February 2013 deliberated upon diverse issues concerning energy security besides various areas and regions that needed to be addressed in order to ensure greater attention towards ensuring energy security.

After coming to power in June 2014, the present NDA government proactively started focusing towards nurturing a meaningful relationship with Central Asian republics. Infact, Mr Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to have ever paid a hectic and productive visit to all the five land locked and resource rich republics of Central Asia at a stretch with effect from 13 July 2015. During these visits the main focus was on developing bilateral ties based on various civilizational, historic and cultural factors consequent upon a series of interactions at various governmental levels. The visit of 2015 was primarily guided by the Indian diplomatic ambition for alignment with the superpower USA, and at the sametime to effectively address the Taliban concerns which were actually hindering India's access to Central Asian republics through Afghanistan.

This was followed by the Indian PM's visit to Tajikistan from 12-13 July 2015 wherein various significant issues i.e. sharing of information, ongoing defence cooperation, trade & economic ties between the two nations, regular air connectivity between the two nations on a regular basis and enhanced cooperation in health sector were deliberated upon.

Besides Ashgabat Agreement, the multimodal Transportation agreement signed on 25 April 2011, between the governments of Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Iran-Pakistan-India and Oman for creating an international transport and transit corridor which was another significant milestone in the relationship of India with CARs was marked by an indication by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in its session in Tashkent on 23-24 June 2016 towards hints of India and Pakistan becoming its new members. Though, despite China constantly creating obstacles to hinder India's membership to SCO, India through a forward looking and aggressive diplomacy, finally succeeded in joining the SCO as a fulltime member on 09 June 2017. This apart, the concurrent inauguration of the first phase of the Shahid Beheshti terminal at Chabahar port on 03 December 2017 with a cost of \$85 million was expected to synchronise with India's efforts towards implementation of the International North South Trade Corridor (INSTC). Thereafter, between 02-05 August 2018, the Indian Foreign Minister visited Kazakhstan followed by Kyrgyzstan & Uzbekistan and held several rounds of meetings with her counterparts on various issues involving strategic partnerships and multifaceted bilateral relations.

Recently Indian External Affairs Minister Smt Sushma Swaraj once again visited Samarkand as a special invitee to co-chair the Foreign Minister level dialogue held on 12-13 January 2019, wherein the main focus was on enhancing the Indian economic footprint in business & development sector throughout the Central Asian region. This was expected to take the strategic partnership to new levels. This apart, Turkmenistan, a depository State of Ashgabat Agreement, on 07 April 2019 confirmed about the unanimous willingness of all the four founding members i.e. Iran, Oman and Uzbekistan to accession of India to the Ashgabat agreement. In short, we find that the efforts of the Indian leadership towards fostering more meaningful ties with CARs have been consistently progressing particularly since 2014.

Diplomatic and Strategic considerations in Indo-Central Asian Ties

There are a few issues that have a distinct bearing on the Indo-CAR ties and need to be analysed and effectively addressed in order to ensure success of the Indian & international diplomatic efforts in Central Asia. Some of the following issues have relevance from the angle not only of energy security but also by virtue of being foundations of mutual relations between the nations of Eurasia with respect to: -

(a) Security Environment. The security around the Eurasian continent assumes greater significance especially with the view to ensure physical security of the proposed transnational oil/gas pipeline infrastructure all along the transit routes, considering the traditionally hostile Indo-Pak relations and the genuine apprehension of vulnerability thereof. As the TAPI pipeline had been conceived during the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Taliban dispensation in December 2016 announced their commitment to protect the national infrastructure projects like CASA-1000 and TAPI.

But the authenticity of any such assurance needs to have a firm backing by a legitimately installed credible government which was definitely not the case in favour of Taliban. The past record of Pakistan with respect to its constant support to international terrorism falls short of boosting the confidence of the world community in Pakistan's professed sincerity to the cause. Considering this, the four stakeholders i.e. Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India had a need to promote the economic connectivity and regional ties. The absence of such an assurance potentially hindered the prospects of inward investments into the project and led to avoidable delays therein. This was contrary to the belief of the project being slated to act as a Confidence Building Measure to motivate more future projects for economic stabilisation in Afghanistan and Central Asian region. Therefore, the issue needed to be dealt with in the most consensual and far sighted manner by all the stakeholders, especially India which had a long history of perpetually strained relations with its western neighbour.

