

AFGHANISTAN FACTOR IN INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

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Abstract

The Central Asia has always been held at high strategic value for India. Geopolitical interests have obligated India and Central Asia to reconnect by reviving the rich legacy of historical and cultural engagements. This past affinity has been a bridge link to develop mutually close and meaningful relations. Due to the geostrategic salience of the Central Asia in terms of its immense proved natural resources, competition of regional and extra regional actors for strategic leverage and most importantly its geographical proximity with the fragile Afghanistan, the region remained vital in the Indian foreign policy radar. To boost its strategic foothold, India redesigned its foreign policy approach vis-à-vis Central Asia under various frameworks such as Look North Policy, Look West Policy, Extended Neighborhood, and the Connect Central Asia policy. To translate these policy projects into practice, Afghanistan remained important especially for connectivity and security. Against this backdrop, this paper is a humble attempt to examine how Afghanistan facilitates India's objectives vis-à-vis Central Asia. Moreover, the subsequent part of this paper will discuss the re-emergence of extremist forces in Afghanistan and their spillover effect to both South and Central Asia that compelled India to focus its policy towards the region.

Key Words: Strategic Significance of Central Asia, Geopolitical Competition, Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP), and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

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Introduction:

The historical and cultural contacts between India and Central Asia date back to earlier times of history. The cultural and economic interaction between India and Central Asia became particularly strong during the Greek and Saka rule and reached at apex under the Kushana Empire. The consolidation of Mughal Empire in India gave a boost to India's interaction with Central Asia, however, the colonization of India by the British and the annexation of Central Asia to the Tsarist Empire has frozen the relations between the two regions. The creation of Pakistan in 1947 resulted into India's cut-off from its historical and natural neighbours- Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Thus, serious obstacles emerged in India's interaction with these neighbours.

During the Soviet period, the socio-cultural relations between Central Asia and India were mediated through Moscow, as there was a lack of direct political relation between India and the Soviet Central Asian Republics (CAR's). The disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the path for India to re-establish the age-old ties with the five independent countries of Central Asia. Both India and the five newly emerged Central Asian states soon realized their mutual interests and importance as they knew that the other enjoyed a place of pre-eminence in their consciousness because of the long historic ties, common heritage, and close friendship and cooperation during the Soviet times. In order to solidify India's interests and find a new platform that could lay the groundwork for evolving an enduring policy, the Government of India had envisaged various policy frameworks such as Look North Policy, Look West Policy, Extended Neighbourhood Policy and finally the Connect Central Asia Policy in order to cement its ties with the land locked and resource rich CAR's. Due to absence of geographical proximity and land connectivity, Islamic extremism and the geostrategic competition among great powers and regional actors emerged as vibrant challenges for India's ties with the CAR's.

Furthermore, the fragile security environment and the reemergence of various extremists outfits particularly Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami, and ISIS and their possible spillover effect to both South and Central Asia challenged India from security point of view. These extremists outfits and their transnational nature and linkages with the Islamic and radical militant groups have been for a long run an obstacle to bridge India's ties with Central Asia. Keeping in view, India gave due

importance to Afghanistan as the latter serves the only viable option to engage itself with Central Asian countries. India has pledged more than US\$2 billion on various projects, emerging as the fifth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. India constructed the 218-Km long Zaranj-Delaram Highway, to access Central Asia via Chabahar sea port. The Chabahar-Milak-Zaranj-Delaram highway will open up the Indian market to Afghan Farm products and other exports.

Geostrategic Salience of Central Asia for India

The importance of Central Asia for India can be judged from three perspectives: historical-cultural, geopolitical and economic. The historical and cultural contacts between India and Central Asia date back to the very dawn of history. There has been a constant flow of culture and commerce between the two regions since the early times. Large number of immigrants came to India from Central Asia, some of them were scholars, scientists, technicians and artisans (Dash, 2012). The cultural and economic interaction between India and Central Asia became particularly strong during the Greek and Saka rule. However, the India-Central Asia relations reached at apex under the Kushana Empire (Bongard-Levin, 1971). This period witnessed lively and reciprocal cultural exchanges between Central Asia and India. According to Devahuti, Indians did not migrate to Central Asia in order to settle there as the inhospitable mountainous terrain and severe climatic conditions in those regions did not attract them but Central Asia provided them opportunities for trade as well as the spread of Buddhism (Rahman, 2007).

