

INDIA AND PAKISTAN, THE QUEST TO REACH OUT TO CENTRAL ASIA

Apprehensive of its long and unsecured borders with India and Afghanistan, and in pursuit of further extending its strategic depth well into Afghanistan, and further into Central Asia, Islamabad quickly formulated an ambitious strategy to establish a reliable and long lasting link with Central Asia before its rivals did so.

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The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent birth of Central Asian republics transformed the landscape of international relations at both the regional and global levels. The five landlocked newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan offered ample opportunities in the fields of energy, transit routes and trade collaborations. Their desire to embrace free trade and integration into the global economy, and to move away from the dictates of the old framework of centralized socialist policies provided encouraging prospects for the regional players to not only eye on exploiting the vast potentials of economic gains, but also to extend their sphere of influence. In some instances, these newly independent republics turned into new grounds of the rivalry among different players.

Pakistan, already locked at odds with India for many decades, was among the first to draw its roadmap of active engagement with the Central Asian republics. Apprehensive of its long and unsecured borders with India and Afghanistan, and in pursuit of further extending its strategic depth well into Afghanistan, and further into Central Asia, Islamabad quickly formulated an ambitious strategy to establish a reliable and long lasting link with Central Asia before its rivals did so. Aside from geostrategic considerations, the unsurpassed benefits of entering into economic, trade and energy dealings with the region for the struggling economy of Pakistan was of paramount importance that could justify every possible endeavor in the shortest span of time.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 coincided with the extensive turmoil and internal strife in Afghanistan. Eager to install a Pashtun dominated rule in Kabul after the fall of the Soviet-backed Najibullah government, Pakistan chose to support the Hezb-E-Islami of Hekmatyar to force out the internationally recognized administration of Tajik President Burhaniddin Rabbani. With no encouraging sign of Hekmatyar's success on sight, Islamabad decided to abandon him and instead, invested heavily in forming a religious and initially non-political entity called the 'Taliban Movement' from amongst Afghan Pashtuns studying in religious schools in Pakistan. With Taliban fast consolidating their presence in southern and western parts of Afghanistan, Pakistan launched the pivotal phase of its arrangements by successfully dispatching a truck convoy of commercial goods destined for the Turkmen borders through areas already secured by Taliban. The euphoria generated by the safe arrival of the convoy to Turkmen territory offered a brighter prospect for total pacification of Afghanistan. This gave weight to serious consideration of passing major transit routes as well as oil and gas pipelines transporting energy from Turkmen sources to international markets crossing all the way from Afghanistan to Pakistani sea ports in the open seas.

The scenario also earned the blessings of the United States at the backdrop of Washington's opposition to the more feasible alternative transit route or energy pipeline through the Iranian territory. In this direction, the United States lent its support to the funding of the project and



entered into interaction with the first Taliban administration as the de facto ruler of Afghanistan. However, alignment of Taliban with Al-Qaeda and the September 11th, 2001 attack altered the seemingly favorable grounds for further implementation of the project and brought every previously agreed arrangement to a total standstill. This setback did not dissuade Pakistan from actively pursuing the core idea of seeking access to Central Asian energy sources and despite the severe disagreements with the new western-backed Afghan administrations, construction of a major natural gas pipeline transporting Turkmen gas to Pakistan via Afghanistan remained high on the agenda.

By May 2002, the agreement on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline (TAP) venture was inked in Islamabad. This project received further boost in December 2010 with the conclusion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI) by the petroleum ministries of the four countries concerned. The project despite all high hopes attached to it is still struggling to commence and is facing trouble not only owing to the uncertain situation in Afghanistan, but also in part, due to the security concerns in Pakistan's Baluchistan region. Though India has officially joined TAPI, its motive to stand on this shared platform with Pakistan has to be

scrutinized as New Delhi is highly unlikely to compromise its energy security and to agree on a shared energy source passing through the territory of Pakistan prior to the final settlement of their long-standing disputes and rivalries. It seems wise for India to officially remain committed to TAPI for keeping Pakistan in check, and also to maintain a closed and friendly association with the source country of Turkmenistan.

