

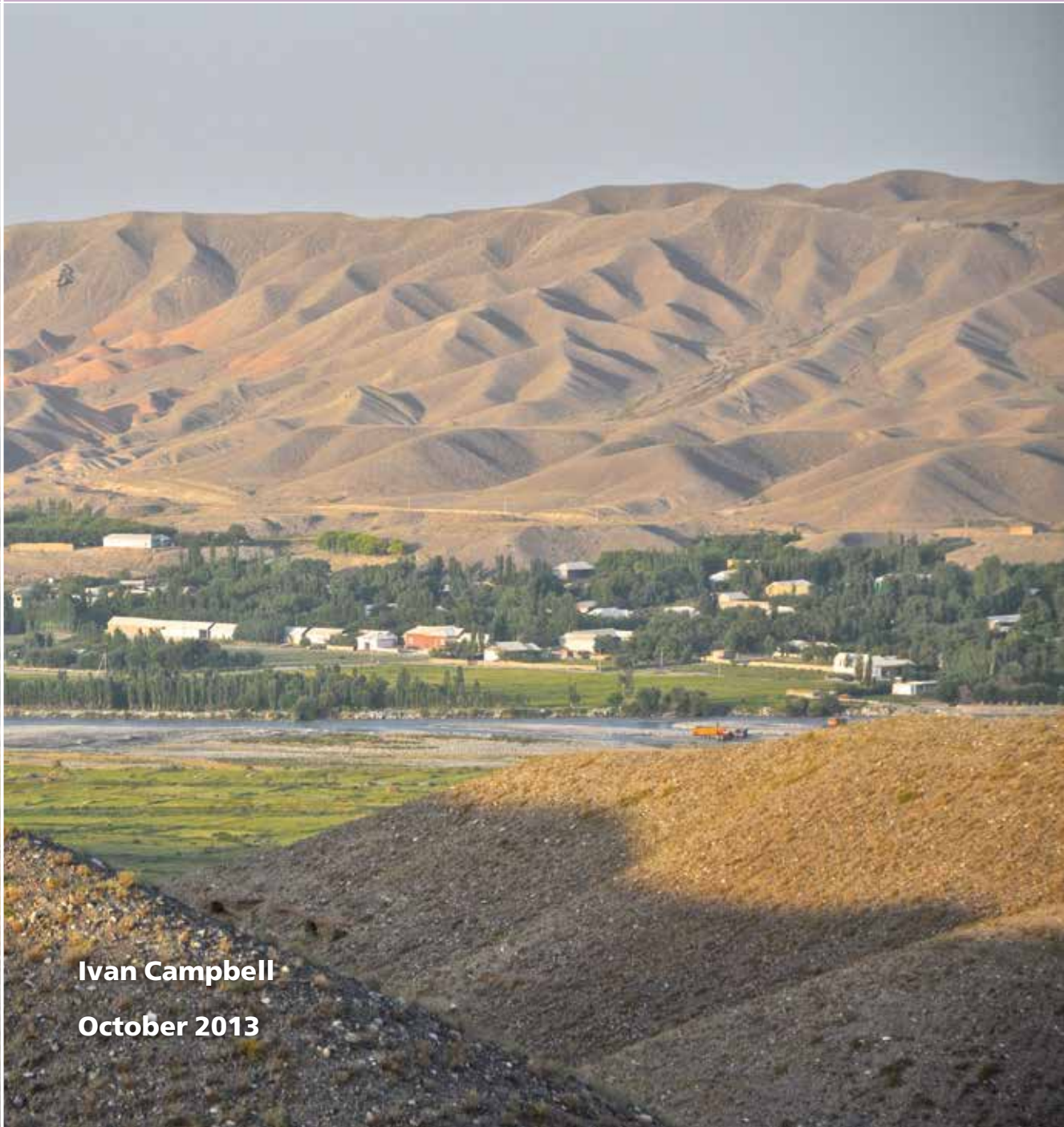


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India's role and interests in Central Asia

INDIA



Ivan Campbell

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Introduction

THE PAST DECADE HAS SEEN A NOTABLE RISE IN INDIA'S EFFORTS to engage with Central Asia. Analysts suggest this is driven by two primary concerns: securing and diversifying India's energy supplies in order to sustain economic growth; and keeping a check on the rise of radical Islamist groups that may pose a threat to India's security.¹ In addition, India is keen to tap the considerable commercial potential of the Central Asian region. Meanwhile, the strategic location of Central Asia means that it is a central locus of geopolitical manoeuvring affecting India's relations with Pakistan, China, the US, and other powers in the region.

