



107 / 15

27 JULY 2015

## Prime Minister Modi's Central Asia Tour: An Assessment

**Sana Hashmi**

*Associate Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies*

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded his Central Asia visit on July 13, 2015. The visit which commenced on July 6, 2015, included stopovers at five Central Asian capitals in addition to the visit to Ufa, Russia, where he participated in the 9<sup>th</sup> BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the 2015 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summits. PM's itinerary included a day-long state visit each to the five Central Asian countries. PM Modi's Central Asia *marathon* has not only provided India with an opportunity to revamp its relationship with the countries of the Central Asian region but has also given an impetus to otherwise inactive 'Connect Central Asia' policy, drafted at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue in June 2012.

A closer look at the press releases, joint statements and media reports highlighted that the main purposes of Prime Minister Modi's Central Asia visit were:

(a) Increase India's presence and economic influence in the region by strengthening

relations with Central Asian countries at bilateral level.

(b) Gather full support and cooperation of the Central Asian countries in preventing terrorism and Islamic State (IS) to spread to this part of the world. In fact, for boosting India's efforts for counterterrorism operations, former Director

of Intelligence Bureau, Asif Ibrahim has been named as the Special Envoy to West Asia and Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, who will report to National Security Advisor, Ajit K. Doval and will be an important functionary to deal with the crisis in West Asia, especially with the rise of IS.<sup>1</sup>

(c) Diversify its uranium requirements by way of deepening cooperation with Central Asian countries, especially Kazakhstan.

(d) Address the issue of lack of surface connectivity.

(e) Reinforce India's position in the Central Asian region bilaterally, as well as

**PM Modi's Central Asia *marathon* has not only provided India with an opportunity to revamp its relationship with the countries of the Central Asian region but has also given an impetus to otherwise inactive 'Connect Central Asia' policy, drafted at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue in June 2012.**

multilaterally in the wake of India's full-fledged membership to SCO.

- (f) Ensure that Afghan-led reconstruction process is peaceful by involving all the stakeholders in the region.

### Developments at the Bilateral Level

Though India was one of the first non-communist countries to establish diplomatic ties with Central Asian Republics in 1990s, Central Asia is one of the regions, long ignored by the Indian leadership. Former PM P. V. Narasimha Rao became the last PM to visit Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995 and the last Prime Ministerial visits to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were undertaken by former Prime Ministers Atal Bihar Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh in 2003 and 2006, respectively. India has established strategic partnerships with three of the five Central Asian states and is yet to elevate the relationship with Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to the same level.

Central Asian Region, which was perceived as Russia's backyard until now, is gradually slipping into the Chinese sphere of influence. India's historical ties and growing interest in the region has the potential to make it an influential player in the region. PM Modi's visit has clearly made headways in reinforcing India's position in the region. He stated that, "as Central Asia links the East and the West, it must also connect to the South. In an age of globalisation, Central Asia cannot remain distant and disconnected from India".<sup>2</sup>

#### **Uzbekistan**

PM Modi embarked on his tour with Uzbekistan on July 6. During the visit, the two sides inked three pacts to strengthen cooperation and coordination between their foreign offices and boost people-to-people interactions for enforcing cultural links and tourism. India also extended an invitation to Uzbekistan to become a part of

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). INSTC is a land and water route for transporting carriage between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia. The visit proved fruitful in strengthening an agreement on the supply of 2,000 metric tonnes of uranium from Uzbekistan which was signed in 2014. India has also sought Uzbekistan's support for its inclusion in 'Ashgabat Agreement', which is a transit agreement established in 2011 between Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkmenistan and Oman.<sup>3</sup> India-Uzbekistan relationship was elevated to the level of strategic partnership in 2011.

