

## The "Game" in Central Asia - India, Pakistan, Part 3

### India's role in Central Asia

First relations between India and Central Asia had developed during the Kushan Empire. In that period both regions shared borders and climate, had similar geographical features and geo-cultural affinity. For centuries India represented an important centre for human migration as well as expansion of Central Asian empires. Good relations extended during the Mughal empire and even after, in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century allot of Indian settlers have made their way to Central Asia and were famous for publication and circulation of books. After the Second World War and during the Soviet era in Central Asia Indian culture, especially the film industry, made a huge impact and gained significant popularity in the Republics.<sup>1</sup> During the Soviet period engagement with the Central Asian region was done in a framework of Indo-Soviet relations. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union relations between India and the "five 'Stans" have been re-established in a new geopolitical environment. Since the nineties India is becoming more important for the development and expansion of the Central Asian states. In the following article I will try to explain interests and nature of India's political engagement in Central Asia.

India's approach towards Central Asia can be observed from three different perspectives: historical, geopolitical and cultural. From a historical perspective India's approach to Central Asia became very limited after the secession of Pakistan. This historical event made a heavy impact on Indian foreign policy, primarily because the country became separated from its natural neighbors such as Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia. From a geopolitical perspective India also faces similar constraints. According to Mr. Mehmet Ozkan there are three big players (Russia, China, US) and three middle-tier players (Iran, Turkey, Pakistan) present in Central Asia. In this kind of setting India is being pushed to the periphery of the region making it an outside power unable to directly influence the key questions in the area.<sup>2</sup> Lastly there is the cultural perspective. During the Soviet times, New Delhi was present in Central Asia on daily basis through movies, TV shows and music. In this period the Indian government managed to establish Indian Cultural Centers in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which have been introducing the Indian culture to the locals. The cultural aspect also expanded to education. Hundreds of Indian medicine and engineering students have been granted Soviet scholarship for studying in Central Asia. This trend, formed in the Cold War era, is popular even today. Nations of Central Asia are still fascinated by Indian films, music and popular culture which has a positive effect on tourism

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Abuzar Khairi, *India-Central Asia Relations: Emerging Partnership*, FPRC Journal 2012, pp. 176-181 (<http://www.fprc.in/pdf/J-10.pdf>)

<sup>2</sup>Mehmet Ozkan, *A Blueprint for India in Central Asia*, FPRC Journal 2012, pp. 287-289 (<http://www.fprc.in/pdf/J-10.pdf>)

in India and on consumption of Indian goods.<sup>3</sup> Bollywood film industry made a significant impact on the expansion of the Indian soft-power in the region. Although the cultural familiarity between Indian and Central Asian nations can affect the growing influence of New Delhi in the region, geopolitical and historical aspects are still representing major obstacles for the Indian policy in Central Asia. Many scholars argue that the main problem of Indian foreign policy in Central Asia is that it lacks a holistic approach to the region and its politics.

New Delhi's motivation to actively participate in Central Asian political theatre is primarily driven by security, energy, trade and geopolitical reasons.

Central Asia represents a vital part of the Indian national security program. Issues such as proliferation and smuggling of drugs and uranium are intertwined with Islamist extremism and terrorism which are present in some of the countries. After the demise of the Soviet Union the region became fertile grounds for jihadist groups, this was soon reflected in the Afghanistan and the rise of Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The main concern for New Delhi is the transnational nature of these terrorist organizations. The Indian government fears that if these groups are left unchecked they will eventually pose a threat to the nation, and more importantly they might involve themselves in the Kashmir's fragile peace.<sup>4</sup> All these fears have been further strengthened by the withdrawal of the US forces from Afghanistan. Furthermore India's military engagement in Central Asia is vastly limited. Attempts to gain military base in Tajikistan were faced with rejection from Dushanbe. India was especially interested for the Ayni airbase since it would allow a better control of the Afghanistan's border, however Russia is very skeptical. Russia still regards itself as a primary security factor in the five Republics. From their perspective allowing Indian forces to gain ground in one of the Republics would potentially open the door for other players to seek military outposts in the region. Lastly New Delhi is concerned with drug, uranium and weapon smuggling that can also benefit the terrorists in the region. Governments of Central Asian Republics are riddled with corruption while border management is insufficient and some sections of the borders are very difficult to control. Production of opium in Afghanistan is welcomed by the traffickers in the region, however much of the revenue is also collected by some extremist organizations (IMU in Uzbekistan is one of them).<sup>5</sup> Drug trafficking further encourages weapon and uranium smuggling. Located between four nuclear powers the states of Central Asia are treated as a potential black market for nuclear material. Although India is pushing for better security relations with the five Republics, Russia will remain as a dominant military actor in the region.

