



ICT: A Tool for Revitalising India-Turkmenistan Relationship

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India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy got a boost with the visit of Minister for Communications and Information Technology Kapil Sibal to Turkmenistan's capital Ashgabat last month. He offered to share India's expertise in information, communication and technology sectors, including e-governance, e-education and e-health, with Turkmenistan. The proposals made during the visit highlight the potential of India's technological achievements in enlarging its presence in this Central Asian country.

Turkmenistan is opening up economically and politically under President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, who came to power in 2007. It adopted a new constitution in 2008, increased the size of the legislature, and very recently, replaced the single-party system with a multi-party system. On the economic front, Turkmenistan, a country of five million population and 24 billion dollar economy, has made notable progress in recent years. According to Economic Intelligence Unit, the Real GDP grew by 10 percent in 2011, and as per government data it grew by 14.7 percent.

On the international front, Turkmenistan has declared itself a country with 'permanent neutrality', which has been also approved by the U.N. in 1995. It is the only regional country which is not a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Ashgabat also downgraded its Commonwealth of Independent

States (CIS) membership to ‘Associate-member’ level in 2005. However, a reverse trend can be observed in post-Saparmurat Niyazov period, the country’s previous presidency. Turkmenistan has been actively engaged with the international community through multilateral platforms such as the U.N. Now, Ashgabat is keen on increasing its engagement with the CIS. It has also started its participation with the SCO as a ‘Guest’. Turkmenistan attended the last SCO summit held in Beijing in June 2012. Presently, Ashgabat is full member of more than 40 international organisations.

India and Turkmenistan enjoy good bilateral political relationship; Ashgabat supports India’s permanent position in the U.N. Security Council. The two countries have shared stakes in a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. However, India-Turkmenistan political relationship has not translated into greater economic engagement. The bilateral trade is much below its potential. In the 2011-12, the total trade between the two was a mere US \$ 60.8 million. The trade balance is in India’s favour, and being an IT power, New Delhi can further increase its economic presence in Turkmenistan. This would offset the future balance of trade that can be in Turkmenistan’s favour substantially once the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas supply commences and India starts making payments to Ashgabat.

New Delhi and Ashgabat, along with other partners, signed the TAPI natural gas sale-purchase agreement in May 2012. Turkmenistan – with fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world – is the source, and India is the final destination of the TAPI project. This gas pipeline is expected to be operational by 2018. Substantial progress has been made and last month, there were road shows of the project in Singapore, New York and London, which generated positive responses. Several companies and financial institutions expressed interests in joining the TAPI project. Currently, Turkmenistan exports gas to Europe via Russia; it also sells gas to China and Iran. It is hoped the Turkmen gas should reach South Asia by the end of the decade. Once operational, TAPI can be a ‘game changer’ in Central Asia – South Asia energy equations and it may open other vistas of cooperation between the two regions.

India’s ICT offers to Turkmenistan, which cover government-to-government, business-to-business and people-to-people sectors, can further strengthen their bilateral ties. New Delhi has proposed setting up an educational satellite for Turkmen students, which can be connected to India’s National Knowledge Network. Through this platform, students in Turkmenistan can

participate in Indian professors' lectures at different universities. They can also join academic sessions in different disciplines in various Indian educational institutions. India has also offered a wide range of expertise in setting up Optical Fibre Cable (OFC) network, Global Positioning System (GPS) network for shipping industry, which is significant for Turkmenistan with a long coastline of more than 1,750 kilometers and an important international seaport of Turkmanbashi in the Caspian Sea.

India's most interesting ICT offer to Turkmenistan appears to be Akash, a hand-held low-cost tablet computer, which can be very handy for Turkmen students. India has proposed a joint-venture of Indian and Turkmen companies to manufacture this device in India. Besides Turkmenistan, the joint-venture company can look for markets in other countries, including in the region. If this model succeeds, it can be repeated in other sectors as well.

India's progress in ICT can be a catalyst for deepening and widening mutual relationship of the two nations but there is a need to explore different areas of engagement. Immense opportunities exist in sectors such as infrastructure, pharmaceuticals and tourism. It will be mutually beneficial for the two countries' economies to encourage Turkmen entrepreneurs to explore investment and business opportunities in India, especially in the infrastructure sector. On the other hand, high income accruing from hydrocarbon exports has led to massive infrastructure development and construction activities in Turkmenistan; Indian companies may become a partner in this process. Similarly, increased per-capita income is likely to generate outbound tourists from Turkmenistan and an 'incredible India' can do more to attract the potential tourists. Besides, Turkmenistan is moving towards democracy, India's democratic credentials are already established, and New Delhi, if approached by Ashgabat, can assist in its endeavour. The future of India-Turkmenistan mutual cooperation seems bright.

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