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The Afghanistan Factor in India's Approach to Central Asia*

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Introduction

Over the past decade, India has stepped up its efforts to reach out to the Central Asian Republics (CARs). New Delhi's approach to the region has been shaped, in part, by its interests in Afghanistan. Given the geographical location of the CARs—especially Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—and the convergence of objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan, greater engagement with these countries is crucial to India's Afghan policy.¹ India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy, announced in June 2012, can also be viewed in the context of the impending drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Given these strategic imperatives, a greater engagement with CARs is crucial for India's interests in Afghanistan.

But that is only a partial view. India also sees Afghanistan as a possible transit to Central Asia in the future, a gateway for a regional trade and transit hub. India has made efforts to achieve this end. However, just as there are limitations to India's engagement with the CARs on Afghanistan, there are a number of obstacles that have to be overcome before Afghanistan can become a viable transit route to Central Asia.

This Issue Brief seeks to examine the Afghanistan factor in India-Central Asia relations. The Brief is divided into two parts. The first section examines how Afghanistan facilitates India's objectives vis-a-vis Central Asia. The second explores the ways in which engagement with Central Asia could play a major role in furthering India's interests and objectives in Afghanistan.

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Accessing CARs

India sees the CARs as its “close political partners” in its “extended neighbourhood” and cultivating closer economic, strategic, cultural and defence ties with them are a key element of its foreign policy.² A number of factors drive this goal—its energy requirements, commercial interests, the desire to play a larger regional role and the need to balance the Chinese influence in the region. The 'Connect Central Asia' policy, which aims at increasing India's political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the CARs, is clearly an effort to strengthen its presence in the region.

But, at present, India is only a marginal player in Central Asia. Countries like Russia, China and the US have much greater presence and consequently leverage in the region. In Central Asia, India is seen as a rising power but not in the same league as China.³ Trade figures are one indicator of this fact. In comparison to India's total trade of \$800 million with the region, that of the other countries is significantly higher—China's total trade with the region amounts to nearly \$29 billion; Russia's and the European Union's is \$26 billion; Turkey (\$6.5 billion), Iran (\$4 billion) and the US (\$3 billion) are also significant trade partners.

Absence of geographical contiguity has been a major reason for the limited trade relationship. Without a viable transit corridor, trade potential with Central Asia has remained largely unrealised.

This gap could possibly be filled by Afghanistan. To realise this geographical reality, India has made moves to create infrastructure in Afghanistan which can effectively be utilised as a 'bridge' to Central Asia. India has been a firm supporter of the 'New Silk Road Initiative', viewing it as a “building block” of India's vision for “Afghanistan as a hub linking Central and South Asia through pipelines, trade and transit routes for the common good of the people of our region and the world”.⁴ This, India believes, could encourage the neighbouring countries to view Afghanistan as an avenue for cooperation and not rivalry.

India has in fact invested substantially in an attempt to realise the transit potential of Afghanistan. For instance, India has funded the Zaranj-Delaram Highway, which connects Zaranj on the Iranian border in western Afghanistan to Delaram, which is connected to Afghanistan's main highway linking Kandahar and Herat. After the 2014 drawdown, India is reportedly planning to extend the Northern Distribution Network route, which enters Afghanistan through Uzbekistan, to connect with this highway.⁵ In May 2013, India pledged \$100 million towards the development of the Chabahar Port in Iran⁶ and has also announced its plan to construct a rail link from the Hajigak iron-ore mines in central Afghanistan to Zahedan, which would then be linked to Chabahar. The development of a trans-Afghan transport corridor has been emphasised as a potential means to overcome the lack of connectivity during high-level exchanges that India has had with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.⁷

Despite such efforts, a number of obstacles and limitations prevent India from achieving its objectives in reaching out to Central Asia through Afghanistan. The most obvious one is the fact that India has no direct access to Afghanistan; it has to depend on a third party—Iran or Pakistan—for this. The Pakistan-Afghanistan route, however, is virtually a non-starter. Pakistan, which is wary of the increasing

Indian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia, has denied Indian goods transit through its territory. In fact, Afghanistan has also accused Pakistan of violating the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement, under which the Wagah border was meant to facilitate India-Afghanistan trade. Given the tenuous India-Pakistan bilateral relations, this option may not be the most durable one either.

This leaves India with one option—using the Iran-Afghanistan access to Central Asia. However, the progress in some of the key infrastructure projects has been slow. For instance, the pace of the Chabahar port's development has not matched expectations. While India believes that Iran has been reluctant to expedite the work, Iran blames India for a waning interest in the project. There is also a sense of disappointment in Iran over the magnitude of support pledged by India towards the development of the port.⁸

In the past, Iran's standoff with the Western powers over its nuclear programme had discouraged India from making large-scale investments in Iran. However, recent developments in the talks between Iran and the West, and the relaxation of some sanctions on Iran, may provide an opportunity for India to increase its engagement with Iran.

