

A Perspective on India-Tajikistan Strategic Partnership

Shri Raj Kumar Sharma@

Introduction

Tajikistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia. It shares 1206 km of porous border with Afghanistan in south, 414 km border with China in east, 870 km with Kyrgyzstan in north-east and 1161 km border with Uzbekistan in north-west.¹ Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) is separated from Tajikistan by a narrow strip (varying between 16 km to 65 km in width) called 'Wakhan Corridor' running through Afghanistan. India sees the Central Asian Republics (CARs) as its 'near abroad' or 'extended neighbourhood'. Since PoK is an integral part of India, Tajikistan is the nearest Central Asian neighbour to India. Tajikistan has strategic importance for India due to its proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan, PoK and Jammu and Kashmir. If there is any radical presence in Tajikistan, this could have spillover effects on PoK and Jammu and Kashmir as well. The spillover effect is likely to be extended in other CARs as well, since Tajikistan is geographically a gateway to Central Asia. Hence, Tajikistan remains critical for peace and stability in Central and South Asia.

India-Tajikistan Strategic Relations

India-Tajikistan relations are rooted in ancient history and culture. Present day Tajikistan was part of ancient Persian and Kushan empires which had close cultural ties with India². There are also ethnic and linguistic similarities between the two countries. As Tajikistan became an independent country after dissolution of former Soviet Union, India opened its embassy in Dushanbe in May 1994 while Tajikistan opened its consulate in Delhi in 2003. It was later upgraded to a full-fledged embassy in 2006.

India and Tajikistan share similar concerns about extremism and terrorism which threaten these two secular and multi-ethnic states. Events in Afghanistan and Pakistan have security implications for both the countries. Tajikistan shares long porous border with Afghanistan. If Afghanistan falls to radical elements, Tajikistan would be the next target which will have spillover effects over other CARs too. Likewise, radical influence in Afghanistan does not bode well for India, as it will threaten Indian investments in Afghanistan and also will increase cross border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.

India and Tajikistan have been conscious of these aspects and started to strategically cooperate in early 1990s. President of Tajikistan, Emamoli Rakhmanov, during his first Indian visit in 1995 stated in 'Declaration for Further Developing Friendly Relations between the Republic of India and Republic of Tajikistan', the need for these two multi-ethnic pluralist states to cooperate actively to preserve their state structures from threats of terrorism. He had also stressed the need for India's role in the Afghan peace process.³

India-Tajikistan strategic cooperation attained new heights when Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in 1996. Northern Alliance (NA) led by Ahmed Shah Massoud was fighting against the Taliban and it received assistance from India, Tajikistan, Russia, Iran and Turkey. India also built a hospital at Farkhor near Tajikistan's southern border with Afghanistan to treat injured fighters of the NA.⁴

The high level bilateral exchanges have been a major feature of India-Tajikistan relations. The President of Tajikistan, Emamoli Rakhmanov, during his 2001 India visit fully supported India's claim for a permanent membership of the UN Security Council while the then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpeyee described joint Tajik-India action as a 'stabilising factor' for the region.⁵ Defence cooperation between India and Tajikistan was taken to a new level when both the countries signed a bilateral Defence Agreement in 2002. The volatile situation in Afghanistan seemed to have been one of the main reasons for this development. The US had launched its 'War on Terrorism' in Afghanistan after the 9 Sep 2001 terrorist attack and there were fears that the radicals could try to find a safe haven in Central Asia or even in PoK, which would impact security situation in India and Tajikistan.

