

India and Tajikistan in the Emerging Multipolar World: Dynamics of Strategic Convergence and Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolving strategic partnership between India and Tajikistan within the context of the emerging multipolar world order. The primary objective of the research is to analyze the historical foundations, political and diplomatic engagements, economic interactions, cultural linkages, and defence cooperation that have shaped bilateral relations between the two countries since Tajikistan's independence in 1991. Employing a qualitative and analytical methodology, the study relies on secondary sources, including government reports, academic literature, policy documents, official statements, and historical records to assess the nature and trajectory of India-Tajikistan relations. The findings reveal that India and Tajikistan share deep historical and civilizational ties, reinforced by convergent strategic interests in regional security, counter-terrorism, stability in Afghanistan, and support for a rules-based international order. Political and diplomatic relations have been strengthened through regular high-level exchanges, strategic dialogues, and cooperation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The study further highlights the growing significance of defence and security cooperation, which has emerged as a central pillar of bilateral engagement. While economic and trade relations remain below their potential due to geographical and connectivity constraints, both countries continue to explore new avenues for cooperation in energy, infrastructure, technology, education, and capacity-building initiatives under India's Connect Central Asia Policy. The study concludes that India-Tajikistan relations have acquired increasing strategic relevance in the evolving geopolitical landscape of Eurasia. Strengthening connectivity, expanding economic engagement, and deepening institutional cooperation can further enhance the partnership and contribute to regional peace, stability, and sustainable development.

Keywords: India-Tajikistan Relations; Multipolar World Order; Central Asia; Strategic Partnership; Defence and Security Convergence

INTRODUCTION

Soon after the independence the newly emerged countries of Central Asia tried to maintain close and healthy relations with the other countries of the world in order to have a successful political and economic transformation. In particular, in respect of India, Central Asia is keen to develop warm, friendly and cooperative relations. The basic attitude of India towards Central Asia has always been one of the relationships between the two sides has always been a smooth one since the time of Tajikistan's creation as an independent republic after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan's geo-political importance has induced both the sides to chart out their policies and relationship carefully and very smoothly. At present, India-Tajikistan bilateral relations are based on mutual respect, convergence of interests and similarity of views. The sudden dissolution of the USSR, the five landlocked central Asian countries of the former USSR republics are India's extended neighbourhood and occupy a special place in India's foreign policy priorities.

Tajikistan occupies a pivotal position in India's foreign policy towards Central Asia and continues to remain a significant partner for India in the region. Political and strategic relations between the two countries can be

termed as excellent.¹ However, economic and trade ties remain the unsatisfactory part of an otherwise fruitful relationship.² Tajikistan's importance for India lies in its geo-strategic location; it shares borders with China, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and is located in proximity to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK). In India's regional security calculus, Tajikistan assumes a significant place, especially in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan.³ The infiltration of extremist forces into Tajikistan can have serious security implications for India because of its proximity to POK and the likely impact of this on the situation in Kashmir.⁴

India-Tajikistan Bilateral Relations: A Historical Overview

Both India and Tajikistan historically linked by long-standing tradition of close cooperation and friendship between the peoples of two countries, deep cross-cultural relations.⁵ The disintegration of the Soviet Union provided the newly independent Tajikistan a new statehood. Under the new statehood of the Republic of Tajikistan, relations between the two countries moved to a new stage of development.⁶ The Republic of India was one of the first foreign countries, which recognized independence of a new country in the Central Asia, the Republic of Tajikistan.

Though the sudden dissolution of the USSR left India in a shocked state of mind, New Delhi soon came out of this shock and accepted the new development in world politics. Since independence, the Republic of Tajikistan had clear and peaceful foreign policy with priorities of the principle of transparency, fairness and multilevel.⁷ The conceptual structure of the Tajikistan foreign policy based on three fundamental components: first, pragmatism in foreign policy and equal mutually beneficial cooperation; second, the legitimate interests of international acts in Central Asian region; third, to conduct predictability foreign policy in international relations.⁸ Both India and Tajikistan signed a historical agreement for the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries on August 28, 1992. After one year, the Republic of India opened its Embassy in Tajikistan. In 2002, the Republic of Tajikistan declared of a new foreign strategy in its foreign policy. It was "Open Doors Policy (ODP)", which means open cooperation with all countries in the world including India on the principle of mutual respect, bilateral and mutual cooperation.⁹

On the basis of bilateral and mutual cooperation, the Republic of Tajikistan opened its diplomatic mission in India on August 2004 and on April 2006, the Republic appointed the first Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan in the Republic of India. The bilateral relations between India and Tajikistan are based on a strong foundation of historical and civilizational linkages, shared cultural heritage, sound political understanding and warm people-to-people ties. The relations between the two countries rest on two solid pillars : first, the bonds of history and culture manifested in shared belief in pluralism, secularism and the spirit of tolerance; and second, convergence of geo-political concerns and interests in modern times.¹⁰ Growing cooperation in economic, political, academic, cultural and defence fields may further strengthen and deepen the existing bonds.¹¹

Speaking at the ICWA-Tajik Academy of Sciences Conference, Prof. Shodi Sufiev, of the Institute of Oriental Studies and Written Heritage (IOSWH), pointed out that during the great Mughal period, when Persian was the language of the court, the number of scientific, literary and historical works written in India in the Persian language far exceeded the number of such works in all other Iranian areas.¹² This period was described by noted German Orientalist, Herman Ette, as "the Indian Summer of the Persian literature".¹³ The Tajiks regard the study of the Persian manuscripts preserved in various libraries in India as very valuable in order to understand their own history and heritage.¹⁴

The advent of Babur in India in the early 16th century is the high watermark of bilateral interaction of two civilizational entities that had much in common besides a common originating source.¹⁵ The time had distanced them from one another.

