



India-Tajikistan relations: From civilizational friends to strategic partners

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Abstract

Tajikistan and India relations are shaped by shared history, culture and civilizational links, and in modern times, these ties are driven by convergence of geo-political concerns and interests. Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in late 1990s changed the threat perceptions and frequent diplomatic visits between the two countries resulted in closer defence cooperation. But the lack of direct overland connectivity has proved a major hindrance, especially in economic and trade relations. Both sides are committed to exploring alternative transport routes to increase economic activities. Indian entry to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and challenges like rising religious fundamentalism and state-sponsored terrorism have given fresh impetus to cooperation in the realms of security, defence, and diplomacy. Foreign troops withdrawal from Afghanistan and subsequent return of Taliban has serious security implications for both India and Tajikistan which necessitates closer cooperation particularly in the arena of defense and security.

Keywords: India, geo-politics, Tajikistan, terrorism, strategic partnership

Introduction

Tajikistan and India are two close neighbours who have shared historical, cultural and civilizational links through history. In modern times, these ties are driven by convergence of geo-political concerns and interests. The increasing threats of separatism, cross-border terrorism and religious extremism have led to greater security and strategic cooperation between the two countries. Recently, Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has renewed the security concerns and thus necessitating deeper cooperation in defence and security arenas.

Tajikistan-India bilateral diplomatic ties were established in 1992. Since then each visit shaped bilateral ties in some new dimensions. The Indian Prime Minister's visit in 2003 laid down the framework for mutual geo-strategic cooperation in the region while Tajik President's visit in 2012 elevated bilateral partnership to the level of long-term strategic partnership. Capitalizing on this mutual trust, confidence and goodwill, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tajikistan in 2015 built deeper development partnerships between the two countries. During Tajik president's visit in 2016, India regarded Tajikistan as a major mainstay against the forces of terrorism and extremism. Today Joint Working Group on Terrorism, Defence, India-Tajikistan Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation, Military hospital at Farkhor, Ayni airbase, Varzob-1 hydropower plant, IT Centre of Excellence in Dushanbe and training and scholarship to Tajik students and defence personnel under ITEC and ICCR are some of hallmarks of our relations.

Tajikistan is the nearest Central Asian republic to India but due to lack of direct land connectivity, ties of two countries especially in the spheres of trade and economic cooperation are still lagging behind. In this context, it is vital for both countries

to seek alternative routes like the North-South Transport Corridor. Diplomatic efforts have yielded results in enhancing India's geo-political profile in Central Asia and Tajikistan and defence and security cooperation is an important part of this. With new challenges like rising radicalization, drug trafficking and fragile situation in Afghanistan and developments like Indian entry to SCO, it necessitates closer partnership in defence and security arenas.

This article delves deep into the civilizational, cultural, diplomatic, trade, defence and strategic cooperation between two countries and examines how shared cultural history in the past and mutual concerns related to security in present times are driving two nations closer. Further, in wake of recent developments in Afghanistan, this paper shows how both countries recognize the centrality of each other in forging a long-term strategy to combat cross border terrorism, Islamic radicalization, separatism and securing their national and economic interests in the region.

Historical and Cultural Relations

In the past, Tajikistan and India have enjoyed shared cultural, civilizational and trade relations. Linguistically and culturally, we belong to the same family. Further the similarities between the cultural traditions of Central Asian and Indian people under Avestan and Vedic period only points to our shared historical and cultural relations. Tajik President's own chronicle, "Tajikistan in the mirror of history-from Aryan to Samanids" recalls the old relationship between the people of two countries. Some of the examples of these cultural relations are the adoption of the game of chess and popularity of Indian literary heritage "Panchtantra" in the Central Asian region (Gulshan, 2015) ^[6]. It is interesting to note that these civilizational links date back to even prehistoric times. Recent