In 2016 the Pakistani sponsored initiative of the Central Asia-South Asia Power Project (CASA-1000) to export the surplus hydroelectricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan got underway. However, the unstable environment in Afghanistan im-

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peded the phased implementation of the project. The departure of NATO forces from Afghanistan and the collapse of Ashraf Ghani administration in August 2021 further added to the complexity of the issue with less encouraging prospects for the near future as the viability of the project could be compromised due to the uncertain situation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Pakistan's ambition to monopolize the rail and road access of the Central Asian republics to the open seas received a stimulus by the introduction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in 2013. Backed by Chinese financial investment and technical expertise and as a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC is mainly focused on the upgrade of the Pakistan sea port of Gawadar and the overland communication links to the Afghan border.

India, on the other hand, did maintain a strong strategic, military, economic and diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union during the cold war. This special relationship allowed New Delhi to enter into close contacts and tangible engagements with the Soviet Central Asian republics, and was privileged to be amongst the very few nations that had a consulate at Tashkent. However, after the breakup of the Soviet Union and in an environment devoid of the valuable blessings of one superpower, India in line with the dictates of the new global order had to prioritize its foreign policy objectives that caused inevitable drift in its relations with Central Asia. Now New Delhi saw itself on its own in the new international system and among many preoccupations had to offer more thoughts to the situation in its immediate neighborhood already aggravated by the chronic territorial disputes with Pakistan. India's concern with Central Asia during this period was driven mainly by the fears that Pakistan may seek to gain strategic depth in that region. A major hurdle in India's route towards entering into a fresh phase of cooperation with the newly independent Central Asian states, as in the case for Pakistan, was the absence of a shared border and proper infrastructure connectivity which denied India the free hand to expand the focus to its extended neighborhood of Central Asia.

Towards the end of 1990's India's foreign policy gradually entered the process of adjusting to the post-Cold War global order. The policy did evolve to include a greater emphasis on engagement with India's extended neighborhood, which included Central Asia. Steady rise of China with its expanding economic footprint in Central Asia principally in the light of its massive project, the BRI posed fresh challenges for New Delhi to tackle. Beijing regarded Central Asia as vital not only for its security, but also as a gateway to the markets of Eurasia, Europe and Russia. Regretfully for India, China's proximity with Central Asia, its financial capabilities, and the coherence



of its policy have driven its initiatives much faster than those of India's.

New Delhi was also alarmed to note that it was close to losing even its 'immediate neighborhood' to China, which was efficiently developing closer political and economic relations with nearly all of India's neighbors, thereby increasing the risks of strategically encircling India. Against this background India in 2015 unveiled its 'Connect Central Asia' Policy that included strengthening



security, economic and cultural connections with the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Old days of friendship with the Soviet Union and the continued fraternal ties with present day Russia has earned New Delhi the concurrence of Moscow for what is interpreted as 'India's constructive approach' towards the Central Asian Region where Russian influence is strongly felt. Likewise, the Central Asian sovereign states have been willful to have new partners like India in order to balance China's grow-

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ing involvement in their region welcomed Indian initiatives.

In addition to expanding trade, investments and development assistance to the region, India also emphasized on shared secular values and drew attention to common threats such as fundamentalism, terrorism, narcotics trafficking and organized crime in its interactions with Central Asian Republics. In order to set the stage for long term ties New Delhi has also signed the 'Strategic Partnership Agreements' with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to stimulate defense cooperation and to deepen trade relations.

To act as a formidable player and balancer to counter the efforts of two rivals of China and Pakistan in Central Asia, India had to settle the connectivity issue, which has compromised its access to the region. For India, the closest and most feasible land route to reach out to Central Asia was through Iranian southern coasts and the international corridors connecting Iran to Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia. In 2003, New Delhi announced its plans to invest in the expansion and upgrade of the Iranian southern sea port of Chabahar. However, the venture did not progress as expected. Indian firms citing possible U.S. sanctions and doubtful of economic viability of the project showed little interest to invest in the port. Reported progress of CPEC and active engagement of China in the development of Pakistani port of Gawadar, together with India's growing geostrategic and security concerns regarding BRI has recently made New Delhi to remedy its inadequate strategy towards Central Asia marred by direct access issue and delayed investments in Chabahar port venture.

The recent unexpected turn in Russia's approach towards its periphery coupled with the new cold war in the offing may have adverse effect on the degree of liberty of Central Asian republics to interact with other global players including India and Pakistan. The emerging international groupings and alliances pursuant to Russian military intervention in Ukraine may decide the extent to which the countries considered Russia's backyard could remain open to external interaction without provoking Moscow.