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## New Dimensions in India-Tajikistan Relations

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### Abstract:

The Eurasia region has been at the centre of geo-politics for long time now. However with time, the centre of Eurasia i.e. the Central Asia, has also gained the importance among the major powers of the world as reflected in the Great Game. Tajikistan, situated in this region of Central Asia, earns strategic importance for India as it shares close proximity with Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Pak-occupied Kashmir separated by narrow Wakhan Corridor. Tajikistan, rather all the five Central Asian Republics have gained importance in India's foreign policy in the recent past as they are located in the heart of Eurasia and have become India's 'extended neighbours', 'near abroad'. Tajikistan's geopolitical location is also significant in a way that it is the 'nearest extended neighbour' among the other Central Asian Republics (CARs). Yet direct connectivity has been an obstacle between the two countries. However both the countries have time and again come closer since the past and have been constant in their warm and cordial relationship.

This paper attempts to understand the relations between both India and Tajikistan from past to present on historical, cultural, political and economic level as well as to explore the future possibilities; the role of the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization and also the implications of Afghanistan crisis in this bilateral relations.

**KeyWords:** Central Asian Republics, SCO, Afghanistan, extended neighbours

### Tajikistan Profile:

Tajikistan is a landlocked country situated in the region of Central Asia. After the collapse of USSR in 1991, Tajikistan-erstwhile a Soviet Socialist Republic- became an independent sovereign state and gained the status of the Central Asian Republic (CAR) along with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Tajikistan, after independence, experienced the civil war for five years from 1992-1997. Till date Tajikistan has not recovered from the economic loss in this war. Major part of its economy is state-controlled, dependent upon the migrant workers, especially in Russia, and investments made by Russia and China. It is the poorest among the CARs.

The early history of Tajikistan before the Soviet regime was dominated by the Iranians, Arabs and Turk invaders. Arabs brought Islam to this region. Post-independence and civil war, Tajiks made their 'National Leader' Emomali Rahmonas the 3<sup>rd</sup> President in 1994's election. However, with the referendum of 2016, the constitutional amendment was made which lifted the term limits for President Rahmon. Mr. Rahmon has remained the President since then till date.

### Indo-Tajikistan Relations:

#### A) Historical:

Present Tajikistan was a part of Kushana and Persian empire which brought it in contact with India for brief period. The ideological forces like Buddhism, Sufism and Islam also connected the two countries in the past.

The traditional connection between the two flourished during the Mughal period in India. Babur gave prominence to the Turk/Tajik generals in his court. It was in the Mughal pe-

riod where we find the spread of Farsi/Tajik language and Sufi culture. Central Asian architecture reflects in Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, Qutub Minar etc.

With the exit of Mughals and arrival of the British in India in the 18th century our relations with Central Asia froze. The colonial rule severed our connection with the region.

In post-independence period India tried to revitalize relations with the USSR and so with the Central Asian states. It was because of friendship with Soviet Union that India could be connected to Central Asia in the form of Soviet Socialist Republics from 1929 until 1991. The first Asian Relations Conference was held in Delhi in 1947. In this conference the first Prime Minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru had welcomed the Central Asian representatives as delegates from the Soviet Republics of Asia. Yet from 1947-1991, our interaction with the Central Asian states was indirect, limited and determined by the Soviet system. However, Post disintegration of USSR in 1991, it was not so difficult to establish direct relations with the newly independent Central Asian states given the fact that India had close relations with the USSR. Since then, India has been taking efforts to reconnect with the Central Asia by developing relations with each of the five independent states i.e., Central Asian Republics (CARs).

#### **B] Political:**

Officially India-Tajikistan established their bilateral diplomatic relations in 1992. In 1994 Indian embassy in Dushanbe was opened. However, Tajikistan opened its embassy in New Delhi in 2003. Since then, regular high-level visits have taken place between the two which has enabled them to cement their bond stronger than before:

1. President of Tajikistan Mr. Emomali Rahmon has visited India 6 times in 1995, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2012 and 2016. In his last visit he signed three new co-operation MoUs with India.

