

# Quest for Energy, Connectivity, and Security

India-Central Asia Relations during the UPA Rule

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## Introduction

India and Central Asia have enjoyed close cultural and religious connections for centuries. The shared ties were further reinforced by the mutual interest and goodwill generated by Indo-Soviet friendship. Yet despite centuries-old cultural-spiritual links and the assumed affinity between their peoples, Central Asia has remained a remote region in India's extended neighbourhood, remaining near and yet quite far. The potential of India's enormous cultural capital remains unrealized due to the profound geographical disadvantage of the lack of easy access routes to the region. India was practically invisible as a strategic or diplomatic actor at least until the mid-2000s. In contrast, China, with the geopolitical advantage of a 3200-km long border that it shares with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, has made enormous strides in establishing itself as the most prominent economic actor in the Central Asian region, enhanced its role in security provision, and bolstered its public diplomacy to muster 'soft power' and promote its developmental model. As a strategic-late mover, India is just about carving a niche for itself in a region that has been incorporated within China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), linking China with the Middle East, Europe, and Africa.

After nearly two decades of 'discursive activity that exceeded the reality of bilateral relationship' (Peyrouse and Laruelle 2011), a gradual shift in India's policy towards the Central Asian region became discernible under

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the second term of the UPA as the Manmohan Singh government began looking to Central Asia for India's growing energy needs to sustain its burgeoning economic growth and devise solutions to the lack of transport connectivity that had continued to stymie the development of economic ties with the region.

The adoption in 2012 of 'Connect Central Asia' Policy, a much-belated act, nonetheless denoted India's first comprehensive attempt to develop a strategy for the region. It marked a departure from the complacency, lethargy, and lofty iterations of cultural ties that had marred the formulation of an appropriate response to the transformations occurring in the Central Asian states and the rapid shifts in regional geopolitics. It sought to articulate a broader vision of the region by prioritizing the establishment of transport connectivity, investments in energy and acknowledging that these would require building on India's existing partnerships with various regional actors and engaging actively with the emerging multilateral organizations.

The launch of the Connect Central Asia Policy in 2012 also reflected a shift in India's strategic approach to Afghanistan in light of the changed context with the departure of NATO troops in 2014 and scaling down of the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan and the Eurasian region. The concept of a 'Greater Central Asia' promoted by the U.S. centred on the establishment of a New Silk Road (NSR) for forging transport and trade linkages as well as people-to-people contacts between Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan in which India potentially had a vital role. However, by 2013, this idea had fizzled out due to the lack of a strategic vision and financial investments. At the same time, during the visit to Astana in October 2013, Xi Jinping launched China's SREB Initiative, which became an integral element of what later was presented as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

India's decision in 2011 to seek membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which it had joined as an observer in 2005 with a lukewarm participation (Raman 2006), was an important precursor to the launch of the Connect Central Asia Policy, marking a shift to engaging with multilateral organizations in the region, instead of the earlier focus on bilateral ties and relying on Russia for advancing its objectives.

This chapter will identify the processes shaping India's diplomacy towards Central Asia during the UPA rule, leading to the adoption of Connect Central Asia Policy and its ensuing realization. It will analyse the policies and measures adopted by the UPA in four key areas: (i) connectivity; (ii) energy partnerships; (iii) strategic engagement; and (iv) multilateral cooperation. The analysis of the aforementioned areas details how India's Central Asia policy has evolved through adjustment to a number of important geopolitical shifts in the region: the all-round dominance of China, the growing Sino-Russian partnership in regional multilateral fora such as the SCO, India's limited strategic engagement with the United States in the creation of a 'Greater Central Asia' incorporating Afghanistan with Central and South Asia, its turn to Iran for the solution to the problem of connectivity with Central Asia, and the continuing rivalry with Pakistan whose efforts to establish close links with Central Asia received a boost by its partnership with China in the construction of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), connecting China's Xinjiang region to the China-built Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. In conclusion, the chapter notes that being at a geographical disadvantage that turned it into a late mover to the region, India, during the UPA period, has had to carve out its options through an enhanced multilateral cooperation with a range of actors and institutions in its extended neighbourhood and build on the niches where it possessed a distinct edge.

### **Evolution of India's Policy towards Central Asia**

Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's visit to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan between 1993 and 1995 promised a fresh approach to the region, which was still seen as Russia's backyard. Rao proclaimed that Central Asia for India is an area 'of high priority, where we aim to stay engaged far into the future. We are an independent partner with no selfish motives. We only desire honest and open friendship and to promote stability and cooperation without causing harm to any third country' (cited in Roy 2011, 161). Rao's proclamation was to offer the discursive genesis of the 'Look North' policy, which soon emerged as the narrative framework of India's relations with Central Asia (Kavalski 2010). It identified several

key areas of cooperation for forging a new partnership: establishing air connectivity to aid trade, investments, tourism, strategic partnerships in defence and security affairs; promoting ties in spheres of higher education, medicine; and providing developmental assistance (Pradhan 2015).

