CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA POLICY: RE-IMAGING THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE

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The disintegration of the former Soviet Union has left in its trail five independent Central Asian Republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The emergence of these newly independent states in the former Soviet space is the most dramatic change in the geo-political and geo-strategic landscape of Eurasia in the Post-Cold War period. Politically, economically and strategically, Central Asia is becoming an important region in its own right in world politics, reviving its historic role as crossroads between Europe and Asia, which was cut off for seven long decades from its natural neighbours because of the region’s remote location, landlocked status and geo-political position at the periphery of the Soviet empire.

The unprecedented manner in which the Central Asian states gained their independence by the demise of the Soviet Union, presented new challenges to many nations of the world; beginning with its new geo-political and geo-economic challenges to China and Russia; Central Asia is also a matter of concern for India and USA, mainly after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Centre, altered the existing structure of power and influence radically. The focus of each power in Central Asia has changed; USA has become the region’s main economic donor and security manager; India though did not show much interest initially due to Russian influence in the region, is now deeply engaged with the states and extends all kinds of military and humanitarian support to the US led war against the Taliban regime in Central Asia. China has also begun to further expand its political influence in the region via its economic policies with the states of the Central Asian Region. Russia, using its traditional linkages tries to maintain its influence over the region. The main interest of Russia and China is to keep US influence in the region limited. However, the growing Indo-US relations does act as a matter of concern for Russia and China, as India has a very close relation with the Central Asian states which will act as a catalyst for US-Central Asian relations to grow.

India’s recent ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy of 2012 is based on “a pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian Countries, both individually and collectively” is what Indian Minister Of State Shri .E. Ahmed said at the
first India-Central Asia Dialogue on 12th June 2012. However, since the commencement of this policy, India itself has not been very active in its dealings with the Central Asian Republics; hence the need has arisen for a pro-active approach by India, revamping and re-thinking certain areas of the policy need to be done so as to ensure that the aims of the policy get fulfilled bringing about closer and better relations between India and the Central Asian Republics.

This paper seeks to analyse the importance of Central Asia States in the world today, this is done through the analysis of India’s relations with Central Asia before the 2000s in the first part of the paper; the second part focuses on India’s two major interests in Central Asia: energy and security since the year 2000 with regard to India’s relations to other powers in the region; and the third part of the paper seeks to analyse India’s recent ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ of 2012; the very important issues that has led to the need of the ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy; and finally conclude with expectations of the Policy.

HISTORY OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Central Asian states are landlocked and surrounded by powerful countries; in the east is China, in the north Russia and in the north-west is Turkey and towards the southern border is Afghanistan and Iran. Central Asia has also been seen as the cockpit between Asia and Europe, and has in the past been subject to subjugation by various nations. The historical significance of Central Asia can be seen from 3000BC to 2000BC where migration was immense between the Indo-European people who moved into the areas of Samarkand, Taskent, Bukhara and Merv. The ‘Silk Route’ found by the Chinese traders was from the period 138BC – 484AD; where the Mongol nomads used this route for trading purposes between China and Central Asian regions, the ‘Silk Route’ was a network of roadways, emanating from China, taking the route skirts of the Tarim Basin north and south. From the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 7th century, the Huns and the Turks invaded Central Asia; the reasons for such interest in the lands of Central Asia were the limitless steppe grasslands and the Silk Route that brought flourishing trade. After the Huns and Turks, came the Arab rule in Central Asia for three hundred and fifty years, from 651-992 AD; this was followed by a period of devastation in Central Asia with Mongol invasion that lasted from 1150-1370. The Mongols had taken control over Iran, China, Baghdad, southern Russia,
and Hungary and even touched the Adriatic. The Mongolian rule over these regions was known as the Golden Horde that dominated southern and European Russia for 200 years. Then came the period of Tamerlane’s control over Central Asia from 1370-1405; he belonged to Turkestan, and finally was the period of the control of the Uzbek Khanates, 1500-1717 till the Russians arrived and controlled Central Asia from 1717-1917 with the primary purpose of trade. By 1873, Russia completed the conquest of the region and Central Asia remained part of, first Tsarist Russia and afterwards Soviet Union until 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of five independent Central Asian Republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan that have come to gain immense importance in the global sphere, bringing about the emergence of the ‘great game’, where the main players are not Great Britain and Russia, but China and India in Central Asia.