In this paper we explore the concerns and interests that motivate India's recent efforts to step up its engagement in Central Asia, policy statements as well as practical initiatives, and we consider how India is faring in the geopolitical competition over the region.

Background

Historically, India was closely linked to Central Asia through trading routes as well as successive invasions of the subcontinent which swept down from the north-west.² Post-independence India's relations with Central Asia were shaped by Delhi's closeness to the Kremlin, especially after the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1962. Constrained by its ties to the Soviet Union, as well as by a general inward-looking focus during the Cold War period, India's presence in the region was mostly limited to cultural exchanges.³ The collapse of the Soviet Union prompted a shift in India's foreign policy in the 1990s away from ideological alliances and towards a more pragmatic approach. Central Asia was now referred to as 'our near abroad' and India began to develop bilateral relations with the five new republics.

India's primary concern and focus of engagement in the wider region is Afghanistan, which reflects both historical links (much of Afghanistan was once part of the Mughal Empire) and the intertwining of Afghanistan's fate with India's nemesis, Pakistan. Over the past decade India has pursued a multi-faceted approach in Afghanistan, combining development assistance – India is the largest donor to Afghanistan in the region, and fifth largest bilateral donor overall – with the promotion of security interests, while also providing commercial opportunities for Indian companies.⁴ In contrast, as the

1 Saferworld interviews with regional and security analysts, Delhi, October 2013

2 Kaplan, R (2010), *South Asia's Geography of Conflict*, (Center for a New American Security) www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/South%20Asias%20Geography%20of%20Conflict_Robert%20D.%20Kaplan_1.pdf

3 Sahgal, A & Anand, V (2010), 'Strategic Environment in Central Asia and India', in Nirmala, J (Ed) *Reconnecting India and Central Asia Emerging Security and Economic Dimensions*, (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program) www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/1004Joshi-V-Strategic.pdf

4 Sidhu, WPS & Norfolk, D (2011), *Why India matters in Afghanistan*, (Pragati, Gateway House) www.gatewayhouse.in/publication/gateway-house-affiliated/pragati/why-india-matters-afghanistan. For a more recent analysis of India's relationship with Afghanistan see Price, G (2013), *India's Policy Towards Afghanistan*, (Chatham House) www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Asia/0813pp_indiaafghanistan.pdf

account below demonstrates, India's approach to the five Central Asian states is generally considered to have been less joined-up and less consistent.

In June 2012, New Delhi launched a new 'Connect Central Asia' policy. This signalled that India would seek to build stronger political relations and strengthen strategic and security cooperation with Central Asian states. It proposed to step up India's engagement in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the establishment of a new Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement to integrate its markets with those of Central Asia. In practical terms it promised a cross-regional energy infrastructure, new flight connections with Central Asian states, and the development of IT, banking, and pharmaceutical industries in order to strengthen economic links.⁵

⁵ Muzalevsky, R (2012), *India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy Seeks to Compensate for Lost Time*, (The Jamestown Foundation)

2

Interests

Energy security

SECURING AN ASSURED AND UNINTERRUPTED SUPPLY OF ENERGY is critical for keeping India's economic wheels in motion. India currently sources almost three-quarters of its oil consumption from abroad,⁶ much of it from the volatile Middle East region. Thus energy security has become a central component of Indian national security and foreign policy. With India projected to become ever more reliant on imported energy,⁷ reducing dependence on the Middle East and cultivating alternative sources of energy has become a vital concern.