Although Babur's military commanders were mostly drawn from Tartar-Uighur stock, yet soon the empire's administrative apparatus and its cultural nurseries were to be manned and nurtured by a galaxy of outstanding Tajik and Iranian personalities.¹⁶ Three hundred years of the rule of Temurid Gorkanis over Hindustan brought out the very best in two great civilizations.¹⁷

Therefore, the Tajiks of today have every right to construe of India as the great repository of their rich and colourful cultural treasure.¹⁸ Naturally, for the Tajiks, the music frozen in the white marble pillars of Taj Mahal is no less reverberating than the music in the profound verses of Bedil who was born, sang and died in India, far away from his own people.¹⁹

The Central Asian region including Tajikistan is considered to be the part of India's "extended neighbourhood" who once were a part of the former Soviet Union which had very friendly relations with India. India had good diplomatic engagements with the region by establishing embassies in the erstwhile Central Asian region of the Soviet Union. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, there seemed to be drift in India's relations with the region. The most prominent being that India was thoroughly engaged with its immediate neighbourhood, especially Pakistan, over the issue of Kashmir.

Since gaining independence, Central Asian states including Tajikistan comprising of at least 62 million people, have drawn worldwide attention due to security and economic compulsions.²⁰ So far India is concerned; there are two important reasons for improving India-Central Asian relations. First, are India's needs for energy in order to sustain economic growth and second, is the threat from militant Islamic groups. Besides these reasons, the geo-political location of Central Asia affects India's relations with Pakistan, China and US and other powers.²¹ India's relations with Central Asian region, especially Tajikistan, was marked by her closeness to the Soviet Union, particularly after the 1962-Sino-Indian war.

India signed a "Friendship Treaty" with the Soviet Union in 1971 and was more concerned with the Soviet Union.²² But after the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, one witnessed a major shift in India's foreign policy as that moved away from Nehru's idealism to BJP's realism and pragmatism. This was quite reflected in India's policy doctrine of 1997 that referred to Central Asia as "India's near abroad". The person responsible for this was the then Prime Minister of India, I.K. Gujral. His policy was more famously known as "Gujral doctrine": and the doctrine emphasized that India would not tolerate any foreign interference that affected India's national interest.²³

Cultural Proximity between India and Tajikistan:

The cultural relations between the people of Tajikistan and India indisputably has an ancient and rich history deserving attention. The state of these relations always depended on historical situation, political views of governments, state of science and culture and world outlook of the people of both the countries. After the year 1947, when India achieved independence, another era of cultural relations of the Soviet Union and India started. One should not confine oneself with pride, howsoever, legitimate in the relations in the past. Today, by the will of history and fate, Tajikistan has been a free independent state for more than a decade now and has the opportunity to have direct contacts with other countries of the world.²⁴

For the first time, a high-level government delegation of independent Tajikistan visited India in February 1993. A very important and useful document – the protocol on cooperation between the two countries consisting of six points was signed during this visit. The fifth point of this protocol related to "Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Government of the Republic of India on cooperation in the field of culture, art, education, science, mass media, film and sports."²⁵

Again, in October 1998, the Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Mr. Himachal Som visited Tajikistan. During this visit, the problems of cultural cooperation and opening of a cultural centre of Tajikistan in India and cultural centre of India in Tajikistan were discussed. At that time, itself an invitation for visit to India by group of 30 Tajik artists was extended.²⁶

At the beginning of the year 2002, the embassy of India organized a round table conference participated by eminent Tajik artists, headed by the president of the Artist's Union on Tajikistan Suhrob Qurbonov. The initiator of this event was the Indian Ambassador to Tajikistan, Mr. Yogendra Kumar who himself is well aware of the Tajik artists' knowledge about the works of Indian artists. The Tajik artists expressed strong desire to collaborate with the Indian artists inclusive of holding joint programmes.²⁷ Thus, the embassy of India makes great contribution to the cause of cultural collaboration between the two countries.

Political and Diplomatic Relations

So far as political and diplomatic factor is concerned, the Republic of India was one of the first foreign countries which recognized independence of a new country in the Central Asia, the Republic of Tajikistan and on August 28, 1992, an agreement was signed on the establishment of diplomatic ties between India and Tajikistan. After one year, the Republic of India opened its embassy in Tajikistan.