CENTRAL ASIA AND INDIA

The relations between India and the Central Asian Region can be traced back to the Prehistoric period via the cultural exchange between the two nations; the migration of ancient tribes between India and the Central Asian Region was how the cultural traditions got exchanged frequently. The ‘Silk Route’ emanating from China along with the Karakoram pass played an important role that enabled networking between these regions. The Ancient Period witnessed the migration of the Saka Tribes via the Pamirs, bringing with them elements and traditions of Central Asian culture. The Kushan Empire of the Ancient Period brought the relations of Central Asia and India to its zenith; as the empire was made up of many territories of Central Asia and a considerable part of North India. The Medieval Period witnessed social, cultural, intellectual and economic relations between Central Asia and India getting established, under the rule of Ghenghis Khan, Taimur, Babar, and also from 1526 to the middle of the 17th Century when the Uzbeks ruled Central Asia and the Mughals ruled India. Such is the timeline of deep cultural relations between Central Asia and India, that stands true as expressed in the statement of the then President of the then Indian Council for Cultural Relations at an International Conference on Central Asia held at Aligarh in 1970.

“From time immemorial, our history has been inextricably bound up with that of Central Asia. With indomitable courage and in quest for knowledge and adventure, saints and seers, students and teachers, artists and traders have travelled widely through the ages and contributed to the cross fertilisation of cultures in this region. Streams of cultures have floated into India and have been absorbed producing the rich culture which is India
today. Recent researchers indicate that the Aryans first met the Dravids at the Khwarizm and at the Indus valley. After the waves of Aryans converged on India, came the Greeks, followed by the Huns, Afghans, Turks and the Mongols. They all took almost the same route and they all had their roots in Central Asia."

Prior to 1990, India’s warm relationship with the Soviet Union allowed India indirect linkage with the Central Asian nations, that laid the foundations for amicable ties between India and Central Asia in the contemporary period, and Pakistan’s support for Islamic fundamentalist movements in the region also served as a push to the countries to move closer to India. Our then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao during his visit to Turkmenistan in September 1995 announced that “for India”, Central Asia 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.”

Rao’s proclamation offered a glimpse to India’s ‘Look North Policy’, so as to include the ‘long-standing historical ties encompassing the political, cultural, economic, and religious dimensions’ for the basis of international relations between India and Central Asia. The main objective of the ‘Look North Policy’ was to bring about ‘a proactive and meaningful approach that accords top priority to Central Asia, and acts as an expression of India’s aspiration, to promote a secular, multi-ethnic order in the region’. However, India’s nuclear testings in 1998 at the Pokhran range was criticized by Central Asia that despite India’s claims of ‘Historical belonging’ to ‘strategic neighbourhood’, India did not pay sufficient attention to Central Asia and therefore India was called ‘a mere spectator’ of Central Asian politics. In an attempt to rectify relations with Central Asia India’s ‘forward’ Central Asia policy in the post-1998 period has been construed ‘as an integral component of its growing military, nuclear and economic powers.’ The foreign policy of India is therefore aimed at making India more appealing to the Central Asian states.

Keeping in mind India’s foreign policy of making India more appealing to the Central Asian states, we can analyse India’s primary interests in the region as that of energy and economic interests, and security and countering terrorism interests; these two areas of focus by the Indian governments is a projection of India’s endeavours of gaining a significant position in the region, thereby limiting the influence of Pakistan’s Islamic linkages in Central Asia. India’s energy and economic interests can be looked into through the lens of her relationship of cooperation and competition with China in the region; and the security scenario that India
addressed in Central Asia can be focussed upon through India’s support towards the endeavours taken up by NATO, USA and Russia to fight ‘the war against terrorism’

**INDIA’S ENERGY AND ECONOMIC INTERESTS**

Central Asia has been ground for the well known ‘Great Game’ between Great Britain and the Russia Empire; a century later, the independent Republics of Central Asia are part of the ‘New Great Game’ due to its geo-political heterogeneous position and most importantly it richness in energy resources; India has become one of the important participants in the competition for influence over Central Asia’s resources.

Changing the region’s energy flows from the existing northern routes to wards Russia to western, eastern, and southern routes towards Europe and Asia was initially thought to be integral to the developmental goals of Central Asian states. To reduce the region’s dependence on Russia, a few massive projects such as the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline were implemented. Since demand in Asia (particularly in China and India) was expected to grow much faster than in Europe, other options were looked upon as economically lucrative, among them an eastward routes to China, southern routes through Iran, or southwest routes via Afghanistan.