The relations between India and Central Asia intensified further when the Islamized Central Asian Turks established their control over north India in the early thirteenth century. Later on, the consolidation of Mughal Empire in India gave a boost to India's interaction with Central Asia. The political stability and economic prosperity under the Mughals led to the growth of India's trade with that region. However, the colonization of India by the British and the annexation of Central Asia to the Tsarist Empire led to the decline of trade between the two regions and consequent decrease in India's ties with that region (Kaw, 2010). It is very important to remember that with the creation of Pakistan in 1947, India was cut-off from its historical and natural neighbours- Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Thus, serious obstacles emerged in India's interaction with these neighbours.

During the Soviet period, the socio-cultural relations between Central Asia and India were mediated through Moscow, as there was a lack of direct political relation between India and the Soviet Central Asian Republics (CAR's). The Soviet authorities tried to keep Central Asia aloof from the rest of the world. However, due to the very special relationship that New Delhi enjoyed with Moscow, India was among very few countries which had access to these republics. The disintegration of Soviet Union was a setback for India as the former was the principal supplier of sophisticated arms, provided financial support, accepting payments in rupees for Soviet goods, but also extended immense political support to the country in the international arena. Its dissolution removed the main anchor of India's foreign policy.

However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union paved the path for India to re-establish the age-old ties with the five independent countries of Central Asia. India established diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in 1991 and 1992, and develop a framework for diplomatic, economic, and cultural cooperation with these countries. India sought good relations with the CAR's for several reasons besides its long historical connections with this region. Some of the India's key interests in the region were to prevent Pakistan from developing an anti-India coalition with the CAR's in the dispute over Kashmir; to persuade those states not to provide Pakistan assistance in its nuclear programme; to ensure continued contacts with long-standing commercial and military suppliers; and to provide new opportunities to Indian businesses (Sahgal, A. & Vinod A., 2017).

Both India and the five newly emerged Central Asian states soon realized their mutual interests and importance. Both knew that the other enjoyed a place of pre-eminence in their consciousness because of the long historic ties, common heritage, and close friendship and cooperation during the Soviet times. Against this backdrop, India upgraded its mission in Alma-Ata and Tashkent to open its embassies. On the other hand, Uzbek President, Islam Karimov visited India during August 1991 and President Nazarabayev of Kazakhstan visited India in February 1992. A slew of agreements were signed in the field of science, technology, culture, and especially economic and investment sectors (Dash, 2012).

Geopolitically, Central Asia has become an arena for competition between three big players- Russia, China, and the United States through its presence in Afghanistan- and three middle-tier players- Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. In this setting, and especially in view of China and Pakistan's aversion to India's involvement in the region, it is very difficult for New Delhi to directly exert influence in Central Asia. This feeling of isolation accentuates India's need to develop a new and cohesive strategy. Mehmet Ozkan is of the opinion that India is an outside power, and may influence the key questions in Central Asia in a mostly indirect way. He believes India needs to evolve a new strategy toward Central Asia, conceiving the region beyond Pakistan and China.

India's security interest was negatively impacted in the 1990s when the Russian influence in Central Asia weakened with a commensurate rise in the Chinese influence. This situation got partly stabilized with the growing United States presence in the region since 2001. There is a growing convergence between the United States and Indian interests, especially their reluctance to see the region fall under the exclusive influence of any one country. These shared strategic interests facilitating the reconnection of Central Asian states to the world economy and helping them sell their energy and other products in the global market. But New Delhi and Washington differ in their approach concerning the usefulness of Pakistan and Iran to reconnect Central Asia with the outside world (Feigenbaum, May 30, 2011).

