Indian Council of World Affairs
Sapru House, Barakhamba Road
New Delhi

ICWA Guest Column

Prime Minister Modi's Recent Visit to Central Asia

By

Ambassador (Retired) Yogendra Kumar

4 August, 2015

Prime Minister's just concluded visit to the Central Asian region and Ufa could not have been better timed. The region finds itself at a transformative point and India needs to get a measure of its regional stakes under the changed circumstances.

If, during the period up to 1991 of the US-USSR rivalry, Afghanistan was considered the fulcrum of the Eurasian, including South Asian, geopolitics; post-1991, the unfolding transition there coincided with that in the five Central Asian states triggered by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The uneasy leaderships of these countries – experiencing the difficulties of their own domestic political consolidation and external uncertainties of regional inter-state adjustments and of Russian leadership's changing attitude towards them – found themselves particularly vulnerable to Afghanistan's own turbulence and the pulls of cross-border affinities of the major ethnic groups of the adjacent border countries of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Not only was there interest on the part of the Central Asian leaderships about the changing fortunes of their co-ethnic groups in Afghanistan, but the spreading ideological, especially extremist Islamist contagion worried them; the nature of these regimes generated adversarial elements of their own, which found cozy havens in Afghanistan and the hilly regions of Pakistan's frontier province for recuperation and preparation for the next contest back at home. Although Tajikistan, due to its civil war (1992-1997), suffered the most, all countries felt vulnerable – in a 'domino' sort of way – due to their deliberately planned, artificial borders dating back to the Stalinist era.

Although these elements do not trouble India, there had been reports of some of these taking part in the "Kashmir Jihad" in the early 1990s; moreover, the widening gyre of political instability in the backdrop of jihadist extremism and trans-national criminality affecting large swathes of territory from Pakistan to Afghanistan and parts of Central Asia, would worry any Indian policy maker. A manifestation of the Indian concern was the support for the holding in check, howsoever tentatively, of the Taliban by the Northern Alliance led by late Ahmad Shah Masoud, who was also helped in varying degrees by the Central Asian governments despite the fact that the Taliban themselves had no intention of entering Central Asia; the American rollback operations of the Taliban, post-'9/11', were supported by all of them and they also caused significant damage to their own extremist elements in Afghanistan.

The current situation in Afghanistan is, once again, at an inflection point. The political consolidation in Afghanistan is not yet complete, as the government formation is still incomplete one

year after the somewhat indecisive presidential elections; this uncertainty is multiplied by government's talks with a group of Taliban about the country's future political order, which are also accompanied by reports that the former Northern Alliance might be resurrecting itself to countenance any unfavourable outcome of these talks. The Central Asian governments are also in some kind of transition, especially as the two most influential countries, namely, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, have ageing leaderships. Institutional fragility in the other countries still remains to varying degrees. The old adversarial groups have morphed themselves into new forms as new jihadist groups have come into existence with an ever lengthening reach into the Central Asian hinterland; extensive drug-trafficking networks and trans-national criminal networks are also impacting on the regional security situation.

The other dimension of the emerging strategic situation, affecting Central Asia, is the current tension between Russia and the West aggravating into 'Cold War.2' and of a confident China striding into the Eurasian space to create the sinews of an economic order, which could, potentially, countervail that of Western Europe; these developments are happening with both Russia and China entering a confrontational phase in their relations with the West. In the Central Asian regional context, China has emerged as a major economic driver, whilst the security provider continues to be Russia, whose economic and people-to-people contacts with the region can still be leveraged by it for strategic purposes.

The Prime Minister's visit, therefore, served to develop personal rapport with each of the Central Asian leaders, to get a feel of their perspectives on their own region, on Southwest Asia and on the regions beyond. It also helped him get a feel of the intra-regional relationships and structures as well as the pan-traditional institutions over-arching it. The visit also provided the occasion to tweak the relationship with the region and to take major initiatives. Some analysts have tried to describe it as India joining the 'Great Game'; but drawing a parallel with the 19th century British-Czarist rivalry would be a dangerous fallacy.