Among the Central Asian nations, Kazakhstan has substantial oil; Turkmenistan has gas; Uzbekistan has hydrocarbon resources; and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has surplus hydro power. India, unlike Russia and China is not well placed as it does not have a direct border with any of the Central Asian Republics. In 2005, our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh warned us that “China is ahead of us in planning for its energy security- India can no longer be complacent.”

India has increased her energy cooperation with her long-standing military and political ally Russia; investing in oil and gas exploration in the joint Russia-Kazakh Kurmangazy oilfield in the Caspian Sea. Experts argue that Russia has vested interests in its cooperation with India and China in Central Asia, so that it can keep the United States out of the region’s orbit. India and Kazakhstan have cooperation in the oil and gas sector; India intends to participate in the exploration and development of Kazakhstan’s oil and gas field. China also has joint ventures carried out with oil and gas companies of Kazakhstan.
Indian companies are trying hard to get a strong foothold in the region. The Sakhalin-1 investment in Russia and recent purchase of Imperial energy by India’s public sector company ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation), are efforts in this direction. Competition in the region is fierce, as China is pursuing the same strategy. At the same time, the rapidly growing trade and economic relationship between India and China also compel the two to talk of building partnerships in other areas. Earlier, both declared their intentions of cooperation in oil and gas biddings. India also mooted the idea of Asia-wide regional cooperation in energy, and initiated a dialogue between the principal Asian suppliers (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Iran, Qatar, Oman) and principal Asian buyers (India, China, Japan, Korea). These efforts showed some results when the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and India’s ONGC mounted a successful $573 million joint bid to acquire Petro-Canada’s 37 percent stake in the al-Furat oil and gas fields in Syria. They earlier worked as joint operators in Sudan.

India and China may be cooperating in other areas, but when it comes to Central Asian energy, competition is fierce. In late 2005 when China outbid India to acquire Petro-Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan’s third-largest oil producer, with CNPC raising its bid to $4.18 billion. Nevertheless, after trying for many years, India may finally be getting into the energy scene in the region. During the visit of Kazakhstan’s president to India in January, 2009, India’s ONGC Mittal Energy Limited (OMEL) and KazMunaiGaz (KMG), signed a Heads of Agreement for exploration of oil and gas in the Satpayev Block in the Caspian Sea. OMEL is a joint venture between ONGC Videsh Limited and Mittal Investments Sarl.

In 2006, during a visit to Tashkent, our Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, a series of documents were signed between the two nations, including a memorandum between Gail and Uzbekneftegaz; this memorandum provided for the joint exploration and exploitation of Uzbekistan sites, as well as for the construction of liquid gas and oil factories in the western regions of Uzbekistan.

In Turkmenistan, ONGC and ME (Mittal Energy) made an acquisition in 2007 of 30 percent of the shares of two oil sites in the Turkmen sector of the Caspian Sea. 2008, witnessed a new memorandum being signed between India and Turkmenistan for cooperation in the oil and gas sector; however, the ONGC and Mittal Energy exited the blocks after exploratory failures in 2010.
Despite Indian companies failing to China’s companies, India has been able to carry out several agreements in Central Asia, however the poor transport linkages are one of the major reasons why India suffers more than China; India, unlike China does not have any direct border with any of the Central Asian Republics. For the last 12 years, there has been much discussion on the $7.6 billion TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline. The project has been marred by uncertainties regarding gas reserves in Turkmenistan, the security situation in Afghanistan, and the strained relations between India and Pakistan. Still, all parties are considering the proposal very seriously. This 1,680 km pipeline would run from the Dauletabad gas field in Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, from where it would run alongside the highway from Herat to Kandahar, and then via Quetta to Multan in Pakistan, with the final destination of the pipeline to be Fazilka in Indian Punjab. India was formally invited to join the project in 2006. Turkmenistan has committed to provide sovereign guarantees for long-term uninterrupted supplies to Pakistan and India. In May 2006, the Indian government officially approved its participation in the TAPI project and authorized the Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas to put up a formal request for joining the project. Afghanistan, India and Pakistan signed a framework agreement to buy gas from Turkmenistan in April 2008. The participating countries then planned to discuss the issues of payments of transit to Afghanistan and Pakistan, taxation structure and consortium issues. Despite many obstacles, an Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline is also on the agenda.