Central Asia contains vast hydrocarbon fields both on-shore and off-shore in the Caspian Sea. These are home to an estimated 4 per cent of the world's natural gas reserves,⁸ and approximately 3 per cent of oil reserves.⁹ Most of these resources are found in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, although Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have potential for generating hydro-electric power. In addition, Central Asia has reserves of uranium ore plus the potential for its enrichment; so the region could be tapped as a source of uranium for India's civilian nuclear programme, which would in the long term help diversify its energy base.¹⁰

Central Asia is thus of prime importance in India's energy security policy. Over the past decade, India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) has sought to invest in Kazakhstan, which has three of the world's richest oilfields. ONGC acquired sizeable stakes in the Alibekmola and Kurmangazy oilfields in Kazakhstan-owned areas of the Caspian Sea.¹¹ More recently ONGC attempted to buy a share of US company ConocoPhillips's holding in the Kashagan oilfield. However, although the Indian Government has begun investing in oil fields in Central Asia, its policy on how to transport this oil to the Indian market or work out oil swap deals is still evolving.

The Indian government has been engaged in protracted negotiations regarding the 1680 km-long Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, estimated to cost US\$7.6 billion to construct. The TAPI project is intended to transport 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas from natural gas fields in Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan to India.¹² However, construction of the pipeline has stalled for various reasons, including prior commitment of Turkmen gas reserves to Russia, difficulties of engaging with the regime in Ashgabat, and the security risks associated with a pipeline

⁶ Energy Information Agency (2011) 'India', *Country Analysis Briefs* p. 3 available at www.eia.gov/EMEU/cabs/India/pdf.pdf

⁷ Meena Singh Roy (2001), 'India's interests in Central Asia', *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XXIV, No. 12

⁸ International Crisis Group (2007), *Central Asia's Energy Risks*, Asia Report No.133, p. 12

⁹ Kiesow, I & Norling, N (2007) *The Rise of India: Problems and Opportunities*, (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program) www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/2007/0701India.pdf

¹⁰ The Hindu (October 16, 2008) *Nuclear Pact with Kazakhstan Likely during PM's Visit* www.hindu.com/2008/10/16/stories/2008101659261200.htm

¹¹ Center for Strategic and International Studies (2007), *India's 'Look West' Policy: Why Central Asia Matters*, South Asia Monitor, Volume 110. 5 (Washington D.C.)

¹² BBC News South Asia (December 11, 2010) *Turkmen natural gas pipeline Tapi to cross Afghanistan* www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11977744

that will run through southern Afghanistan. As a result, despite the hype around the TAPI project, there are doubts as to whether international companies will be willing to finance it.¹³ Therefore practical implementation of the project is still at an early stage.¹⁴ Furthermore, following Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's visit to Turkmenistan in September 2013, there is speculation that the TAPI project may be derailed altogether.¹⁵

National security

Central Asia is of vital importance to India not just in terms of energy security but also for reasons of national security. New Delhi sees the region as a source of religious extremism and is concerned to check the rise of radical Islamist groups which may present a terrorist threat.¹⁶ Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has been a fertile recruiting ground for such groups,¹⁷ and there are reportedly scores of jihadist groups based in the region.¹⁸ Given the transnational nature of these groups, including links with the Taliban and other militant groups in neighbouring countries, this generates a high degree of unease in New Delhi. The fear is that if the emergence of jihadist groups is not checked, they will eventually pose a serious threat to India's security, especially in the contested state of Kashmir.¹⁹

This concern is exacerbated by the situation in Afghanistan. There is a prospect of increasing insecurity in Afghanistan following the NATO withdrawal in 2014, which may spill over and destabilise fragile Central Asian states. Furthermore, New Delhi fears that a resurgent Taliban integrated into Afghan power structures post-withdrawal will be counter to India's interests.²⁰ These security concerns are compounded by the proliferation of drug-trafficking in Central Asia. Weak border management and high levels of corruption, coupled with the failure to stem opium production in Afghanistan, have made drug-trafficking an extremely lucrative industry. Much of the money generated provides a vital source of funding for jihadist groups.