2. The two Presidents of India have paid visits to Tajikistan in 2009 (Smt. Pratibha Patil) and 2018 (Mr. Ramnath Kovind). During his visit, a grant of USD 20 million for Tajikistan was announced by President Mr. Kovind for the projects mutually agreed upon by these two States. A total of 08 MoUs were signed in the areas of— (i) Peaceful Use of Space Technology, (ii) Disaster Management, (iii) Renewable Energy, (iv) Youth Affairs, (v) Agricultural Research and Education, (vi) Unani Medicine, (vii) Programme between Foreign Ministries for 2018-21, (viii) Cultural Exchange Programme for 2019-23.

3. The two Prime Ministers of Indian Republic paid visits to Tajikistan in 2003 (Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee) and 2015 (Mr. Narendra Modi). During the visit of Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi, the two sides decided to speed up cooperation in the spheres of defence, connectivity and in fight against terrorism. Both signed 'Programme of Cooperation in Culture and Art' for 2016-18. India also fulfilled the promise of setting up of computer labs in 37 schools of Tajikistan in 2016. PM Modi met President Rahmon again in SCO Summit of 2016 in Tashkent and then in Summit of 2018 in China.

4. Foreign Minister of Tajikistan visited India in 2015 while Foreign Minister of India visited Tajikistan in 2014, 2018 and 2019. S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India, met Foreign Minister of Tajikistan while participating in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Meeting of Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process in March, 2021. He also had a telephone conversation with Tajik Foreign Minister in May 2020 where issue of combating Corona virus as well as Regional and bilateral relations were discussed.

5. Apart from these, other high level bilateral visits have also been occurred among different ministries of the two countries.

6. Between the two countries more than 70 intergovernmental and sectorial agreements and MOUs have been signed (as on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2020).

7. The two countries also have five bilateral consultative mechanisms- (i) Foreign Office Consultations (four rounds held; last in December 2018 in New Delhi); (ii) Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism (three rounds held; last in June 2017 in Dushanbe); (iii) Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (11th meeting held in Delhi in February 2020); (iv) JWG on Peaceful Use of Space Technology for Development (Second Meeting was held in Aug 2020 through Direct Video Conferencing.); (v) JWG on Defence Cooperation (7th Meeting held in July 2018 in Dushanbe)<sup>1</sup>

8. In 2019, first Consular consultations were held between the two in Dushanbe. In February 2021, the last round of India-Tajikistan Strategic Consultations was held between the two National Security Councils in New Delhi.

### C] Cultural and People-to-People Relations:

Traditionally India and Tajikistan have been connected with culture, languages and shared history. This is evident from the exchange and influence of Sufism and Farsi language in India during the period of Persian and Mughal Empire. These mutual ties have been maintained even after independence in the two countries. Today, Indian films and TV serials, dubbed in Russian language, are popular in Tajikistan. The regular cultural exchange of troupes has also been encouraged between the two. In recent past following initiatives have been taken by both countries:

1. Art and cultural troupes from Tajikistan have visited India to participate in Surajkund International Crafts Mela since 2010 to 2018 every year.

2. During the visit of the Prime Minister of India to Tajikistan in 2015, a significant Cultural Exchange Program for 2016-2018 was signed.

3. India also inaugurated the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (earlier known as Indian Cultural Centre) in Dushanbe in the year

2018 which now offers courses in Kathak & Tabla as well as Sanskrit and Hindi language classes.

4. Under India Central Asia Dialogue Process Tajik journalists have visited India in April 2019.

5. Yoga is also popular in Tajikistan. In 2020, 'My Life, My Yoga' ('Jeevan Yoga'), a video blogging contest was organized by our Ministry of AYUSH and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in which Tajikistan had also participated.

6. The India Study Corners in Tajikistan's prominent Universities or Institutions in Dushanbe, Khorog, Konibodom and Panjikent offer the courses in Indian Languages and Yoga. These are funded by Indian Ministry of Culture to friendship societies in Tajikistan.

7. In order to ease the people-to-people relations, India has kept Visa regime liberal for Tajikistan. This has resulted in increasing number of Tajik people travelling to India on e-visa for tourism and medical treatment. Tajikistan also has launched online visa regime which includes Indian nationals as well.