From the various meetings and joint documents, it is evident that there are three aspects to the Prime Minister's interactions. Terrorism and extremism have been important themes because all countries have concerns as these trends are worsening with the proliferation of such groups, including the emergence of ISIS in the region. There have also been reports that several Central Asian elements, earlier hiding in the tribal region of Pakistan, have made their way to Syria to join ISIS operations with

the aim to return to the respective countries with fresh battle experience; there has been Uzbek terrorist involvement in attacks in Pakistan and, most recently, the head of Tajikistan's Special Forces defected to ISIS. With all governments, reiteration was made to cooperate – or reinvigorate existing cooperation – amongst counter-terrorism organisations. Moreover, agreements exist, or have been made, for cooperation in defence, including joint exercises, training and defence equipment production. Although in nascent phase, they signify serious intentions on the part of India as well as the Central Asian countries.

The second important aspect is surface connectivity. Because of Pakistan blocking India's transit route to Central Asia in Afghanistan, the government has moved decisively to upgrade Iran's Chabahar port in the Persian Gulf to establish connectivity through Afghanistan and join the rail link via Iran and Turkmenistan. Prime Minister Modi made a pitch for reinvigorating the North-South Corridor starting from this port to Russia as well as Central Asia. He also pitched for India being able to accede to the Ashgabat Trade and Transit Agreement (2011) between Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Oman and Kazakhstan. Equally interestingly, India-Tajikistan joint statement talks of consultations about inclusion of India in the proposed Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Agreement, which is also being espoused by the Afghan President, Ashraf Ghani.

The third important aspect is the investment plans made by India in Central Asia. India's bilateral economic cooperation has been quite modest due to the lack of attractiveness of this market for Indian companies for a variety of reasons; primary one being the nature of their economic system. Significant announcements, during the visit, were made in hydrocarbons, petro-chemicals, infrastructure, strategic minerals, like uranium, IT, textiles, banking, *et cetera*. He also spoke of early implementation of the problematic TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline, which has been bedevilled by turbulence in Afghanistan and, now, in the Baluchistan area of Pakistan. Tantalisingly, Prime Minister Modi suggested to the Turkmen President an alternative land-sea route for the Turkmen gas via Iran: this could fit into the Indian government's recent initiative for an Iran-Oman-India subsea pipeline in the context of an agreement signed in February, 2015, between the Indian External Affairs Minister and Oman's Foreign Minister to resuscitate an earlier project conceived under the former Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao. A significant initiative to enlarge India's footprint in the region is tele-medicine programme for live consultations among specialty hospitals between India and Kyrgyzstan – a project, which could be extended to other countries as well.

India's acceptance as a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Opposition (SCO), along with Pakistan, is significant since it was the unanimous decision of the existing members, including China. The organisation's role is expected to grow in Central Asia and it is attempting to shape events in Afghanistan, for which it has a Contact Group, following the withdrawal of US troops. It also has a Defence Ministers' forum and a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), in Tashkent, both of which provide a unique forum for India and Pakistan's senior counter-terrorism and defence officials to interact; Xinhua quoted President Putin expressing hope that "... the SCO will be able to facilitate a compromise between India and Pakistan." This organisation, along with the BRICS and the China-created Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), paves the way for India's association with China's ambitious infrastructure programmes on the Eurasian landmass, notwithstanding its reservations on specific projects. India is also seriously considering FTA negotiations with Russia-inspired Eurasian Union.

The entire gamut of Prime Minister Modi's engagements in this tour signifies India's desire to be involved in the Russian and Chinese initiatives to economically reconfigure the Eurasian landmass on terms, largely, determined by China; given India's own size and heft, it also signifies serious Chinese interest in engaging India and, perhaps, to show some sensitivity to the latter – creating diplomatic space for India in the larger India-China-US triangle. It also signifies that India and Pakistan would be subjected, in terms of managing their own bilateral relations, to a different kind of dynamic – which also creates diplomatic space for India. Furthermore, Prime Minister's interactions in Central Asia also indicate the desire of the leaders there to welcome India to enlarge its footprint for the purpose of diversifying their own options *vis-a-vis* China and Russia.

Of course, all of these steps are for the future and have a certain aspirational aspect to them. A happy dénouement is contingent upon everything going according to the script. The real risk is in the situation getting out of control in Afghanistan and its cascading effect on Pakistan and Central Asia given that the practitioners of real-politik, whoever they are, may have their own calculations far apart from these grand visions. That may present India with far brutal dilemmas – as to how deep it must get into a quagmire and as to how to relook at the 'Great Game' in Central Asia.

(The author is Yogendra Kumar, former Ambassador of India to Tajikistan)