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Relations between India and central Asia in globalized era

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Abstract

(Throughout India's history the Central Asia connection has been extremely important. Central Asia has been India's principal door to the outside world. It has deeply influenced India's history, culture and polity. Of all India's neighbouring regions, whether across land or maritime frontiers, it is with Central Asia that India has had the longest association, and the most extensive people to people ties. It is from Central Asia that the traditional threats to India's security have emanated. That is why the central Asian aspect of India's foreign policy needs greater attention than it has received so far.)

Keywords: Silk route, globalization, central Asia, fundamentalism, Chabahar sea-port

Introduction

Every one of us is touched by the process called globalization. But that process is poorly understood, and its impact is a topic of fierce debate. This paper seeks to clarify what we mean by globalization, and capture the extent to which it affects the future of the recently independent states of Central Asia and India. Relations between India and Central Asia are ancient and civilisational. India has been connected closely with Central Asia through the Silk Route from circa 3rd century BC till 15th century AD when the sea route from Europe to India was discovered ^[1]. This made the land journey unviable because it was more risky, longer in duration, more expensive and volumes of cargo that could be carried by sea -faring vessels were much larger than by caravans over the land route. Relations between India and Central Asia are ancient and civilisational. The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia not only for transportation of goods and wares like silk, textiles, spices etc but was an effective channel of exchange of thoughts, ideas, religion and philosophy. Buddhism travelled over this route from India to Central Asia and from there to West China in contemporary Xinjiang region ^[2].

Meaning of Globalization

The globalizing process knits people everywhere together, thereby producing worldwide interdependence and featuring the rapid and large-scale movement of persons, things, and ideas across sovereign borders. As such globalization may erode national autonomy, and dilute individual and collective identities. David Held and his colleagues define it as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual ^[3]." Globalization consists of the "multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-state. It defines a process through which events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals in quite distant parts of the globe ^[4]." In a globalized world, contacts among people and their ideas are growing as a result of advances in communication, travel, and commerce that produce mutual awareness

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¹ Friedman, Thomas L. (2005), *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

² Ibid, Pp. 34

³ Held, David and Et.al (2006), "The Globalization Debate," in Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew, eds. *Classic Readings and Contemporary Debates in International Relations*, 3rd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, pp. 547-570

⁴ Ibid, Pp. 554

among individuals.

Significance of Central Asia

All these countries are landlocked. Some of them are doubly landlocked. It is generally assumed that unless countries have access to warm-water seas, they will not be able to develop fruitful economic relations with the outside world. These countries hence felt that it will be difficult for them to prosper as they do not have access to seas. Most Central Asian States particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have converted the perceived disadvantage of being landlocked into an asset by constructing a web and network of roads, railways, highways, oil and gas pipelines criss-crossing from East to West and North to South to connect industrial and production hubs with consumer markets. Last few years have seen highways and railroads traversing from the East in China through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Europe, Russia, Iran and the Middle East. Similarly oil from Caspian Sea offshore facilities in Kazakhstan and gas from Turkmenistan is being shipped by pipelines to the western region of China.

All Central Asian States are rich and well-endowed potentially with mineral and hydroelectric resources. Kazakhstan has the world's second largest reserves and is the world's largest producer 23,000 tons of uranium in 2014^[5]. It has almost all minerals including iron-ore, coal, oil, gas, gold, lead, zinc, molybdenum etc. in commercially viable quantities. Uzbekistan has large reserves of gas, uranium and gold. Turkmenistan is endowed with world's fourth largest reserves of natural gas. Tajikistan is blessed with huge hydroelectric potential. Kyrgyzstan is rich in gold and hydroelectric power.