Even in the area of trade, China is favoured against India as it can benefit from its shared borders, mainly with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, while India has to pass through Iran, Afghanistan, and the Jammu and Kashmir region or through the difficult Leh-Kashgar pass. China has implemented a two-pronged strategy; first, to improve the border-bound routes in order to increase cross-border transactions, and, second, to open up the most isolated regions in order to facilitate internal communication. Apart from commodity trading, China is also interested in Central Asia’s electricity sector; China’s aim is not only to gain supply of hydroelectricity in its large cities in the east but also to make up for the energy shortfall in its Xinjiang province. Currently, negotiations are on regarding China financing the construction of three stations on three cross-border rivers, which would run from the Kyrgyz glaciers towards China. With regard to India, the geographical distance between India and Central Asia is not the only factor that hinders trade between India and Central Asia, the difficulty of transiting via Afghanistan has blocked the development of trade flows for the past two decades; the absence of secure road, rail, and electric systems prevents practically all north-
south transportation. Hence, the need of the International North-South Transport Corridor project which was launched in 2000 in Saint Petersburg. The project concentrates on the establishment of a road and rail corridor linking the large cities of Russia with the Iranian ports of the Persian Gulf, and then with the Indian Ocean. The first flows of commodity began in 2004 but remain limited. Potentially, the North-South Corridor could facilitate the transit of goods from India to Iran’s port of Bandar Abbas, and then hopefully to Chabahar. India thus finances the transforming of Chabahar into a commercial port and its connection with Afghanistan’s main ring road highway system, however the port’s capability and its connectivity to the rail networks of Iran and Afghanistan is not up to par. In 2009, the Northern Distribution Network was launched; it was charged with supplying nonlethal equipment to international coalition forces in Afghanistan and contributes to the launch of a trans-Afghan train, a potential link between Tashkent and Islamabad or New Delhi. Thus, for now Indian access to Central Asia is practical only by air which reduces the profitability of potential exchanges and limiting them to materials with high added value.

India is famous for her Information Technology sector, and the Central Asian states are on a quest for development in this domain, especially Kazakhstan, which launched a Program of Non-industrial Development and Investment for the period of 2003-2015. In 2001, the state educational centre Bilim and the Chennai based Internet Business Factory India (IBFI) opened a techno-pole devoted to the handling of information technology in the Kazakh public school system. IBFI also set up an intranet system for the Kazakh national educational system. These are a few successful endeavours of Indian Information Technology projects in Central Asia. India is also one of the main exporters of pharmaceuticals products to Central Asia; India supplies Central Asia with more than 30 percent of its pharmaceuticals needs. Several joint ventures that specialise in the manufacture of pharmaceutical products; several large Indian pharmaceutical companies have opened offices in Almaty or Astana.

Thus, in economic terms, the presence of China and India, as two important powers in Central Asia differ greatly; China a global power with increased influence in most of the sectors, while India is a minor economic player with specialised niches. However, despite their role of competition, India and China do manage to carry out a good relation of cooperation in many of their economic endeavours in the Central Asian Region.

**INDIA’S SECURITY INTERESTS**
At the domestic level, Indian security forces have been guarding its frontiers with Pakistan. Cross-border terrorism has been contained and the destabilization of J&K has been prevented. At the political level, India has attempted to solve the issue within a democratic and secular framework. Regular elections to the State Assembly take place. The government engages in dialogue with radical Islamist groups operating in J&K, provided that they accept the Indian Constitution. And a composite dialogue with Pakistan has been initiated. Focusing on bilateral mechanism, India has expressed its readiness to find pragmatic solutions to all outstanding issues, “short of redrawing the boundaries.”

Every time India-Pakistan relations harden, these bilateral mechanisms come under strain and their value is questioned. In the wake of the Mumbai attacks, all bilateral initiatives have been stalled. However, reports suggest that the composite dialogue between India and Pakistan has in fact made substantive progress. Inevitably, a central point in India’s diplomacy is to highlight the threat emanating from religious extremism and cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. Combating non-traditional threats and challenges, especially those supported by external forces, is India’s uppermost security concern. India has therefore been supportive of initiatives in this area launched by the United Nations. It has supported Security Council Resolution 1373, a milestone resolution aimed at combating terrorism, and it has introduced the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, which is currently before the UN’s General Assembly. During Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh’s June, 2009, visit to Yekaterinburg he elicited support for this initiative.