This was not the question only of the physical security of the pipeline, but also concerning existence of a comprehensively institutionalised framework to tackle the security in its entirety all along the proposed logistical routes, and in turn addressing not only the internal security but also counter insurgency scenarios in the nations having stakes in the enterprise. It assumed importance as the threat perceptions had changed by now and became more sub conventional especially in the nations of South Asia and more importantly India.

The sub conventional national threats i.e. military operations short of full scale war include sabotage and subversion besides organised terrorist activities by Anti National Elements (ANE) to broadly discredit the government in power in the eyes of the masses. The public is pushed into a situation to believe that the government is unable to protect them in the event of terrorist activity. However, by virtue of a clear majority government and an aggressive statesmanship, the efforts made so far towards handling the sub conventional security threats have yielded satisfactory results in India.

The significance of the modernisation of the military also goes a long way in dealing effectively with the conventional as well as the sub conventional security threats. India is making aggressive strides in the direction of modernisation of its armed forces through rapid provisioning of the sophisticated weaponry and system support equipment in the past few years. The release of revised Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP)-2016 and addition of provisions to support “Strategic Partnership” and “Make in India” ideology, has tremendously enhanced the scope for involvement of Indian industries.

The emphasis upon Strategic Partnership with international industrial majors is expected to contribute not only to strengthening and equipping the Indian armed forces with more sophisticated and advanced weaponry, but will also help in attracting enhanced Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in the Indian defence manufacturing sector with increased percentage of the offsets.

With signing of new contracts for acquisition of military hardware with foreign countries, the potential of employment generation in the country as part of offsets is expected to address not only the issue of unemployment in the nation but also divert the youth of India to the productive ventures from falling prey to the anti national activities.

Above factors sufficiently boost our confidence that the economic development and mutual gains are inevitable preconditions for national security not only in respect of India but also for the nations that are involved in the transnational logistics of energy in some way or other.

(b) Role of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in the management of energy and tackling terrorism. SCO was formed on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai with an aim to promote political, security and economic alliances among the Eurasian nations, at the initiative of the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. India became a full member of the SCO in June 2017 though the process of acquiring the permanent membership had begun as back as 2015. Currently headquartered in Beijing (China) SCO has China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as permanent members. Broadly speaking the aim of SCO is to establish cooperation between members wrt:-

- Security-related concerns
- Resolving border issues
- Military cooperation
- Intelligence sharing
- Countering terrorism
- Countering American influence in Central Asia

The membership of SCO assumes significance for India so as to help India to combat terrorism as a regional geo-political heavyweight through economic alliances. The Indian Prime Minister in the SCO Summit on 24 June 2016 expressed concern about geo-political complexities and security challenges while at the sametime he hailed the vast opportunities existing for cooperation through interdependence. Apart from highlighting the importance of constant peace in Afghanistan for enhanced security in SCO region, he considered India’s participation in SCO as being helpful in building up the region.

The Indian External Affairs Minister Smt Sushma Swaraj also attended the meeting of the Council of Heads of Government at Dushanbe on 11-12 October 2018 wherein she expressed concern over terrorism as being the biggest common threat to the common goals of development and prosperity and hailed the successful completion of “SCO Peace Mission 2018”, besides expressing India’s keenness to co-host the next meeting of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact group in India.

However, an important issue that needs to be addressed is about the capability of SCO to effectively tackle terrorism in the Asian region and promote peace in Afghanistan besides its showcasing its capability to de-escalate the current Indo-Pak standoff. Infact fight against terrorism in all forms and drug trafficking had been taken up by SCO as the main issue, and Indian stand on this had been in favour of collective efforts by the SCO members. The Indian side expressed its keenness for an enhanced cooperation through MoU between the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure and the UN’s Office to achieve the goal of Counter-Terrorism. The Indian side also stressed upon a structured multilateral approach towards tackling the terrorism wherein, the role of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) was lauded as a useful mechanism for coordinated action against terrorism and drugs.