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<sup>3</sup>Asoke Mukerji, *India, Central Asia and the new Silk Road*, Tuesday 10 July 2012, pp. 2-3  
(file:///E:/downloads/67924.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Ivan Campbell, *India's Role and Interests in Central Asia*, October 2013 SAFEWORLD, pp. 4  
(file:///E:/downloads/indias-role-and-interests-in-central-asia.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>Dilip Kumar Maurya, *India-Central Asia Relations in 21st Century*, pp. 8-9  
(<http://euacademic.org/UploadArticle/1381.pdf>)

Other driving factors which propel India's ambitions in Central Asia are commercial and energy interests. Central Asia is a relatively untapped market whose consumers are divided between Western high-priced imports and Chinese low-quality but cheap merchandise. In this environment Indian products can take a significant place and possibly fill the gap between Western and Chinese commodities. India's pharmaceutical industry has been recognized as a reliable partner while tea, and similar products are very popular on the markets of the five Republics. IT sector, banking, construction and various other medium and small enterprises are also making a solid foothold on the markets of Central Asia. Likewise, mining and textile industries are attracting Indian investments, especially the cotton production in Uzbekistan and copper, uranium, gold and silver mines in Kazakhstan and other countries. While Chinese economic influence is very hard to challenge, New Delhi is trying to penetrate the region's markets by establishing bilateral cooperation. In 2013 governments of India and Tajikistan signed bilateral cooperation in sectors such as: IT, energy, education, trade, mining, agriculture etc.<sup>6</sup> Although somewhat insignificant move compared to the Chinese overall economic engagement in Central Asia, it still means that India is perceived as a potential economic partner; which can be very important for the future commercial relations between Central and South Asia.

In current day and age energy is the locomotive of production and Central Asia's hydro-carbon reserves are strategically very important for the region's economic progress and for the development of other countries in its neighborhood. The intensified energy game in the region, with Russia and China holding the spotlight, is also attracting other players with India being one of them. Indian economy desperately needs energy, in fact securing energy is second only to securing food in the country. Three-quarters of India's oil consumption is imported from abroad, most of that is coming from the Middle East. The volatile nature of the Middle Eastern region is making much of its oil consumers nervous forcing them to search for alternative sources of this commodity. Since India is projected to become even more reliant on imported energy it is crucial for New Delhi to acquire a safe flow of oil and gas in order to sustain the country's growing energy needs. Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC India's state owned firm) is actively investing in Kazakhstan's oil, has acquired stakes in Alibekmola and Kurmangazy oil fields while also attempting to buy shares of some US based oil corporations in the region. Although the Indian government is trying to position themselves in this energy game the competition will be fierce. Furthermore there is also the question of energy transport and the required infrastructure. The TAPI pipeline that will be around 1700 km long, estimated construction cost of 8 billion dollars, should transport 30 billion cubic meters of gas from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India is facing various difficulties. Complicated relations with Ashgabat and security problems in Afghanistan are just some of the issues that the TAPI project faces, but they can be enough to deter international companies who wish to invest and finance

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<sup>6</sup>Dilip Kumar Muarya, *India-Central Asian States Relations in the 21st Century*, European Academic Research, p. 10-11(<http://euacademic.org/UploadArticle/1381.pdf>)

this bulky infrastructure venture.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately these won't be the only obstacles which the Indian energy companies will come across. Chinese and Russian energy interests are very strong in Central Asia, their companies which are already present in the region won't allow another party to compete and possibly contest their influence over the Central Asia's energy sector. India's engagement on Central Asian energy market can have a major impact not only for the domestic energy consumption but for the India's foreign policy in Central Asia as well. In other words energy and commercial perforation of Indian companies on the markets of Central Asia can deliver that 'holistic' approach which Indian foreign policy lacks when accessing the overall politics of the region.

