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INDIA AND KAZAKHSTAN: NURTURING THE RELATIONSHIP

Poonam Mann
Associate Fellow, CAPS

Joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a full member is an important move on India's part to get connected with Central Asian republics (CARs). Certainly being a part of the SCO would create new opportunities for India to reconnect with the CARs and engage with them regionally as well as bilaterally on issues of mutual interest. For instance, during the annual summits of the organisation, India can engage these Republics on new possibilities of cooperation and then with a proper follow up, move on to strengthen its relationship with them.

Against this background, emerging new opportunities between India and Kazakhstan present a strong case to boost their relationship. Indeed defence and security cooperation will be an important dimension of strategic partnership between the two countries. During Prime Minister (PM) Modi's visit to Kazakhstan in 2015 India inked a defence pact to enhance military cooperation with the Kazakhstan which included regular exchange of visits, consultations, training of military personnel, military-technical cooperation, joint exercises, special forces exchanges and cooperation in UN peacekeeping operations etc.¹ More recently, the visit of Indian Army chief, General Bipin Rawat, to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (1st-5th August, 2017) is a step forward in this direction. The visit aimed at strengthening the existing bilateral defence cooperation and to explore new possibilities for expanding India's strategic footprint in the Central Asian region. As the official statement from the Indian Defence Ministry said "The visit to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is yet another outreach initiative to engage with our extended neighbourhood and strengthen the existing defence cooperation with the two nations."²

Both sides also mutually agreed to take forward the joint military exercise Prabal Dostyk (Robust Friendship) that is going to be held at Bakloh, Himachal Pradesh this year in November 2017. This joint military exercise was earlier held in 2016 in Kazakhstan with an aim to enhance

interoperability while undertaking counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations in rural and semi-urban environment under the umbrella of United Nations.³ Over the years, both countries have forged extensive cooperation in the fields of military exercises, training, jungle warfare, information technology and counter-terrorism as well as joint research and development of naval armaments and torpedoes. However, Kazakhstan has further sought assistance for capacity enhancement in the areas of counter insurgency operations, military education and training of cadets in India, and the Chief of the Army Staff assured them of wholehearted support.⁴ In the past, Kazakhstan has expressed its keenness to forge joint ventures with India in upgrading the erstwhile 'Soviet' defence equipment they have been using since long.⁵ Such initiatives and regular exchanges can provide a new momentum and relevance to the relationship between the two countries.

Further, during a meeting between PM Modi and Kazakh President Nazarbayev on the side-lines of SCO summit in June 2017, not only the decision to launch two flights connecting Delhi and Astana was taken but also the issue of enhancing connectivity between two countries was discussed where Chabahar port in Iran can play a significant role. It should be remembered that the Chabahar project entails a plan to provide connectivity via rail and road from Chabahar to Afghanistan. Through this route India is hoping to gain an entry to Central Asian markets. PM Modi had already done the necessary diplomatic groundwork to fill in the missing links with the cooperation from CARs during his visit to all the five republics in 2015.⁶ Further, to enhance connectivity and give fillip to bilateral trade, Kazakhstan's national railway company Kazakhstan TemirZholy (KTZ) had signed a memorandum of Understanding with SEZ Adani Ports for building a port in Mundra (Gujrat). This port will play a significant role because once the link between Mundra Port and Bandar Abbas port (Iran) is ready, the goods can be transported via Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway link and this will be shorter and cheaper.⁷

Furthermore, during the meeting the progress on decisions and agreements made during PM Modi's 2015 visit was discussed and reviewed and PM Modi invited Kazakhstan to become a member of the International Solar Alliance.⁸ Such discussions will help in shoring up bilateral confidence and marketing itself as a plausible alternative for Kazakhstan (and the rest of the republics of the region) and in crafting a strategic vision for securing its place in the emerging Eurasian order. One must remember that Central Asia is changing and the present day geopolitical realities of the Central Asian region are complex and multi-layered with a number of players with their own specific agendas, trying to make a niche in the region. Kazakhstan is emerging as an important player of the region not only for its rich hydrocarbon reserves but for global engagement also. For instance:

- It is the non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the term of 2017-18.
- In recent years it has played constructive role in conflict resolutions such as it has hosted four rounds of talks on resolving Syrian conflict and also attempted to resolve Turkey-Russian conflict.
- In a bid to consistently promote futuristic vision for Eurasia based on consensus-building, multi-lateral cooperation and sustainable development, it hosted four major international events in 2017-The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Expo 2017, the Astana Economic Forum and Eurasian media Forum.⁹
- It is all set to open the IAEA's Low-Enriched-Uranium (LEU) bank. The bank will be a physical reserve of LEU available for IAEA member states.¹⁰
- It is a member of the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG)
- Through its multi-vectored foreign policy, it has been successful in balancing out its relations with big / major powers like, the United States, Russia, China and European Union etc.

All these factors raise Kazakhstan's profile at the international level. Therefore, in order to develop its own discourse in the Central Asian region India must find more and more opportunities to constructively engage with this country, in a bilateral as well as the larger regional context.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹"India, Kazakhstan sign five key agreements", *The Hindu*, 08 July, 2015, available at www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-kazakhstan-sign-five-key-agreements/article7398943.ece, accessed on 05 August, 2017

²"VISIT OF COAS GEN BIPIN RAWAT TO KAZAKHSTAN & TURKMENISTAN", available at <https://nationaldefence.in/breaking-news/visit-of-coas-gen-bipin-rawat-to-kazakhstan-turkmenistan/>, accessed on 05 August, 2017

³"India- Kazakhstan Joint Exercise Prabal Dostyk-16", available at www.pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=149599, accessed on 08 August, 2017

⁴"GEN. BIPIN RAWAT MEETS C-IN-C LAND FORCES, KAZAKHSTAN" available at <https://nationaldefence.in/breaking-news/gen-bipin-rawat-meets-c-c-land-forces-kazakhstan/>, accessed on 07 August, 2017

⁵"Kazakhstan wants JVs in defence sector with India", available at www.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/kazakhstan-wants-jvs-in-defence-sector-with-india/articleshow/50629134.cms, accessed on 08 August, 2017

⁶Poonam Mann, "India and Central Asia- Finding a way to one another", *CAPS In Focus*, 26 October, 2016 available at capsindia.org/files/documents/CAPS_infocus_PM_02.1.pdf, accessed on 09 August, 2017

⁷*Ibid*

⁸“ PM’s bilateral meetings on the sidelines of SCO Summit In Astana”, *Press Information Bureau*, Government of India, 09 June, 2017 available at www.pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=165530, accessed on 20 June, 2017

⁹Michael Tanchum,” Israel and Kazakhstan’s futuristic vision for Eurasia”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 08 July, 2017, available at www.jpost.com/opinion/israel-and-kazakhstan-futuristic-vision-for-eurasia-501841, accessed on 09 August, 2017

¹⁰“ IAEA Low Enriched Uranium Bank”, available at <http://www.iaea.org/topics/iaea-low-enriched-uranium-bank>, accessed on 10 August, 2017

