



CHINA'S GROWING DIPLOMATIC AFFINITY WITH AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

Group Captain (Dr) Rajneesh Kumar

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies



Assadullah Bilal Karimi-a former spokesman of Taliban was appointed as Afghan Ambassador to China on December 1, 2023.¹ He becomes the first Afghan envoy to be accredited to any country since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. This was preceded by a warm welcome accorded by Afghanistan to the new Ambassador of China at Kabul in July 2023. The presentation of the credentials by a new envoy to any accredited country finds reference in the established diplomatic traditions followed worldwide. In July 2023, the Taliban's chief spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, stated that the presentation of the credentials by the new Chinese envoy is also a signal to other countries to come forward and interact with the Taliban-led government.² This avowal of Afghanistan hints at its overt keenness to receive the forward-looking diplomatic gestures and alliances from the other countries of the world.

There has also been a noticeable Chinese expansion in Central Asia which has the potential to eventually cast a shadow on the existing security symmetry in the Central Asian region³ besides being against Indian interests in Central Asia. Considering this, it would be worthwhile to look into the implications of rising Chinese involvement in Afghanistan, especially as it serves as the gateway of India into Central Asia. Also worth exploring is the ramifications thereof for Indian interests in Central Asia.

Chinese Involvement in Afghanistan

The international apprehensions across the globe, owing to the aggressive and undemocratic way the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan, and the expression of interest of Afghanistan through the abovementioned statement of Taliban's chief

spokesperson, Zabihullah Mujahid, in July 2023, towards seeking international recognition, assumes significance. This is so especially in light of a large part of the globe, including India, having clearly abstained (read hesitated) from giving an open and prompt acceptance to the Taliban government taking into account the fact, that the Talibani assumption of power in Afghanistan had been through other than democratic means.

Taliban leadership had been trying hard to garner international recognition for its government considering the need for restoration of the crumbling Afghan economy in the face of refusal of the US, World Bank and IMF to sanction the promised aid.

Taliban leadership had been trying hard to garner international recognition for its government considering the need for restoration of the crumbling Afghan economy in the face of refusal of the US, World Bank and IMF to sanction the promised aid.⁴ Under these circumstances, China becomes the first country to establish diplomatic relations through appointment of its Ambassador to Afghanistan. This is coupled with the statement of Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin that: “As a long-standing friendly neighbour of Afghanistan, China believes that Afghanistan should not be excluded from the international community”.⁵ China through such a statement seems to have made an effort to encourage the international community to maintain dialogue and encourage the country to put in place an inclusive political framework, adopt moderate policies, combat “terrorism” and develop friendly external relations.⁶

China’s rising involvement in Afghanistan is likely to pose a threat to India’s regional security considerations and could pose a challenge to India’s energy interests in the Central Asian region. This is particularly relevant to the Indian energy logistics enterprise i.e., the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline, which has to traverse through Afghanistan to reach India.

China’s Involvement in Central Asia

Conspicuously, China being an economic and technological power, has recently been found making discreet inroads in Central Asia. Without a doubt, the success of Chinese designs in this power game would not be favourable for India’s strategic outreach to Central Asia, by any calculations whatsoever.

The recent gradual rise in Chinese influence in Central Asia’s regional geo-political setting, was visible in Chinese President Xi Jinping hosting his Central Asian counterparts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan during May 2023. This meeting aimed at solidifying the links between the Chinese government and its Central Asian counterparts,

China’s rising involvement in Afghanistan is likely to pose a threat to India’s regional security considerations and could pose a challenge to India’s energy interests in the Central Asian region.

enhancing educational and cultural exchanges and creating trade promotion mechanisms like the Central Asia–China Business Council. This summit witnessed the signing of 54 agreements, 19 new cooperation mechanisms and platforms with nine multilateral documents including the Xi'an declaration.⁷ Coupled with China's recent efforts towards the empowerment of SCO and its rising involvement in the South China Sea by strengthening the Gwadar Port, all taken together might eventually create a lopsided balance of power in the Central Asian Region. All these might collectively lead to a subtle power disequilibrium in the region, which might eventually jeopardise India's position in Central Asia.

Addressing India's security concerns arising from the influx of narcotics and terrorist activities orchestrated from Afghanistan as the staging base becomes the most important priority.