research and archaeological excavations clearly show the similar agricultural practices, town planning and regular contact between Indus Valley and Central Asian people. These civilizational links between lands of Amu Darya and Ganga got further strengthened when Bactria, Sogd and Parthia came under a common state along with Gandhara and North-Western India during the period of Achaemenid, Indo-Greek and Kushan empires. The Kushan Empire marked the highest level of Cultural exchanges that resulted in the infusion of Indian culture, traditions and Buddhism to the Central Asian region. It was during this time of history that the Great Silk Road served as a medium of exchange of goods, services and ideas rendering peace and prosperity to the people of the region. To sum up, Professor K. Warikoo (2016) states that, "Geographical proximity, ethno linguistic affinity and shared history have formed the basis of a special relationship between India and Tajikistan". This bilateral engagement between the people continued during Turkish and Persian empires that strengthened ties further. There were continuous exchanges of leaders, people, poets, Sufi saints and intellectuals between seats of learning like Samarkand, Bukhara and Delhi. Tajik and Indian poets and scholars made equal contributions to the advancement of Indo-Persian literature in the Indian subcontinent. The popularity of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry in Tajikistan and Bedil's poetry in India and the Indian Prime Minister presenting a miniature painting of Abdul Qadir Bedil to Tajik President points towards shared spiritual and cultural heritage (Olimov, 2016) ^[11]. Mughals who came from this region made India their new home but given their emotional and psychological connections with their homeland, they continued their engagements with the region in one or the other form. According to Richard Foltz, this two hundred years of continuous engagement with the Central Asian region and especially influence of Tajik nobility in Mughal courts led to the development of India's cosmopolitan culture. It would be naive to assume that this engagement was just one way, but traveling of Buddhism, traditional knowledge of medicine and herbs and India traders, poets and monks to this region only points that our shared past experienced mutual influence. Now, with India and Central Asia coming under the Russian and British empires respectively and later on rivalry and mutual suspicion between the two empires widened the distance between two regions of shared close cultural and historical relations. As Professor K. Warikoo (2016) points out, "This Russian policy of strategic diversion was countered by the British by adopting a sustained forward policy in the region". By the treaty of 1907, both Tsarist Russia and British decided that Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip of Afghan territory, would be separating Russian Central Asian territories and British Indian possessions and rendering a serious long-term blow to the connectivity between the two regions. Thus is it clear that this 'Great Game' rivalry between two empires put a stoppage to the centuries old civilizational links between the two regions. Tajik people and poets like Mirzo Tursun-Zoda supported the Indian freedom movement. Indian independence resulted in the forming of two separate states namely India and Pakistan proved catastrophic to the age-old connections with the Central Asian region as direct land connectivity to the wider South Asian region was lost. And again during the