The 'Look North' Policy emphasized secular values and cultivating mutual interest in combating religious fundamentalism, terrorism, narcotics-funded violence, and crime. It was also a benign representation to the newly emergent Central Asian states of India as a model of secular, multiethnic order and as a normative actor, guided by shared concerns to promote stability and cooperation. Unlike the 'Look East' policy, which successfully reset India's economic and strategic relations with Southeast Asia, the goals set in the 'Look North' were overshadowed by India's complex relationship with China, the lack of a strategic vision and tools for pursuing the goals. 'Look North' Policy denoted an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to 'break out of the claustrophobic confines of South Asia' (Kavalski 2010, 43).

Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the next prime minister to visit the region in 2002, where he also attended the first Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measure in Asia (CICA) in Almaty. CICA was the first major Central Asian regional cooperation structure initiated by Kazakhstan, of which India became a member and has remained its consistent supporter and an active participant. Vajpayee was to underscore the 'new geopolitical reality' in the region following the independence of the Central Asian states, the end of the Cold War, and India's significant role in Afghanistan. He was also the first Indian prime minister to visit Tajikistan in 2003, in an affirmation of Tajikistan's important role in supporting the Northern Alliance and its vital contribution to realizing India's strategic goals in the region.

Notwithstanding the NDA government's emphasis on a closer engagement with the extended neighbourhood as a core element in foreign policy (Scott 2009), Central Asia continued to remain peripheral to all major foreign policy initiatives. Lacking shared borders, transport links, trade, and economic leverage, India had been content to follow a 'do no harm' policy in the Central Asian region. During his visit to Central Asian states in 2003, Minister of External Affairs Yashwant Sinha had averred that 'we are not in Central Asia to replace anyone. We see Central Asia as part of India's extended neighbourhood and our presence there is to promote a mutually

inclusive relationship' (Aneja 2003). Such pronouncements reinforced the image of India as a relative bystander in a region that has historically been described as an arena of the 'Great Game' between European powers and again as the site of a 'New Great Game' denoting competition for energy resources and security objectives between the emerging powers. During the 1990s and early 2000s, when numerous Western diplomatic establishments, China, Japan, and Korea began paying close attention to the region, training experts and policymakers to learn languages of Central Asia, India was visibly lagging behind in imparting appropriate Central Asian language training to its diplomatic staff, many of whom appeared self-satisfied in the belief that as Indians they already had the cultural and linguistic affinity to understand the Central Asian societies.<sup>1</sup>

Central Asia is perhaps the only region in India's extended neighbourhood where India's image ranged from being positive to neutral, untainted by perception of dominance, conflict, or political or ideological contestation. The positive image based on 'goodwill without depth' (Dave 2016) in many ways stemmed from the absence of an effective engagement with the region. As Subrato Mitra (2003, 399) notes, Central Asia as a neutral space masked the 'hiatus between India's self-perception as a status quo power and its perceptions by the neighbouring states as a regional bully'. From this standpoint, India's cautious 'do no harm' approach under Look North Policy, combined with a benign presentation of its secular model, sought to build on existing goodwill, without a long- or medium-term strategy (Mehta 2009). It approached Central Asia still as a backyard of Russia, failing to apprehend the profound, though chaotic process of post-Soviet transition and sovereignty consolidation among Central Asian states on the one hand and respond to the rapid expansion of China's economic activities, energy investments in the region on the other. With China asserting its first-mover advantage, India's policy inadvertently had to work on calibrating responses to the actions of China and Sino-Pakistan cooperation in the region.

### **India-Central Asia Relations under the UPA Rule**

The new self-confidence and major power image gained by rapid economic growth gave a boost to India's cultural and economic diplomacy

in Central Asia during the first phase of the UPA rule with a series of medium to high-level exchanges facilitating a gradual shift from symbolic utterances of friendship to concrete steps at establishing energy, transport and security partnership.

However, As far as launching a decisive presence in Central Asia was concerned, India was constrained by still a weak economy, lack of connectivity, absence of a meaningful trade and investment, struggling to link its policies in Afghanistan and Central Asia under a single strategy and operating in a context where China had already seized numerous initiatives. Unlike China, India did not yet have the credibility to portray itself as an emerging economic power or as a more 'developed' partner (Sachdeva 2011). India had averaged just under 5% annual growth between 2000 and 2005, which was just over half of China's annual per capita GDP growth exceeding 8%. Though economic growth accelerated further during the second term of UPA, it also fluctuated and still lagged behind that of China's.