The significance of India’s resolve about strengthening the SCO to combat terrorism is that every SCO state has experienced terrorist attacks in one way or other. As an important activity, the RATS successfully carried out three-stage Counter Terrorist Command and Staff Training Maneuvers i.e. “Peaceful mission - 2012” on 8-14 June 2012 involving over 2000 military divisions of the land forces and over 500 units of military

equipment and aircraft from Kazakhstan, China & Kyrgyz Republic, Russia and Tajikistan under observance by the President of Tajikistan, Defense Ministers and delegations representing Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan.

Guided by this therefore, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (RATS SCO) signed a MoU on 25 March 2019. This was aimed at enhancing the strategic cooperation between the two parties, which provides for enhanced sharing of information on counter-terrorism besides participation of RATS SCO in the Counter-Terrorism Committee's assessment visits to Central Asian countries in supporting their counter-terrorist crusade and for discussing issues related to border security.

The 24 April 2018 meeting of SCO member nations was attended by the Indian Defence Minister Mrs Nirmala Sitaraman who stressed upon the need for an enhanced cooperation to control organised terrorist activities considering the international terrorism as the most serious threat to the international peace, that threatens to derail the development apart from creating sustained instability.

Thereafter Exercise 'Peace Mission' Mission 2018 was conducted 24 August 2018 onwards at Chebarkul in Russia with military contingents from all the eight SCO member nations participating. In this the Russian Army participated with 1700 personnel followed by China with 700 & India with 200 personnel participating.

However notwithstanding this, there is a definite scope for SCO to control the terrorism in the region, by way of controlling the funding of terrorist activities. However, the SCO has not been able to deliver a blow on this despite the funds being the most potent weapon against terrorism.

In today's changed scenario where India holds a position of influence, there are positive prospects for India to control the regional business activity that would go a long way in controlling the financing and indirectly controlling the funding of undesirable activities by the nations that are averse to peace and tranquility in the region.

(c) **Addressing Issues Related to Medical Services.** It is important to appreciate the significance of the medical services in the Central Asian region, as the CARs in general and our strong ally Afghanistan does not possess adequate medical services that are a mandatory requirement for touching the pulse of humanity. The CARs as a whole lack even the most basic public health facilities. The states of Central Asia in general are affected with chronic and infectious diseases. The period of 2010-15, witnessed an increase @ 57% in the cases reported for HIV and AIDS in the Central Asian states and East Europe. Not only is there a lack of awareness but also of the dedicated infrastructure supported resolve to tackle the diseases. As a result of this, the HIV continues to grow in these regions in face of inaccessibility to medical services.

The Russian Federation topped the list with the largest HIV epidemic and its millionth case of HIV in 2016 closely followed by Ukraine being the second-largest HIV epidemic prone state in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Apart from this, the World Mortality Report brought out by UN for the year 2017 shows the figures in respect of deaths per 1000 and life expectancy including the child mortality as under:-

Table 5.2 : Figures of death rates and life expectancy in CARs in 2017				
States of Central Asia	Crude death rate	Life expectancy at birth (in years) for both sexes	Infant mortality deaths per 1000 lives	Under five mortality deaths per 1000 lives
Kazakhstan	8.8	69.7	12	18
Kyrgyzstan	6.3	70.8	18	23
Tajikistan	5.2	70.9	36	49
Turkmenistan	7.1	67.7	45	56
Uzbekistan	5.1	71.2	29	36
Total	32.5	347.3	140	182
Average	6.5	69.46	28	36.4

Source: World Mortality Report 2017 brought out by UN, Page 13

The above figures are self explanatory and highlight an undeniable need for addressing the issue of health services in CARs on the highest priority. The death rate has been rising in CARs mainly on account of lack of adequate medical facilities, fatal diseases and epidemics. There is an undisputed requirement of not only the child care, pre & post natal care but also the elderly care through availability of better health services in the CARs.