At the regional level, India and the Central Asian states have a common stake in peace and stability in the region. In the early years, the Indian concern was that developments in Afghanistan could cast their shadow on the new countries of Central Asia, which it perceived as fragile entities engaged in the monumental task of systemic transition for which they lacked experience and expertise. At this nascent stage of their consolidation process the potential for Afghan turmoil to spill over into Central Asia appeared strong, not least because the borders were porous and undefined and because of the vast Central Asian Diaspora living in northern Afghanistan. From the Indian perspective, the possibility of a destabilized Central Asia seemed very real.
The Indian government was equally concerned over Pakistan’s approach to Central Asia. At the core of India’s concerns was the apprehension that Pakistan would seek to acquire ‘strategic depth’ vis-à-vis India by bringing these states within the fold of Islam. The strategy of seeking strategic depth in Afghanistan was initiated by President Zia-ul Haq of Pakistan even before the Soviet Union collapsed. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the overthrow of Afghanistan’s President Najibullah by the mujaheddin gave a powerful impetus to pursue this strategic project with added vigor. Indeed, Pakistani leaders found the prospect of a vast region coming under the sway of their own Islamic values very appealing. However, they seem to have underestimated the degree to which the values of the Central Asian milieu were liberal and moderate, a balance between modernity and tradition. Yet at the time, the potential that the Pakistani push for “strategic depth” in Afghanistan could strengthen the forces of instability religious extremism in the broader region could certainly could not be discounted.

To repeat, Indian apprehensions were not unfounded. Official thinking in New Delhi perceived the beginning of the Tajik civil war and the Taliban’s capture of power in Afghanistan as part of Pakistan’s larger plan to extend its influence in Central Asia, and to do so under a flag of Islamization. Also lending credence to this conclusion was the widespread talk of a “Greater Afghanistan,” much of it emanating from Islamabad. All this, and the obvious fact that the fragile new states of Central Asia were in no position to defend themselves, led India to welcome the Russian military presence in Central Asia as a guarantor of peace and stability. This fully accorded with India’s interests. Later, when the Taliban came to power, India supported the anti-Taliban Afghani forces (mainly Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras from the North) that came together under the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance received backing from Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were also apprehensive of the Taliban but opted for a policy of engagement and negotiations with the Taliban. It was therefore both logical and consistent for India and the Central Asian states to welcome the US-led War on Terror and NATO’s military presence in the region.

In the Indian perspective, the security and stability of Afghanistan is linked with that of Central Asia. Indian engagement with Central Asia ranges from security and strategic diplomatic to the economic and cultural spheres. The Central Asian states have welcomed India’s enhanced interaction with them. Having consolidated their independence, they are
now focusing on efforts to build new polities, a project that has progressed everywhere, albeit at very different paces. In the economic sphere Kazakhstan has made considerable progress, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan proceeding at a slower pace and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan having recently adopted policies that are intensifying the pace of their development.

On issues of regional security, a successful scenario will depend largely on a balance of interests among the US, Russia and China. Through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, the US, European Union, and NATO have established a wide-ranging presence in Central Asia. Russia’s great leverage their stems from its strong military presence and dominance of the energy sector there, as well as the large presence of migrant workers from Central Asia in Russia itself. Within careful limits the Central Asian states perceive all these external presences as essential. As one official put it, “We need external powers to maintain stability of the region, but do not want one dominant power, whether it is the US, China, or Russia.

The Central Asian states have joined a number of multilateral regional groupings. Earlier, it was the Collective Security Treaty of 1992 that provided them with a security umbrella. In 2001 the Shanghai Five evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the agenda of which includes both security and economic issues. Among its structures, the SCO has established the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) primarily to deal with unconventional challenges. At present RATS is merely a coordinating center for the exchange of information. Cooperation among its members is weak and the SCO lacks forces of its own with which to deal with threats and challenges. India is today an observer in the SCO but all the Central Asian states have strongly backed India’s application for full membership. Another regional security arrangement is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian initiative aimed primarily at integrating its members’ defence sectors. At a Moscow summit in February, 2009, the CSTO formed its own Collective Fast Reaction Force to deal with threats and challenges.