For these reasons India is keen to play a bigger role in Central Asia's security matrix and to prevent real and perceived threats to its national security. Over the past decade, New Delhi has sought to enhance its security assets in the region, notably through the acquisition of a first foreign military outpost in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is of particular concern for India since only a narrow 20 km stretch of Afghan territory separates it from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. India began to refurbish the airbase at Ayni in 2004, reportedly spending \$70 million as part of its aid to Tajikistan. Although New Delhi never publicly announced its intentions, there was speculation in the media that a squadron of MiG 29 bombers would be stationed at the airbase.²¹ The Ayni airbase was seen by some as emblematic of India's growing strategic aspirations and an attempt to project Indian military power in Central Asia.²² Not only would it enable India to respond to situations in the region that threatened its security, it also increased India's options in the event of heightened tensions with Pakistan, since it would enable India to strike at Pakistan from the rear.²³

¹³ The Economic Times (October 16, 2012), *No international pipeline firm ready to implement TAPI gas project* http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2012-10-16/news/34498967_1_tapi-gas-turkmenistan-afghanistan-pakistan-india-gas-pipeline

¹⁴ Indian Council on Global Relations (2011) *TAPI Pipeline: Possibility or Pipe-dream* (Gateway House) www.gatewayhouse.in/sites/default/files/Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India%20Pipeline%20Possibility%20or%20Pipe%20Dream.pdf

¹⁵ StratRisks (September 8, 2013), *China snatched away the TAPI pipeline from USA* www.blacklistednews.com/China_snatches_TAPI_pipeline_project_from_USA/28787/0/38/38/Y/M.html

¹⁶ See *Strategic Environment in Central Asia and India*, *Op cit* Sahgal, A & Anand, V

¹⁷ McGlinchey, E (2005). *Autocrats, Islamists and the Rise of Radicalism in Central Asia* in *Current History*, October 2005.

¹⁸ Ramachandran, S (2006) *India's foray into Central Asia*, *World Security Network* www.worldsecuritynetwork.com/India/Ramachandran-Sudha/Indias-foray-into-Central-Asia

¹⁹ Blank, S (2003) *India's Rising Profile in Central Asia* in *Comparative Strategy*, 22:2 p.141. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01495930390202607#.UmEe_tL2Zxl

²⁰ Saferworld interview with Indian security analyst, Delhi, October 2013

²¹ *Op cit* Ramachandran

²² Kucera, J (2011) *India's Central Asia Soft Power*, 'The Diplomat'; <http://thediplomat.com/2011/09/03/india%E2%80%99s-central-asia-soft-power/>

²³ Saferworld interview with security analyst, Delhi, October 2013

However, Russia – still regarded as the dominant security actor in Central Asia – appears to have been unwilling to sanction India's attempt to establish a military foothold in Tajikistan.²⁴ Perhaps fearful that this would open the door to US and NATO influence,²⁵ it reportedly used its leverage over the Tajik Government to ensure that India did not deploy fighter aircraft at the base.²⁶ After a decade of negotiations between New Delhi and Dushanbe, in 2011 the Tajik Foreign Minister launched negotiations with Russia to discuss possible deployment of the Russian military at Ayni, while also ruling out the deployment of Indian or American forces at the airbase.²⁷

Despite this setback, India continues efforts to strengthen bilateral cooperation on security with Central Asian states. In recent years, it has shown signs of changing tack in its military outreach to a more 'soft power' approach.²⁸ In July 2011, the Indian Defence Minister visited Kyrgyzstan and announced plans to open a joint military research centre there, as well as an initiative to train Kyrgyz soldiers to serve in UN peacekeeping missions. It was considered that lower-profile initiatives like military hospitals and research centres may allow Indian military officers to build relationships with their Central Asian counterparts in a manner less threatening to Russia.