It can be construed that apart from providing the institutionally supported basic medical facilities, India can contribute to the CARs also through the Indian corporate sector taking it up as a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The scope of voluntary state insurance set up in CARs can be enhanced by active support from Indian health services sector with possibly best of the Indian hospitals entering into the health services sectors in CARs with their expertise of non-interventional surgical techniques.

Strategic Determinants of Pipeline Logistics

There are a number of strategic considerations that directly influence the energy supply, regardless of the robustness that the logistics support infrastructure may have. These factors directly depend upon favourable diplomatic engagements by the national government with the governments of respective nations that have direct as well as indirect stakes in the complete enterprise. Some of the broad factors that affect the energy logistics and need to be addressed on priority are summarised as under:-

- **Security Aspects Related to the Pipeline.** This assumes extremely significant proportions especially in today's era of cross border terrorism and organised crime in most of the South Asian nations and beyond. No project can succeed unless backed with a guaranty of security for the investments by the stakeholders. Despite the Taliban assurance to secure the TAPI pipeline because of the conceptualization thereof by the then Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the surety of its security needs to be guaranteed by a legitimately installed government as that alone would encourage the nations to invest in the project apart from sharing the necessary technological support for its development, maintenance and operations.
- **Favourable Diplomatic Engagements.** The favourable diplomatic engagement by government of India would go a long way in attracting the inward investments and the required transfer of technology for the highly technology and capital intensive project of development at Chabahar Port. As it stands, a technologically strong nation like Japan has recently taken initiative for investing into development of facilities at Chabahar Port but with a somewhat cautious approach. This cannot be achieved without a favourable diplomatic climate created in the region by India. The Indian diplomacy needs to boldly focus also on the likely takeaways of mutual benefits for all the stakeholders.
- **International Synergy.** International synergy and globalization are the keys to success of any development initiative. While it would help India in utilizing the inherent core competencies of various nations, it would also accrue the competitive advantages by leading to a healthy but fierce competition among the participating nations which ultimately would do well for India in the long run. It is an extremely significant condition which accounts for successful creation of a robust logistics infrastructure based on Transfer of technology (ToT) from the nations having the techno-commercial capability.
- **Need for Enhanced Participation by Indian Private and Public Sectors.** The contribution of main actors i.e. ONGC (V), Gas Authority of India Ltd (GAIL), India Ports Global and Indian Railway Construction Company Limited (IRCON) which are already involved in the creation of logistics infrastructure around Chabahar Port region is important. Other Indian major Indian Public sector players i.e. Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) for laying, maintaining and operating the communication lines, State Bank of India (SBI) to meet investments and banking requirements, Container Corporation of India (CONCOR) to facilitate smooth transportation logistics, National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) to undertake construction of road network, Air India to provide Air logistics services and the Indian Hospitality Industry especially major hotel groups like ITC, Taj etc also should be sensitised and encouraged to make in-roads in the CARs and extend their professional hospitality services. This would directly lead to the development of an all encompassing support services network around the entire supply chain besides creating greater employment opportunities and enhancing the earnings of these Public Sector Enterprises manifold.
- **Strategic Need to tackle China and Belligerent Pakistan.** While China is lately playing an active role in Central Asia, it is also seen assisting Pakistan in the development of infrastructure at Gwadar Port. With China's active support, Pakistan is emerging as an effective entity in the politics of energy security. Owing to the history of traditionally strained relations, India has reasons to consider protecting its national interests in Central Asia by neutralising Pakistan's rising support in Islamic world and eventually containing the resurgence thereof as a possible threat in the region through creation of challenging situations in Indian enterprise concerning energy logistics. However, despite a weakening economy, Pakistan under the current leadership can be seen showing interest towards development of better and constructive ties with Central Asia as well as the powers involved therein. The new government of Pakistan has expressed keenness to constructively participate in the international economic activity.
- **Focus on promoting diplomatic studies and empowering the diplomatic cadres.** Recently the BJP has launched its Election Manifesto for 2019 General Elections wherein great emphasis has been laid on creation of a University of Diplomatic Studies and Foreign Policy. This indicates the enhanced focus of the present government towards diplomacy and its academic study besides promoting research on foreign