**INDIA’S “CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA” POLICY**

The ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy (CCAP) was first unveiled by the Minister of State for External Affairs, E.Ahmed, in a key note address at the First meeting for the India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track II initiative, organised on 12th and 13th June 2012 in Bishkek.
Kyrgyzstan; so as to fast track India’s relations with the Central Asian nations. Some of the highlighted elements of the Policy are:

- Building of strong political relations through bilateral and multilateral for a
- Strengthening of strategic and security cooperation; focus on military training, joint research, counter-terrorism, coordination, and close consultations on Afghanistan.
- Use of multilateral agreements; the SCO and EEC and Custom Union for close engagement with the Central Asian states.
- India and Central Asian states to become long term energy and natural resource partners, in order to gain cooperation and profits.
- To extend cooperation in the medical field between Central Asia and India.
- In the education system; India is to assist and impart world class education in areas like Information Technology, management, philosophy and languages.
- E-networks to be setup between India and Central Asia, for tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity., linking all five Central Asian nations.
- Construction and land connectivity projects, where Indian companies are to make investments in the region for the building of roads and rails, mainly for the purpose of proper transportation; the International North South Transport Corridor project is to be sort after.
- India to help develop the banking infrastructure for the Central Asian nations
- Air connectivity projects to also be undertaken
- Finally, for the purpose of cultural linkages; students and teacher exchange programmes to be carried out, also tourism to be promoted between India and the Central Asian Region.

E.Ahmed said that, “India is now looking at the region through the framework of its Connect Central Asia policy, which is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian Countries, both individually and collectively.” Thus, the policy can be seen as a broad-based approach that includes political, economic and cultural connections between India and the Central Asian Republics.13

India’s External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna paid a two day visit to Tajikistan on the 2nd and 3rd of July 2012. His visit to Dushanbe is the first by an Indian External Affairs Minister to this strategically located country in nine years; he held extensive discussions with his counterpart Hamrokhom Zarifi about bilateral cooperation on several issues.
including energy, countering terrorism and communication aimed at further cementing bilateral ties. During his visit Krishna spoke of his new mantra of the four C’s, namely ‘Commerce, Connectivity, Consular and Community’, as part of the ‘Connect Central Asia’ Policy.¹⁴

**REASONS FOR THE ‘CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA’ POLICY**

There are certain compulsions that drive India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy, these are mainly India’s strategic drawbacks that India failed to address earlier and has realised the importance of addressing the issues at hand so as to gain ground in the Central Asian Region.

In order, to fuel her growth and also serve her domestic needs, India is trying to expand her economic opportunities abroad; the Indo-Central Asian bilateral trade stood at a trivial $500million in 2011, which is way below the full potential of their trade relations. Trade will take a quantum jump only if transportation hold-ups are safely surmounted, which means that bracing security threats to safeguard India’s interests; as experts are of the opinion that India’s “arc of instability” commences from the Ferghana Valley- the wellspring of ethno-sectarian ferment that encompasses the highly populous core of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. So a need is present to develop better ties on this ground with the Central Asian Republics¹⁵.

The need to oust the growing Chinese footprint in the region is illustrated in Parag khanna statement, “China has built roads, railways and pipelines across the Central Asian Region. Siberian timber, Mongolian iron ore, Kazakh oil, Turkmen gas and Afghan copper are delivered to China through an East-bound network. Oil pipelines from the Caspian Sea across Kazakhstan, gas pipelines from Turkmenistan and other planned roads and railways across Russia down to the Pakistani port of Gwadar are all part of China’s efforts to turn the region into a transit hub between the East and West.

The resource-rich Central Asian Republics are called the underbelly of Eurasia that lies on the Old Silk Road that connects China and South Asia to West Asia and Europe. The diplomatic push for a coherent Central Asia strategy by India became more forceful due to China’s deepening engagement with Afghanistan, the thaw of Russia-Pakistan ties, Russia’s promotion of the Eurasian Project and the erratic US-Pak ties. Pakistan is averse to opening up overland transit for Indian freight. The North-South Transport Corridor, which India has reactivated, bypasses India’s independence on Pakistan to link up with Central Asia. The
Iranian port of Chabahar will serve as India’s gateway to Afghanistan through Zaranj-Delaram Roadway (ZDR) in the Nimroz Province, built with India’s assistance. An alternate sea-land route which India could use to gain access to the Central Asian Region and Russia is through the Iranian port of Bandar Anzali on the Caspian coast; once this corridor becomes fully operational, transportation of energy supplies, agricultural produce and minerals will become swifter and hassle-free, achieving India’s goal to expand its strategic reach northwards.