As a buffer, the usefulness of Central Asia for India is three-fold: to prevent the creation of an Islamic belt allied to Pakistan, to forestall encirclement by either China or the USA, and finally to insulate India from narcotic terrorism that now plagues its northern borders. This security dimension has driven Indian investment in Afghanistan and military cooperation with Tajikistan (Moore, 2007). The biggest threat to India's and Central Asia's security and regional stability has originated from Afghanistan in the activities of radical extremists and drug traffickers. Islamic radicalism and its manifestations of separatism and extremism justifying terrorist methods of conflict create instability in Central Asia. India and Central Asia share this common threat as they share their borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan. In fact, a common threat unites them in combating the common adversary and strengthening future ties (Mann, 2001). However, in order to emerge as a prominent player in Central Asia, New Delhi needs a strategy and mechanism. The joining of SCO would enhance India's existing bilateral economic and military and other ties with the Central Asian states and Russia. Increasing military and other cooperation with Iran,

Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan is critical to India's strategic vision. Joining the SCO also provide a forum to engage China and strive towards a permanent, stable relationship with it.

India also has significant economic interests in Central Asia. Central Asia provides a market for India's emerging export industries. New Delhi intends to ensure reliable access to oil and gas sources originating in Central Asia and increase its trade and investment in the region. India wants cooperation with the energy exporting states of Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. A great power competition in Central Asia will make it difficult for India to pursue its goals. Hence, India's interest is best served through major power cooperation to bring stability to Afghanistan and the larger Central Asian region (Pant, 2011).

It is estimated that the Central Asia republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan have about 300 trillion cubic feet of gas and 90 to 200 billion barrels of oil. India has already started to gain access to the natural resources of the Central Asian region and it was in 2009 that an agreement was signed between Heads of India's Oil and Natural Gas Limited (ONGC), Videsh Limited (OVL), AND Kazakhstan's KazMunaiGaz (KMG). This was followed by an Exploration Contract between India's Ministry of Oil and Gas and the KMG in 2010. During the Indian Prime Minister, NarendraModi's Kazakhstan visit in July 2015, key agreements were signed including a defence pact to enhance military cooperation and a contract for supply of uranium (The Hindu, 2015).

India's Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP)

In order to clarify India's interests and find a new platform that could lay the groundwork for evolving an enduring policy, the Government of India had envisaged its new Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP) in 2012. The CCAP outlines India's multifaceted pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian countries, individually and collectively (Kothari, 2014).The policy is anchored in broadening India's firm and long term strategic interest which will also serve to commensurate with India's rising profile on to the global stage. Greater emphasis was given on extending India's soft power, for example by setting up a Central Asian University in Bishkek that could evolve as a centre of excellence to impart world class education in areas like IT, management, philosophy and languages (AKI Press,

2012). The new policy also envisaged replicating India's success of the Pan Africa e-network by creating a similar project of Tele-education and Tele-medicine connectivity, linking all the five Central Asian states. The CCAP was launched at India's first Track 1.5 diplomacy in the framework of India-Central Asia Dialogue held in Bishkek on June 12-13, 2012. The dialogue was inaugurated jointly by the Minister of State for External Affairs E.Ahamed and the former Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva (Kothari, 2014). The Dialogue was held under the joint aegis of the Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA) and the World Diplomatic Academy, Bishkek. Broadly, the "Connect Central Asia Policy" envisaged the following:

- (1) To build strong political relations through the exchange of high level visits at both in bilateral and multilateral fora.
- (2) To strengthen strategic and security cooperation with focus on military training, joint research, counter-terrorism coordination and close consultations on Afghanistan.
- (3) To step up multi-lateral engagement with Central Asian partners using the synergy of joint efforts through existing for a like the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Custom Union.
- (4) To develop a long term partnership in the field of energy, natural resources and agricultural land use with value addition.
- (5) To cooperate in the medical field by setting up civil hospitals and clinics in Central Asia.
- (6) To set up a Central University in Bishkek as a centre of excellence to impact world class education in the fields of IT sector, philosophy, language, etc.
- (7) To set up a Central Asian e-network with its hub in India, to deliver, Tele-education and Tele-medicine connectivity, linking all the five Central Asian States.
- (8) To encourage Indian companies to showcase their capabilities in building world class structures at competitive rates.
- (9) To improve land connectivity, by reactivating the international North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and bridging the missing links in the Corridor.
- (10) To promote a viable Indian banking infrastructure in the region.
- (11) To improve air connectivity with Central Asia with a view to promote tourism between the countries.