#### **Kazakhstan**

Of all the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is arguably India's strongest partner. Being the largest economy in Central Asia and the largest producer of uranium in the world, Kazakhstan is one of the prime sources of uranium supply to India. The visit resulted in the signing of several pacts including a pact

**As Central Asia links the East and the West, it must also connect to the South. In an age of globalisation, Central Asia cannot remain distant and disconnected from India.**

for a long-term supply of uranium, an agreement for strengthening bilateral defence cooperation, and a railway cooperation agreement. The core objective of the pacts is to enhance connectivity between India and Kazakhstan so as to give a boost to their under-utilised economic relations. The main outcome of the visit is that Kazakhstan has agreed to supply around 5,000 tonnes of uranium to India for the next five years starting from 2015. This is second such agreement between Astana and New Delhi since 2009, as a result of which Kazakhstan's uranium firm KazAtomProm supplied 600 MT of uranium ore concentrate in 2010-11, 350 MT in 2011-12, 402.5 MT in 2012-13 and 460 MT in 2013-14, and the five-year contract to supply uranium ended in 2014.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Kazakhstan was one of the first countries with which India launched civil nuclear cooperation through a uranium purchase contract in 2009.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Turkmenistan**

PM Modi visited Turkmenistan on July 11. To strengthen bilateral cooperation, PM inked seven

pacts in the fields of counterterrorism, defence, connectivity, energy, tourism, and fertiliser sector. The most significant of all is the defence cooperation agreement which provides a framework for deepening bilateral defence and security cooperation through exchanges of high and mid-level visits, training, and dialogue between the Ministries of Defence of the two countries and other relevant organisations.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, given that Turkmenistan possesses world's fourth largest natural gas reserves with proven 17.5 tcm reserves, it is natural for India to push for the speedy completion of TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India) pipeline. The TAPI gas project, expected to be completed by 2018, is an over 1,800-km pipeline with design capacity to supply 3.2 billion cubic feet of natural gas per annum from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Kyrgyzstan***

During the state visit to Kyrgyzstan on July 12 the two sides signed four pacts to strengthen bilateral relationship including cooperation in the fields of culture and defence. Under the framework of defence agreement, both sides pledged to hold annual joint military exercises mainly as counterterrorism exercises. The other two MoU were also signed for cooperation between the Election Commissions of the two countries and on cooperation in the sphere of standards, a move that will help economic relations.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Tajikistan***

Visit to Tajikistan marked the last leg of PM Modi's eight-day visit to the Five Central Asian Republics. Tajikistan, which has a military base operated by Indian Air Force with Tajikistan Air Force, is closest to the Indian Territory; hence, India's gateway to Central Asia and beyond.

During the visit, two agreements were inked. First, Programme of Cooperation (POC) between Ministries of Culture of India and Tajikistan for the year 2016-18 was agreed upon. Second, India will set up computer labs in 37 schools of Tajikistan for supporting Government of Tajikistan's human resource & skill development efforts.<sup>9</sup>

### **Opportunities**

PM's Central Asia visit was dominated by security concerns, energy needs, connectivity requirements and India's efforts of exhibiting its soft power image. With the US drawdown from

Afghanistan and IS's efforts to recruit the youth of Central Asia, it has become important for the countries of the immediate and extended neighbourhood to step up the counterterrorism operations. Clearly, reaching agreement on counter terrorism operations was one of highest priorities during Prime Minister's

Modi Central Asia visit.

Clearly, the visits to the five Central Asian countries proved beneficial in convincing the post-Soviet states of India's commitment towards the region. Central Asia's hydrocarbon and other mineral reserves are still untapped, India's interest in the region does not only bring India closer to Central Asian countries but also provide India with an opportunity to exploit the resources as it is seen as a potential economic partner by the countries of the region.

With India's inclusion in the SCO as a full member, India will be regionally integrated with Central Asia. India is clearly to go ahead with both bilateral and multilateral legs of diplomacy. India's policy of 'walking on two legs' in terms of engaging the Central Asian Republics has become a major defining parameter of its regional

**Central Asia's hydrocarbon and other mineral reserves are still untapped, India's interest in the region does not only bring India closer to Central Asian countries but also provide India with an opportunity to exploit the resources as it is seen as a potential economic partner by the countries of the region.**

and multilateral diplomacy. From gaining observer status in June 2005 to getting the status of full membership in 2016, India has certainly crossed several milestones. It may be noted that India submitted its membership application in September 2014. Formed in 1996 as Shanghai Five, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan established the regional grouping to settle the inherited border dispute. With Uzbekistan's inclusion in Shanghai Five, the grouping was rechristened as SCO in 2001.

### Conclusion

PM's visit to Central Asia was a welcome move and did result in several meaningful agreements. However, certain factors which need to be highlighted to be able to strengthen India's relationship with the Central Asian Republics are as follows:

Given that India does not share a common border with any of the Central Asian countries, lack of surface connectivity has always been a major issue in the way of boosting trade ties and tourism. However, affordable and economically viable air connectivity has the potential to link India with the Central Asia region and beyond.