Tajikistan is the ‘lynchpin’ of India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy because of its strategic location; it borders with Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and is located in close proximity to Gilgit Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Tajikistan has worked closely with India along with Russia and Iran in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime earlier. Tajikistan is on the same page as India on Afghanistan; terrorism and extremism are common threats faced by both nations. There is a Joint-Working Group on Counter-Terrorism between India and Tajikistan. During External Affairs Minister, SM Krishna’s visit, both countries agreed that without a stable Afghanistan the region cannot be stable. There are ongoing co-operations in the defense and security sector with India providing training to Tajik forces to cope with such threats; India maintains its only foreign military base in Farkhor near Ayni, where the Indian army is likely to restart medical services. Tajikistan has vast potential to generate hydroelectricity which is of great interest to the Indian industry. India is helping Dushanbe in developing the Varzob I hydropower station. India may also benefit from the Russian-backed CASA 2000 power project; agriculture, terrorism, education, research and skills development are the other thrust areas in the blossoming of bilateral relationship between India and Tajikistan.

India attaches great importance to Kazakhstan for 4 main reasons: it strategic location, its untapped energy and mineral wealth, its secular values and the vast tracts of land available for large scale commercial farming. Prime Minister Man Mohan Singh’s visit to Astana in 2011 helped India to finally gain access to the North Caspian Sea region, a known repository of oil and gas and Kazakh uranium. OVL (the overseas arm of Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) was allowed to pick up a 25% stake in the Kazmunaigaz – run off shore Satpayev oil block. A joint action plan was also signed during the Prime Minister’s visit in areas like nuclear energy, IT sector, cyber security, pharmaceuticals, health care, agriculture, cultural exchanges, mining and fertilizers. Kazakhstan hosts the Baikanour cosmodrome but
lacks an independent space program. Kazakhstan looks at Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to catapult it into the league of space faring nations.\textsuperscript{18}

Hamid Ansari’s visit to Turkmenistan in 2008 opened up new vistas for Indo-Turkmen; Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline; where India has made progress and also in acquiring an oil block in the Caspian Sea by signing a commercial agreement between ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Corporation) Videsh Limited and the Kazakh State Company. Turkmenistan, also being a Caspian Sea littoral state has a special appeal to India. Ashgabat has sought Indian investments in pharmaceutical, mining, textile, telecom and IT sectors to put more flesh on existing ties.

India and Uzbekistan share historic and cultural ties; Buddhism reached China through Uzbekistan while Sufism came to India mainly from Uzbekistan. The planned road from the Uzbek city of Termez to Herat in Afghanistan, which will be linked by Railways to Chahbahar, will cut the distance between India and Uzbekistan by 1500 kilometers; loads of cotton, wool, silk, metals and fertilizers can then reach India in just a few days. Tashkent has allowed Indian participation in the development of its energy sector, particularly the Karakal gas reserves. Joint exercises between the armed forces of both nations have been steadily growing over the last few years. The Pul-e-Khumir transmission line, built by India to bring electricity to Kabul from Baghlan and the power provided by Uzbekistan, stands out as a symbol of growing mutual cooperation. The Tian Shan covers over 80% of Kyrgyz territory, which overlooks the Tarim Basin in the Xinjiang Province of China, which was part of the Old Silk Route, dotted with towns like Kashgar and Hotan where there is a massive surge for infrastructural development through the Karakoram Highway to Gwadar. Reports of the PLA (Pakistan Liberation Army) cadres embedded in the construction squads in the Karakoram sector near Ladakh, have raised hackles in Delhi. The armed forces of India and Kyrgyzstan have conducted military exercises, jungle warfare training and counter-terrorism drills; the Indian army is also willing to train Kyrgyz forces in the U.N. peace keeping missions. India seeks to play a bigger role in developing Kyrgyzstan’s mining, agriculture, IT, hydropower and pharmaceutical sectors besides boosting cultural and educational ties; the Defence, Research and Development Organizations (DRDO) Mountain Biomedical Research Centre is an ambitious joint project with Kyrgyzstan.\textsuperscript{19}

Since 2005, India has been an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); the SCO is an important platform for cooperation on regional economic and security issues in
Central Asia. With the NATO and US forces to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, the onus is on the SCO to ensure security and stability in Afghanistan; India’s Minister of External Affairs, Salman Khurshid considers the SCO as an important body in Afghanistan; despite the presence of several multilateral initiatives in the Central Asian Region, the SCO has emerged as the most prominent forum for the Central Asian Region.