During a visit to Uzbekistan in April 2006, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reiterated the importance of Central Asia in India's extended neighbourhood and pledged 'to build on our traditional ties in providing them with new meaning and substance including in the political, economic, defence, energy, science and technology and cultural fields' (cited in Scott 2009). The pledge to provide new substance to ties broke away from much of the normative baggage of the Look North policy while incorporating its emphasis on establishing close economic and cultural cooperation in subsequent policy iterations. Though it sought to signal India as a 'rising power' parallel to China (Dave 2016, 5), the Look North policy failed to emulate the success that the Look East policy had achieved by establishing closer economic, trade, and cultural linkages with South East Asian countries (Sikri 2009a). While India's aspiration for closer engagement with Central Asia had remained unfulfilled, China had steadfastly established itself as a formidable economic and strategic partner for the region. It was China, and not Central Asia, that India encountered everywhere where it looked North (Kavalski 2010).

As noted earlier, Central Asia was seen as culturally very proximate and at the same time geographically quite distant. India's efforts at forging meaningful economic, political and cultural, people-to-people linkages have been stymied primarily by geographical barriers and lack of

connectivity. As the strategist K. Subramanian (2015) said, 'the Central Asian Republics (CARs) posed the most excruciating and complex challenges to Indian diplomacy judged whether by geostrategic compulsions or by India's energy concerns'. The UPA Government sought to overcome this geographical barrier and establish closer connections with the region through the 'Connect Central Asia' policy.

The 'Connect Central Asia' policy, launched in 2012, sought to promote India's new image, define its objectives and priorities in the region and align them with its emerging power status. The Policy was unveiled at the first meeting of India-Central Asia Dialogue in June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, by India's Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed.<sup>2</sup> Ahamed reiterated the priorities placed on establishing economic and cultural cooperation under the Look North policy pointed to the urgency of formulating a cohesive solution to the unfavourable geography that had plagued transport and trade connectivity. The lack of suitable transport connections and direct flights had deterred potential Indian investors who otherwise may have been willing to brave language and cultural barriers, cumbersome visa procedures, and challenging business climate in the region.

The pronouncements under 'Connect Central Asia' policy emphasized Central Asia's ongoing political and economic integration with the world, highlighted the region's place in India's extended neighbourhood, and called for enhancing strategic and security cooperation, including close consultations on Afghanistan, energy, and other natural resources, as well as connectivity. By establishing a template for finding innovative solutions for overcoming transport and infrastructural connectivity and forming comprehensive partnerships in the development of energy and natural resources, it set many concrete objectives, departing from the ritualistic affirmations of historical ties, amity, and friendship.

During the visit to Tajikistan a month later in July 2012, Minister of External Affairs S. M. Krishna summed up the priorities of the Connect Central Asia Policy as the four C's—'commerce, connectivity, consular and community' (*The Economic Times*, 3 July 2012b). The four C's targeted for expansion of activities included a broad list of goals and targets—establishment of Central Asian University at Bishkek; connecting Central Asia through an E-Network in telemedicine and other critical areas of commercial activities; opening up of hospitals, centres of excellence in IT sector, enhancing defence and strategic partnership through training and

joint research between India and the Central Asian Republics, opening of 14 direct flights between India and the 5 Central Asian countries to give a boost to tourism, trade and commerce, cultural contacts, relaxation of visa regimes, and energy cooperation.

As elaborated below, India's approach towards the Central Asian region during the UPA period can be summarized under four rubrics: Forging Connectivity to Central Asia, Quest for Energy, Quest for Strategic Engagement, and Shift to Multilateralism.

## **Forging Connectivity to Central Asia**

### **Overcoming the Geographical Barrier**

The geopolitical and logistical difficulties of obtaining a transit passage to the Central Asian region through Pakistan had confined India into a rigid frame of fractious relations with Pakistan and lingering suspicion of China. India's Central Asia policy, in many ways, had remained trapped in South Asian constraints.

Afghanistan became an area of strategic priority for India after the defeat of the Taliban by U.S.-led forces, in which India and Russia-backed Northern Alliance played a vital role. India offered \$2 billion in developmental aid, forging a close partnership with the United States in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. After the United States acquired military bases in Central Asia (K-2 in Uzbekistan, Manas in Kyrgyzstan) for strategic and humanitarian operations to Afghanistan, discussions in the U.S. centred on devising ways of forging a closer connectivity between Afghanistan and Central Asia through cooperation with India as well as Pakistan. The concept of a 'Greater Central Asia' (Starr 2005) had been gaining currency in the U.S. foreign policy-making circles. It envisaged forging a single integrated unit of South and Central Asia through the building of an NSR for forging economic and security relations. It was an attempt to build on the Western-sponsored Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that sought to establish alternative routes to the traditional access to Afghanistan via Pakistan via a system of air, land, and sea supply routes through Central Asia and Caspian to Europe. The key rationale of the NSR was to stabilize the region through transport and trade



connectivity, building economic, strategic, and cultural links following the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

The United States was betting on India's positive image and close historical-cultural ties with the region to bring South and Central Asia together and curailing China's growing hold over the region. A Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs was set up in the State Department in 2006. The NSR concept appeared to be an excellent opportunity for India to leverage its position in Afghanistan and the goodwill in Central Asia with the strength of its growing partnership with the United States.