(12) To promote people-to-people contacts through exchanges of youth, future leaders, scholars, academics, and civil society in order to gain deeper insights into each other's cultures.

Connectivity as a linchpin in India's Engagements with Central Asia

Under the present circumstances, there are several drawbacks in enhancing the relationships and governmental interactions of India with the Central Asian region. It seems to be very difficult to bring energy directly and easily from the region in the present settings of South and Central Asia. Here are some of vibrant challenges that makes hindrance in India-Central Asia connectivity:

(a) Lack of direct route connectivity: India has been lacking direct land route links since its partition. This forms the fundamental challenge in establishing easy and sustainable connection. This poses a great difficulty for India's trade with Central Asia as it has to seek other options to connect with Central Asia. Land route connection plays a key role in developing trade and transport of energy materials (Foshko, 2012).

(b) India's relations with Neighbouring countries and weak border: This is the main geopolitical challenge and associated problem with the above stated point. Governments of India's neighbours are poor, corrupt, unstable and dysfunctional, and can be easily manipulated (Singh, 2014). Moreover, India has hostile neighbours like Pakistan and China. China's encirclement of India via Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan poses problems for its security. These types of relationships with neighbouring countries and weak borders (e.g. Pakistan's infiltration into Kashmir, pressures of migration from Bangladesh, Tamils' identity in Sri Lanka and Nepal's open borders) made India an isolated land which has to struggle for making presence across the region (Jacob, 2005). These conditions are the major challenge for projects like the TAPI pipeline as Indian government apprehends that Pakistan would do everything possible to jeopardize its energy security. In addition, the present political situation of Afghanistan not conducive to this project.

(c) Islamic extremism: This issue has been focal point of India's concern on its national security. The terrorist activities such as Taliban insurgency on domestic soil of Afghanistan and Pakistan has been unthreatening. The attack on Indian Parliament in 2001 and Mumbai attacks in 2008, masterminded by Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are telling examples. Due to the

proximity of CARs to the Afghan border, Central Asian countries are also experiencing terrorist activities and drug trafficking which has become a big security concern for India too. The threat of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihadists Union (IJU) undermining domestic stability are grappling the region (Sharan 2012). Since there is always threat of disruption to India's energy initiatives across the region it has become vital for India to ensure strategic and border security along with energy security.

(d) Geopolitical competition between great powers in the energy sector: There is an intense competition in the region between great powers of the world such as the US, Russia and emerging power China, which are economically as well as politically involved in the region, in the energy sector. China is one of the major energy competitors for India in the Central Asian energy story. Chinese companies are outbidding the Indian companies like ONGC Videsh Ltd(Singh, 2014). Recently, in 2013 China won \$5 Billion oil deal from India, thereby facing intense competition with China. Russia wanted to maintain its soviet legacy over the region. Both China and Russia are members of SCO and aiming at reducing the US influence in the region. On the other hand, the US is trying to exploit energy resources of the region and make this a strategic base to control Islamic terrorism (Ahmad 2010). Hence India has to push its interests through the interplay of these powers and across their individual interests. Moreover, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey are trying to pursuing their interests in the region and Pakistan continues not only to block India geographically but also politically.

In short, India has been lagging behind in meeting its energy needs in Central Asia because of these challenges. Nevertheless, India has been trying to make foothold in the region in several ways using its soft power and investment measurements and diplomatic and political negotiations. It is with such an intention India has recently launched the CCAP which covers all areas of India's goals to achieve in the region. It is an integrated, multifaceted and long-duration strategy to achieve positive results on Central Asia. Such a concerted approach would allow India to push its energy priorities with regard to CARs.

Afghanistan: A Deciding Factor in India-Central Asia Relations

With its geo-strategic location, Afghanistan has remained a focus of India's regional foreign policy, despite the emergence of several events that led India's diplomatic isolation in Afghanistan like the rise of Afghan Mujahideen, disintegration of Soviet Union, ousting of pro-India Rabbani government. Moreover, India supported the non-Pushtun groups which were opposing the Taliban regime and formed the Northern Alliance that controlled areas in the north of Afghanistan. India also provided technical support, high altitude warfare equipments, and medical facilities in the borders of Tajikistan by establishing a hospital in Farkhor on the Afghan-Tajik border and provided medical assistance to soldiers(Dar, 2014).