Diplomatic Roadmap of India

Considering the present involvement of China in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region, it may be prudent to deliberate on the desired contours of India's diplomacy in these areas. The shape of Indian foreign policy in the two arenas may be described as under:

India and Afghanistan

Afghanistan is India's gateway to Central Asia and considering this in light of the recent disturbing developments post-Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, India introduced a separate sub-category of "e-Emergency X-Misc Visa" to Afghan nationals desirous of travelling to India. Orders were also issued for the cancellation of the physical visas issued to Afghan nationals who were not physically present in India.⁸ India has consciously adopted a cautious approach of neither denouncing nor showing its support for Taliban besides having also expeditiously evacuated its nationals staying in Afghanistan to ensure their safety in the trouble-torn nation.

It would be well within the context to mention here that, addressing India's security concerns arising from the influx of narcotics and terrorist activities orchestrated from Afghanistan as the staging base becomes the most important priority now. In other words, India's Afghanistan diplomacy needs to primarily address security concerns.

India and Central Asia

Indian diplomacy with respect to Central Asia needs to exhibit a forward-moving approach with a focus towards efficiently managing the strategic alliances in Central Asia. Owing to the stability by virtue of a clear majority enjoyed by the current government, India has earned enormous international respect. The dexterity shown by India in handling the big powers like the USA and Russia on one side and other countries like Japan and a few others in the sub-continent on the other brings to the fore a definite

confidence that the Chinese influence in Central Asia can be tackled by India.

The active Indian interaction with Central Asia manifests India's resolve to strengthen the seemingly dormant diplomacy in the region which was initially restricted to cultural exchanges. Indian foreign policy began moving from the limited interactions of the past to Connect Central Asia Policy 2012 which formed the basis of fostering fruitful relations with Central Asia. There were also a series of visits paid by Indian dignitaries that included President of India Smt Pratibha Patil in 2009, Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in 2015,⁹ and then the President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind in April 2022. These were followed by reciprocal visits to India by the Uzbek president Islam Karimov in 1991, 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2011, to quote a few examples. To add to the series of bilateral visits, a notable one occurred between August 2-5, 2018, when the Indian Foreign Minister Late Smt Sushma Swaraj visited the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. She held several rounds of meetings with her counterparts on various issues involving strategic partnerships and multifaceted relations including Nuclear Security Summits, followed by discussing multi-dimensional relations in political, parliamentary, defence, science & technology, health, and other sectors. These interactions aimed at boosting the thrust in the intensification of bilateral ties. It seems to have brought to the fore the viability of various strategic engagements by India in the region. Not only this, but the proactive diplomatic approach of India seems to have propelled even China to enter into the Central Asian arena with a demonstrated sense of urgency in geographically and commercially connecting with Europe and Central Asia.

Though the two leftist giants, China and Russia, have been engaged in Central Asia for long, and India was a late participant in the arena, the growing Indian interest in the region and its proactive involvement in the region impelled these two leftist powers to fast-track their efforts to reinforce their imprints in the area.¹⁰ Also, a sense of urgency to safeguard its interests in Central Asia seems to have inspired India to grab the centre stage in the relationships with Central Asia.¹¹ It would certainly be desirable for India to proactively counter the Chinese ambitions in the Central Asian region considering the dangerously growing China-effect there. The Indian strategy needs to be guided primarily by the fact that China slowly rose but rapidly shot into global economic dominance during recent years.¹² The Chinese engagement in Central Asia was in competition with other powers namely the West, Russia, and India, with India being the last entrant into Central Asia. The Chinese sway in SCO has increased,¹³ with its parallel affinity with all the five Central Asian States through cooperation in the economic, defence, education, culture, and energy sectors.

We understand that, for the success of any enterprise in Central Asia, it would be imperative for India, as an emerging Vishva Guru, to expand its umbrella by providing technological, economic, infrastructural etc., support to Central Asian states based

on the philosophy of mutual gains which is likely to establish India as a major power in Central Asia. Far-sightedly enough, India seems to have realised it early and has accordingly begun focussing on Central Asia with renewed vigour since 2015, aiming to strengthen and sustain its foothold in Central Asia.

However, Central Asia's recently growing dependence on China seems to highlight the prospects of gradually but certainly tilting the power equilibrium in Central Asia. This assertion gets further emboldened by China's constantly increasing military presence in the Central

Central Asia's recently growing dependence on China seems to highlight the prospects of gradually but certainly tilting the power equilibrium in Central Asia. This assertion gets further emboldened by China's constantly increasing military presence in the Central Asian region.

Asian region.¹⁴ It is, therefore, important for India to have the capability of achieving and sustaining its hitherto practised strategic reach and forward-looking diplomacy in the Central Asian region by indirectly projecting itself as a benevolent protector. This is an important imperative that India needs to focus on, with regards to Central Asia.