However, the actual establishment of connectivity between South and Central Asia with Afghanistan as the hub was a formidable task given a number of constraints: the complicated India-Pakistan and Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, the continued U.S.-Iran confrontation, lack of trust and cooperation among the various Central Asian states, and absence of meaningful trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia as well as South and Central Asia and the limited potential for enhancing trade.

The strategic role and cultural capital of India were far from sufficient for it to play a pivotal role in forging trade and transport connectivity under the NSR given its negligible economic presence in Central Asia, which counted for about 0.25% of total Indian trade, with India representing only 0.4% of Central Asian trade. Planned energy security initiatives such as that in the form of developing a Central Asia wide power grid (CASA-1000) connecting resource-rich Central Asia to supply energy to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India were key objectives that had also led the United States to pin hopes on the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline.

The NSR idea continued to be debated by the Obama administration but without seeking a consistent participation of India. These proposals did not find much resonance in India. First, the United States did not provide a comprehensive aid package or hold discussions on its strategic elements to bring the plan to fruition. Second, the launching of the NSR initiative was contingent on some degree of goodwill and sustained dialogue among Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, which did not happen. Third, the advantages of this connectivity to the Central Asian states were mixed—while they could enhance options for the export of energy resources, they also came with the fear of spillover of terrorism and illegal drug trade from Afghanistan and Pakistan into Central Asia.

The failure of the NSR project to materialize due to lack of finances and commitments (Kuchins 2013) and the waning of the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan after 2014 weakened the leverage that India could have developed in the Central Asian region via Afghanistan and its close partnership with both the United States and Russia. By this time, China had already launched its own connectivity initiative, inaugurated in September 2013 by Xi Jinping at Nazarbaev University in Astana as the SREB Initiative. SREB incorporated several elements of the NSR concept, albeit it was China and not India, that was spearheading connectivity between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia as part of what later came to be known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

### Developing Connectivity via Iran and Afghanistan

With China and Pakistan developing close transport and infrastructural connectivity, India had to engage in out-of-box thinking to pursue innovative solutions that would bypass the conventional constraints. The solution centred on bringing Iran, a crucial supplier of oil and gas, into the regional geopolitical equation for solving the connectivity conundrum. The Chabahar port, with which India had well-established maritime linkages and had harboured a long-term interest in its expansion, was recognized as the new access point through which rail links could be built to Afghanistan and onwards to Central Asia. The UPA government also renewed the pledge to develop the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and to explore alternative routes. In 2000 Russia, India and Iran had reached an agreement in St Petersburg to establish the INSTC, a 7,200-km-long multi-mode network of ship, rail, and road route for moving freight between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, Bandar Anzali, etc.<sup>3</sup> While the INSTC is currently routed via Iran's Bandar Abbas port, India began exploring the options of connecting it with Central Asia via Chabahar port and thereafter overland corridors passing through Afghanistan. INSTC's membership has since expanded to include all Central Asian states which have pledged to support in completing the missing links along the corridor.

Chabahar was estimated to result in a 60% reduction in shipment costs and a 50% reduction in shipment time from India to Central Asia. India, Iran, and Afghanistan had already agreed in 2003 on a joint development of transportation links to Afghanistan. A finalized plan to construct a 900-km railway line to connect Chabahar port to Afghanistan's mineral-rich Hajigak region unveiled in 2011 (*Hindustan Times*, 1 November 2011) also proposed to build a road from the Uzbek city of Termez to Herat in Afghanistan, to be linked by railways to Chabahar. Dry runs of two routes were conducted in 2014, the first was Mumbai to Baku via Bandar Abbas and the second was Mumbai to Astrakhan via Bandar Abbas, Tehran, and Bandar Anzali. India has spent \$134 million during 2005–09 to construct a road from Delaram in Afghanistan to Zaranj at the Iran-Afghanistan border and connect Chabahar and Zaranj by rail, as Iran completed 70% of the first phase of the Chabahar project at the cost of \$340 million. Further development of the railway links is contingent on Chabahar becoming fully functional.

Chabahar's development has stalled due to numerous complex issues—the differences between India and Iran on construction contracts and financial commitments and the effects of Western sanctions on Iran that complicated India's relations with Iran. The souring of India-Iran relations after India voted twice against Iran at International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (*Hindustan Times*, 28 November 2009) slowed the progress on the Chabahar port and the INSTC as well as India's investments in Iran's energy sector.

While India had supported Iran's development of the civilian nuclear programme, its vote against Iran at IAEA also conveyed an attempt to garner the U.S. support to realize its major power status and ambitions in the region. At the same time, India could not afford to alienate Iran, which was an integral component of its Afghanistan strategy as well as the best option for connectivity with Central Asia. Having agreed to reduce its oil imports from Iran in response to the U.S. stance, the UPA government was subsequently able to assert its strategic autonomy from the United States by refusing to support the sanctions on Iran. Given their significant dependence on Iran for oil and transport routes, the position of India and China also converged with both supporting Iran's right to 'peaceful uses of nuclear energy consistent with its international obligations' at the BRICS summit in 2012 (*The Economic Times*, 29 March 2012a). China, in

the meanwhile, had already become Iran's largest trading partner and oil importer, also supplying it with technological know-how to develop its energy resources, military facilities, and shield against the effects of international sanctions (Harold and Nader 2012).