When India's Vice-President visited Tajikistan in April 2013, both governments stressed the importance of cooperation in dealing with anticipated security threats from Afghanistan,²⁹ and India has established Joint Working Groups on Terrorism with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. However, despite shared concerns over security, there is little effective security cooperation between India and Central Asian states. Whereas Russia conducts numerous joint military exercises with these states under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation, and China does to some degree through the SCO, there is limited direct collaboration with India's armed forces.³⁰

India did join the multilateral SCO as an Observer in 2005, and it aspires to become a full member. The SCO is one of the most prominent multilateral bodies with regard to Central Asia, and the issue of counter-terrorism regularly features on the agenda of SCO summits. However, it is doubtful that India will be able to utilise the SCO platform to advance its own security interests, given the predominant Chinese influence within the organisation and Beijing's sensitivity towards Pakistan, which is also an Observer in the SCO.

Commercial

Central Asia offers a relatively untapped market for Indian consumer goods, especially as consumers in the region have little to choose from between highly priced, imported Western products and cheap but lower-quality Chinese manufactured goods that have flooded the region. Indian tea and pharmaceutical industries have already acquired a foothold in the Central Asian market,³¹ while potential for Indian investment and expertise has been identified in the areas of IT, banking, construction, and food processing.³² There is also scope for India to assist Central Asian states in developing small and medium-scale enterprises.³³

²⁴ Kucera, J (2010) *Why is India's air-base idle?*, Eurasianet.org; www.eurasianet.org/node/61503

²⁵ Saferworld interview with security analyst, Delhi, October 2013

²⁶ Muzalevsky, R, Central Asia (2011) *India fails to gain a military foothold in Tajikistan* (Caucasus Institute, John Hopkins University); <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5485>

²⁷ Central Asia Newswire (2011) *Tajiks likely to grant Russia access to Ayni air-base*; www.universalnewswires.com/centralasia/viewstory.aspx?id=3252

²⁸ *Op cit* Kucera (2011)

²⁹ The Hindu (April 16, 2013) *India, Tajikistan stress stakes in Afghan peace*; www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-tajikistan-stress-stakes-in-afghan-peace/article4620799.ece

³⁰ Stein, M (2012) *Compendium of Central Asian Military and Security Activity* (Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth); <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Central-Asian-Military-Events.pdf>

³¹ Gulshan, S (2010), 'Regional Economic Linkages', in Nirmala, J (Ed) *Reconnecting India and Central Asia Emerging Security and Economic Dimensions*, (Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program); www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/1004Joshi-VII-Linkages.pdf

³² Laruelle, M & Peyrouse, S Eds (2011) *Mapping Central Asia: Indian Perceptions and Strategies*, (Ashgate)

³³ *Op cit* Kiesow, I & Norling, N

Currently, India provides limited assistance in some of these areas as part of its long-running ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) Programme. In recent years, the Indian Government has also begun to assist Indian entrepreneurs and business chambers to organise trade fairs under its CIS programme,³⁴ and a joint business council has been set up with Kazakhstan.³⁵ Nevertheless, India's rather piecemeal economic engagement in Central Asia, compounded by its own belated economic reforms, means that its commercial clout in the region is limited. This is reflected in the bilateral trade figures which show that Central Asia's share of Indian exports is 1.07 per cent, while imports stand at an even lower 0.08 per cent.³⁶

On his April 2013 visit to Tajikistan, India's Vice President signed deals to expand bilateral cooperation in IT, energy, health, education, trade, commerce, mining, and agriculture, while there are also plans to collaborate with Tajikistan in establishing an IT centre of excellence and a Central Asia e-network.³⁷ However, the current extent of India's actual bilateral cooperation with Tajikistan is very small, especially when compared with China's economic engagement.³⁸ China has invested large sums in Tajikistan's IT and telecommunications industries and in mining uranium and other minerals. It has also leased large areas of land rich in minerals from the Tajik Government at low cost.³⁹ As described below, China also has far more trade and investment with the other Central Asian states than India.

