



INDIA'S 'CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA' POLICY

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Relations between India and Central Asia are historic in nature. Both India and Central Asia shared deep cultural, and economic links from ancient times. India was connected with Central Asia through the Silk Route from third century BC to 15th century AD when the sea route from Europe to India was discovered. Religion was also a key factor in bringing the two regions closer. Buddhism found its way from India to Central Asia,¹ and a number of rulers who established their rule in India had their origins in Central Asia.

Today, India sees Central Asian region as part of its "extended neighbourhood".²

Traditionally, India enjoyed close and cordial relations with the former USSR and thus, when the USSR disintegrated and the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) announced their independence in 1991, India did not face any problem in establishing friendly relations with these newly independent countries. In fact, even before the disintegration of USSR, India had a consulate at Tashkent which later became the capital city of Uzbekistan.³

¹ Ashok Sajjanhar, "India-Central Relations: Expanding vistas of partnership", *Observer Research Foundation*, June 22, 2016 at <http://www.orfonline.org/expert-speaks/india-central-asia-relations-expanding-vistas-of-partnership/>

² Martand Jha, "India's Connect Central Asia Policy", *The Diplomat*, December 6, 2016

³ Ibid

The Central Asia region is important for India due to a number of factors. The region is rich in energy resources like natural gas, crude oil, uranium, copper, gold, iron and aluminium to mention a few, and thus, this region is increasingly attracting regional and extra regional power tussle. For India, being a growing economy, the energy rich Central Asia certainly holds great importance. Besides, China after making huge inroads in certain South Asian countries which India considered it traditional "sphere of influence", is also making its mark in the Central Asian region.⁴ In addition, this region is also important for India due to its location. It not only connects Asian and European continents, but also offers shortest route to Europe from Asia⁵. It was in this scenario that India introduced its "Connect Central Asia" policy in June 2012 during the first meeting of the Indian-Central Asia Dialogue in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.⁶ Through this policy, India intends to overcome the disadvantage of lacking a direct land route with this resource rich region. It is also through this policy that India intends to take active part in region's security arrangements (particularly in the context of situation in Afghanistan and rise of terror outfits in the region) and regional connectivity.

The Indo-China rivalry in this region seem to be growing lately since China announced its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative.⁷ India feels that through this project, China would be better positioned to take maximum advantage of the resources of the region besides finding a market for its goods. On the other hand, after oil and uranium rich Kazakhstan which has close relations with India, Uzbekistan is also emerging as a potential partner for India. Uzbekistan has offered to provide special zones for Indian business and expand defence and counter terrorism partnership with India.⁸ Uzbekistan, the seventh biggest uranium exporter in the world⁹ is also seeking to export uranium to India. In this regard, a delegation from Uzbekistan had visited India in August, 2017 just two months after a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on the sidelines of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. India is expected to import more than 2,000 tonnes of uranium from Uzbekistan after final arrangements are in place.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Raj Kumar Kothari, "India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy': Emerging economic and security dimensions", *Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 2 & No. 6, September 2014 at <http://www.hrpub.org/download/20140902/SA5-19690106.pdf>

⁶ Dr. Jyoti Prasad Das, "India's Connect Central Asia Policy", *Foreign Policy Journal*, October 29, 2012 at <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2012/10/29/indias-connect-central-asia-policy/>

⁷ "India and China new players in Central Asia's great game", *The Economic Times*, October 2, 2017 at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-china-new-players-in-central-asias-great-game/articleshow/60905273.cms>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ "Uranium supply to power Uzbek-India growing ties", *The Economic Times*, October 3, 2017 at <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/uranium-supply-to-power-uzbek-india-growing-ties/articleshow/60916089.cms>

India along with Uzbekistan is also exploring the possibility of extending the "Friendship Railway Bridge" to Herat in Western Afghanistan.¹⁰ Besides Chabahar port, India also plans to complete the International North-South Transport Corridor project in the next few years, which will also help in connecting India with the Central Asian states.

Apart from energy and connectivity, India also intends to set up an Indian-Central Asia University in Kyrgyzstan as part of its Connect Central Asian policy. India also intends to promote its soft power through IT, culture, networking with young politicians, academia, as well as Bollywood songs and movies. Further, New Delhi is also negotiating with Tajikistan to set up a military hospital and also plans to operate up to 14 direct flights to Dushanbe. Initially, it is planned that both India and Tajikistan will launch four flights each.¹¹ Hence, India's Connect Central Asia policy is not only limited to economics or defence relations, but covers a wide spectrum of cooperation in diverse fields.

¹⁰ "India and China new players in Central Asia's great game", op.cit

¹¹ Raj Kumar Kothari, "India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy': Emerging economic and security dimensions", op.cit.