Soviet era, there was commonality of interests and close cooperation in science, politics, economics and culture. Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic enjoyed close trade and cultural relations with India. These relations were regulated through Moscow and the extent and intensity of these relations were still limited. However, with the signing of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty in 1971, cultural exchanges between India and Central Asian republics increased considerably (Singh, 2003) ^[14]. During this period of time, Hindi films enjoyed much popularity in Central Asia. During the Cold War era, India, despite being the founding member of the Non-alignment movement, remained a close ally of the Soviet Union and for that matter Central Asian republics. Friendly Indo-Soviet ties were instrumental in forging deeper Indian contacts with Central Asia in comparison to other southern neighbours and this very good mutual understanding along with age old brotherly bonding and commonality of interest and views in modern times provided India an added advantage to establish political relations with newly emerged Central Asian republics after the disintegration of Soviet Union. Soviet disintegration resulted in the emergence of five Central Asian Republics namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the 1990s. India was one of the first countries to recognize their Independence and started to establish diplomatic relations with newly emerged republics by segregating its overall Soviet-era ties by Republic wise. The sudden breakup of the Soviet Union brought socio-economic miseries to these republics and these miseries coupled with the transitional pain resulted in widespread poverty, unemployment and political instability in many countries. These countries started to interact with regional and global powers to overcome this situation. During this time, India was in shock due to the break up of its dependable ally and political and economic instability at home further delayed Indian outreach to the region. However India was quick to realize this delay and now it has a strategic partnership with three of the five Central Asian republics and trade is also picking up, though slowly. Indian measures like 'Connect Central Asia' policy, and also holding an India-Central Asia Dialogue at Track II annually in one of the republics have contributed to the closer ties (Singh, 2003) ^[14]. Though India and Central Asian countries enjoy friendly relationships, the economic and trade engagement between the two sides has been much below its potential. The countries of Central Asia are rich in hydrocarbons, minerals and other natural resources and are close to India geographically. Geographically, the strategic location of these countries also makes them a bridge between different regions of Asia and between Europe and Asia. Although the significance of the region in India's economic and energy security is clear, lack of direct surface connectivity has been affecting the economic engagement. However, the recent progress in the North-South Transport Corridor will certainly improve the connectivity between the two regions. Geographically, Tajikistan is nearest to India and given its geo-strategic position, it is important not only to India but also regional and global actors as well. Further, Tajikistan is rich in mineral and natural resources and it has a fast-growing consumer market and India is important to it due to its status as an emerging economic and political power in the world.

Mutual interests of both sides rest primarily on economic and trade cooperation, regional security and stability and maintaining of strategic order. As far as this modern relationship between two countries is concerned, it is simply not based on close civilizational, cultural and trade ties but both sides find several commonalities. In the present time, the similarity of worldviews, common threat concerns like cross-border terrorism, religious extremism and separatism, high level of mutual confidence and trust, their commitment to build modern secular, pluralist and democratic polity, securing stability and peace in Afghanistan, promoting social-ethno-linguistic and cultural harmony, adherence to non-interference and peaceful co-existence and promoting overall trade, cultural and technological cooperation are imparting new colors to the dynamic partnership between two countries. Tajikistan provides a special place to India in its foreign policy due to its close geographical proximity and age-old close historical, cultural and trade ties and mutual concerns related to regional security and stability. Referring to these bilateral relations between two countries, Tajik President stressed: “the Republic of Tajikistan within the framework of its bilateral and multilateral relations with India is looking at it as a factor for peace and stability in the region”. The disintegration of the USSR followed by Tajik civil war disrupted Tajikistan-India relations for some time. But it also gave an opportunity to engage with the new sovereign Tajik state. Attempts by outside powers to secure geo-political and economic interests (New Great Game) coupled by rising threats of cross-border terrorism; extremism and volatile Afghanistan situation have turned Tajikistan a high priority in India’s foreign policy, which led to high-level diplomatic exchanges between the two countries.

Diplomatic and Economic Cooperation

Formal diplomatic ties were established between the two countries on 28 August, 1992. Since then, Indo-Tajik cooperation has covered a broad spectrum of fields from diplomatic, economic, cultural, defence and security to education, human resource development, science and technology, academic and humanitarian arenas. Diplomatic visits by leaders from both sides have helped in strengthening bilateral ties in these spheres and thus taking bilateral cooperation to new heights. Tajik President has visited India several times so far. It was during the first state visit of Tajik President in 1995 when a mutual understanding was reached on Afghanistan for security and stability of the region (MEA, 2017). However, the Taliban took over Afghanistan and escalation of cross-border terrorism in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir started a new phase in the bilateral cooperation between two countries. Here it is also important to note that Pakistani sponsored extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan had a direct spill over effect on Tajikistan and thus worsened its internal security scenario. Now worried about their respective internal security and stability, both countries cooperated well in supporting the Northern Alliance led by Tajik leadership of Ahmad Shah Masood against the Taliban. Against these developments, landmark visits by Tajik President in 1999 and 2001 and Indian Prime Minister in 2003 concretized the ties in geo-political and security realms in the

wake of rising threats of state sponsored terrorism and religious extremism and Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee described this joint Tajik-Indian action as a “stabilizing factor” for the region (MEA, 2018). It was due to these diplomatic efforts that India was able to garner Tajik support for Indian claim of permanent membership at United Nations Security Council and entry to Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). At the same time Tajikistan found a reliable partner in its pursuit of regional security and stability and economic development of the country.