India's geopolitical perception of Central Asia is mostly influenced by Pakistan, and in recent years by the growing expansion of Chinese influence in the region. Pakistan and China represent the main adversaries for New Delhi and its policy towards the five 'stans, moreover Pakistan is treated as a serious security threat for the national interests of India. On many occasions Pakistan served as a natural obstacle for Indian deeper engagement in Central Asia. Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan and its Islamist militants was usually perceived as a deliberate action to sabotage or invade Indian sovereignty. This security issue along with geographic positioning of Afghanistan and Pakistan to a larger extent influenced and restricted India's potential political presence in Central Asia, and will remain an important obstacle for future Indian foreign policy in the region. Besides Pakistan, China is becoming a big power in Central Asia. Flexing its economic muscles and boosting diplomatic relations with the Republics since the nineties China has become a prominent economic actor and main foreign investor in the area. China largely outpaced India in terms of infrastructure networks, energy acquisition, investments, transport etc. While India's trade volume with the Republics of Central Asia doesn't exceed 500 million dollars, Chinese trade in 2012 was more than 40 billion dollars with the five Republics.<sup>8</sup> This enormous gap in commerce is reflecting badly on New Delhi's bilateral ties with the Central Asian Republics, most of them are directing their markets towards China while India's investments are often left in the background. Nevertheless both countries have complementary interests in fields such as security, IT, banking and infrastructure where cooperation will probably follow. Furthermore India as a regional power which follows the principles of democracy can be seen as a potential partner for the US or other Western powers, if they wish to engage in South or Central Asia in the future. Although at the moment this doesn't seem so plausible, the rising authoritarian power of China may push India to look for partners which are led and governed by the same democratic principles. Despite this China and Pakistan will remain as a main competitor for India's geopolitical ambitions in Central Asia.

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<sup>7</sup> Ivan Campbell, *India's role and interests in central Asia*, October 2013, SAFEWORLD, p. 3  
(file:///E:/downloads/indias-role-and-interests-in-central-asia%20(2).pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Wu Jiao, Xi proposes a 'new Silk Road' with Central Asia, September 2013  
([http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sunday/2013-09/08/content\\_16952160.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sunday/2013-09/08/content_16952160.htm))

## Pakistan's ambitions in Central Asia

Pakistan's involvement in Central Asia can be separated in two different time periods. The primary Pakistani ambition towards the region began as a reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late seventies. The Soviet invasion brought a new security dimension to Pakistan's foreign policy makers, the invasion was actually perceived as a prelude for further Soviet expansion south towards Pakistan and its warm-water seas. This wasn't only threatening for Islamabad but also for Washington and its interests in the bi-polar world. At that moment Pakistan served as a front-line state for containing further Soviet expansion while also providing a base for Mujahedin and their operations in Afghanistan. This allowed Pakistan to acquire additional US help and expand their strategic goals at that time. However Pakistan's involvement in countering the Soviets and helping the Mujahedin to a larger extent influenced later Pakistan's relations with the 'stans after the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>9</sup> The second part of Pakistani engagement in Central Asia begins in the nineties. The government saw many opportunities especially in the commercial sphere with the newly independent Republics, although the Central Asian Republics haven't been so benevolent and didn't share Islamabad's point of view. The 'stans were very skeptical towards the new political climate in the region. Pakistan who once funded the Mujahedin was perceived as a supporter of radical Islamism that can seriously impact the stability of Central Asia. Historic ramifications have deeply influenced the relations between these political entities and to some degree still confine Pakistan in engaging in Central Asian political theatre.

Pakistan's interests in Central Asia are geopolitical, security but primarily commercial and economic. Geopolitical aspirations are consisted of establishing a strong influence in the region while countering India's presence. Cultural and religious similarities are favoring Islamabad and its attempts to establish closer ties with the region. Even though the religious similarities of these societies are located in the Arabian spectrum, the cultures are intertwined. Pakistan is often described as an extension of Central Asian culture, a form of amalgam between Central and South Asian civilizations. This is very important for Pakistani government if they wish to solidify their presence in the area. Instructed by the Indian example of exporting its popular culture to Central Asia Pakistan can strengthen its soft power by highlighting common historical, cultural and religious ties with the populace of the five Republics. Although countering Indian influence in the region may prove to be a difficult task, mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, India was very active during the Cold War and the Soviet era in Central Asia primarily in the fields of culture and film industry. Secondly, relations between New Delhi and the 'stans are not burdened by the conflicts from the eighties. India is regarded as a stable security partner for countering terrorism, while Pakistan began to develop its counter-terrorist

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<sup>9</sup> Meena Singh Roy, *Pakistan's Strategies in Central Asia*, Strategic Analysis 2006, p. 800-801 ([http://www.idsa.in/system/files/strategicanalysis\\_msroy\\_1206.pdf](http://www.idsa.in/system/files/strategicanalysis_msroy_1206.pdf))

image only after 2001 and the US pressure which came after that. Nevertheless, rivalries between these regional powers will certainly be reflected on Central Asian theatre also, despite having common interests in some sectors (TAPI pipeline and the energy sector).

