

Preface

This volume addresses several of the most urgent issues of the day. Its nominal subject is the rapidly developing skein of interrelationships between India and the former Soviet states of Central Asia and also with Afghanistan. Its larger theme is the way we conceive the political, economic, and civilizational map of Eurasia, and especially that heart of the mega-continent that lies between Russia, China, India, and the Caspian Sea. The authors of this study propose—rightly, in my view—that India should be, and is fated to become, no less decisive a presence in this pivotal region than Russia, China, or, for that matter, Europe and the United States.

For the century prior to 1991, India's contacts with Central Asia were largely mediated through Russia, which had absorbed most of the region into its tsarist, and then Soviet, empire. True, during the last Soviet decades India maintained privileged links with Central Asia and especially Uzbekistan. But these, too, were filtered through Moscow and through the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace Friendship and Cooperation, in which India was definitely the junior partner.

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the rising presences in Central Asia have been China, the U.S. and Europe, as well as Japan and Korea, but not India, which seemed far away and indifferent. The “opening to the East” celebrated by the European Union's TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe- Caucasus-Asia) transport project referred to China, but not India. It is true that India was a rapidly rising power, but Central Asian leaders felt no compelling need to include it in their geopolitical or economic calculus. The Indians returned the compliment.

Against this background, recent events are nothing short of electrifying. First, the Indian government gave the place of honor at its 2009 national day celebrations to President Nursultan Nazerbayev of Kazakhstan, at the same time announcing a series of important political and economic initiatives, in-

cluding the purchase of uranium from Kazakhstan. Then, late in the year, India's President Pratibha Pratil appeared as the honored guest at Tajikistan's national day, at which time she also attended an Indian-Tajik Business Forum and, significantly, visited the shrine of the Sufi saint Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani, who figured prominently in the spread of Islam in the Kashmir valley. Nothing could be clearer: India is finally moving to establish its presence in Central Asia. The announcement that Indian engineers have completed a transmission line to carry Uzbek electricity deep into Afghanistan (and potentially beyond) underscores the strategic nature of these developments.

It is not a coincidence that at the same time India has mounted a forward policy in Afghanistan as well. Largely unnoticed in the US and Europe, some 1,000 Indo-Tibet Border Police are deployed in Afghanistan, and hundreds of officers of the Afghan National Army are training in India. India ranks as the fifth largest donor to Afghanistan, supporting projects in education, infrastructure, health, and other fields. Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai, who studied in India, has welcomed India's well-staffed consulates throughout the country. Building on its reputation for having modernized under a democratic system and with a free press, and without resort to the narrow authoritarianism so popular in Asia, India is constructing Afghanistan the new building in which the Afghan Parliament meets.

It is easy to dismiss all this as simply a new front in India's half-century struggle with Pakistan. It is that, of course, but it is far more. For while India is clearly moving to flank Pakistan to the west and north, it is at the same time laying the basis for post-conflict relations between the two countries and, indeed, within the region as a whole. In this effort India is drawing upon the experience of three millennia of relations between the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan and Central Asia, reviving ties that languished throughout the period of Russian and British colonial rule in the region.

It is frequently pointed out that India has been the object of repeated conquest by Central Asian states from the time of the Kushans in the first centuries A.D. down to Tamerlane (Timur) in the fourteenth century and Babur a century later. More than the Arabs, it was the Turkic armies of Mahmud of Ghazni that brought Islam to what is now Pakistan and northern India in the

eleventh century, and it was Central Asian Sufi saints like Mir Sayyid Ali Hamdani who gave it form and substance there. The Taj Mahal is a lineal descendant of Central Asian prototypes, just as the Moghul dynasty itself, one of the glories of Indian civilization, came to the sub-continent from Afghanistan and, earlier, the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan.

Less well-known is the enormous cultural influence of India in Central Asia over the millennia. Buddhism sent down deeper roots in Afghanistan and Central Asia than even in India itself. In the wake of the Buddhist monks came the Indian traders, thousands of whom settled permanently in Central Asia. The Roman geographer, mathematician and astronomer, Ptolemy, wrote of a city called “Indikomandana,” or a “city of Indians” located north of the Amu-Darya in present-day Uzbekistan (probably Termez), while large religious and commercial colonies of Indians existed also in what is now Turkmenistan and western Kazakhstan. Thanks to these contacts, Central Asia became the point of transmission of Indian medical and scientific knowledge (including our system of counting, wrongly identified in the West as Arabic) between India, the Middle East, and Europe. It is no accident that even today pharmaceuticals are one of India’s largest exports to Central Asia.