India was able to negotiate a waiver from the expansion of the U.S. sanctions by reducing oil imports from Iran. India's decision in 2011 to become an SCO member (*The Hindu* 2011) also factored in the realization that India's interests with Iran could be advanced further within its multilateral framework in which Russia and China were Iran's allies and opposed the U.S. sanctions. Iran has been keen to upgrade its observer status to become a full SCO member.

## The Quest for Energy

### A Latecomer in Central Asia's Energy Field

India's rapidly rising energy requirements had already turned it into the fifth largest consumer of energy and placed it to be the third largest by 2030 (Madan 2006). In 2006, then Petroleum and Natural Gas Minister, Mani Shankar Aiyar, stated, 'we are fortunate to be placed at the vortex of an extended neighbourhood which has some of the largest gas resources in the world'. He also referred to the need to tap into the energy potential of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and the Astrakhan littoral on the Russian shore off the Caspian to justify the proposed North-South energy corridor from the Kazakhstan port of Aktau to the Iranian port of Chabahar on the Arabian Sea 'as another exciting prospect' for India (Aiyar 2006).

Recognizing the urgency for India, already a latecomer, to be seen as a serious player in carving out a presence for itself in the exploration of the Caspian's rich resources, Aiyar actively lobbied for contracts for Indian firms in the region, targeting Russia's Transneft built Bluestream to bring Caspian oil into the Black Sea as well as Kazakhstan-China pipelines bringing oil to China's Xinjiang region.

In 2005, India came very close to securing the take-over of the Canada-based PetroKazakhstan, then Kazakhstan's second-largest foreign producer after Chevron, after ONGC Videsh Ltd (OVL) made a bid for

\$3.9 billion against China's National Petroleum Corporation's (CNPC) \$3.6 billion. China clinched the deal last minute after offering \$4.18 billion in what India saw as an unfair auction in which 'the goal posts were moved midway [through the auction]' (Ramachandran 2008). Moreover, CNPC's bid is already believed to have been approved a few months earlier during the visit of then Chinese President Hu Jintao with Nazarbaev (Petroleum Economist 2005).

OVL was again on the verge of acquiring what could have been its biggest overseas deal of nearly \$5 billion following an agreement in November 2012 with the U.S. energy giant ConocoPhillips to buy its 8.4% stake in the Kashagan oilfield. In 2013 Kazakhstan, at the last minute, blocked the deal by exercising its pre-emptive right to first buy ConocoPhillips' stake, only to sell it to CNPC, which secured the deal (*The Financial Times* 2013, Modi 2013).

A year after India's failed bid in the previous year, Kazakhstan in 2014 offered OVL a stake in medium-sized Abai oil block in the Caspian Sea. It was adjacent to the Satpayev exploration block in which OVL and KMG had signed agreements for the exploration of oil and gas in the Satpayev block in the Caspian Sea, with OVL acquiring a 25% share in 2011 following Manmohan Singh's visit to Astana. Plans to drill two exploration wells on Satpayev in 2014 and 2015 were delayed. Eventually, after having spent almost \$300 million on the block, OVL decided to exit it in 2018 as it did not find commercially viable oil (*The Economic Times*, 18 September 2018).

### Expansion of India-Kazakhstan Energy Cooperation

An impressive achievement of the UPA government was on forging a comprehensive relationship with Kazakhstan, endowed with rich energy and mineral resources. President Nursultan was the first Central Asian leader to visit Delhi as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day celebrations in 2009, a visit that resulted in a joint declaration of Strategic Partnership. Manmohan Singh's official visit to Astana in 2011 sealed agreements on cooperation over legal issues, peaceful use of nuclear energy, cooperation in agriculture, healthcare, and IT. The meeting between visiting Secretary of the Kazakhstan Security Council Marat Tazhin in February with the

National security advisor Shivshankar Menon paved the way for agreements on Kazakhstan supplying over 2,000 tons of uranium by 2014 (*The Economic Times* 2019). Trade volume between India and Kazakhstan has experienced rapid growth, rising from roughly \$80 million in 2004 to \$253 million in 2009 and \$314 million in 2010.

### Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) Project

The prospects of Turkmenistan's abundant gas resources reaching the energy-deficient regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India via a new pipeline (TAPI) generated considerable optimism, notwithstanding the recognition of enormous geopolitical, security, and logistical challenges. The TAPI project, together with Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Trade Project (CASA-1000), was actively promoted by the U.S. State Department as integral components of its New Silk Route Strategy, which were also seen as delivering energy security to Afghanistan (Ashraf 2013). The TAPI project was first proposed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the mid-1990s and later incorporated into the U.S. concept of Greater Central Asia for delivering energy security to Afghanistan and Pakistan in particular. CASA-1000 was a \$1.16 billion project with funding from the World Bank to allow for the export of surplus hydro-electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (Kucera 2011).