India has begun dialogues with the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) of the SCO in order to deal, with the threats emanating from terrorism and drug trafficking. India has expressed its desire to gain membership into the SCO; many Indian interlocutors are expecting a movement on membership only in 2015 as the SCO Secretariat is moving slowly on the issue of admission to new members.

India seeks cooperation from Iran and the SCO members in achieving its aims and objectives of its “Connect Central Asia” policy; India seeks to become an important partner to the SCO so that its connectivity and trade objectives can be realised through the SCO Development Bank, who is modernising the economies and infrastructure and transport corridors. India also engages with the SCO members in areas of human resource development, IT, pharmaceuticals, small and medium enterprises, people-to-people relations, in order to intensify its new policy through the SCO platform. Hence, India seeks to use its ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy to gain membership into the SCO and also seeks to use its relation with the SCO members to gain ground for its ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy.

**CONCLUSION**

Despite previous efforts in the region, India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy has a huge onus riding on its shoulder for the betterment of relations between India and Central Asia; however, since the inception of the policy little or no initiative has been taken by India to use the policy for promoting its varied interests in the region and thus the need for a Pro-active Approach towards the policy has arisen as Central Asia still finds India to be ‘a mere spectator’ of Central Asian politics.

The basic recommendations for India to carry out a Pro-active Approach in its policy is to increase investments, encourage regular talks between the leaders of India and the Central Asian Republics, pushing projects for trade, transport links, educational and cultural exchanges apart from trying to solve tensed relations between India and her neighbours who share borders with the Central Asian Republics.
The TAPI gas pipeline project according to US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State on South and Central Asian Affairs, Susan Elliot said that “TAPI route may serve as a stabilising corridor, linking neighbours together in economic growth and prosperity. Indian External Affairs Minister SM Krishna considers the TAPI pipeline as an important confidence building measure. The project will not only provide political cooperation but will also ensure energy security, economic benefits and most importantly peace and stability of relations between the nations involved in the project. The only hindrances in the project are the severed relations between India and Pakistan that have lasted for years and never seem to be coming to any area of mutual cooperation, especially over the Kashmir issue and the promotion of Islamic Fundamentalism by Pakistan; the insecurity felt due to the Taliban influence in Afghanistan pockets.

For gaining entry into the SCO, India has to appease the members of the SCO and more importantly strengthen ties with China, who is India biggest competitor in the Central Asian Region; however normalising relations with China is not that easy, the Tibet issue of 1956, where India offered refuge to the Dalai Lama, remains a matter of bitter history between China and India; China’s claim that the whole of Arunachal Pradesh belongs to it, as the state was once a part of Tibet, that now belongs to China; and most dangerously is China’s close relations with India’s target enemy, Pakistan; the Sino-Pakis Alliance is a matter of grave concern for India, as India knows that Sino-Pak ties will any time prevail over Sino-Indian ties.

Despite the worrisome issues that need to be handled gently during the carrying out of projects in Central Asia between the other powers involved, it must be remembered that the new great game is at play in Central Asia, where stiff competition lies between China, India and Russia; China exerts its political influence through its economic ties, Russia through its traditional and historical linkages and India via its cultural linkages. Hence, the ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy is welcomed by Russia and China so as to ensure that India gains ground at the cost of limiting US influence in the region, while USA backs India’s initiative so as to exert its influence in the region through its Indian ties; if India plays it cards well enough through its bilateral relations with each of the Central Asian Republics, creating a kind of dependence of those nations on India, in a manner that only India will be given importance, despite the strong Chinese influence in the region; India will be able to fulfil the aims and objectives of its policy in the days to come.
NOTES

2 Mohammad Shafi, op. cit, pp 195-199.
6 Gulshan Sachdeva, op. cit.
7 Gulshan Sachdeva, op. cit.
9 Nawal K. Pawan, op. cit.
10 Nawal K. Pawan, op. cit.
12 Nirmala Joshi, op. cit.
14 Dr. Jyoti Prasad Das, “India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ Policy’
15 Dr. Jyoti Prasad Das, op. cit.
16 Dr. Jyoti Prasad Das, op. cit.
19 “India, Uzbekistan Sign Pacts on Defense and Trade,” Asia Pulse, April 7, 2005.