So dense and enduring is the web of political, religious, economic, and intellectual interaction between Central Asia/Afghanistan and the northern regions of the Indian sub-continent that one is quite justified in considering them a single cultural zone. This notion, so strange to our modern sensibilities, would have seemed natural to anyone in either region prior to the last century. Thanks to the collapse of the USSR and the opening of the old southern border of the Soviet Union following the post-9:11 destruction of the Taliban regime, this deeper reality is now able to reassert itself. It is this process, rather than the latest twists and turns in the painful India-Pakistan relationship, that is forcing us to reconfigure the geographical, economic, cultural, and geopolitical concepts on which we base policy.

As of this writing, it is impossible to predict how far India’s new approach to Central Asia will progress. In this context it is usual to raise the question of India’s possible future military footprint in the region. But in spite of several modest military interactions with Tajikistan, it is unlikely that this will be-

come an important focus in the region for New Delhi. This does not preclude selling arms and equipment, training forces, and assisting in military reform, however. Now does it exclude India's role in reorienting many officers in the region towards the English language.

As authoritarian states, both China and Russia have tended to crystallize their policies towards Central Asia in terms of large-scale initiatives and formalized, heavily promoted programs. China's "Develop the West" and "Strike Hard Maximum Pressure" campaigns and Russia's "Collective Security Treaty Organization" (CSTO) and its nascent common market, the four-member "Common Economic Space" (CES), go far towards defining Moscow's presence in the Central Asian heartland. As a democracy, India is unlikely to develop or pursue such centrally-administered schemes. Expect it instead to operate through diverse points of initiative, many of them in the private sector, in pursuit of more limited, more *ad hoc*, and yet possibly more substantial objectives.

In following such a course, India has several important advantages. First, is its proximity to formerly Soviet parts of Central Asia. Beijing is eight hours by air from Astana, and Moscow is five hours from Dushanbe. By contrast, Delhi is a mere two hours by plane from Bishkek. Indian honeymooners already fly from Amritsar to bask on the shores of Issyk-Kul.

Second, Indian policy leads with trade, education, health, technology, and transport, rather than anti-terrorism or large-scale exploitation of Central Asia's natural resources, as is the case with Russia and China. Stated differently, India's expanded presence, while still limited, is in areas that are directly relevant to ordinary people in Central Asia and Afghanistan, and not just to a limited circle of governmental officials.

Third, India poses neither a security threat to the region, as is the case with Russia, nor an economic or demographic threat, as is perceived to be the case with China. Russian media may still dominate the Central Asian airwaves, but Indian films and music are wildly popular there, as is India itself. Surveys indicate that 71% of Afghans hold favorable views of India, with similarly high figures elsewhere in Central Asia.

And, fourth, India's level of knowledge of Central Asia is far superior to that of China, while its cultural literacy concerning the region far outshines that of Russia, Europe, or America. Indian journals issued in Delhi, Calcutta, Srinagar and Chandigarh cover Central Asia more thoroughly than their counterparts in China. Russia still possesses solid knowledge of Central Asia but this is a wasting resource, while India's knowledge base on the region is expanding.

Finally, India's role in Afghanistan is an asset not only there but among Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors. Last September the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General Stanley McChrystal, affirmed in a leaked assessment that Indian activities in Afghanistan largely benefit the Afghan people. Even if this statement elicits a hostile response from Islamabad, it is acknowledged with approval in all the Central Asian capitals.

In the following pages, Nirmala Joshi and her colleagues offer a careful assessment of India's current activities and future prospects in the region. Together, the authors command a formidable range of concrete knowledge and expertise. Precisely because of this, they are neither enthusiasts nor naysayers, offering instead a restrained and responsible evaluation of the prospects for Indian-Central Asian relations as viewed from New Delhi.

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute is honored to present the findings of these respected Indian colleagues and friends to a broader audience of analysts and policy-makers. It is hoped that this volume will give rise to more detailed studies focusing on specific sectors and countries, and also on the inevitably complex interplay between India's growing presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan and that of those other countries which have dominated the discussion to now.

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