The United States saw promoting TAPI also as a counterforce to Iranian, Russian, and Chinese influences and as part of its objective of promoting multiple pipelines from the Caspian and Central Asian region to numerous destinations by bypassing Russia. Indeed, in an ideal geopolitical setting of secure borders, close regional cooperation, and determination of all parties to develop the pipeline, TAPI promised to be the perfect solution to the potential of delivering enormous benefits to all.

In May 2006, India officially approved its participation in the \$5 billion TAPI gas pipeline project. The death in December 2006 of president Saparmurat Niyazov, who had built a bizarre personality cult, maintained personal control over the country's resources, and shown little interest in foreign investment, kindled hopes of an active commitment on the part

of his successor on developing TAPI. Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India signed a framework agreement to buy natural gas from Turkmenistan in April 2008. Following up on this, India and Turkmenistan signed a Memorandum of Understanding during Vice President Mohammad Hamid Ansari's visit to Ashgabat in April 2008 to cooperate on conducting further explorations (*The Economic Times*, 5 April 2008). Keen to tap into Turkmenistan's enormous energy potential, OVL–Mittal joint venture acquired a 30% share in the exploratory Block 11–12 in October 2007 in offshore Turkmenistan, only to surrender it in 2013 after the explorations failed to yield any commercially viable success (*Business Standard*, 20 January 2013).

Difficult relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, insurgency in the border regions, and continuing tensions between Pakistan and India dimmed the prospects of TAPI's realization. Making the prospects of the project's realization dim further, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov of Turkmenistan displayed little commitment to the project beyond periodic references to it, which seemed to be directed at an international audience (Durdiyeova 2007). The pipeline, as a result, is yet to see the light of the day.

## Hydroelectricity

Tajikistan's hydroelectricity potential is estimated to be around 4% of the world's potential. India's efforts to enter its hydroelectricity sector were timid in view of its complex structure of ownership and control and huge infrastructural costs. Though India attained a toehold in developing the Varzob I hydropower station, it has opted to focus on agriculture, tourism, education, research, and skills development to build a bilateral relationship.

## The Quest for Strategic Engagement

In articulating India's distinct approach to its neighbours, several foreign policy strategists in India have evoked the framework of concentric circles (raja mandala) from Kautilya's Arthashastra to define India's foreign

policy strategy (Menon 2014; Mohan 2005). This logic calls for bolstering India's role in the extended neighbourhood by also utilizing the support of the United States to counteract the influence of China and enhance the leverage against its more prickly immediate neighbours. It identifies plausible scenarios for India, ranging from its role as a stable democratic ally of the United States in the region to a reluctant partner in the Sino-Russian anti-hegemonic coalition (Mohan and Khanna 2006).

India's Ministry of Defence officials reportedly have tended to view India-Central Asia relationship and India's developmental efforts in Afghanistan within the conventional Indo-Pak rivalry framework and look upon Central Asian states as vital in 'building strategic space for India in the region and to encircle Pakistan' (Blank 2004, 8). Some Western scholars have tended to analyse India's growing engagement with the Central Asian states in the post-2001 context as driven primarily by the need to counter Pakistan's role in Central Asia and Afghanistan (Cooley 2012). However, if any plan of 'encircling' Pakistan through forging closer ties with Central Asia did exist, it would still leave India in a catch-22 phase, unable to act effectively due to the clear strategic geopolitical advantage Pakistan has over India in connecting to Central Asia, China as well as Afghanistan. Even if India had this objective, it still lacked the leverage to restrain Pakistan from expanding its interests in Central Asia in light of the expanding role of SCO and the development of CPEC.

### India's Ambiguous Security Engagement: The 'Military Base' in Tajikistan

Tajikistan, which also shares a 1,400 km border with Afghanistan through the restive Badakhshan region, was of utmost importance from a strategic and security point of view in aiding India's developmental and peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan. It is also the closest to New Delhi in terms of geographical distance. India's support to the former Northern Alliance headed by the Afghan Tajik commander Ahmed Shah Masood between 1996 and 2001 had already established close security and strategic cooperation. India was using the Farkhor airbase, about 130 kilometres southeast of Dushanbe, as an extension of the field hospital in the



late 1990s to help the Northern Alliance in its fight against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

A Defence Agreement in 2002 resulted in India acquiring its first foreign military facility in Tajikistan in 2003 in an airfield at Ayni north of Dushanbe (Central Asia Newswire 2012). India spent \$70 million in technical assistance to renovate the Ayni airbase between 2004 and 2010 by extending the runway, building a control tower, and three new hangars. Then Russian Minister of Defence Sergei Ivanov declared in 2005 that Russia was using the Ayni base together with the Tajik and Russian air forces for conducting joint operations. In September 2010, Tajik Ministry of Defence spokesperson confirmed that the Ayni airbase has state-of-the-art navigational and defence technology and a 3200-metre runway—one of the longest in the world—able to accommodate all types of aircraft (RFE/RL, 9 September 2010). Russian sources claimed Russian officials were training Indian air forces at the Ayni airbase in lieu of renovation of the Ayni base (Savenikov 2011).