The advent of Taliban in 1996, however, resulted in complete rupture in Indo-Afghan relations as Taliban shared close relationship with Pakistan's military and Intelligence establishment. India started renewing its diplomatic ties with Afghanistan after the U.S.- led coalition forces in response to the 9/11 attacks removed Taliban from power by late 2001. Immediately after Karzai took the reins of Afghanistan's interim government, India's Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, on December 22, 2001, flew to Afghanistan to participate in Karzai's inauguration and to re-open the Indian embassy, which was closed on the eve of the Taliban's capture of Kabul in 1996 (Fair 180). Since then, India's relations with Afghanistan have improved considerably. India had adopted the 'Soft Power Approach' by avoiding any sort of military engagement towards Afghanistan.

With the commencement of the Interim Government led by Hamid Karzai, Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee immediately announced a U.S. \$100 million in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan (The Tribune, 22 Jan 2002). Since 2001, India has already pledged more than \$2 billion on various projects, emerging as the fifth largest bilateral donor to Afghanistan. India's assistance was largely directed towards education, health and infrastructure related activities. This civilian-centric policy helped in augmenting mutual trust. Despite periodic attacks on Border Roads Organisation (BRO) personnel, India has till now successfully constructed the 218-Km long highway linking the town of Zaranj near the Iranian border to Delaram in the northeast Afghanistan. India has also played a significant and commendable role in constructing roads which have improved Afghanistan's connectivity with strategic ports thereby reducing Kabul's

dependence on Pakistan. India has so far been able to increase Afghanistan's connectivity with the Iranian port of Chabahar which has led to an indirect decrease in Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani ports of Gwadar and Karachi (Khan 83).

India's effort at developing the Chabahar Port in Iran is also based on the fact that it provides India with the most viable option of gaining access to Afghanistan since Pakistan has refused to provide transit route to Indian goods bound for Afghanistan through its territory. India used the port in 2012 to deliver humanitarian aid to Afghanistan demonstrating that the sea-route access to Afghanistan through Pakistan is not the only option available to India in the long run (Mullen, 8 May 2012). India has successfully renovated the damaged Indira Gandhi Institute of Child Health and has regularly dispatched teams of doctors to Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kandahar to attend to the massive medical needs of Afghanistan (Kumar 388). On December 25, 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the Afghan parliament building that was constructed by India at a cost of USD 90 million (Hindustan Times, 25 December 2015).

Since 2001, several high level official visits from both countries have strengthened and enhanced cooperation between the two countries. For instance, India and Afghanistan signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) in 2003, aimed at removing all obstacles in the way of increasing mutual trade and commerce (The Times of India, 6 March 2003). Similarly, in 2005, when Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh met Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul they agreed on expanding bilateral cooperation to wide ranging areas including development, defence, education, energy, trade, combating terrorism and working towards greater economic and cultural integration of South Asia. India also threw its support behind Afghanistan's entry into SAARC as a full-fledged member (Dar, 2014). On October 4, 2011, India and Afghanistan signed a milestone agreement on "Strategic Partnership" that included provision for both security and economic cooperation, training and equipping of Afghan National Security Forces, provision of economic aid and assistance, development of mining and energy production, and establishment of 'strategic dialogue' between their national security advisers to provide a framework for cooperation in the area of national security¹.

¹ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (04 October 2011). *Agreement on Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Republic of India*. Retrieved from:

However, the new government in Afghanistan came to power in 2014, it was being speculated that India has come down in the priority list of Afghanistan. The reason behind this skepticism was a major policy shift in Afghanistan's foreign policy towards Pakistan. The government of Afghanistan, under the leadership of Ashraf Ghani was convinced that Pakistan has unavoidable influence on the Taliban leadership, and has inevitable role in eventual peace settlement. Thus, Pakistan became a priority for Afghanistan (Tiwari, 2015). As of now, the relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan is worsening day-by-day as the border clashes between the two countries have got a new pace.

