



India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' Moves a Step Forward

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The 'Connect Central Asia Policy', unveiled at the backdrop of the First India-Central Asia Dialogue held in June 2012 reflects India's greater interest in connecting with its 'extended neighbourhood'. India's engagement with the region in the last twenty years has been limited and the new policy aims to promote pro-active engagement with the five "stans". India's approach to engage with the region both bilaterally and multilaterally is a positive step.

The official visit of President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon to India from 1-4 September 2012 is a step towards connecting with the region. This is President Rahmon's fifth visit to India. The decision to upgrade the bilateral relationship to the level of 'strategic partnership' shows the mutual interest in deepening ties. India has signed 'strategic partnership' agreement with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan too.

Tajikistan holds strategic significance for India, primarily because of its geographic location. It is located close to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) and it shares the longest border with Afghanistan in the region. Stability in Afghanistan is a common concern for India and Tajikistan, which figured in the bilateral discussions. Both sides also agreed to strengthen bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation.

Economic engagement is the weakest link in the bilateral relations and similar situation prevails with regard to other Central Asian Republics (CARs). India's trade with Tajikistan is abysmally poor. From US\$ 15.42 million in 2006-2007, the bilateral trade has increased only to US\$41.33 million in 2010-2011. This is partly due to lack of direct access to the region, which hinders the growth of robust bilateral trade ties. Increasing cooperation in areas that do not require direct land corridor would be mutually beneficial. Promoting Indian investments in Tajikistan is one such option and was reflected in the bilateral agreements signed during the visit. The Joint Statement underlines the potential areas of cooperation such as- Information Technology, e-connectivity, pharmaceuticals, biotechnology, textiles, silk, leather goods, mining and exploration; hydropower and renewable energy sources and tourism.

Tajikistan has rich water resources and is the second largest producer of hydroelectricity in the CIS. Indian companies, BHEL and NHPC have assisted in modernizing the Varzoh-I Hydropower Station, which is expected to start generating power soon. During the visit, BHEL signed a preliminary agreement with the Ministry of Energy and Industry of Tajikistan to establish a 100MW Hydro Electric Power Plant on the Zeravshan River in Tajikistan.

Given the limitations of access and connectivity with the region, India needs to identify a few projects in Tajikistan and see to its speedy implementation. This will lay the foundation for a stronger economic engagement in future.

Capacity building in the region is an important component of India's new policy to connect with the region. It finds resonance in the present bilateral discussions too. The present visit resulted in increasing the number of Tajik students coming to India under the ITEC programme from 100 to 150. Both sides have also signed documents to promote cultural exchanges, cooperation in the field of education, sports and youth development and health sector. President Rahmon's visit to India reflects mutual interests in developing meaningful bilateral ties. However, the visit emphasised more on the economic content of the bilateral engagement. Nothing substantial came out to enhance defence cooperation between the two countries. The Joint statement only mentions that the sides were satisfied with the "continuing expansion of defence cooperation". Tajik military personnel have been receiving training in India and some

have been trained in Tajikistan by Indian military officials. India has assisted in the reconstruction of the Gissar military aerodrome (also known as Ayni), which was inaugurated in 2010. However, the visit was silent on the future of Indian engagement in Gissar.

Another issue that should have been raised with the visiting President is India's participation in the Quadripartite Group established in 2009, which includes Russia, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Regional security and Afghanistan have featured prominently in the three quadripartite summits held so far.

Another important issue that the group has been discussing is the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000), a joint venture between Russia and Tajikistan, exporting 1,000 MW of electricity from Tajikistan to Pakistan and Afghanistan. India has friendly relationship with three of the four members of the Quadripartite Group. It is time India uses its relationship with these countries to seek participation in the Group, which would increase India's visibility in the region.

President Rahmon's visit to India after seven years is a step forward in cementing our ties. The bilateral relationship will qualitatively improve if newer vistas be explored and look beyond just economic cooperation. Speedy completion of the India-Tajik Friendship hospital in Tajikistan, setting up of more Information Technology Centres like the Bedil India Tajikistan Centre for Information Technology, increasing training opportunities for Tajik professionals, promoting educational exchanges and enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism would go a long way in deepening the relationship.

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