Connectivity and mobility represent important factors for establishing commercial ties and development of the economic market. Landlocked nature of the Central Asian Republics demands a warm-sea access in order to effectively reach out to other markets. Establishing a good transport infrastructure with Central Asia Pakistan's ports such as Gwadar and Karachi can become main hubs for transport of Central Asian goods across the globe. The Gwadar deep-sea port is a part of the CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) which represents an important part of the Chinese One-Belt-One-Road policy. The port of Gwadar provides the shortest route for Kirghizstan, Kazakhstan, Southern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (and other Central Asian Republics) which mainly produce dry cargo.<sup>10</sup>

While these ports are crucial for linking Central Asia with the sea, all land routes are going through Afghanistan. Therefore the stability of commercial trade between Pakistan and the region will inevitably require security and political stability in that country. Providing security for Afghanistan won't only benefit the economy and trade it will also signify that Islamabad is willing to counter the Taliban and Islamist terrorist organizations which can significantly bolster the country's image in Central Asia. Major product categories which Pakistan exports to the region include: fruits, pharmaceuticals, leather, textile and some medical products.<sup>11</sup> Opening their ports for Central Asian products Pakistan can achieve much to improve the relations with the Republics, in general and on the bilateral level as well. Economic integration and the CPEC program is welcomed by the Republics furthermore Central Asian states see an opportunity by deepening economic ties with South Asia to also expand its energy grid. Pakistan similarly to other countries is importing most of its oil from the Gulf, while there have been ideas to import Iranian oil as well. Since the Middle East is in turmoil and the Iranian-Pakistan pipeline can face serious US obstruction the Central Asian energy is very attractive. The TAPI pipeline is a promising project which wouldn't only transfer energy from Turkmenistan but would also bridge the gap between India's and Pakistan's disagreements (at least to some extent). As with the transport and trade infrastructure the gas pipeline could encounter security problems in Afghanistan. Pakistan as a regional power which treats Afghanistan as its own geopolitical backyard will want to engage in its evolving political and security problems which are threatening the region's development. Managing the issues in Afghanistan wouldn't only contribute to the economic development but would also signify that Islamabad is ready to commit to the state-building process in Afghanistan which was absent for a long time.

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<sup>10</sup> Mir Shebaz Khetran, *Economic Connectivity: Pakistan, China, West Asia and Central Asia*, p.69-70 ([http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SS\\_Mir\\_Sherbaz\\_Khetran\\_No-4\\_2016.pdf](http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/SS_Mir_Sherbaz_Khetran_No-4_2016.pdf))

<sup>11</sup> USAID Trade Project, *Potential for Trade and Goods between Pakistan and Central Asia*, p.11 ([http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00K244.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00K244.pdf))

Pakistan desires to expand to Central Asia are expected, for the country's policy makers the region is perceived as an area of natural expansion. Expanding its presence further from Afghanistan and into Central Asia Pakistan's foreign policy would gain the much needed strategic-depth which can counter India's growing influence in the region. The Sunni population of Central Asia is anticipated to gravitate towards Pakistan as the biggest Sunni country in the area. According to some Pakistani thinkers religion is seen as a main tool for spreading the country's influence over the five 'stans. Despite these religious ambitions, Republics of Central Asia though Muslim are mostly secular due to their Soviet past. Furthermore Pakistan's meddling with the Taliban and other radical organizations which participated in the Tajik civil war caused a major setback for the overall Islamabad's policy for the region. However Pakistan can still play its economy card to gain the trust of Central Asian governments. Pakistan's geostrategic placement is also important and cannot be ignored. The country provides an important gateway for Central Asian markets and its products, which has been a vocal point of Islamabad's politics on a bilateral level with the Central Asian Republics. Playing the economy card properly Pakistan can hope to achieve not only good relations with the Republics but also to attract other manufacturers who cannot access the markets of Central Asia due to its landlocked nature. Furthermore the mechanics of geo-economics can appropriately manage and create a win-win situation not only between Pakistan and Central Asia but also between Pakistan and India. Nonetheless limitations for Pakistan's policy still remain. ISI's (Inter-Service-Intelligence of Pakistan) connection to the Islamist groups and its involvement in the Afghan war combined with a tough competition from Turkey and Iran in Central Asia will largely contain Islamabad's rapid expansion in this complex region.

Part four coming soon...

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