The Republic of Tajikistan opened its diplomatic mission in August 2004 and in April 2006, appointed Ambassador of the Republic of Tajikistan in the Republic of India.²⁸ Since the independence, the Republic of Tajikistan has clear and peaceful foreign policy with priorities of the principle of transparency, fairness and multilevels.²⁹

Ever since the independence of the Republic of Tajikistan, both countries have exchanged high level visits from both sides. During the visits, both have laid the foundation for a mutually beneficial relationship in many areas such as, trade, defence, politics, energy cooperation, culture and development.³⁰ The political dialogue between India and Tajikistan has been regular and mutually beneficial. High-level exchanges have set the tempo to chart-out the scope and direction of cooperation and have also laid the foundation for understanding each other's interests and core concerns. Both countries subscribe to common principles of inter-state conduct, peaceful settlement of all differences and rejection of extremism of all forms as well as the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.³¹

The first major step in the direction of strengthening bilateral relations between India and Tajikistan was taken during the state visit of the then Tajik Prime Minister Abdul Mallik Abdullajanov in February 1993. The Tajik Prime Minister pledged to forge bonds of friendship and economic cooperation in the interest of peace and stability in the region and signed six agreements to give substance to their cooperation. The prime ministers of the two countries dwelled at length on the problems created by religious extremism and fundamentalism and also cross-border terrorism sponsored by the state to destabilise governments.³² In 1993, Indo-Central Asia relations wrote a new chapter when India's then Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao paid an official visit to the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The first Central Asian visit in the post-Soviet period by the Indian Prime Minister unfortunately had to skip Tajikistan on account of the disturbed conditions there due to the bloody civil war.³³ Despite valid reasons for Indian prime minister not being able to visit Tajikistan on account of the prevailing political instability in this republic until the signing of the Moscow Peace Accord (MPA) in 1997, the delay particularly after the success of the peace process had not been appreciated by the Tajik people at large who are quite enthusiastic about further deepening their age-old bonds of friendship.³⁴

Tajik president's visit to India

Indo-Tajik relations reached at its height after the first state visit of president of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon took place in December 1995. It was preceded by the visit of the then Indian Minister of State for External Affairs, Salmon Khurshid to Tajikistan in June 1994. The visit further strengthened mutual understanding between India and Tajikistan of the situation in the neighbouring Afghanistan where the Mujahideen were creating trouble along the border of Tajiksitan.³⁵ The visit also resulted in signing another six agreements and one Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). These agreements related to the development of friendly ties for comprehensive of strengthening the cooperation between the two countries including cooperation at the international forums for setting up Indo-Tajik Joint Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technological Cooperation, protection of bilateral investment, cultural exchange programme, Memorandum of Understanding in environmental protection, cooperation in Science and Technology and in the area of health care.³⁶

On January 22, 1999, on his return journey from Vietnam, the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon made a brief halt at Delhi and had a meeting with Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India, in which they discussed the problems of mutual cooperation between the two neighbouring states, the situation in the region etc.³⁷

India-Tajikistan relations cemented further following the state visit of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon to

India in May 2001. The visit resulted in signing of five agreements on mutual-legal assistance in criminal matters, on prevention of illicit trafficking in narcotics, on long-term cooperation in the field of industry, MOU on technical cooperation and agreement of direct air services between Dushanbe and New Delhi, besides a Joint Declaration on Principle of Mutual Relations (JDPMR).³⁸

In the Tajik-Indian talks, the India's Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee described Joint Tajik-Indian action as a "stabilizing factor" for the region. Vajpayee also noted that the state visit of the Tajik President had opened up a new chapter in 'close and dynamic' Tajik-Indian relations of friendship and cooperation oriented towards 21st century.³⁹

Similarly, in September 2009, India's then President, Mrs. Pratibha Patil paid a three-day goodwill visit to Tajikistan which was the first ever visit by an Indian President to the Central Asian region. On the occasion, she attended the National Day celebrations of Tajikistan as the Guest of Honour. During her visit, president Patil held talks with her Tajik counterpart, Imomali Rahmon on a wide range of issues, including efforts to tackle terrorism, bilateral relations and developments in and around the region, aimed at consolidating ties between the two countries in the political, economic and other spheres.⁴⁰ Besides, Patil also held meetings with the Tajik Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Defence Minister of Tajikistan and interacted with the Chairman and members of the Lower House of the Tajik Parliament.⁴¹

President Rahmon's Visit to India : A Fresh Impetus for Indo-Tajik Relations India-Tajikistan relations received a fresh impetus during the state visit of president Imomali Rahmon to India from 1-4 September 2012 at the invitation of the president of the Republic of India, His Excellency Mr. Pranab Mukherjee. This is Tajik president Rahmon's fifth visit to India as his earlier visits to this country were in 1995, 1999, 2001 and 2006. In New Delhi, Tajik President Mr. Imomali Rahmon held detailed discussions with the then prime minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh and met the president of Republic of India, and Vice-President Hamid Ansari on September 3, 2012.⁴²

President Rahmons' visit has not only strengthened existing ties, but has also resulted in building a long-term strategic partnership. According to the joint statement issued during his visit, India and Tajikistan have "decided to elevate their bilateral relations to the level of a long-term strategic partnership".⁴³ This strategic partnership is expected to increase cooperation in a wide spectrum of areas- political, economic health, human resources development, defence, counter-terrorism, science and technology, culture and tourism etc.⁴⁴

The Indian side noted that the visit of the President Rahmon was a welcome continuation of the tradition of regular exchange of high level visits between India and Tajikistan. The two countries reviewed the current status of bilateral relations and exchanged views on regional and international issues. They noted the similarity of their positions on bilateral, regional and global issues.