Although each visit brought both countries closer, but due to political instability at home which resulted in political indecisiveness in foreign affairs and lack of political and bureaucratic will to implement the already signed mutual agreements failed to raise India’s geo-political and strategic profile in the Central Asian region. However, developments like Kargil war and persistent volatile security situation in the neighbourhood provided a new urgency to the bilateral cooperation especially in the fields of security and defence. The visit of the Indian defence Minister in 2002 points to this urgency and growing defence cooperation between two countries. The military hospital at Farkhor and Ayni air base for infant Tajik air force are physical signs of this new cooperation.

Indian President Pratibha Patil’s visit enhanced goodwill, trust and mutual confidence between the two countries. During the state visit of Tajik President in 2012, both sides decided to elevate their bilateral relations to the level of a long-term strategic partnership. The Indian Prime Minister’s visit in 2015 provided further impetus to these relations. On his last stoppage to Tajikistan, Narendra Modi remarked: “This is the last stop on my visit to the five Central Asian countries. But, we sometimes save the special one for the last”. He pointed out the closest linguistic, civilizational and historical links with Tajikistan. Tajik President’s visit to India in 2016 reinforced the commitment of both countries to take bilateral ties to a new level by improving overall bilateral security cooperation, capacity building, and information exchanges and via active coordination at regional and multilateral platforms. India regarded Tajikistan’s role as a ‘mainstay’ against forces of extremism, religious radicalization, and terrorism (MEA, 2015). These diplomatic visits also resulted in the strengthening of cooperation between two countries in areas like human resource development by providing increased number of scholarships and training to Tajik students via ITEC in areas ranging from English language, banking, and finance, IT to industrial development and management and defence training and identifying new areas of cooperation like tourism, agriculture and space. Tajikistan attracts the largest share of humanitarian and development assistance in the form of aid and material support and it has significantly built the IT capacity of Tajikistan while at the same time enhancing Indian strategic outreach in the region (Gulshan, 2015) ^[6].

Diplomatic ties shaped by regular visits of leaders, bureaucrats and other cultural and academic missions resulted in the signing of several mutual agreements and MOUs including those of economic and trade nature and helped in strengthening defence, security and strategic cooperation, but the lack of direct overland connectivity hindered trade cooperation.

Though economic and trade ties between Tajikistan and India go back to Silk Road days, in present times it's a low-key affair due to structural and connectivity hurdles. There is a vast potential of trade between resource rich Tajikistan and technology-rich India. Private sector cooperation is an important aspect of trade relations that can increase the competitive nature of Tajikistan's manufacturing units thus leading to Tajikistan's export diversification and economic independence in the wake of dominating cheap Chinese goods. In return India can avail the benefit of the vast potential of hydro power in Tajikistan for its energy security. The areas of cooperation between two countries are pharmaceuticals, education, health, energy, tele-communication, and infrastructure.

Structural changes in the trade relations between two countries are the need of the hour. The reasons for this low level of trade between the two countries are of direct overland connectivity due to political differences between India and Pakistan, expensive and unreliable Mumbai- Bandar Abbas- Dushanbe route, macroeconomic instability in Central Asia inadequate banking facilities, strict visa regimes, language barriers and absence of direct and daily air connectivity are some of them (Warikoo, 2015) ^[18].

