



China and India in Central Asia

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For centuries, the Central Asian region has been a strategic position because of its proximity to several great powers in the Eurasian region and it also played an important role in the geopolitics of major powers that desired to establish a foothold in Asia. History shows that the region served as the battleground for outside powers such as the United States, China and Russia. These countries engaged themselves in a struggle to exert their influence in Central Asia and therefore the region stands out as a theatre rather than as a power in its own right. The situation has not changed in the twenty-first century wherein China has displaced Russia and left behind others including the U.S in establishing its presence in region. In civilizational terms, India in comparison to China is culturally closer to the Central Asian countries but is unable to exert its geopolitical influence in the region. With this backdrop, the speaker brought the issue of India's ongoing efforts to strengthen co-operation in the field of energy and other areas in Central Asia. While doing so, the speaker also tried to compare the different strategies and foreign policy visions of China and India in Central Asia.

Central Asia was described as the "centre of periphery" and with the collapse of USSR, it served as a strategic boon for China to enter the region. While China formulated its foreign policy strategy based on an in-depth understanding of the problems and issues of the region, India, in contrast, lacked an appropriate policy towards Central Asia. According to the author, India's lack of a deeper understanding of the political and economic conditions could have been a major setback to lose out on the ample opportunities that Central Asia had to offer. Therefore, tea and Bollywood movies from India could work as a bridge to tie India and Central Asia. From the context of growing China-India business cooperation in Central Asia, one can see a possibility of win-win situation for India vis-à-vis China in Central Asia. In fact, willingness of some Indian companies to work together with Chinese companies is a clear indication of such a possibility.

Looking from the historical perspective, it is clear that China rescued the Central Asian economy from near collapse. Central Asia, which comprised of several communities of traders, has 2000 years historical relations with China. In the contemporary scenario, the Silk Route economic corridor, proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in a speech in 2013, is a clear indication of China's long term interest in the region. In the energy sector, oil and gas has been another major attraction for the Chinese. At present, about fifty percent of Chinese requirements of oil and gas come from Central Asia and fifty percent of Kazakhstan oil companies have shares with China. In the recent years energy resources have become a strong bargaining chip which has given rise to "resource nationalism" in the Central Asian countries.

Over the years since the post-cold war period, perspectives from both sides on each other have also changed. The practice of viewing all Chinese as "black Chinese" is no longer prevalent among the Central Asian elites. China has proved its shrewdness by engaging Russia in its venture in Central

Asia. In fact, the situation in the region is such that “Central Asian people like Russia cannot live without China.” However, there is possibility that China might face serious challenge after the creation of the Customs Union established by the joint effort of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia on January 1, 2010. This forum was initiated to limit the dumping of Chinese goods into their markets. Though Central Asian countries are interested in having closer interactions with India, the latter appears to be less enthusiastic. In fact, India can cooperate with China in Central Asia in many areas despite the stiff competition. One platform is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which comprises of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. This multilateral body plays an important role in China-Central Asia relations. India’s entry into this forum as a full member will leverage it to engage more in Central Asia. For example, the reconstruction of Afghanistan could be a win-win situation for both India and China and the opening of Karakorum Pass can bring business opportunities for India. However, the sticking point in using the Karakoram Pass as a corridor between China and India is bedevilled by the Chinese refusal to involve directly in the Jammu and Kashmir region.

The foreign policy of Central Asian countries are yet to mature as they endeavour to adopt a multilateral policy that benefits the countries from all foreign actors. For example, every second year Uzbekistan changes its foreign policy priorities, therefore changing its relations with the stakeholders in the region. Such weak foreign policy agendas have in the past helped China to establish and strengthen its position in Central Asia. However, the author remains sceptical of the Chinese strategy in the long run.

One participant pointed out that India lacks a defence strategy in the Central Asian region. Besides several initiatives, India has introduced outreach programmes of building an e-network with five Central Asian countries, actively promoted cultural diplomacy and has taken steps to establish universities and cultural centres in the countries of the region.

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