Track record of these countries on socio-economic development is mixed. Kazakhstan with its vast mineral resources has done better than others. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lag behind. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan remain closed and controlled societies. Uzbekistan is a potential leader in Central Asia, but has difficult relations with its neighbours, namely Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on water issues, and Kazakhstan to become the pre-eminent power in the region. Religious extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism pose challenges to these societies and to regional stability. Issues like water security, borders, environmental degradation and migration have become acute. Central Asian republics face serious threat from illegal drug trade emanating from Afghanistan. Traditionally, Central Asia has been an arena of "great game"^[6]. The modern version is being played out even today. Russia, China, US, Turkey, Iran, Europe, EU, Japan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan have substantial security and economic stakes in the region.

Relations with India

India has not been able to take advantage of its civilisational and historical ties with the region as adequate attention was not accorded to the relations. Another significant reason for the listless state of bilateral ties is that India does not share

"physical borders"^[7] with any of the Central Asian states. This is a huge bottleneck in promoting and expanding economic, commercial, energy, tourist links etc. with them. No direct route from India to these countries is available as Pakistan does not permit goods, cargo or people to move through its territory to Afghanistan, let alone to Central Asia beyond it. Trade hence has been conducted with Central Asia through China. This is both time consuming and expensive. Alternatively cargo has to be sent to by sea to Northern Europe from where it is transported by rail and road through Russia and other adjacent countries. India has registered significant progress in concluding a trilateral agreement for renovation of Chabahar port, development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and becoming a member of Ashgabat Agreement. India's membership of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as also of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)^[8] should go a considerable way in bridging this gap.

India uses the instrumentality of soft power and its ready acceptability in Central Asia to strengthen bilateral ties. There is immense interest in Indian classical dance, music, Bollywood films, yoga, literature etc.^[9] in these countries. India regularly and frequently arranges cultural events in these countries and also provides scholarships for study in India of these disciplines by young men and women of these countries. Several of them on their return to their native countries after receiving high quality training in eminent institutions like Kalakshetra in Chennai; Ganasa Natyalaya, New Delhi run by Guru Saroja Vaidyanathan; Asavari, New Delhi run by Guru Shovana Narayan and several others open their own institutions to teach and promote Indian culture and further reinforce ties with India^[10].

The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme is an effective instrument under which young professionals of these countries undergo training and human capacity development in areas ranging from banking, remote sensing and English speaking to agriculture, rural development and information technology in the premier institutions in India. This initiative exposes the youth of these countries to India's economic progress as well as its civilization and heritage. ITEC has significantly contributed to economic and social growth and development of beneficiary countries.

More energy and vigour needs to be imparted to the area of commercial and economic ties. One important reason for the uninspiring level of bilateral commercial ties is lack of authentic and up-to-date information on potential and possibilities available in this area. Chambers of Commerce as well as official government agencies need to be more active to bridge the "information deficit"^[11] between India and the region. Private sector needs to look at these countries with greater seriousness and focus. Our companies need to participate in trade fairs and organise single country trade fairs in major commercial and industrial centres of

⁵ Luong, Pauline Jones. (2002), Institutional Changes and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17-18.

⁶ Luong, Pauline Jones. (2002), Institutional Changes and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions, and Pacts Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 17-18.

⁷ Inayatullah, Naeem and Blaney, David L. (2004), International Relations and the Problem of Difference, New York: Routledge, pp. 191-210

⁸ Collins, Kathleen. (2006), Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 88

⁹ Rosenau, James N. (1990), Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 239.

¹⁰ Ibid, Pp. 113

¹¹ Smith, Graham, and Et.al, eds. (1998), Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

these countries. The Indian Trade Promotion Organization (ITPO) needs to pay more attention to this region. Several private agencies also organize sale-cum-exhibition shows with 100-200 private companies in different cities. These shows provide greater exposure for Indian companies and products amongst business and consumers of these countries.

Significant opportunities exist for Indian companies to undertake projects for building infrastructure related to rail network, roads, highways, power stations, transmission lines, renewable energy, nuclear power etc in these countries. Many projects are funded by international agencies and multilateral banks like ADB, EBRD, IBRD, IDB and others^[12]. It is expected that AIIB and NDB will also enter this market shortly. Indian companies with wide experience can make a significant contribution to development of this region.