³⁴ Government of India, Ministry of Trade and Commerce, Trade Promotion Programme: CIS; http://commerce.nic.in/trade/international_tpp_cis_2.asp

³⁵ Embassy of India, Kazakhstan <http://indembastana.in/ieb.php?id=Bilateral%20Relations>

³⁶ Government of India, Ministry of Trade and Commerce; <http://commerce.nic.in/ftpa/rgncnt.asp>

³⁷ The Economic Times (April 13, 2013) *Vice President to visit Tajikistan to boost trade ties* http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2013-04-13/news/38511356_1_president-emomali-rahmon-tajikistan-defence-minister

³⁸ *Op cit* The Hindu (April 16, 2013)

³⁹ Vinson, M (2012) *Tajikistan to Lease 6,000 Hectares of Land to China*, (The Jamestown Foundation); www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=39006#.Ugef9Lrxtw

3

Geopolitics

INDIA'S APPROACH TO CENTRAL ASIA cannot be divorced from either its South Asia policy or from its management of a host of triangular relationships, involving China, Russia, Pakistan and the United States.⁴⁰ Iran too is being looked upon as offering an alternative route for India to access Central Asia via western Afghanistan.⁴¹ Below we sketch out the contours of India's relations with some of the key players in the region.

India – Pakistan

India's historical relations with Central Asia influence how the region is perceived today, and thus how Indian policies are shaped. According to Robert D. Kaplan, India's history is "the story of invasions from a north-westerly direction", and this explains why Central Asia continues to be seen more as the source of threats than of opportunities.⁴² In particular, India's approach to Central Asia is conditioned by its profound distrust of, and tensions with, Pakistan. India's ability to access Central Asia is vulnerable because Pakistan's geography – and at times its deliberate policy of obstruction – cuts India off from the region.

Given Afghanistan's close relations with Pakistan and its troubled history, New Delhi's primary concern in the wider Central Asia region is Afghanistan. Afghanistan is viewed not just as a spring-board for anti-India militants but also as a rear base for Pakistan. At the same time, Afghanistan is regarded by some Indian eyes as "part of the Indian subcontinent, linked organically to India on account of the record of empires past".⁴³ This is not to suggest that India has territorial designs on Afghanistan, but it does mean that New Delhi is deeply concerned about who rules in Kabul and wishes to ensure that whoever does so is well-disposed to India.

India's fear in the past and for the future is that if Afghanistan falls under the Taliban's sway, it could give rise to a succession of radicalised Islamic societies throughout Central Asia. This would have a destabilising effect not only in Central Asia but also in Pakistan.⁴⁴ Conversely, an Afghanistan at peace and governed along secular lines would strengthen India's position vis-à-vis Pakistan. Thus India supported the Najibullah regime during the 1980s against the pro-Pakistani Islamist mujahidin trying to topple it. And similarly, India now strongly backs Hamid Karzai's government as a bulwark against Pakistan and its perceived surrogates in Afghanistan.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Op cit* Sahgal, A & Anand, V

⁴¹ Saferworld interview with Indian security analyst, Delhi, October 2013

⁴² *Op cit* Kaplan, R

⁴³ *Op cit* Kaplan, R

⁴⁴ Saferworld interview with Indian security analyst, Delhi, October 2013

⁴⁵ Saferworld interview with Indian regional analyst, Delhi, October 2013

India – China

Equally significant in geopolitical terms – though very different in terms of history and future outlook – is India's relationship with China. China's long land border with the Central Asian states and its massive economic muscle gives it considerable leverage in the region. Since China forged diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian states in 1992, its overall trade with the region has increased over a hundred-fold.⁴⁶ China is now the most prominent economic actor and main source of foreign investment in the region. This has enabled China to outpace India throughout Central Asia in terms of volumes of trade and investment, energy acquisitions, and the building of transport and infrastructure networks.

In 2012 India's overall trade volume with the five central Asian republics was estimated at \$500 million.⁴⁷ In contrast, China's trade with the five states in 2012 amounted to nearly \$46 billion.⁴⁸ In the energy sphere, India has regularly been beaten by China when it comes to securing energy acquisitions. In June 2013, India lost out when Astana blocked its deal to buy a major stake in the giant Kashagan oilfield from a US company; the Kazakh Government purchased it instead and then sold it on to China. China already receives 40 bcm of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan, a figure projected to rise much higher when Chinese pipelines from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are added. And there are concerns in India that China will resist its attempts to gain access to Central Asia's natural gas through the TAPI pipeline.⁴⁹ China's ability to compete successfully against India is also visible in its consolidation of transport networks with Central Asia that make up its own version of the Silk Road.