Indian access to Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade Transit Agreement can tap the vast potentiality of trade between India and Central Asia. And, further establishment of India-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia Transport Corridor will reduce the cost of transportation significantly (Warikoo, 2016). Political relations need to be improved between India and Pakistan and political stability in Afghanistan is the need of the hour. However, Indian hopes lie mainly on the North-South Transport Corridor and recent progress in this project is a positive sign. According to the respective embassy websites, both countries have a Joint Inter- governmental commission led by the ministry of economy and trade that reviews the existing level of cooperation in several fields. Apart from this, several major agreements and bilateral treaties like Agreement for Bilateral Investment Protection, Air Services Agreement and Agreement on Long-term Cooperation in Trade, Economic and Industry and institutional arrangements like setting up of an Indo-Tajik Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation and business forums and even after their several rounds of meetings have strengthened bilateral trade while at the same time identifying the new areas of cooperation. A number of civilian projects like the reconstruction of the Varzob-1 hydro power plant, Fruit Processing Plant and IT Centre in Dushanbe have strengthened the existing relations between two countries. Indian Prime Minister's visit to Tajikistan in 2015, where he addressed an agricultural workshop, points to the vast potential of cooperation in farming techniques, equipment and space technology. Similarly Hindi-Urdu Chair was established at Tajik State University in 2019 (MEA, 2021).

Defence and Strategic Cooperation

One of the vibrant dimensions of these ever growing bilateral ties is the increasing cooperation in security and defence related fields between the two countries. Mutual interests concerning peace, security and stability of Central Asia in the

wake of volatile Afghan situation coupled with rising threats of religious extremism and cross-border terrorism brought two countries closer in defence and strategic partnership. These developments increased the diplomatic efforts between two countries for closer defence ties. In this context, the Indian Prime Minister's visit in 2003 laid down the framework for mutual geo-strategic cooperation in the region while Tajik President's visit in 2012 elevated bilateral partnership to the level of long-term strategic partnership (MEA, 2012). Today, joint military exercises, defence personnel training, Ayni airbase, military hospital, defence material supplies and Joint Working Group on Terrorism are the hallmark of this partnership. Although, Indian entry to SCO provided it some influence but entry to other regional organizations like 'Dushanbe Four' is still needed to push these ties forward. It is clear that Pakistan has a role in spreading religious extremism and cross-border terrorism that is harming both Tajikistan and India. Pakistan is using this platform to secure a position in the Central Asian region and is denying India's entry to this organization which is a Tajik Initiative to counter narco trade and promoting economic cooperation and sharing electricity. Indian entry into this organization can add greater significance to it (Dutta, 2015) ^[2]. The establishment of Joint Working Group on terrorism, defence and sharing of intelligence and expanding cooperation between heads of relevant organizations are positive signs of our growing security and defence cooperation with the country. During the Indian Prime Minister's visit to the country in 2015, both sides expressed satisfaction with growing defence ties and at the same time reaffirmed their commitment for closer cooperation in this field. During Tajik president's visit in 2016, India regarded Tajikistan as a major mainstay against the forces of terrorism and extremism and Tajikistan recognizes Indian participation imperative for the security, stability and development of the entire region (Sharma, 2016) ^[13].

Tajikistan and India are faced with a wide range of common questions connected with most important challenges such as terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. However, these security challenges to regional peace and stability are not the only reasons for Indian outreach in this region, given the fast developing Pakistan-China axis in the region, Indian need to maintain its strategic influence in the region. Stephen Blank (2012) in this regard opines that, "Two key Indian objectives are to deny Pakistan and China, her key rivals and threats, opportunities to increase their strategic capability by gaining predominant influence in Central Asia or by threatening India's assets there. Enhancing Indian influence in the region equates to a strategy of strategic denial". Both Russia and Central Asian states have welcomed the Indian role in this region and Central Asian states especially Tajikistan and Uzbekistan recognize India as an important factor in the regional peace and stability in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. Further, India's accession to SCO provides it a legitimate platform to enhance its political and strategic profile in the region. However, India's increasing closeness to the USA may result in the formation of the Russia-China-Pakistan axis and may harm its economic and strategic aspirations in the region. Russian cooperation is vital for India's presence in this region and for this India needs to sort out the apprehensions of the

long-standing ally in this regard. Recent top level visit including India's national security adviser and foreign minister to Tajikistan reaffirms the commitment for robust ties particularly in wake of Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.