Indo-Tajik Relations: A Big Commitment to Multilateralism

Both India and Tajikistan expressed their strong commitment to multilateralism, with the United Nations playing a central role in dealing with global challenges and threats.⁴⁵ They reaffirmed their commitment to the reform of the United Nations, particularly, the Security Council, through its expansion in the permanent and non-permanent categories, with increased representation of developing countries in both, in order to improve its efficiency, representativeness, and legitimacy to meet contemporary challenges faced by the international community.⁴⁶ The Tajik side reiterated its support for India's candidature for permanent membership of an expanded Security Council.⁴⁷

Further, Indo-Tajik relations got big boost when India's then Vice-President Mr. Hamid Ansari paid an extremely productive four-day visit to Middle East nations in April, 2013. Mr. Ansari said that this visit was his first ever visit to Tajikistan and held that besides the substance of his discussions with the Tajik leadership, headed by its president Imomali Rahmon, the general ambience and warmth displayed by his hosts was "very significant" in the field of international diplomacy.⁴⁸ Ansari's visit is a part of India's "Connect Central Asia Policy", aimed at greater political, economic and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian nations including Tajikistan.⁴⁹

In September 2014, India's then External Affairs Minister, Smt. Sushma Swaraj visited Tajikistan for the Council of Heads of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit, held in Dushanbe. The prime minister of the Republic of India, His Excellency, Mr. Narendra Modi paid a state visit to the Republic of Tajikistan from 12 to 13 July, 2015, at the invitation of the president of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Mr. Imomali Rahmon. The president and the prime minister held wide-ranging talks on bilateral regional and international issues. The discussions between the leaders were warm and cordial and the outcomes of the visit reflected the mutual trust that exists between the two countries.⁵⁰

Again, in December, 2016, Tajik president Imomali Rahmon paid a goodwill visit to India. During his visit, he was accorded a ceremonial welcome by president Pranab Mukherjee at Rashtrapati Bhavan. He also held wide-ranging talks with Prime Minister Modi on bilateral, regional and international issues, before the two leaders issued a joint statement. India's Prime Minister in his address, called Tajikistan "a valued friend and strategic partner" and appreciated Rahmon's leadership and contribution in strengthening bilateral relationship.⁵¹

In July 2018, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited to five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This visit was as Indian diplomats said, aimed at making India a strong player in a region rich in natural resources and important strategically, especially in the fight against terrorism.⁵² On October 12, 2018, India's Hon'ble External Affairs Minister Smt. Sushma Swaraj, attended the SCO Heads of Council of Ministers meeting in Dushanbe. While addressing the meeting, Smt. Swaraj expressed India's support for open, stable international trade regime based on centrality of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Earlier addressing the Indian community and Tajik Friends of India at a cultural event organised by the Embassy of India on October 11, 2018, Smt. Swaraj spoke of the close cultural bonds between Tajikistan and India and the shared ethos of strong family values.⁵³

In October 2018, India's President Ram Nath Kovind paid state visit to Tajikistan. In his very first visit to Central Asia after assuming office, president Ram Nath Kovind met President of Tajikistan Imomali Rahmon in Dushanbe. While recalling the long-standing diplomatic relations with Tajikistan, India's president said, "India and Tajikistan together have built a strong foundation for bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Dr. S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister of India visited Tajikistan from 16-17 September, 2021 to attend the 21st Meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of States and joint meeting of the SCO-CSTO Outreach on Afghanistan. He also had a meeting with President Rahmon during the visit. Similarly Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhriddin visited India from 18-20 December, 2021 on an official visit and also to participate in the India-Central Asia Dialogue. He also held official levels bilateral talks with EAM, NSA and Speaker of Lok Sabha.

India Tajikistan Economic Engagements

The Republic of India established strong economic ties with Central Asian republics, more especially with Tajikistan. Both countries are strongly and inseparably associated with other by numerous economic ties after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The region's importance has been greatly highlighted for its huge reserves of natural resources. Tajikistan is a country with large reserves of oil, natural gas, natural resources etc. Tajikistan's geo-strategic importance has attracted India to establish close and cordial economic relations with the region.