Several areas present excellent opportunities for enhancing bilateral trade and economic cooperation. In addition to oil and gas, information technology, pharmaceuticals and textiles, areas like higher education, space, civil nuclear energy, small and medium business, power generation, food processing and agriculture present rich potential for deeper engagement.

Recent development

Several significant developments have taken place in last few years. The most momentous is the bold and decisive move by PM Modi to visit all five Central Asian States in July, 2015, combining his travel with his tour to Ufa, Russia for the BRICS (and SCO) Summit. His visit to these countries sent out a loud and clear message to the region and the world that India is determined to make up for lost time and expand its ties with these countries. He found a more than ready and keen leadership in all these countries to strengthen relations with India.

The second significant development is decision at SCO Summit in Russia in July, 2015 to induct India (and Pakistan) as new members of the organisation. India is expected to assume full membership of the organization at the forthcoming summit on June 23 and 24, 2016 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. This will provide an opportunity to India's Prime Minister to meet and interact with all his counterparts from Central Asia every year. An important reason for India's failure to fully realize potential of our partnership with this region is the infrequent contacts between leaders of these countries. Annual SCO summits will provide a forum to leaders of these countries to meet and discuss issues of bilateral and regional interest.

An added advantage is that Russian leadership will also be present at these conclaves. Because of the historical association of Central Asia and India with Soviet Union/Russia, several possibilities exist to promote cooperation in security, defence, energy and economy with Central Asian region in conjunction with Russia.

The third significant development, although confined to relations with only one Central Asian State and not the region as a whole, is commencement of construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas

pipeline on Dec 13, 2015^[13]. India was represented at the ceremony by Vice President Hamid Ansari while Presidents of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and Prime Minister of Pakistan represented their countries. This project has been under protracted discussions for last several years. It is significant that this project has been launched in about a year and a half of coming to power of NDA government. The 1800 km long pipeline is expected to be completed by end 2019^[14]. India is expected to receive about 13 bcm per annum once the pipeline is completed.

Additionally, a study was instituted at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June, 2015^[15] to examine the benefits and disadvantages of India's membership of EEU, current membership of which is Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The issue was initially broached by Kazakh President Nazarbayev during PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Astana in April, 2011 but no progress was evident^[16]. The NDA government has however given it a decisive push soon after coming to power.

Discussions on INSTC have been going on for the last more than 15 years, but scant progress was visible. The project has suddenly come to life with visit of PM Modi to Iran in April, 2016 and signing of trilateral Agreement with Presidents Rouhani of Iran and Ghani of Afghanistan for upgradation of Chabahar sea-port and construction of related rail network at a cost of USD 500 million for which allocation has been made by India^[17]. These initiatives which are closely linked can prove to be a game-changer in dramatically improving India's connectivity with Central Asia, Afghanistan and Russia.

Conclusion

Strengthening of relations between India and Central Asia is to mutual benefit of all countries involved. It is not directed at countering China's presence in the region. India is interested in expanding its ties with the region as it will promote security, stability, economic growth and development of all countries. Good relations with India will provide an assured market to these countries for their energy, raw materials, oil and gas, uranium, minerals, hydroelectric power etc. India is the fastest growing economy in the world today and can be a stable, assured, expanding market for these countries.

The current political, strategic and economic scenario, both regionally and internationally, presents immense challenges but also potential for India and Central Asia to qualitatively enhance their engagement. Both India and Central Asia are factors of peace, stability, growth and development, in the region and the world. Stronger relations between them will contribute to increased security and prosperity of these countries and the world.

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¹⁴ Ibid, Pp. 67.

¹⁵ Drezner, Daniel W. and Farrell Henry (2004), "Web of Influence," *Foreign Policy*, 145 November- December, pp. 32-40.

¹⁶ Llosa, Mario Vargas. (2001), "The Culture of Liberty," *Foreign Policy* 112 January/February, pp. 66-71.

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