Way Forward

In the wake of volatile Afghanistan situation and escalation of cross-border terrorism situation in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir in the 1990s, India started defence cooperation with Tajikistan in order to counter state-sponsored terrorism, extremism and separatism. It is the most vibrant aspect of bilateral cooperation between the two countries and has been consistently growing in newer areas. Today, again with the return of the Taliban, the situation demands enhanced cooperation between two sides. Tajikistan is grappling with Afghan refugee problems and potential terror and security threats emanating from Afghanistan. Similarly, return of Taliban and Afghanistan turning into a hotbed of terrorism has serious implications for peace and security for India especially in Kashmir. But, just one-way cooperation in defence and security has its own limitations. Tajikistan needs to reciprocate Indian eagerness to become the major security and defence partner of the country by providing it access to use Ayni airbase and other similar projects. Indian and Tajik diplomatic pro-activeness is required to take Russia in confidence to make it a reality. What is important to note here is that a similar kind of security situation has arisen in the extended neighbourhood of India. With the new challenge like emergence of new radical Islamist groups like ISIS, rise in cross-border and state sponsored terrorism, return of Taliban, Al-Qaeda and other extremist groups coupled with fast changing geo-political global power equations and security environment necessitates deeper defence and security cooperation between Tajikistan, Afghanistan and India. Pakistan is continuing with its old tactics of sponsoring cross-border terrorism to disturb peace and stability in Afghanistan and India. Non-state actors sponsored by Pakistan are continuously attacking Indian humanitarian and development projects in the region in order to curb growing Indian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asian republics. Apart from India and Afghanistan, countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Iran are also suffering from the terrorism emanating from Pakistan-based terror camps. India needs to formulate a proper action plan to take these countries on board to united stand against state-sponsored terrorism and diplomatic efforts to isolate Pakistan over this. With the formation of the hostile China-Pakistan axis through China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that violates India's territorial integrity, India needs to pursue a well-coordinated defence and security policy as part of its foreign policy with regional and global powers like Russia and USA. Although in the case of Central Asia and for that matter Tajikistan, India is doing this since the emergence of extremist Taliban and the rise of state-sponsored terrorism in the 1990s. But general observation has been that India has been reluctant to expand its geo-political profile in the Central Asian region and Tajikistan in particular in comparison with regional players like Iran and China. What is worth mentioning in the relationship of two countries is the fact that both are strategic partners to each other and recognize the centrality of each other in maintaining

peace and stability in the Central and South Asian region. During Tajik president's visit in 2016, India regarded Tajikistan as a major mainstay against the forces of terrorism and extremism and Tajikistan recognizes Indian participation imperative for the security, stability and development of the entire region. Capitalizing on this mutual trust, confidence and goodwill and building deeper development partnerships will certainly bode well for India's broader aspirations in energy-rich Central Asia in general and strategically located Tajikistan in particular.

Conclusion

Emphasis on having close historical, cultural, and civilizational and trade ties between the two countries needs to be matched by significant improvement in economic and trade relations. Proactive diplomacy is the need of the hour to address the vital issues of connectivity, ensuring stability, security and peace in the region along with economic prosperity via human resource development, shared knowledge and innovation. Both countries need to build a long-term strategy and secure their national interests by curbing the menace of separatism, cross-border terrorism and religious extremism. There are immense opportunities and challenges before the two countries, but sustained and close cooperation in diplomatic, trade, defence and security arenas will certainly move the relations between the two countries to new heights. As Bedil, the Tajik poet urged, "The Sea of time and place, for you, is but one gulp limit, not your boundless imagination".

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