No less an important deterrent has been the security situation in Afghanistan. Persistent security concerns, for instance, have stalled the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Likewise, the Chinese have put on hold the exploration of the Mes Aynak copper deposits in Logar province for the same reason. A number of India's projects are also stuck because of security reasons. Besides, insurgent activities have derailed trade and commercial activities on the Zaranj-Delaram Highway. In September 2013, the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries reported that activities of insurgents and illegal armed groups were hampering commercial transport between Chabahar Port and Afghanistan's major cities.⁹

Apart from security, funding is another major constraint that needs to be overcome. Although India is keen on further expanding the existing infrastructure in Afghanistan to Central Asia, indications are that it may find it difficult to procure funding for this purpose. Uncertainty over Afghanistan's future has already led India to scale down its projects in the country. It has also been shy of starting any large-scale projects in the last few years and has opted instead for smaller development projects. For instance, the Salma Dam project was halted due to funding constraints as well as security concerns. This monetary crunch has also discouraged India's private sector from investing in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Engaging CARs

India's presence and influence in Afghanistan have never been as prominent as they are today.¹⁰ Having pledged more than \$2 billion to Afghanistan since 2001, India is among the largest bilateral donor nations to Afghanistan. New Delhi has repeatedly claimed that it has “no exit strategy” from Afghanistan and remains committed to the development of the country. The Strategic Partnership Agreement signed with Kabul in 2011, committing India to support Afghanistan in the political, security, economic and social spheres, is one indicator of India's future commitment to Afghanistan.¹¹

The new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also assured Afghanistan that India remains committed to “build a strong, independent and prosperous country”.¹²

The drawdown of foreign troops from Afghanistan, set to be completed by the end of 2014, poses challenges for India to maintain the same level of engagement with Afghanistan post-2014. The likely reduction of Western support also increases the need for India to seek partners in the region that could help it pursue its goals in Afghanistan. This is something that India also recognises and it has already sought to engage with other countries in the region on Afghanistan. India and Iran have already collaborated to improve connectivity between Iran and Afghanistan, and New Delhi has also held dialogues with both Moscow and Beijing to explore possible avenues for cooperation on Afghanistan.¹³

There is much scope for collaboration on Afghanistan with the CARs as well. Besides their location, India and the CARs also share a number of similar concerns vis-à-vis Afghanistan. In fact, one of the principle goals of the 'Connect Central Asia' policy has been strengthening strategic and security cooperation with the CARs, which includes close consultations on Afghanistan, besides military training, joint research and counterterrorism coordination.¹⁴

An unstable Afghanistan that could become a haven for radical extremists and terror groups is an overriding concern. India fears that terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyeba, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Harkat-ul Mujahideen could use Afghanistan as a base to train and operate against India, just as they had in the 1990s. 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.¹⁵ The prospects of Islamic and radical militant groups being based in Central Asia, and their transnational nature and linkages with other militant groups in the region, have for long been a concern in New Delhi.¹⁶ Tajikistan, separated from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir by only a small strip of Afghan territory, is particularly vulnerable to the extremist forces. Instability in Tajikistan or infiltration by radical extremists could have serious implications for India's security, especially with respect to Jammu & Kashmir.¹⁷

A number of terrorist groups have a presence in Central Asia. Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), reportedly responsible for a number of attacks in the region in the past few years, 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. Post-2014, there is a possibility of these groups moving into the Ferghana Valley from where they could create mayhem in the region. Such a possibility notwithstanding, the bigger threat from radical Islamic groups is likely to come from within the region than from groups connected to Afghanistan.¹⁸

The CARs see opium cultivation and drug smuggling from Afghanistan as equally serious threats. High levels of drug addiction, human trafficking and powerful criminal networks are some of the other serious associated challenges to the region. In 2010, 90 tons of heroin and 35-40 tons of opium were smuggled into the CARs from Northern Afghanistan, with Tajikistan being the worst affected.¹⁹ India, too, has its share of opium burden with drugs coming from the Afghanistan-Pakistan region affecting a growing number of people in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.

Military Engagement

Given the above concerns, the idea of an Indian military footprint in the region has been advocated. In the 1990s, India utilised military bases in Tajikistan to provide assistance and equipment to the Northern Alliance and ran an emergency hospital at Farkhor to treat its wounded soldiers. Media reports have suggested that India's role in the refurbishment of the Ayni airbase in recent years should be seen as a move towards New Delhi seeking a military presence for itself in Tajikistan.²⁰ However, such reports have little credibility in the absence of any official statement on the subject.

