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Strengthening India's Logistics Outreach in Central Asia

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Introduction

Central Asian Region (CAR), comprising five independent states of erstwhile USSR namely Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, has always been an attraction for India's energy security quest and other strategic interests. Considering this, India has long been striving to enhance its interaction with CAR through conventionally diplomatic as well as soft power options, with an aim to bolster its geopolitical interface with the region. Towards this, India has always showcased its keenness to create an enabling infrastructure, duly reinforced with suitable technology, besides highlighting its sincere commitment and a sense of urgency to proactively boost an all-inclusive growth and development in the region.

However, notwithstanding this, the geographical incongruity between India and the CAR has always been posing a distinct hindrance in realising India's strategic ambitions in the region. This constraint has always stressed upon an incontrovertible need for a smooth land and air connectivity between India and the CAR. It also needs an allusion here that India has always shown interest towards creation of suitable road infrastructure in Central Asia. However, India needs to make demonstrated efforts to institutionalise the procedures for administering and managing the infrastructure projects so as to ensure the ease of movement of men and material between India and Central Asia¹.

It is well within the context here to note that the biggest constraint in ensuring an unhindered transportation between India and CAR has been largely due to an explicit absence of smooth transportability and dearth of suitable mobility avenues, especially through territories of Afghanistan and Pakistan, due to various geopolitical irritants arising out of prevailing unrest in these countries. It becomes more intricate when one of these countries happens to be a long-time proclaimed adversary of India.

Contribution of India towards Strengthening the Surface Logistics Connectivity

Infrastructure diplomacy tends to foster transparency, wide-scale participation of all the stakeholders, addressing local priorities and peculiarities, and evaluation and utilisation of the fiscal sustainability considerations besides promoting reverence for mutual sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nations involved in the said enterprise.² As a testimony to the calculated Indian resolve to establish effective logistical linkages, India and Central Asia have already been involved in the construction of road and rail network projects within CAR. One of the important surface transport projects among these is the Dushanbe-Chortut highway project in Tajik territory, costing US \$20 million. This was gifted to Tajikistan during the visit of the President of India to Tajikistan in

October 2018. As an important off take India, soon after the visit of the President of India to Tajikistan, initiated the construction of Phase-I of an eight-lane expressway starting from Chortut village to Ayni village in Dushanbe. This project was budgeted at an approximate cost of US \$ 17.54 million³. Incidentally and interestingly enough, Ayni also happens to be the place that houses an Indian overseas air base in Central Asia. Thus, the completion of this expressway is expected not only to sustain smooth and rapid logistics operations but indirectly assumes the contours of being a strategic force enhancer for India towards attempting to boost its strategic presence in the CAR. Such a mega connectivity venture of India is expected to actively support the Indian alliance with the Central Asian republics even more effectively, as stated above, for the reasons of eliciting participation of all the stakeholders duly addressing local priorities and peculiarities besides promoting mutual sovereignty and territorial integrity of all the nationalities involved in the said initiative⁴.

As a consequence of the visit of the President of India to Tajikistan in 2018, the construction of the Dushanbe-Chortut highway project was zealously undertaken by the Border Roads Organization (BRO) of India. This project featured a 4.44 km eight-lane expressway which mainly aimed to ease the overcrowding in Dushanbe, the national capital of Tajikistan. As per an official statement issued by Shri V Muraleedharan, the Minister of State for External Affairs, Government of India, in Rajya Sabha on December 22, 2022, the project had achieved 90.57 per cent physical progress as of December 12, 2022.⁵

With China accelerating the development of Gwadar Port, it became imperative for India to counter the Chinese advances by focusing upon the creation and sustenance of an equally effective logistics infrastructure in Central Asia. It was noteworthy also because the increasing activity in the CAR impelled India to achieve and sustain an unhindered mobility within the CAR. Therefore, in May 2015, India signed a trilateral accord with Iran and Afghanistan and announced its decision to invest US \$ 500 million for the development of Chabahar Port.⁶ Soon thereafter, India Ports Global undertook the task of creating the logistics network and facilities which culminated in the operationalisation of Chabahar Port by 2022. This completion of the Chabahar project resulted into efficient handling of the cargo from countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, Australia, Germany, UAE and Russia. This also marked an ambitious beginning of a gargantuan mission undertaken at Chabahar Port thereby facilitating India's strategic and logistics outreach in CAR.

India also stands far-sightedly and resolutely committed to amplify its connectivity not only within CAR, but also with the outside world through Central Asia. We can safely say that India has achieved this to a large extent by initiating the development of the Chabahar Port region, besides assimilating

it with an ambitious intercontinental multimodal transport project, i.e., the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This logistics force enhancer called INSTC stretches about 7200 km and covers Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Syria, Belarus and Oman on its network, with Bulgaria being an observer state.⁷ This corridor offers a multimodal transportation network with an intelligently crafted combination of sea, road, and rail routes, and is capable of achieving the benefits of being a highly smooth connectivity route. It was heartening to see the successful handling of the first Indian consignment through INSTC in July 2022 which marked a major milestone for India towards constructively exploiting the force multiplier offered by this mega enterprise.⁸