Furthermore, the security environment in Afghanistan is deteriorating day-by-day. The Taliban is giving a blow-back effect to security forces and gaining ground in Afghanistan. The Taliban captured the Kunduz province in 2015, which the ANSF recaptured only after intense fighting. Moving across the Kunduz, the Taliban increased their activities to other provinces of Afghanistan in the north like Faryab, Jawzjan, and Baghlan. More recently in March 2017, the Taliban captured Sangin district in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province. The current position of the Taliban depicts that they are more organized and better equipped than before. (Aljazeera, 19 March 2017). The re-emergence of Taliban means that there will be threats to Indian establishments, investments, embassy, consulates, etc. The attack on Indian consulate in Jalalabad on March 2, 2014, proves India's vulnerability to terrorist attacks.

The complete withdrawal of the Western troops increases the need for India to seek partners in the region that could help it pursue its goals in Afghanistan. For this, India and Iran have already collaborated to improve connectivity between Iran and Afghanistan. In order to explore possible avenues for cooperation on Afghanistan, New Delhi has also held dialogues with both Moscow and Beijing (Live Mint, 2017). There is much scope for collaboration on Afghanistan with the Central Asian countries as well. Besides their geo-political location, India and the Central Asian Republic's also share a number of similar concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan. In fact, strengthening strategic and security cooperation with the CARs, which includes close consultations on

<http://mfa.gov.af/content/files/agreement%20on%20strategic%20partnership%20between%20afghanistan%20and%20india%20-%20english.pdf>. Accessed on: December 15, 2015.

Afghanistan, besides military training, joint research and counterterrorism coordination is one of the principle goals of the “Connect Central Asia policy” (Bhatnagar, 2014).

The present security situation of Afghanistan clearly depicts that it is becoming a heaven for radical extremists and terror groups which is an overriding concern for India as the latter fears that terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Harkat-ulMujahideen could use Afghanistan as a base to train and operate against India, just as they had in the 1990s (Bhat, 2015). India is also concerned about the prospects of the Afghan conflict spilling over into Central Asia, which can have an impact on its security environment. The prospects, transnational nature and linkages of Islamic and radical militant groups based in Central Asia have for long been a concern in New Delhi. Tajikistan is separated from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir by only a small strip of Afghan territory, and is particularly vulnerable to the extremist forces. There are number of terrorist groups operating in Central Asia. Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the United Tajik Opposition, which once operated from bases in Afghanistan during the Taliban-era in the 1990s, pose a serious challenge to peace and stability in the region (Bleuer&Kazemi, 2014).The opium cultivation and drug smuggling from Afghanistan are as equally serious threats to the CAR’s. Drug addiction, human trafficking and powerful criminal networks are some of the other serious challenges to the region.² India, too, has an opium burden with drugs coming from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region which are affecting a growing number of people in Punjab.

Conclusion

Central Asia and Afghanistan serves as an important players of India’s extended neighbourhood policy. Under this policy, India had started to strengthen strategic outreach, develop economic and cultural interactions, and build regional collaborations. Nevertheless,both India and Central Asia have encountered challenges such as issues of connectivity, terrorism, socio-economic development, instability in Afghanistan and religious extremism.Bringing to fruition the existing projects on establishing physical connectivity with the Afghanistan as well as to Central Asian region is absolutely essential for India to become a critical actor in the region. The importance of

² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “Opiate Flows Through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment”, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012 http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-andanalysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf

Afghanistan can be seen as an enabler for India's objectives in Central Asia as well as an avenue for cooperation between India and the CARs. It is necessary for India to continue with its policy of engaging with both Afghanistan and the Central Asian countries. Although, the emerging security environment is not favourable for India, but it is important for New Delhi to remain committed to the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Apart from its bilateral engagements with Central Asian countries and Afghanistan, several multilateral initiatives such as the International North–South Trade Corridor (INSTC), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), provides India an opportunity to enhance its strategic moves in the region. Therefore, India’s active participation in these regional organizations is regarded as a significant diplomatic gesture to solidify its regional presence.

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