Recently there have been indications of rapprochement and of a more cooperative approach between India and China in Central Asia. In August 2013, senior officials from India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs met with their counterparts in Beijing to discuss a range of issues relating to Central Asia. These reportedly included "regional security and counter-terrorism, SCO, energy security, development partnerships, and people-to-people contacts with the countries of the region".⁵⁰ They were the first ever official bilateral talks on the region held between the two countries, and open the possibility of further cooperation between New Delhi and Beijing.⁵¹ Subsequently a delegation from China headed to New Delhi to discuss issues related to Afghanistan, including the consequences of NATO withdrawal in 2014.

India and China clearly have some shared concerns in the region, especially where issues of security are concerned, and the August talks identified a number of areas of potential complementarity between the two countries. One area reportedly discussed is the complementarity of India's expertise in service sectors, including IT and banking, with China's major investment in Central Asian infrastructure.⁵² Nevertheless, and despite public statements to the contrary,⁵³ most analysts take the view that India's engagement in the region will continue to be characterised by competition with China. Indeed, the September 2013 visit to Central Asia by Chinese Premier Xi – when the media reported that contracts worth almost \$100 billion were signed⁵⁴ – has reinforced

⁴⁶ Xinhua, *Xi proposes a 'new Silk Road' with Central Asia*, 8 September 2013, www.chinadaily.com.cn/sunday/2013-09/08/content_16952160.htm

⁴⁷ Meena Singh Roy (2012) *SM Krishna's Visit to Tajikistan and India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses; http://idsa.in/idsacomments/SMKrishnasVisittoTajikistan_MeenaSRoy_050712 Up-to-date official statistics for India's trade and investment in Central Asia are hard to locate, though see Government of India, Department of Trade, Foreign Trade performance analysis at <http://commerce.nic.in/ftpa/rngcnc.asp> and p. 82 of <http://dgftcom.nic.in/exim/2000/statrep/rep0910/are0910.pdf>.

⁴⁸ China Daily (September 8, 2013), *Xi proposes a new 'Silk Road with Central Asia'*; www.chinadaily.com.cn/sunday/2013-09/08/content_16952160.htm

⁴⁹ Saferworld interview with Indian regional analyst, Delhi, October 2013

⁵⁰ Press Release on First India China Dialogue on Central Asia, Embassy of India, Beijing, China, www.indianembassy.org.cn/newsDetails.aspx?NewsId=421

⁵¹ Hindustan Times (August 14, 2013), *India, China hold first talks on Central Asia* www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/1108070.aspx

⁵² Saferworld interview with Indian regional analyst, Delhi, October 2013

⁵³ The Indian Express (April 18, 2013), *No clash between India, China to up stakes in Tajikistan, says Ansari*; www.indianexpress.com/news/no-clash-between-india-china-to-up-stakes-in-tajikistan-says-ansari/1104015/

⁵⁴ The China Post (October 9), *Xi buckles Central Asian belt*; www.chinapost.com.tw/commentary/the-china-post/frank-ching/2013/10/09/390815/p1/Xi-buckles.htm

Indian fears that China will undermine its own contract negotiations for energy supplies.⁵⁵

India – United States

The other key player with regard to India's role in Central Asia is the United States. Washington has supported an expanded Indian role in Central Asia, evident in the US strategy for a New Silk Road which would link India with Central Asia – and ultimately with the West. This initiative, launched in 2011, aims to help stabilise Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region by developing cross- and intra-regional trade, energy, and transit connections.⁵⁶ It is also perceived as a means for the US to sustain its economic interests in the Central Asia region by bypassing Russia, Iran, and China while linking India with Europe via Central Asia – thus providing new investment opportunities for US business.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, US involvement in Afghanistan is seen to expand the political, economic and military space available to India in the region. According to Stephen Blank, “Washington's presence allows India to play, or at least aspire to, a greater Central Asian role than it could achieve on its own. Washington also counts on New Delhi playing an expanded role in Afghanistan and Central Asia as its troops depart Afghanistan.”⁵⁸ Kaplan goes further and avers that “As the United States and China become great power rivals, the direction in which India tilts could determine the course of geopolitics in Eurasia in the 21st century. India, in other words, looms as the ultimate pivot state.”⁵⁹