Important Milestones in Air Connectivity

December 2019 witnessed the resumption of direct air connectivity between Delhi and Dushanbe with M/S Somon Air, a Tajik private airline starting the air logistics operations. Thereafter this air connectivity further progressed with Somon Air starting to operate also its second weekly flight between Dushanbe and New Delhi, in February 2020. However, soon thereafter both these flights had to be temporarily suspended in March, 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19, but were resumed in May 2022.⁹

Recently, IndiGo Air- one of the major airlines of India, announced that they would be starting a direct flight between New Delhi and Almaty, Kazakhstan, with effect from September 23, 2023. This is expected to ensure increased connectivity with Kazakhstan, one of India's major trade partners. This assumes significance also by virtue of Almaty being Kazakhstan's largest metropolis that projects itself as a major international airport besides being an important commercial, financial, and cultural centre in the CAR. This is also likely to foster trade and commerce between India and CAR, given the Kazakhstan's status of being the wealthiest country in Central Asia. In addition, this connectivity is expected to lead also to the promotion of tourism in Central Asia.¹⁰

Way Forward to Enhanced India's Focus on CAR

The Central Asian ambitions of India appear to be largely aimed at boldly marking the Indian strategic footprint in the CAR. This Indian effort would be guided by the principal aim of safeguarding India's energy logistics and promoting Indian trade with CAR. While India is one of the four major players in the region in addition to the USA, Russia and China, the establishment and sustenance of a strong posture in the region amidst these powerful contenders becomes inevitable for India.

It therefore assumes the contours of an unavoidable strategic consideration that India should uphold at all costs, through a forward looking strategic outreach. Towards this, India needs to practice the promotion of international cooperation based on a mutual win-win strategy with all the stakeholders in Central Asia. To achieve this objective, India needs to collaborate with the nations having a strong foothold in CAR, especially Russia and the USA, by involving them in an all-inclusive infrastructure development campaign. This is feasible for India by utilising mostly its soft power elements i.e., culture, medical support, addressing common concerns like terrorism and drug menace and by promoting economic development and undertaking infrastructure development projects in close cooperation with major countries involved in CAR.

In short, the promotion of effective logistics between India and Central Asia is an important strategic imperative and involves addressing a multitudinal infrastructure, trade and geopolitical challenges in CAR in an all-inclusive manner.

It is felt that the creation and sustainment of Indo-CAR logistics supply chain mechanism in close association with the other countries in the region, in addition to the major powers i.e. the USA and Russia which are already active in CAR, would be a desirable option. The strategic advantages arising out of such large-scale infrastructure development enterprise, in all probability, will have the potential to attract not only major powers like the USA and Russia but would also help India in eliciting the participation of some other less privileged nations in the region e.g., Iran and Afghanistan.

All this seems achievable mainly by virtue of the sincerity of purpose being depicted by India through an all-inclusive approach based on the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which happens to be the current mantra also of the recently concluded G20 Summit in India.

Notes:

¹ Ayzaz Wani, "Slow, Not Steady: Assessing the Status of India-Eurasia connectivity projects", *Observer Research Foundation*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/assessing-the-status-of-india-eurasia-connectivity-projects/>. Accessed on September 02, 2023

² "India emerges as a Key Infra Player in central Asia", *Construction World*, January 04, 2023, <https://www.constructionworld.in/policy-updates-and-economic-news/india-emerges-as-a-key-infra-player-in-central-asia/38473>. Accessed on September 01, 2023

³ "Brief on India-Tajikistan Relations, MEA Brief", *Ministry of External Affairs*, November 30, 2022, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral Brief EOI Dushanbe Nov 2022.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral%20Brief%20EOI%20Dushanbe%20Nov%202022.pdf). Accessed on September 01, 2023

⁴ "PM Modi in Iran: India commits \$ 500 Mn to develop Chabahar Port and Infra", *First Post*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.firstpost.com/business/chabahar-port-heres-why-modi-govt-deserves-credit-for-signing-the-deal-2794106.html>. Accessed on September 02, 2023.

⁵ "India becomes a key player in Central Asia riding on infra projects", *Economic Times*, December 23, 2022, <https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/amp/news/urban-infrastructure/india-becomes-a-key-player-in-central-asia-riding-on-infra-projects/96451374>. Accessed on September 08, 2023

⁶ INSTC is a Reflection of India's Expanding Footprint, ET Infra.com, *Economic Times*, June 6, 2023, <https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/ports-shipping/international-north-south-transport-corridor-a-reflection-of-indias-expanding-global-footprint/100780405>. Accessed on September 01, 2023.

⁷ Naina Bharadwaj, "India's Export Opportunities along International North-South Transport Corridor, *India Briefing*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/indias-export-opportunities-along-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-22412.html/> , Accessed on September 01, 2023

⁸ "INSTC is a Reflection of India's Expanding Footprint", *Economic Times*, June 6, 2023, <https://infra.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/ports-shipping/international-north-south-transport-corridor-a-reflection-of-indias-expanding-global-footprint/100780405>. Accessed on September 01, 2023

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ "Indigo expands International connectivity with flights from Delhi to Almaty, Kazakhstan", *Economic Times*, August 16, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/transportation/airlines/-aviation/indigo-expands-international-connectivity-with-flights-from-delhi-to-almaty/articleshow/102777828.cms>. Accessed on September 01 2023.