With the US drawdown in Afghanistan, a security vacuum is looming large in the region. Moreover, speculations are rife that the IS is looking for recruits from the Central Asian region. Given that Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan, China, India and Russia are geographically contiguous, vulnerability of the region to such threats is profound.<sup>10</sup>

China's dominance in the region may loom large over India's ambitions of establishing its foothold in the region. The concern is not much on China's gain, but the apprehension that India might lose out in efforts to engage with the region. However, India-China equation is witnessing a change particularly with respect to the Central Asian region. A closer look reveals that in the Central Asian region, India and China seem to be more partners than competitors. Their interests lie in

cooperating on areas of convergence than perceiving each other as competitors. That said, the policy makers in India have to find ways and means to engage China and ensure honest, time-bound and long-term joint efforts in engaging the region together. One such area of cooperation is linking India with Central Asia through land, rail and air connectivity. China has invested massively in road, rail, and pipeline projects, to link Central Asia to itself. India could perhaps ask China to facilitate it in the endeavour considering that China is looking for India's support in making the BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, Myanmar) - Economic Corridor a reality. One may argue that India should have asked for the Chinese support even when the two sides started the BCIM-EC discussion process. It may be suggested that New Delhi takes the matter on a priority basis with China in the next bilateral discussion and put up the BCIM-EC as a model for India-China-Central Asia connectivity plan. India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' would not be able to realise its fullest potential until its physical, trade and people-to-people connectivity objectives are realised.

### Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> "Former IB Chief Syed Asif Ibrahim named Afghanistan-Pakistan Special Envoy", *Indian Express*, June 4, 2015, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/former-ib-chief-syed-asif-ibrahim-named-afghanistan-pakistan-special-envoy/>, accessed on July 15, 2015.
- <sup>2</sup> "Text of Address by PM at Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office*, July 7, 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=123067>, accessed on July 8, 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> "India, Uzbekistan Ink Pacts to Boost Cooperation", *The Hindu*, July 7, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/prime-minister-narendra-modi-visit-to-uzbekistan/article7392482.ece>, accessed on July 10, 2015.

- <sup>4</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "PM Modi's Visit to Central Asia: India and Kazakhstan Ink Deals on Uranium Supply, Defence", *The Economic Times*, July 9, 2015, [http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/47996585.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/47996585.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst), accessed on July 9, 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> "Text of Media Statement by PM in Astana, Kazakhstan", *Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office*, July 8, 2015, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=123067>, accessed on July 8, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> "Joint Statement between Turkmenistan and India During the Prime Minister's Visit to Turkmenistan", July 11, 2015, <http://www.narendramodi.in/joint-statement-between-turkmenistan-and-india-during-the-prime-minister-s-visit-to-turkmenistan>, accessed on July 11, 2015.
- <sup>7</sup> "Modi Pitches for Early Implementation of TAPI Project", *The Hindu*, July 11, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/modi-pitches-for-early-implementation-of-tapi-gas-pipeline-project/article7411290.ece>, accessed on July 11, 2015.
- <sup>8</sup> "India, Kyrgyzstan Voice Concern Over Extremism and Terrorism", *Rediff*, July 12, 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/report/india-kyrgyzstan-united-by-bonds-of-shared-democratic-values-pm-modi/20150712.htm>, accessed on July 12, 2015.
- <sup>9</sup> "List of Agreements Signed during Prime Minister's visit to Tajikistan", July 13, 2015 <http://www.narendramodi.in/list-of-agreements-signed-during-prime-minister-s-visit-to-tajikistan-july-12-13-2015->, accessed on July 13, 2015.
- <sup>10</sup> Sana Hashmi, "India's Entry into the SCO May Bring it Closer to China", *Rediff*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.rediff.com/news/column/indias-entry-into-the-sco-may-bring-it-closer-to-china/20150706.htm>, accessed on July 6, 2015.



Centre for Air Power Studies

The Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS) is an independent, non-profit think tank that undertakes and promotes policy related research, study and discussion on defence and military issues, trends, and development in air power and space for civil and military purposes, as also related issues of national security. The Centre is headed by Air Marshal Vinod Patney, SYSM PVSM AVSM Vrc (Retd).

Centre for Air Power Studies  
P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010  
Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily of the Centre or any other organisation.