India had continued to deny the reports that it had a military base in Ayni but did not offer any further clarification on its reported activities.<sup>4</sup> Tajikistan and Russia also remained silent on this issue. During his visit to Tajikistan in October 2011, India's Defence Minister A.K. Antony finally denied reports that India was using Ayni Air Base for military or strategic purposes (Shukla 2011).

The much-talked-about security cooperation between India and Central Asia did not go beyond the pledges to regional security and combating Islam-based insurgency. Indian army conducted some joint training exercises with Central Asian states focusing on counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism. Uzbek special forces have trained at India's prestigious counterinsurgency jungle warfare school in the state of Mizoram (Jha 2011). The participation of Indian armed forces in counter-terrorism military exercises in Tajikistan had been limited in contrast to the joint exercise by the Chinese PLA and the Russian military in June 2012 (Tanchum 2013).

Keen to pursue a close security cooperation with India, President Rahmon visited India six times between 1995 and 2016. His fifth state visit to India in 2012 elevated bilateral relations to a strategic partnership.

Overall, India was unable to garner multilateral support and establish important security cooperation with Tajikistan for its operations in Afghanistan and build on its repeated references to Tajikistan as India's

'gateway to Central Asia' (Mishra 2017) as a narrow strip of territory connects India with Afghanistan and Tajikistan at the Wakhan corridor.

Tajikistan is also one of the biggest beneficiaries of the ITEK programme, with many Tajik officers graduating from Indian military academies.

India's aspirations for permanent membership of the UN Security Council too found sympathetic ears in the region. Kazakhstan has been most active in extending support for India's proposals for reforms of the UN and its bid, together with the G4, for a permanent membership of the UN Security Council. India and Kazakhstan have also actively supported each other's bid for the non-permanent seat of the UN Security Council. Kazakhstan subsequently withdrew from the electoral race in 2006 to ease the path for India (*India Today*, 11 May 2011), with India holding the seat for the seventh time in 2011–12 and Kazakhstan for the first time in 2017–18 (*The Economic Times*, 24 April 2010).

### A Shift to Multilateralism

To its credit, the UPA administration sought to disengage India's role and objectives in Central Asia both discursively and in policy terms from the prevalent 'Great Game' rhetoric, including the references to the 'New Great Game' (Swanström 2005) in Eurasia with China as a major actor.

Delivering a speech at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, the Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran (2011) declared that the theories of 'balance of power' or 'conflict of interest' are 'outdated in today's fast-emerging dynamics of Asia's quest for peace and prosperity and its interconnectedness'. He further asserted that 'India and China, as two continental-sized economies and political entities, are too big to contain each other or be contained by any other country'. The Connect Central Asia Policy reflected this flexible thinking of avoidance of traditional rivalries and shift to multilateralism (Singh 2011).

### Seeking Full Membership of SCO

Though India did obtain an observer status in SCO in 2005, the decision at that time lacked a long-term objective and was limited to issues of energy and

supporting the measures to combat cross-border Islam-based radical ideology. While all SCO members and observers attending the annual meeting are represented by the heads of the government, India was represented by Murli Deora, Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, from 2005 to 2008, denoting that energy cooperation remained India's priority. Manmohan Singh attended the SCO summit for the first time in 2009, held in Yekaterinburg, Russia. Minister of External Affairs S.M. Krishna represented India in 2010 SCO summit in Tashkent and at 2011 SCO summit in Astana.

It was at the Astana summit in 2011 that Krishna conveyed India's desire to join the SCO as a full member 'to add value but also to enhance the stature of the organization' (*The Hindu Business Line*, 15 June 2011). The decision was a belated recognition of the Central Asian region's incorporation into a broader geopolitical space dominated by Russia and China through regional cooperation arrangements and a declining influence of the United States and Western Europe.

India's admission together with Pakistan into the SCO in 2017 had been in the making behind the scene, with Russia brokering a consensus on India joining SCO and negotiating China's objections for India's membership. Though the concept of the Russia-China-India triangle or 'trilateral cooperation' promoted by Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov failed to gain traction, it offered an initial synergy to the effort to bring India within the SCO (Pant 2006).

India's participation in BRICS, as well as sporadic engagement with the Russia-China-India triangle, enabled it to assert a significant policy autonomy from the United States, whose half-hearted efforts to build an NSR have been criticized for 'geopoliticizing' the establishment of trade and transport network and 'deliberately exclude Russia, Iran, and China' (Peyrouse and Raballand 2015).