Dushanbe has always been a priority in Indian foreign and economic policy. India regards economic cooperation with Tajikistan as the best way to counter the influence of Pakistan and other outside powers in the region. The economic factors play a dominant role in the relationship of both the countries. Trade and economic ties between India and Tajikistan are based on inter-governmental agreements on trade and economic cooperation as well as commercial contracts. Today, an important sign of the relationship between India and Tajikistan is to revive and develop the relationship in different spheres especially in the sphere of economy. India is one of the main partners of Tajikistan in the region and expand cooperation with it is a priority foreign policy orientation of the Republic of Tajikistan. 83 Tajikistan is inviting India, Indian companies for investment on economy of the Republic of Tajikistan, which giving great hope in near future.⁵⁴

For the present, the trade and economic connections between Tajikistan and India are maintained by the route of Mumbai, Bandar Abbas, Meshad, Sarakhs, Charjou, Termej and Dushanbe. This route includes the shipping, rail and road freightage. However, for political and other reasons, the facilities of this route are utilized at an extremely low level. Especially, almost insurmountable obstacles for the movement of goods to and from Tajikistan are created by Uzbek and Turkmen governments.⁵⁵

Establishment of Free Economic Zones in Tajikistan The most acceptable way of productive investment programmes is the establishment of Free Economic Zones (FEZs) in different regions of Tajikistan. These zones have become important factors in development. The Republic of India in this direction has a wealth of experience and the Tajik can use this experience. The creation of free economic zones due to the fact that Tajikistan is how at the crossroads of Eurasia, the Middle East and South Asia.⁵⁶ The Republic of Tajikistan is a rare economical natural potential for mutually beneficial cooperation and is ready to confirm to the current level of economic cooperation and friendly relations with the Republic of India.⁵⁷

In September 2009, India's then President Pratibha Patil paid a three-day goodwill visit to the Republic of Tajikistan. Her visit was the first ever visit by an Indian president to the Central Asian region. President Patil held talks with her Tajik counterpart, Mr. Emomali Rahmon on a wide range of issues, including efforts to tackle terrorism, bilateral relations and developments in and around the region aimed at consolidating ties between the two countries in the political, economic and other spheres.⁵⁸

During president Patil's visit, Hydro-electric power was one of the most important issues discussed between the two presidents. Tajikistan is the second largest producer of hydroelectricity in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), after Russia.⁵⁹ Its potential, according to official figures, is about 40,000 MW, i.e. around four percent of the world hydroelectric potential.⁶⁰ India is providing help for the Varzob-1 Hydro-Power Station. The progress of Varzob-1 Hydro-Power Station, being upgraded by Indian companies, National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) and BHEL, was reviewed. India's involvement in this sector needs to be enhanced as this will be mutually beneficial for both countries.⁶¹

India has also wide experience in the development of tourism and would like to share it with the Republic of Tajikistan. India's tourism occupies an important place in the world in terms of number of tourists and on the basis of income from this kind of activity. It has successfully created the State Tourism Corporation (STC) which has material resources.⁶² It is necessary to contact this corporation to invite experts on tourism, to make an objective estimation of the potential of tourism in Tajikistan, especially its recreational diversity to solve the problem of reconstruction of the available material resources of tourism in accordance with the international standards.⁶³ As the State Tourism Corporation of India has a high reputation in the world, creation of Joint Venture with it will enable the receipt of long-term credit on the basis of guarantee of this corporation with the purpose of development of an infrastructure of tourism and organic connection of Tajikistan to the global tourist industry.⁶⁴

Tajikistan showed an interest in India's experience and technology for purifying and disinfecting water, ensuring the rational use of hydropower, building mini power plants and processing natural building materials.⁶⁵ India offered its assistance in setting up the production of semiconductors in Tajikistan using its own raw-materials and so on. The Indian side has also been showing an interest in developing Tajikistan's mineral resources. In addition, Indian-Tajik cooperation has been designated in such spheres as environmental protection, tourism, the textile, leather and chemical industry, public health, civil aviation, telecommunication, science and so on.⁶⁶

India's Connect Central Asia Policy

Recently, China has made deep inroads in the Central Asian republics in terms of investments in and with the region. It was in this context that India formulated its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' which is a broad-based approach including political, economic, cultural and security relations.⁶⁷ The primary goal behind this policy was re-connecting with the region which has a long-shared history with India. India's Minister of State for External Affairs, E. Ahmed unveiled the "Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP)" at the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative held from June 12-13, 2012, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to fast-

track India's relations with the Central Asian states.⁶⁸ In his keynote speech, Ahmed mentioned that "the policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, Information Technology (IT) Centres, an e-network in telemedicine connecting India to the Central Asian Regions, Joint Commercial Ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, joint scientific research and strategic partnerships in defence and security affairs."⁶⁹

With the aim of strengthening the all-round relationship under its Connect Central Asia Policy, India has offered to undertake a series of new development projects in Tajikistan. These include : an IT Centre, Medical Centres, language labs, supply of agricultural machinery and the implementation of a package of small development projects and setting up of fruit and vegetable processing plant.⁷⁰ In addition, both sides have agreed to enhance cooperation in hydel power, solar and other forms of renewable energy and to start discussions on a regional energy infrastructure network.⁷¹

According to the joint statement on strategic partnership, the two countries have "agreed to discuss and finalize in the near future more bilateral documents in spheres, such as, air services, double taxation, consular issues, justice, mining, social security, finance and banking, industry and energy, and transportation and communication".⁷²

