India and Central Asia*
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By extraordinary turns of events, relations between the Indian sub-continent and Central Asia, stretching back to ancient times, have acquired renewed importance – albeit for totally different reasons. During the early period of recorded history, it was the migration of pastoral communities – sometimes peaceful, other times not – which moulded history. Today, it is the drive for improving the living standards of tens of millions of settled people that has become the prime narrative of the political and economic chronicle.

It was from the steppes to the North and East of the Caspian Sea that the nomadic, pastoral Aryan tribes, facing lack of pastures, began migrating southwards, and arrived in the Indo-Gangetic plains around 1500 BC. Later, around 1000 AD, Sultan Mahmud, the Turkic ruler of present day Afghanistan and parts of Uzbekistan, extended his realm into the Indian subcontinent, setting in motion a process that led to the Delhi Sultanates (1206-1526). The founder of the subsequent Mughal Empire, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1483-1530), was born in Andijan, the fourth largest city in contemporary Uzbekistan. In his journal, the Babur Nama, he refers repeatedly to Transoxania, meaning beyond the Oxus River, which is today's Central Asia – also known as Eurasia.

By happenstance, the Republic of India became the first country to establish its embassy in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent in 1992. It did so by upgrading its already existing consulate after the erstwhile Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic declared itself independent in December 1991 and became the Republic of Uzbekistan. The consulate was established during the Soviet era to serve the large number of Indian students at the V.I. Lenin Tashkent State University (renamed National University of Uzbekistan), most of them pursuing a degree in petroleum engineering.

At one billion (1,000 million) barrels of oil, Uzbekistan's petroleum reserves are modest. But its natural gas reserves of 66.2 trillion (1,000 billion) cubic feet of natural gas are enough to enable it to export the gas to the neighbouring Tajikistan. However, Uzbekistan's greater importance lies in its strategic location and the size of its population. It has common borders with the remaining Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. At 28 million, its population is almost equal to the combined populations of the rest of the Eurasian republics.

While sharing their Soviet heritage they have developed differently since their independence two decades ago. Each of the five republics now has a distinct geopolitical identity. Uzbekistan has adopted Emir Timur Beg (also known as Tamerlane) as the progenitor of the Uzbek nation, with his statue erected where Lenin's used to stand. The fact that Timur Beg was not an ethnic Uzbek has been conveniently overlooked.

In Turkmenistan, President, Saparmurat Niyazov (r. 1991-2006) tried to forge the Turkmen identity by publishing Ruhnama (Journal of the Soul) – a hotch potch of revisionist history, petty philosophising, and unsubstantiated claims – as a cultural and moral guidebook for Turkmens. In Kyrgyzstan, the nation has grounded its identity in the Manas, an epic poem of 500,000 lines of verse about the eponymous Kyrgyz superhero. Twice the length of the Mahabharata, the Manas is as stirring as the Iliad and as episodic as Don Quixote. The Tajik government has pegged the history of the nation to Emir Ismail Samani (r. 892-907) who ruled both Transoxiana and Khorasan (Eastern Iran). Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev chose Khwaja Ahmad Yasawi (1106-66) as the epitome of Kazakh identity; a popular Sufi poet who composed poems in Turkish, rather than Persian, the language of literature, he brought Islam to Turkistan, the present-day Southern Kazakhstan

In area, Kazakhstan dwarfs all other 'istans' (countries) in Eurasia. At 2,717,300 sq km (1,049,155 sq miles), it is four-fifths the size of India. Yet its population of 16.5 million is less than that of Metropolitan Delhi with its 19 million residents.

Kazakhstan is vast not only in its area but also in the size of its oil reserves. At nearly 40 billion barrels they are the second highest in the former Soviet Union, after Russia. Therein lies the attraction of Kazakhstan to the energy-hungry mega nations of India and China. In 2005, their oil companies competed for Kazakhstan's petroleum. On one side was China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), the country's largest oil and gas producer, and on the other ONGC Mittal Energy (OME), a combination of India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation and the steelmaking Mittal group. At stake was the future of the Canadian-registered Petro Kazakhstan Incorporated, the third largest producer of oil in Kazakhstan. CNPC outbid OME – but only after, in the words of then Indian petroleum minister Mani Shankar Aiyar, "the goalposts were changed after the game began."

The other Central Asian country that is of particular interest to India is Turkmenistan – and again for its energy needs. This sparsely populated country of 5 million has natural gas reserves of 286 trillion cubic feet. The only economic way to transport gas is by pumping it through a pipeline. The idea of erecting a pipeline to carry gas from Turkmenistan to the Indian sub-continent through Afghanistan came up in 1995. However, due to the political and military convulsions that Afghanistan suffered for the better part of the next decade, nothing substantial happened. It was not until 2005 that the Asian Development Bank (ADB) undertook a feasibility study for the proposed pipeline after the governments of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan had signed a fresh agreement. However, the construction of the Turkmen section of the pipeline that was supposed to start in 2006, failed to materialise.

It was only in April 2008, when Pakistan, India and Afghanistan inked a framework agreement to buy natural gas from Turkmenistan that the 1,735-kilometer (1,080 mile) gas pipeline project acquired credibility. The next step was for the four neighboring countries to hammer out a contract that was acceptable to all. That happened in December 2010. Four months later ADB officials felt confident enough to predict that gas deliveries would start in 2016-17. Nonetheless, doubts about the security of the pipeline persist. Originating in Turkmenistan's Dawlatabad gas field, it will cross into Afghanistan at Herat, and then follow the highway to Kandahar on its way to Quetta in Pakistan. This region of Afghanistan is a bastion of the resurgent Taliban. President Hamid Karzai has promised to deploy 5,000 to 7,000 security personnel to safeguard the pipeline. Yet, the danger is that the Taliban will extract protection money in return for not blowing up the pipeline, and thus bolster its finances.

After the signing of the four-country agreement on the gas pipeline in the Turkmen capital of Ashgabat, the Indian petroleum minister Murli Deora hailed the pipeline as a modern version of the Silk Road. Others have called it the Peace Pipeline, hoping that it will persuade Pakistan and India with a history of animosity and tension to cooperate actively to keep the vitally needed gas flowing.

The pipeline might even prove an antidote to the anxiety that Delhi had aroused in Islamabad by stationing its warplanes at the Farkhor air base in Tajikistan. This happened in stages. It was after the 1992-96 Afghan civil war between the Northern Alliance (dominated by ethnic Tajiks) and the predominantly Pushtun Taliban – a creature of Pakistan – that the authorities in Tajikistan first came into contact with India's military. The Indian Army's technicians were flown in to repair the Soviet-made tanks and artillery that the defeated Northern Alliance had brought with it after its retreat from Kabul in September 1996. Unsurprisingly, soon after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in December 2001, the Tajik government invited India to construct a hospital at its Farkhor air base, located 40 miles north of its Afghan border. The next year it signed an agreement with Delhi for renovating the air base and stationing Indian Air Force planes there.

India also has ongoing programmes of training Tajik cadets at its military academies and awarding scholarships to Tajik students to study at its universities. Islamabad views these links of India with Tajikistan as part of its strategy to increase its influence in Afghanistan with the ultimate goal of breaking up Pakistan in a pincer move in a hot war. Thus, by now, the geopolitics of Central Asia has become interlinked with the Indian subcontinent for economic, military and political reasons.

* This is an abridged version of the talk delivered by Mr Dilip Hiro at USI on 09 Mar 2011.

Mr Dilip Hiro has authored 30 books, including 'Inside Central Asia: A Political and Cultural History of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Iran', published by Harper Collins India.

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