There are a number of factors that are unlikely to make an enduring Indian military presence in Tajikistan or anywhere else in Central Asia a viable option. Russia would strongly object to such developments in its 'sphere of influence'; it is believed that India's attempts to secure such a position for itself at Ayni were thwarted by Russian opposition.²¹ Moreover, such a scenario could antagonise Pakistan as well, which has for long feared military encirclement by India.²² In fact, when reports had surfaced of India securing a base for itself at Farkhor, General Pervez Musharraf, the then President of Pakistan, had raised objections arguing that such a base would allow India to dominate the Pakistani airspace.²³

Instead, India's military cooperation with the CARs should be focussed on expanding the existing mechanisms for engagement in the region. India has joint working groups on counterterrorism with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which have been meeting regularly. The objective of these working groups has been to exchange intelligence and data. India has also signed Military-Technical Cooperation Agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which provide for the construction of training facilities, the purchase of defence equipment and the regular exchange of high-level military delegations.²⁴ Thus, the renovation of the Ayni airbase at reportedly \$70 million, including the upgrading of the runway and building and equipping of hangars—as well as plans to set up a joint high-altitude military research centre in Kyrgyzstan and a military hospital in Tajikistan—should be seen in this context. Besides, India has also trained military officers and soldiers from Central Asian countries. Although, such defence cooperation may not improve the security situation in Afghanistan, it can help in developing the capacity of the Central Asian states to withstand any spillover from Afghanistan.

Similarly, India could also help in developing the intelligence gathering and analysis capacity of the CARs. To do this, India must enter into defence cooperation agreements with all Central Asian countries, especially Turkmenistan which shares a long land border with Afghanistan. Likewise, India must also engage more strongly with the CARs on anti-drug trafficking mechanisms. As of now, India has a joint working group on drug-related issues only with Tajikistan; it would be prudent for New Delhi to explore this avenue with other CARs as well.

Promoting Regional Integration

Apart from military cooperation, India can work with the CARs in promoting Afghanistan as the main hub for a regional economic and trade network. Some progress towards this goal has been made. For

instance, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)—a group comprising of the CARs, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Azerbaijan and Mongolia—envisions the construction of a railway network connecting Central and South Asia, Europe and the Middle East, expected to be completed by 2020.²⁵ The 75-km Hairatan-Mazar-e-Sharif railway in Uzbekistan is already in operation with plans to extend it to other parts of Afghanistan, including Herat. This has greatly enhanced the cargo transit via Hairatan, said to handle almost half of Afghanistan's imports.²⁶ Uzbekistan has also been supplying electricity to Afghanistan and has constructed 11 bridges between Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul. Kazakhstan has also invested in the reconstruction of a highway linking Kunduz and Taloqan in Northern Afghanistan and wants to build an oil refinery in Herat. Moreover, Turkmenistan plans to build an oil export terminal on the Afghan border and construct a rail link to Andkhoy in northern Afghanistan.²⁷ Tajikistan, on its part, plans to transmit power across Afghanistan by investing in the construction of transmission lines to Iran via Mazar and to Jalalabad via Kunduz and Kabul.²⁸

Two key challenges, however, inhibit progress of these projects—security and finances. Given the economic condition of some of the CARs, they are likely to be dependent on grants from the West or organisations like the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank to undertake such projects. But, above all, the security situation in the region as well as in the neighbourhood remains highly volatile. Of the other factors that prevent integration in the region, the most obvious one is the little cooperation that exists among the CARs themselves. Central Asia has been described as a region where unilateralism, lack of coordination and zero-sum mindsets prevail.²⁹ The CARs are among the worst-ranked countries in terms of ease of conducting trade and business activities.³⁰ The different CARs measure their engagement with Afghanistan strictly on the basis of short-term self-interest rather than long-term and the broader regional context.³¹

The relations among the CARs are extremely tense, which makes it even tougher for these countries to cooperate with each other. For instance, Uzbekistan has serious differences over the sharing of water resources with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are vying with each other to emerge as the main centre of influence in the region. Afghanistan has already felt some of the ramifications of these tensions: Tajikistan's attempts to provide electricity to Afghanistan were thwarted due to the pressure imposed on the Kabul government by Uzbekistan.³²

Moreover, regional integration, apart from the above mentioned factors, is further constrained by the absence of a coherent policy regarding Afghanistan.³³ These countries are shy of becoming actively engaged in Afghanistan post-2014 and, instead, are likely to adopt a defensive approach—more as an attempt to insulate themselves from the events unfolding in Afghanistan.

Conclusion

Afghanistan can be seen both as an enabler for India's objectives vis-a-vis Central Asia as well as an avenue for cooperation between India and the CARs. Despite the limitations, it is critical for New Delhi to continue to persist with its policy of engaging with both Afghanistan and the CARs.

Future uncertainties about the security and political transition in Afghanistan do impede its transit potential at the moment. India has, nonetheless, managed to remain engaged with Afghanistan and has,

in fact, gradually enhanced its presence in the region over the past decade. Given India's objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan, and in the broader context Central Asia, it is important for New Delhi to remain committed to the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan even following the drawdown of foreign troops.

Similarly, notwithstanding the lack of political will among the CARs to increase their involvement with Afghanistan, given their strategic location, they cannot be completely immune to developments in Afghanistan. This factor itself makes them valuable to India's immediate concerns about Afghanistan, especially in the context of the waning interest among the Western countries for investing in Afghanistan's future after 2014. India has engaged with the CARs in the past as well to pursue its objectives in Afghanistan. It is critical for India, with its reservoir of goodwill among CARs and Afghanistan, to take the initiative of expanding and exploring avenues for cooperation with the CARs.

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