Tajikistan is one of the largest beneficiaries of India's ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) programme, where Tajik officers have been trained under the ITEC scheme.⁷³ Similarly, 160 students have received Government of India Scholarships for higher studies, till date.⁷⁴ Again, till date, 728 Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Scholarships and 280 Indian Council of Cultural Research (ICCR) Scholarships have been utilized. After the visit of the president Patil in September 2009, the number of ITEC slots was increased from 70 to 100 per year.⁷⁵ Again, the ITEC training slots increased to 150 from 100 during Tajik President Rahmon's visit to India in September, 2012.⁷⁶

Indo-Tajik Military Collaboration

The most extensive and visible cooperations between India and Tajikistan are in the military and security spheres. The military and strategic cooperations between the two countries has remained strong since the independence of Tajikistan in. In the matters of security, Tajikistan depends upon India and regards the latter as the main supporter of stability in the region. Tajikistan too has great strategic importance for India because of its large reserves of oil, energy and other natural resources. India wants to maintain regional and political stability in the Republic of Tajikistan in order to check the interference of extra-regional powers. Since the independence of the Republic, both countries have been inseparably associated with each other on numerous defence issues.

Both India and Tajikistan have signed a number of agreements for ensuring Tajikistan's national security both bilaterally and multilaterally. Both sides are absolutely committed to jointly fight cross-border terrorism, drug-trafficking and Islamic fundamentalism which constitute the main threat to regional security, stability and development.

There was a new situation in Afghanistan where, in the wake of the 11 September events, the Northern Alliance forces backed by Tajikistan and India have turned the tables against the Pakistan-sponsored Taliban. This has provided India and Tajikistan a big opportunity for further upgrading their cooperation.

They started rendering logistical and humanitarian assistance to the forces led by the late Ahmad Shah Masood.⁷⁷ Such cooperation will go a long way towards forging a future Eurasian system of regional cooperation including the Shanghai-Six countries and India in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter.⁷⁸ Both India and Tajikistan are fully supporting the US-led military action against international terrorism in Afghanistan. Both countries can also cooperate in raising the professional level of the Afghan defence forces engaged in fighting the Taliban and the Al-Qaida terrorists in Tajikistan.⁷⁹

Further, India started running a military hospital from early 2000 for the treatment of injured soldiers of the Northern Alliance (NA). The hospital was located on the Tajik-Afghan border at Farkhor, south of Dushanbe.

Later, the Indian Air Force was reported to have widened the air strip at Dushanbe for use by large transport aircraft.⁸⁰ Indo-Tajik cooperation further developed after Russian President Putin's visit to India in October, 2000 when India and Russia reached an agreement for joint struggle against international terrorism promoted by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In this joint struggle, cooperation of Tajikistan is of vital importance.⁸¹

The Indo-Tajik strategic cooperation became widespread after the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon visited India in May, 2001. During this visit, the Tajik President extended heartiest support to India's claim for a permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).⁸² The two sides also called on the international community to combat terrorism in view of the threat posed by it to peace and security. After the India-Tajikistan talks, Indian then Prime Minister Vajpayee described joint Tajik-India action as a 'stabilising factor' for the region.⁸³

Indo-Tajik cooperation has acquired a new urgency in the light of the development taking place in and around Afghanistan. The visit of the then India's Defence Minister, George Fernandes to Tajikistan in April 2002 followed by the visit of Afghan Foreign Minister, Gen. Fahim to New Delhi are encouraging signs in the direction of raising the political and strategic profile of India in south-west Asia in cooperation with Tajikistan.⁸⁴

The Senior Visiting Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), Dr. Jyotsna Bakshi, said, close strategic cooperation between Indian and Tajikistan is crucial for protecting vital security interests of both the countries.⁸⁵ Similarly, Dr. Abdunabi Sattorzoda of the Tajik Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) – an institution affiliated to the office of the Tajik President, stressed that India has traditionally been a special friend of Tajikistan.⁸⁶

India-Tajik relations have a tremendous significance for the region, and India is held in very high esteem among the Tajiks for a variety of reasons, most notably for its democratic governance, for its value systems that promote tolerance, and for the strong positions, it has taken on the need for eliminating religious extremism, fanaticism and terrorism in the region. This is something Tajikistan proudly shares in common with India, said Sattorzoda.⁸⁷

One of the significant areas of cooperation between the two countries is to fight against terrorism and drugs-trafficking. Both the countries have together fought against the Taliban and there is already a joint working group on counter-terrorism activities.⁸⁸ Both sides agreed to jointly combat terrorism, expand defence cooperation as both the countries share close defence and security relations.