Under the 2002 Defence Agreement, India also upgraded the Soviet era airfield at Ayni, 15 km from Dushanbe costing around USD 70 million. India also conducted its first overseas military exercise with Tajikistan in 2003 to strengthen its counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism capacity. To further strengthen the bilateral ties, Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpeyee visited Tajikistan in November 2003. The joint statement issued after Vajpeyee's meeting with Rakhmanov made a reference to the steady progress in defence exchanges between the two countries and their intent to further intensify these relations.⁶ Another important feature was that both countries agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on counter-terrorism and also signed an extradition treaty. India also agreed to assist in building a highway that would give Tajikistan a link and access to Chabahar port in Iran through friendly areas of Afghanistan.⁷

Former Indian President Pratibha Devisingh Patil had paid a state visit to Tajikistan in Sept 2009 while Indian Vice President, Hamid Ansari visited Tajikistan in April 2013. Tajikistan remains at the forefront of India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy. This policy seeks to intensify India's links with the CARs by helping them in areas like agriculture, health, education, banking and information and technology. Keeping in view their convergence of strategic interests, India and Tajikistan elevated their bilateral relations to the level of long term strategic partnership in 2012, when President of Tajikistan was on his 5th official visit to India. This partnership will encompass cooperation in political, economic, education, health, defence, counter-terrorism, science and technology, culture and tourism. Both the countries also said in the joint statement that terrorism was a threat to global peace and security and condemned those who supported terrorism. They also underscored that those who aid, abet and shelter terrorists are as guilty of acts of terrorism as the actual perpetrators. This shows that Tajikistan does not support Pakistan's state sponsored terrorism aimed against India. More importantly, Tajikistan remains neutral on Kashmir issue, treating it as a bilateral issue between India and Pakistan.⁸

India focuses on 'capacity building' approach in its defence relations with Tajikistan. Due to increasing radicalisation in Pakistan, volatile situation in Afghanistan and the proposed US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan

this year, security situation could be at risk in both India and Tajikistan. Stability in Afghanistan remains critical for stability in Tajikistan which further ensures peace and stability in Central Asia. Taliban linked terror groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan pose a threat to Tajikistan. Information sharing, material support and joint exercises are another component of India's efforts to strengthen Tajikistan's defence capability. India is helping Tajikistan in building an effective air force, as India upgraded the Ayni airfield in 2010. India has gifted military uniforms, jeeps and trucks, two Mi-8 helicopters along with spare parts and consumables to Tajikistan.⁹ India is also providing free training to large number of Tajik military cadets and young officers at various defence training institutes in India.¹⁰ In 2013, India also airlifted a military hospital, with doctors, paramedics and equipment to establish the "India-Tajik Friendship Hospital" in southern Tajikistan. The 50-bed hospital will treat both military as well as civilian people.¹¹

Pakistan Factor in India-Tajikistan Relations

Pakistan had close security relations with the US during the Cold War era, due to which Soviet Union-Pakistan relations remained in a state of rivalry. Further, Soviet Union had close strategic relations with India which also distanced it from Pakistan. Hence, despite being closely located to Central Asia, Pakistan could not have much presence in Central Asia during the Soviet days. However, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia became important for Pakistan's security.

The disintegration of Soviet Union opened several opportunities for Pakistan in Central Asia as it could think of materialising its dream of forming an Islamic commonwealth in the region. Political elites in Pakistan envisioned forming a Muslim security belt from Turkey to Pakistan having CARs as the buckle. This was to provide Pakistan strategic depth and new allies for supporting its interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir.¹² However, leaving aside the initial phase of euphoria, the Central Asians have not responded to the Islam based overtures of Pakistan. This is because the Central Asian countries have a secular outlook, have Sufi influence and nomadic psyche which do not favour any fundamental tendency. Pakistan and Taliban backed Mujahideen had fought alongside the opposition forces during the civil war (1992-1997) in Tajikistan. This period coincided with Taliban rule in Afghanistan and Pakistan tried to extend its strategic depth in Central Asia by having a favourable government in Tajikistan as well. However, its plans could not fructify.