The waning of the U.S. role in the region reflected the exhaustion of the potential of the U.S.-India cooperation in Afghanistan and the limits of India's bilateral approach to Central Asia. As China assumed a vital strategic role in Afghanistan, India's position increasingly came to converge with that of Russia and China on key issues in Iran and Afghanistan. It also led to a recognition on the part of UPA foreign policy establishment that membership of multilateral structures that engage other regional stakeholders such as Iran and Afghanistan (both are candidate members of SCO) can boost India's strategy in the Central Asian region.

In August 2013, in what were the first-ever official bilateral talks on the Central Asian region held between the two countries, senior officials from India's Ministry of Foreign Affairs met with their counterparts in Beijing to discuss cooperation and areas of potential complementarity between them with discussions centred on 'regional security and counter-terrorism, SCO, energy security, development partnerships, and people-to-people contacts with the countries of the region' (*The Indian Express*, 18 April 2013). These were followed by a visit by a Chinese delegation to New Delhi to discuss Afghanistan and the consequences of NATO withdrawal in 2014.

The lingering suspicions about China's intents among Indian foreign policy establishment gradually gave way to a more pragmatic thinking as India also began cooperating with China on a number of global issues—environment, climate change, terrorism in various multilateral fora. A consensus was emerging among Indian experts on the region who argued that India could be more effective by cooperating with China and joining the SCO. To quote Rajiv Sikri, India's former Ambassador to Kazakhstan, 'in order to protect and preserve its interests in the region, India has no alternative but to closely consult and cooperate with the other major powers who have an interest and a presence in Central Asia' (Sikri 2009b).

## Conclusions

This chapter has argued that the UPA Government, especially through the 'Connect Central Asia' policy adopted in 2012, marked a welcome, though belated, departure from routine affirmations of cultural ties and friendship and projected a transformed image of India as an emerging power, with a thriving economy and advanced capability and innovation in science and technology. The policy identified the strategic directions along which bilateral relationship and multilateral ties were to evolve. A number of incremental changes during the UPA rule enabled India to expand its engagement in the region, especially in the energy sphere. However, India has continued to lag behind other major actors in the region due to being a peripheral actor in terms of geography and a late mover, in contrast to China, Western states, and even Turkey (Wheeler 2013).

After a decade of a close strategic partnership with the United States on Afghanistan and the pursuit of the goal of establishing a 'Greater Central Asia', which also portended to complicate India's relations with allies such as Iran, alienate Russia and enhance suspicion among adversaries that India was acting as a U.S. proxy, the UPA government was able to assert India's autonomy by not endorsing the sanctions on Iran as India's hopes for establishing road and rail connectivity with Central Asia and acquiring a strategic foothold in the region hinged precariously on transport links through Chabahar and cooperation with Iran, which is also critical to its oil imports.

The development of the Chabahar port was still a distant option, though the Manmohan Singh government could draw some comfort in having finally identified the trajectories for connectivity and pledged investments in its development. At the time of writing this chapter in late 2019, Chabahar had not yet become a fully functioning port. Many questions remain about its ability to deliver the promise and also about the railroads connecting it with Central Asia. The Modi government has pledged an investment of \$500 million in building the Chabahar port, which is a fraction of what China has invested in building Gwadar and the CPEC.

India's quest for energy resources, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, was one of the driving factors behind the salutary shift from platitudinous references to cultural ties to the appreciation of the region's resource potential and negotiations over specific projects. While the UPA government displayed a pro-active approach towards establishing close energy partnerships and looking for investments, as a late actor in devising a strategic plan and objectives in defining its place in the region, it found itself outpaced and outplayed by China in every sphere.

Towards the end of its second term, the UPA policies shifted to the inevitable recognition of the importance of joining multilateral institutions in the region by seeking membership of the SCO and collaborating with China-led regional security and strategic cooperation initiatives.

The eventual admission of India and Pakistan to SCO in 2017, facilitated actively by Russia and aided by Kazakhstan, was also made possible by the growing multilateral cooperation between India and China on a number of global concerns in multilateral organizations. The Connect

Central Asia Policy initiated by the UPA Government also reflected the pragmatic realization that India's policies towards Central Asia as an extended neighbour could not be separated from 'the management of a host of triangular relationships among China-Pakistan-India, China-India-United States, United States-Pakistan-India, Russia-China-India, and India-Russia-United States, not to mention the Iranian factor' (Sahgal and Anand 2010).

## Notes

1. Personal observations of the author. As a fluent Russian speaker with proficiency in Kazakh, the author has regularly visited the Central Asian region since 1992 for doctoral research and subsequently for ongoing academic research and interacted with a range of Indian diplomatic officials posted in the region.
2. E. Ahamed, 'Keynote Address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue', 12 June 2012. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/>
3. Intergovernment Agreement on International North-South Transport Corridor, <https://instc.org/Include/ReadFile.asp?qsFileName = Agreement.pdf&qsFilePath = Earchiverad742BC.pdf>
4. Amar Sinha, then Indian ambassador to Tajikistan, resolutely denied the existence of a base during a conversation with the author in Dushanbe in July 2008.

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