The defence cooperation between India and Tajikistan covers a wide spectrum of issues notably, sharing of information, material support and joint exercises. India also extends assistance to Tajikistan to raise and build an effective Air Force. Ayni facility thus, is the first home to Tajikistan's air force.⁸⁹ In addition, India has gifted military uniform for two brigades, aviation suits, computers, language training material, military jeeps and trucks and two Mi-8 helicopters alongwith spare parts and consumables. As a component of officers training, batches of young military cadets from Tajikistan regularly receive training at the National Defence Academy (NDA) at Khadakwasla since 1998.⁹⁰

Besides, the Tajik Ministry of Defence received a grant of US \$ 0.5 million to renovate and upgrade the Tajik Military Institute in Dushanbe. Tajikistan does not have an army that could guarantee its territorial integrity and is also not in a position to establish a well-trained standing army, as its economy is unable to finance and support their needs. Though Tajikistan spends around 3.5% of its GDP on defence and security, the sum of US \$ 35 million per annum is too little for the defence of the country.⁹¹ Tajikistan's standing army is made up of conscripts and the size of the army is dependent on the conscription. Tajikistan, in addition, also needs air arms that could extend aerial support for its ground forces where India can cooperate. India may expand the bilateral defence cooperation to help Tajikistan to establish a professional army.⁹²

India-Tajikistan defence relations reached at its height when India's then Prime Minister Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee visited to the Republic of Tajikistan which was the first ever visit by an Indian prime minister to the energy resources region of Central Asia. During his visit, New Delhi and Dushanbe decided to intensify

defence cooperation. India decided to extend assistance for the “infrastructure requirements” of the Military Training College (MTC) in Dushanbe.

Both sides agreed on the issues linked to international terrorism. The signing of a joint working group on counter-terrorism would help in combating international terrorism, organized crime, money laundering and illegal trafficking in weapons.⁹³

Again, the state visit of the president of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon to the Republic of India in August 2006, gave great impulse on Tajik-Indian relations. The Tajik presidents’ visit to the Republic of India was happened at the invitation of India’s Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. The visit was preceded by the meeting of the bilateral Inter-Governmental Commission and India-Tajikistan Joint Working group (JWG) meeting on counter-terrorism both held in New Delhi.⁹⁴ Tajikistan and India have repeatedly started their interest in establishing constructive interaction in fighting against international terrorism in all its form and manifestations, expressing their trouble on emerging drugs in the region. In this regard, two countries have formed a working group which is already have good effect.⁹⁵

The then, India’s former president Smt. Pratibha Patil visited Tajikistan in September, 2009, which was the first ever visit by an Indian president to the Central Asian region. President Patil held talks with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon on a wide range of issues, including efforts to tackle terrorism, bilateral relations and developments in and around the region aimed at consolidating ties between the two countries. Patil also held meetings with the Tajik Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the Defence Minister of Tajikistan.⁹⁶

Speaking on the issue of terrorism, President Patil sought the support of Central Asian nations in eliminating terrorism from the region. She said, “our region is today beset by the menace of terrorism. Terrorism, extremism, and fundamentalism are posing serious threats to the peace and security in our region, be it India, Afghanistan or Tajikistan”.⁹⁷

In July 2012, the then External Affairs Minister of India SM Krishna visited Tajikistan. His visit to Dushanbe was the first by an Indian External Affairs Minister to this strategically located country. He held extensive discussions with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan Hamrokhon Zarifi about bilateral cooperation on several issues including energy, counter-terrorism and communication aimed at further cementing bilateral ties.⁹⁸ A constructive talk was also held regarding the international and regional issues of both countries, including in the framework of the United Nations, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), concerning the strengthening of peace and stability in Afghanistan, as well as the development of economic-trade cooperation between the two countries.⁹⁹ Similarly, the visit of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon to India from 1-4 September, 2012, at the invitation of the President Pranab Mukherji and this was Rahmons’ fifth visit to India. This visit opened a new page, in the annals of India-Tajikistan relations and is considered as an important stage on the way of strengthening friendship and interaction between the two countries.¹⁰⁰ Both sides reviewed the current status of bilateral relations and exchanged views on regional and international issues. The two countries agreed that the Foreign Ministries and other line Ministries of both countries would continue to hold regular consultations. The two sides noted that India and Tajikistan had stakes in mutual progress, prosperity and regional peace and stability, and expressed their determination to impart greater dynamism to the relationship through all-round cooperation and engagement.¹⁰¹

Both India and Tajikistan expressed satisfaction at the continuing expansion of defence cooperation. Nothing that the recently concluded Joint Working Group (JWG) in Dushanbe provided a fillip to this cooperation would contribute to regional security and stability.¹⁰² The Tajik side expressed gratitude for India’s assistance in defence capacity building and infrastructure and welcomed India’s further contribution in this strategic sector of cooperation.¹⁰³

India continues her assistance to the Republic of Tajikistan in the defence sector and provides training to the forces of Tajikistan. So far, 35 Tajik military cadets and 67 young officers underwent training at National Defence Academy in Pune, Indian Military Academy in Dehradun and other training establishments and the first batch of Tajik officers graduating out of NDA and IMA returned to Tajikistan in June 2007 and were inducted into the Tajik Defence forces.¹⁰⁴