In the wake of India's growing strategic relations with Tajikistan, especially post 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, Pakistan has been trying to break new grounds with Tajikistan. Indian involvement at the Ayni airbase had raised concerns in Pakistan's security community, as they feared it could be used against them. Growing Indian presence in Afghanistan and Tajikistan is seen by Pakistan as Indian efforts to encircle it from the West. It was due to India's increasing presence in Central Asia that former President of Pakistan, General Pervez Musharraf had said that India ought to stay away from the region in a national television address after the US launched its 'War on Terrorism' in October 2001.¹³ He is also believed to have raised the issue of Indian military 'presence' in Tajikistan while meeting his Tajik counterpart Emamoli Rakhmanov in 2003 at Almaty.¹⁴ Pakistan was so much concerned about the issue that Tajikistan's Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov had to pay a special visit to Pakistan in January 2004 to allay its fears.

There has been exchange of high level visits between Tajikistan and Pakistan recently. Pakistan's Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif visited Tajikistan in June 2014. General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, former Chief of Army Staff visited Tajikistan in August 2013. Before that, former President Asif Ali Zardari had visited Tajikistan in 2009 and 2012. Kayani's Tajikistan visit highlighted Pakistan's 'strategic push' to Pakistan's Central Asia policy. However, no substantial security cooperation has come out of these visits. It must be mentioned that Pakistan's policy in Central Asia remains unchanged, though it is talking more about trade and cultural relations now than it did before. It pursues a dual policy in the region. On one hand, it talks about cooperation on terrorism while on the other; it uses terrorist groups as a 'bargaining chip' to extend its influence in the region.

With the proposed US-NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan this year, Pakistan is looking to re-energise its Central Asian policy. It is banking on China for securing its place as a permanent member whenever the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is expanded. Pakistan is also looking forward to provide the landlocked CARs access to sea through its Gwadar port. This seems to rival Indian attempts to provide Tajikistan access to Iran's Chabahar port via Afghanistan. The connecting route will be Chabahar-Kabul-Kunduz-Badakhshan.¹⁵ Despite Pakistan's efforts to have a robust policy in Central Asia, it must be mentioned that the Central Asian countries (especially Tajikistan) remain wary because of its support for radical elements.

Conclusion

Due to volatile situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan, India and Tajikistan are finding 'strategic convergence' of interests. This is evident from the recently held Afghanistan-Tajikistan-India trilateral meeting in August 2014 bringing together senior academic, former and serving officials from the three countries to explore possible areas of cooperation. A stable, independent, democratic and totally de-Talibanised Afghanistan is in the mutual interests of India and Tajikistan. However, the reality remains that future of Afghanistan is uncertain in the wake of US-NATO withdrawal from the country this year while the Taliban remains still a force to reckon with. The rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq and recent announcement by Al Qaeda about forming its new branch in Indian subcontinent could encourage radical elements in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This will not be in interests of India and Tajikistan as it will impact their internal security situation. These developments necessitate close strategic cooperation between India and Tajikistan which are natural partners in their quest for developing their secular, plural and democratic polities. Drug trafficking and proliferation of small arms are the other mutual concerns that the two countries share.

While strategic aspects of India-Tajikistan relations seem to be moving ahead, there is need to uplift economic relations. Tajikistan is making a transition from a state controlled economy to a market economy and requires financial assistance in areas like education, health, food security and infrastructure development. The total trade between the two countries stood at USD 55 million in 2013. This figure is below the potential and the two countries can cooperate in tourism, hydroelectricity and uranium trade. Mutual trade is also hampered by lack of direct connectivity between the two countries. However, once projects like International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are completed, this

hurdle too will be overcome. India's image of a secular democracy echoes well with the peace loving Central Asians than the radical image of Pakistan. India enjoys a positive public opinion and has much more to offer to these countries as compared to Pakistan in areas like pharmaceuticals, information technology and military know how. The CARs follow a multi-vector foreign policy which seeks to avoid too much dependence on a single country. Hence, they will encourage more Indian presence in Central Asia to balance China and Pakistan in the region.

Endnotes

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@Shri Raj Kumar Sharma is a doctoral research scholar at the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLIV, No. 598, October-December 2014.