It would therefore be an equally desirable option that the Indian foreign policy follows a more vigorous Track-Two/Public diplomacy route in Central Asia. It becomes important for India to promote its wide-ranging interests in central Asia, particularly the energy interests, because the Government of a nation needs to create an enabling environment to conduct activities of public good.¹⁵

India mainly has energy interests in Central Asia which need to be safeguarded. There are sufficient reasons to believe that, given its effective diplomacy of playing on the front foot, India, beyond doubts, enjoys the capability to efficiently tackle the rising Chinese influence in the Central Asian Region, despite the fact that China is firmly grabbing the ground at a faster pace than before in Central Asia.

Conclusion

To conclude, as diplomatic relations flourish between Central Asia, Afghanistan and China, the foreign policy of India in Afghanistan needs to be largely security-oriented. Regarding Central Asia, it has to be multifaceted and all-encompassing, covering diplomatic, economic, cultural, and security dimensions. With a focus on economic development, regional cooperation, effective Track-II diplomacy, people-to-people connect and promoting security interests, India can significantly contribute to the creation of an enabling diplomatic climate in Central Asia, thereby smoothing its access to the region.

We find that in the extant regional equations, the philosophy of a balanced and comprehensive approach, considering the interests of all the stakeholders-i.e., the Indian industry, infrastructure development agencies, technological & banking institutions

and a host of others including culture, health and educational echelons which may be involved in the effort to assist the development and sustenance of logistics infrastructure in Central Asia- carries potential to be the key to India's success in shaping a positive and lasting impact in the Central Asian region.

Though the strategic road from India to Central Asia via Afghanistan seems bumpy, the prospects appear to be bright, especially considering the proven track record of India's vibrant diplomacy and its fast-growing international sway.

Notes:

¹ Anwesha Ghosh, "China become the first country to host Taliban Ambassador," *View Point*, Indian Council of World Affairs, December 14, 2023, https://icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10268&lid=6538 Accessed on December 18, 2023.

² "Taliban Gives A Warm Welcome To China's New Ambassador To Afghanistan," Al Jazeera, September 13, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/13/taliban-gives-a-warm-welcome-to-chinas-new-ambassador-to-afghanistan#:~:text=The%20Taliban%20on%20Wednesday%20welcomed,step%20with%20a%20significant%20message%E2%80%99>. Accessed on September 29, 2023

³ "Central Asia's economic evolution from Russia to China," *Worldview*, April 05, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/central-asia-china-russia-trade-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

⁴ Ali M Latifi, "Taliban Still Struggling for International Recognition," Al Jazeera, October 7, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/taliban-afghanistan-international-recognition>. Accessed on December 20, 2023.

⁵ PTI, "China accords diplomatic recognition to Taliban Government in Afghanistan," *India Today*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/china-formally-accords-diplomatic-recognition-to-taliban-govt-in-afghanistan-2472483-2023-12-05?onetap=true>. Accessed on December 20, 2023

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ "How China is increasing its influence in Central Asia," *Hindustan Times*, May 25, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/china-influence-central-asia-western-countries-chinas-influence-in-central-asia-101684993387961.html>. Accessed on December 21, 2023.

⁸ Embassy of India, Uzbekistan, "eVisa Scheme for Afghan Nationals," <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?17751?000>. Accessed on December 21, 2023.

⁹ Extract from Doctoral Thesis on "India's Energy Security in terms of oil and natural gas contextualising Central Asia since 2012", Submitted to Amity University Uttar Pradesh in September 2019 by Dr Rajneesh Kumar.

¹⁰ Deepak Kumar, "Russia China Strategic Partnership in Central Asia" *Central Asia Key to Engaging China and Russia*, MPIDSA, July 2022, p 20-21, <https://www.idsa.in/system/files/monograph/Monograph%2076%20for%20website.pdf>. Accessed on January 04, 2024.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Xiangmin Chen & Fakhmiddin Fazilov, “Re-centering Central Asia “China’s new great game” in the old Eurasian heartland,” *Nature*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-018-0125-5>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

¹³ Rajneesh Kumar, “Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and India’s Strategic Options in Central Asia,” *Expert View*, Centre for Air Power Studies, May 22, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-and-indias-strategic-options-in-central-asia/>. Accessed on December 21, 2023.

¹⁴ “Central Asia’s economic evolution from Russia to China,” *Worldview*, April 5, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/central-asia-china-russia-trade-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

¹⁵ Kalam, APJ Abdul and Rajan YS, *India 2020: A Vision for The New Millennium*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2014), Pg 289.



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 Anil Chopra PVSM AVSM VM VSM (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

Formatting and Assistance: Ms Radhey Tambi, Ms Khyati Singh and Mr Rohit Singh

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