### D] Indo-Tajik Economic Relations:

Tajikistan like India is a developing country but this energy rich country is still a key Central Asian Republic for energy deficit India. Both India and Tajikistan have grown and expanded their political and cultural linkages but what they are still lacking is their economic and strategic cooperation. Connectivity with trade routes, Foreign Investment, Development cooperation are the focus areas in their bilateral economic cooperation.

**Connectivity with trade routes-** Once trade partners via Silk Trade route in old times, they are now facing some limitations in direct connectivity. The reason behind this is Tajikistan's location as it is landlocked and the trade route to it from India is indirect i.e. India- Tajikistan via Iran (Abbas Port)-Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan. The trade turnover between the two in 2020-

21(April-March) is 43 million 920 thousand US dollars, which is 52% more than the previous year. If both work on the connectivity in terms of trade routes, then there are chances to further increasing the trade. This barrier of limited connection in trade with Central Asia, in general, was realised in the 1<sup>st</sup> India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2019 where the establishment of India-Central Asia Development Group (CADG) was proposed. The major purpose of this was to develop the transit and transport potential of their countries, improve the logistics network of the region and to promote joint initiatives to create regional and international transport corridors which will improve and incentivise trade, business and investment, especially in the area of Small and Medium Enterprises. This also resulted in starting of renovation of the Chabahar port in Iran by India and similarly the development of the International North-South Corridor (INSTC), both of which can become the potential trade links between the Central and South Asia. Tajikistan is keen to use India's Chabahar port in Iran. These two routes, once accessible to Tajikistan, can enable both countries direct connectivity which will ease their trade relations. The second India-Central Asia Dialogue was hosted virtually by India in October, 2020 to speed up bilateral trade relations. India extended a US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit to the Central Asian countries for priority development in fields of IT, energy, healthcare, education, agriculture etc. in this meeting.

There is also a key mechanism to encourage the development of bilateral economic cooperation between the two, which is, the Inter-governmental Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation.

**Foreign Investment-** At present Russia and China are major investors in Tajikistan. However India still has a chance to make her presence in the region. Tajikistan is also ready to open up its state-economy to the market in small steps. In the 9<sup>th</sup> Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference

on Afghanistan, held in Dushanbe in March, 2021 the two countries took their bilateral economic cooperation to the next level since the President of Tajikistan- Mr. Rahmon stressed on the need of much stronger economic co-operation, especially in terms of investment in Tajikistan from Indian companies. The conference was also first bilateral official visit for our Foreign Minister Mr. Jaishankar who met his Tajikistan counterpart Sirojiddin Muhriddin and insisted for the engagement of the private actors i.e., business community, the Chambers and trade bodies from both ends to enhance the bilateral trade.

**Development Cooperation-** Mr. Jaishankar, Foreign Minister of India, acknowledged development cooperation as one of the other pillars of bilateral relationship between the two countries during his visit to Tajikistan for 9<sup>th</sup> Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan in March 2021. India has initiated a number of projects over the years in Tajikistan under its grant assistance including IT equipment in schools, food processing plant, engineering workshop, pharmaceutical plant, IT centres, rehabilitation and modernisation of the Varzob-1 hydroelectric power plant etc. India is also involved in the construction of the 8-laning of the Dushanbe-Chortut highway. Apart from these, community development projects and projects in the energy and transport sectors as well are lined up in Line of Credit extended by India.

#### **E] Strategic Relations:**

Extremism and Terrorism are the two concerns which both the countries have in common. It is while opposing the terrorist group Taliban and supporting the anti-Taliban group Northern Alliance, both found convergence of their anti-terrorism interest and the need of strategic cooperation.

India and Tajikistan have worked along with Russia and Iran while supporting the Northern Alliance formed to respond the radical presence of Taliban in Afghanistan. In PM Vajpayee's

visit to Dushanbe in 2003 the agreement was signed between the two countries which established the Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism. Apart from this, both the countries have also focused on military training, joint research, counter-terrorism coordination and close consultation on Afghanistan through the 'Connect Central Asia Policy'.

In 2012, India declared its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' approach in External Affairs Minister, S M Krishna's visit to Tajikistan. This was the first India-Central Asia dialogue where India acknowledged Central Asia as her 'extended neighbourhood'. S M Krishna, in his speech stressed on the four Cs-Commerce, Connectivity, Consular and Community- i.e., measures to be focused on while connecting to Central Asia.