However, India is yet to capitalise on this ostensibly pivotal role in Central Asia. It continues to lag behind Russia and especially China in the region. China's obstructionism towards Indian efforts to engage in Central Asia also suggests that it may view India as a ‘stalking horse’ for the United States.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, China is well advanced in the process of building its own ‘Silk Road’, well before US–India plans to revive the historical trading route have got beyond the drawing-board.⁶¹

⁵⁵ Blank, S (2013), *India's strategic failure in Central Asia*, The Diplomat; <http://thediplomat.com/2013/06/11/indias-strategic-failure-in-central-asia/?all=true>

⁵⁶ US Department of State, US Support for New Silk Road; www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/

⁵⁷ US Department of State (March 2013), *The New Silk Road and Regional Economic Integration*; www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2013/206167.htm

⁵⁸ *Op cit* Blank 2013

⁵⁹ *Op cit* Kaplan

⁶⁰ *Op cit* Blank 2013

⁶¹ LeVine, S (2013), *While the US talks about saving Afghanistan with a new Silk Road, China is actually doing it*; <http://qz.com/110085/while-the-us-talks-about-saving-afghanistan-with-a-new-silk-road-china-is-actually-doing-it/>

4

Conclusions

IT IS CLEAR FROM THE FOREGOING ANALYSIS that India's strategic approach lies in the "development of strong ties with the countries of Central Asia along the energy and security vectors."⁶² However, India's experiences in Central Asia over the past decade demonstrate the challenges of competing with China on energy issues and with Russia on matters of regional security. Thus far, India has managed to secure only a tenuous foothold in Central Asia when considered alongside other major players in the region.

Many analysts take the view that India has yet to translate the aspirations of its recent Connect Central Asia policy statement into strategic and sustained policy action. Despite much talk of India's growing role in Central Asia, it remains essentially a minor player and is unable to compete with China or Russia. Analysts Marlene Laruelle, Jean-Francois Huchet, Sebastien Peyrouse, and Bayram Balci conclude that despite signs of Sino-Indian rivalry in some areas such as energy acquisition, India's business presence in the region is minimal.⁶³

It is also not yet apparent that India is willing and able to invest the considerable amounts of economic, military, and diplomatic capital required to turn the Connect Central Asia policy into practice. While Indian officials may proclaim Central Asia a priority of Indian foreign and security policy, India is not at present among the major influential powers in the region. Laruelle and Peyrouse conclude that talk of the priority New Delhi gives to Central Asia and efforts to cut a major figure there are more aspirational than actual and "its discursive activity by far exceeds the reality of bilateral relationships."⁶⁴

As we approach 2014, recent experience suggests that as the US presence in Afghanistan diminishes, the more established regional players – notably China and Russia – will continue to constrain India's ability to project meaningful economic or military power in Central Asia.⁶⁵ Notwithstanding the recent bilateral talks between Indian and Chinese officials regarding cooperation in Central Asia, the risk is that India will continue to be thwarted by China on issues of energy security and by Russia on issues of military security.

⁶² *Op cit* Sahgal, A & Anand, V

⁶³ Laruelle, M, Huchet, J, Peyrouse, S & Balci, B Eds (2011) *China and India in Central Asia: A New "Great Game"?* Asian Politics & Policy

⁶⁴ *Op cit* Laruelle & Peyrouse Eds (2011)

⁶⁵ *Op cit* Blank (2013)

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

COVER PHOTO: The main road from Batken to Leilek in Kyrgyzstan passes through the Tajik enclave of Sogh and then Chorkukh in Tajikistan proper. Kyrgyz nationals can use this road without a visa, although incidents involving Tajik border guards are known to occur. Foreign nationals, however, must use a newly built detour along the fine line between Chorkukh and the Tajik enclave of Vorukh. © KAREN WYKURZ



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