policy and geo-political issues with reference to India. This is expected also to facilitate the diplomatic capability build-up to promote India's overseas interests besides enhancing the strength of Indian diplomatic cadres to keep pace with increasing Indian engagements and internationally promoting a tall diplomatic stature for India. This is also expected to facilitate participation of career diplomats in promoting Indian strategic interests.

- **Strategic Need to re-structure and strengthen the Diplomatic Cadres in Government of India to deal with Central Asian affairs.** The empowerment and outreach of diplomatic cadres is a manifest priority of the present Indian government. On these lines, the Energy Security Division (ESD) has been dealing with the issues concerning Central Asia under the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) with a Joint Secretary level officer. But while the government can be seen showing an unprecedented attention towards Indo-Central Asian ties, recently it was also found that the ESD under MEA was trimmed based on certain functional requirements and merged with its Investment and Technology Promotion (ITP) Division under a new banner as ITP & ES Division. While this tends to curtail the scope of the ESD, the Minister of State External Affairs, General (Dr) VK Singh (Retired) while replying to a question in Lok Sabha, on 27 April 2016 stated that the energy sector is recognised "as an important and growing concern for the nation" and the re-designated ITP&ES Division serves as a nodal point for energy security related matters in MEA. This division is supposed to maintain close liaison with other line ministries of Government of India (GoI) & Niti Ayog besides supporting the external diplomatic engagements of India with respect to acquisition of energy assets across the Indian boundaries and fostering strategic partnerships with Central Asia.

There is a definite requirement to have an enlarged and dedicated ESD as an independent entity with a dedicated Additional Secretary Level Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer with sufficient experience and preferably with a background of having served in Central Asian Missions in the recent past. This apart, the broad composition of the restructured ESD on following lines may involve ex-cadre domain expertise of people belonging to diverse core competency areas as under:-

- (a) Career Diplomats of regular cadres of Indian Foreign Service (IFS)
- (b) Engineers of all relevant branches i.e. civil, mechanical, electrical & electronics
- (c) Oceanography experts from ONGC (V) / GAIL etc
- (d) Academicians & scholars of diplomacy
- (e) Foreign Policy thinkers
- (f) Medical practitioners and experts in the field
- (g) Military Officers especially with research aptitude and/or experience of UN Working and Capital Acquisitions
- (h) A mix cadre of officers of GoI officers with sufficient experience on Intelligence & international Policing from IPS/ Armed Forces/ CAPFs/ IB/NIA etc
- (i) Strategic Planners and Public Diplomacy practitioners from various NGOs & Interest Groups
- (j) Economists
- (k) People of repute from Indian culture and film industry
- (l) Industrialists of repute from Indian Public and Private Sectors
- (m) Representatives of Defence PSUs
- (n) Officers with sufficient experience from sub cadres of Indian Railway Service / IRCON /RITES etc
- (o) Officers from National Highway Authority of India
- (p) Officers from State Bank of India
- (q) Representatives from reputed groups in Indian Hospitality Industry
- (r) Any other expert from other domains as required

II. CONCLUSION

To summarise, we can see that despite an inconsistency in the approach towards Central Asia in the past, there has been significant progress and improvement in the relations between India and Central Asian republics in the past about 4-5 years or so. Considering the inevitability of the desired favourable and mutually beneficial relations, not only the Indian diplomatic cadres & thought process need to be re-structured with domain specific expertise for strengthening the Indo-Central Asian ties, but also the approach of the Indian diplomacy is required to be multipronged, multidirectional and comprehensive. Tackling the most basic issues comprehensively in the spheres of medical facilities, literacy & poverty etc in the CARs, should form the desired contours of the Indian foreign policy towards a better Indo-Central Asian strategic partnership.

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