Since then, besides cultural and economic relations, India has shown keen interest to expand its strategic and defence ties with Tajikistan with more pro-active engagement in the region. Looking at the strategic geopolitical location of Tajikistan as it shares the boundaries with Afghanistan, China and its close proximity with PoK, the direct connectivity becomes important.

**Maritime connectivity projects-1)** International North South Trade Corner (INSTC) is a multi-modal transportation route which will provide direct connection with Central Asia, Russia and Europe. It connects the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St. Petersburg in Russia. This route is important for India, Iran, Russia, Europe and Central Asia as it is cheaper than the traditional Suez Canal route. Thus, this maritime connectivity will help these countries to boost up their bilateral trade.

2) Chabahar Port- India pushes for its Chabahar Port in Iran to be a part of INSTC which will facilitate the access to Tajikistan. Once this becomes operational, it will give a boost to the bilateral trade.

### Security and Defence Co-operation-

1. Farkhor air base- India acknowledged the setting up of its first and the only overseas air base at Farkhor, Tajikistan in 2002.

2. Ayni airport - India helped refurbishment of Ayni airport near Dushanbe from 2003-2010, but it was paused due to the resistant pressure on Tajikistan from Russia and China who were uneasy about India's military presence in Central Asia. Pakistan too was uncomfortable and open protestor as this would reduce the travel time between India and Tajikistan and had been initiated with the purpose to keep check on hostile activities by Pakistan especially post-Kargil war. By 2010, Tajikistan government formally reopened the air base as at several occasions it assured that the base will not be used for Indian military deployment.

3. The Indo-Tajik Friendship hospital (ITFH)-In 2012, during the meeting between the visiting Tajik President Mr. Rahmon and the Indian PM Manmohan Singh, both the countries agreed to set up the India-Tajikistan Friendship Hospital (ITFH) near Kurghan Teppa (now called Bokhtar). Today India based doctors and medical staffs are helping Tajik civil and armed forces patients who have been fighting against the extremist and terrorist groups like Taliban. In his visit to Dushanbe for the 9<sup>th</sup> of Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference on Afghanistan, Indian Foreign Minister Mr. Jaishankar acknowledged this hospital as 'one of the important symbols of bilateral cooperation'.

### The Great Game, Central Asia and Indo-Tajikistan Relations:

Great Game is where all the major powers like USA, Russia, China and Europe are trying to establish their influence in the Eurasia region or more particularly as the past developments have unfolded, in the Central Asian region. On 30<sup>th</sup> August, 2021 the US Armed Forces completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan as per promised in Doha Agreement of 2020. This has resulted into USA's lesser engagement in

the Central Asia region. The other two major players in the region are Russia and China. Tajikistan, the poorest CAR, since its independence from the USSR, has been economically dependent on Russia as a traditional partner and China as emerging strong investor. Russia's economy is weakening especially after facing the Western sanctions in the post-2014 period. China is taking advantage of Russia's weakness where it seeks to replace itself with Russia as a major influence in Tajikistan and thus becoming aggressive player in the Great Game. Tajikistan just like the other CARs has adopted the 'multi-vector' policy to stabilize its economy as it cannot afford to depend solely on China's investments. Moreover there is resentment among the CARs towards China's aggressive engagement in the region and its 'debt diplomacy' as well. Tajikistan also wants to get rid of from this 'debt trap policy' of China which may perhaps cost Tajikistan to lose its sovereignty too. In this context, India has an opportunity to become pro-active in the region, as reflected in PM Modi's visit to the five CARs in 2015. Tajikistan also seems to welcome India's presence since it will balance the competition between Russia and China in the region.

#### **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and India-Tajikistan Relations:**

Established in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization emphasised harmony, working on consensus, respect for cultural values and policy of non-interference into the domestic affairs of the member states. Tajikistan being the founding member and India being the observer member state of the SCO, tried to cooperate with each other with their foundational legacy or through their historical linkages.

The significance of the Central Asian Republics has been side lined in the Indian foreign policy in earlier time. Now through this platform India started reviving its relations with the CAR. Through SCO, with Tajikistan, India continued its joint military exercise since 2003 to

deepen its relations. There has been diplomatic engagement through the visits of the military heads where issues concerning to military and security were discussed between these two countries. The significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is that it provides the platform to both the countries to accomplish their common objectives without sacrificing their national interest. For fulfilling the national and domestic needs like huge demands for the oil and natural gas, India has been maintaining good relations with in general Central Asian countries and specifically with Tajikistan for the hydroelectric energy resources. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has offered the new prospects for economic cooperation in the region. It is through this platform, that India and Tajikistan with other Central Asian Countries are trying to address the several issues including social, political, strategic, economic and cultural. With Tajikistan, countries like Russia and Kazakhstan also supports the India's full fledge membership to the SCO as it will contribute to the overall growth of the organisation. There are several reasons for that as India is having historical linkages with the Eurasian region. India being the major player in the region of South Asia, it will certainly act as a regional balancer for China and therefore, it can act as a guiding factor for Russia and other Central Asian countries in the organisation. The membership of India to the SCO is strongly supported by the Russian Federation as India has been important strategic partner of Russia in multiple ways. "The SCOMembers realize that cooperation with observer states in areas of countering terrorism, solving growing environmental problems, ensuring food security, energy security and economic cooperation including banking can be realized to the potential only with the granting of full membership to the existing observer members."<sup>2</sup>As India is supported by the key members of SCO, it will certainly have greater scope for playing its role in the Asian region. In this context, even



the bilateral relations of India and Tajikistan will continue to prosper through SCO.

### Afghanistan factor in India-Tajikistan Relations:

Even though Tajikistan is one of five Central Asia Republics, the region which is rich in oil and gas resources, it is still the poorest country among the CARs. With the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, her economy has further suffered. Also, Afghanistan is the connecting bridge between India and Central Asia. Any presence of radical forces and instability in Afghanistan would hamper the bilateral trade as well. On the other hand, Tajiks make the major ethnic group among others in Afghanistan. In this context Tajikistan is worried about Taliban government in Afghanistan. Thus besides the economic loss, questions of terrorism and security have been addressed by both India and Tajikistan after the recent developments of Taliban in Afghanistan.

Tajikistan has always been opposing the terrorist groups like Taliban. In this respect India shares the common bond with Tajikistan, as India too has been on the front since the beginning in fight against terrorism and terrorist groups. On the other hand, important players in the region- Russia, China and Pakistan seem to have different interests in Tajikistan. The scenario where Russia is thinking of engaging with Taliban government and disallowing Tajikistan to seek military alliance from the USA; China is threatening Tajikistan's sovereignty by using its expansionist policy to acquire Tajik lands and Pakistan's support to Taliban from the past has left Tajikistan with no option but to have hopes from India. Iran also appears as this ray of hope as its Chabahar port, operated by India can be proved helpful for Tajikistan. Afghan crisis has posed a threat to Iran's security too. Thus the two insecure countries have come together after facing the common security challenge from Taliban in Afghanistan. Similarly, India's security is in risk if Taliban regime comes to power in

Afghanistan. Pakistan too has acknowledged Taliban as legitimate in the past. This has added in the risk on the side of India.

Since India has had cordial relations with both the countries from the past, the collective action of the three friends (India, Tajikistan and Iran) can have the potential to solve the Afghan crisis. Both Tajikistan and India are looking forward for the "inclusive political process" in Afghanistan as they, Tajikistan in particular, are worried that the new Taliban rule which will pose a threat not only to the women but also to the minorities including the Tajiks in Afghanistan. During the 9<sup>th</sup> of Heart of Asia Ministerial Conference - Istanbul Process on Afghanistan (March 2021), India's Foreign Minister Mr. Jaishankar made a statement- "For a durable peace in Afghanistan, what we need is a genuine 'double peace', that is, peace within Afghanistan and peace around Afghanistan. It requires harmonizing the interests of all, both within and around that country."<sup>33</sup>[https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33751/Statement\\_by\\_External\\_Affairs\\_Minister\\_at\\_the\\_9th\\_Ministerial\\_Conference\\_of\\_Heart\\_of\\_Asia\\_Istanb](https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33751/Statement_by_External_Affairs_Minister_at_the_9th_Ministerial_Conference_of_Heart_of_Asia_Istanb)

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