India has quietly airlifted a military hospital with doctors, paramedics and equipments to Tajikistan as part of the deepening “strategic partnership” with the energy-rich Central Asian country that shares borders with Afghanistan, China, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁵ This is not the first time that India has established a hospital in Tajikistan, which shares a 1,400-km with Afghanistan. In the 1990s, India had run a famous field hospital at Farkhor on the Tajik-Afghan border to treat wounded fighters from the then Northern Alliance that was battling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁶

The visit of Indian Vice-President to Tajikistan in April, 2013, is another high-level contact maintained between India and Central Asian country over the years. This is based on mutual interests as India is seeking space in Central Asia while Tajikistan needs assistance on economic development and also assistance in military sphere that has been provided by India in various forums.¹⁰⁷ The Gissar Military Aerodrome is the main Indo-Tajik venture which has been in the limelight for some time. India had provided extensive assistance to Tajikistan on modernization of airport and expanding the same which has been much appreciated however, this was also seen as an attempt to establish military footprint in Central Asia which has now been denied with no intent of having any military presence in the country.¹⁰⁸

India and Tajikistan together have been playing a positive role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, which has been the breeding ground for international terrorists and religious extremist forces ably supported by their counterparts in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Both countries emphasized the need for an early conclusion of the comprehensive contention on combating international terrorism at the United Nations sponsored by India and supported by Tajikistan. Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister of Tajikistan, Abdullo Uldoshev said, “Tajikistan and India are facing common threats from terrorists and it would be our efforts to evolve common responses”.¹⁰⁹

When India’s Vice-President visited Tajikistan in April, 2013, both governments stressed the importance of cooperation in dealing with anticipated security threats from Afghanistan.¹¹⁰ Still, India has strong hold in security sphere in Central Asian region, including Tajikistan.

During Ansari’s visit to Tajikistan, both sides agreed that the global community should strengthen Afghan’s capacity to maintain peace, stability and prosperity of its people. While addressing a joint media interaction with Tajikistan president Emomali Rahmon in Dushanbe, Hamid Ansari said, the two sides had exchanged views on how to cooperate in maintaining regional peace and security especially in Afghanistan, which “is of prime importance”.¹¹¹ The Indian ‘military outpost’ at the Ayni airbase around 15 km from Tajik capital Dushanbe, also helps New Delhi keep tabs on its economic and strategic interests in Central Asia as well as ‘any anti-India activity’ in the terrorism-infested Afghan-Pak region.¹¹²

Indo-Tajikistan relations reached at its zenith during the visit of India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi to Tajikistan in July 2015 at the invitation of the president of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency, Mr. Emomali Rahmon. During this visit, the two leaders noted the rising trend of extremism and terrorism in many parts of the world and in their immediate neighbourhood, posing a threat to India and Tajikistan as well as the region.¹¹³ Both sides further emphasized the need for adoption of the “Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism” by the UN General Assembly.¹¹⁴ Both leaders agreed to continue their active engagement and cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremism, and reaffirmed their determination to act resolutely against organisations and agencies that support terrorism.¹¹⁵ Modi and the Tajik president expressed satisfaction at ongoing defence cooperation which remains one of the main pillars of partnership between the two countries.

Again, in July, 2018, India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi paid a goodwill visit to five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, aimed at making India a strong player in a region rich in natural resources and important strategically, especially in the fight against terrorism.¹¹⁶

Similarly, India’s president Shri Ram Nath Kovind paid a state visit to Tajikistan on 7-9 October, 2018 at the invitation of His Excellency, Mr. Emomali Rahmon, president of the Republic of Tajikistan. The two leaders stressed on the bilateral engagement on the existence of Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation, consultation between Security Councils and Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism (JWGCT) important

for timely implementation of bilateral agreements, decisions and mutually agreed programmes.¹¹⁷ In view of rising threat of terrorism, religious fundamentalism, extremism and radicalization to regional and global peace and security, the leaders stressed on cooperation in elimination of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.¹¹⁸ They condemned sponsorship financial support, assistance and provision of safe heavens to terrorists anywhere in the world.¹¹⁹ National Security Adviser to the Prime Minister, Mr. Ajit Doval visited Dushanbe from 26-27 May 2022 to participate in the Fourth National Security Advisers/Secretaries of Security Councils Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan. Thus, India's strategic and military relations with the Republic of Tajikistan have remained close and cordial. Her basic thrust towards the region has been one of positive engagement.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Strengthening Connectivity and Trade Routes: India and Tajikistan should work towards improving regional connectivity through initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port project. Enhanced connectivity would reduce transportation costs and facilitate greater trade and economic exchanges.

Expanding Economic Cooperation: Both countries should encourage greater participation of private sectors and promote investments in areas such as hydropower, renewable energy, information technology, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, and infrastructure development.

Enhancing Defence and Security Collaboration: Given the common challenges posed by terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking, India and Tajikistan should deepen intelligence sharing, joint military training, capacity-building programmes, and counter-terrorism cooperation.

Promoting Educational and Cultural Exchanges: Increasing scholarships, academic partnerships, student exchange programmes, and cultural interactions would strengthen people-to-people contacts and reinforce the historical and civilizational bonds between the two countries.

In conclusion, it is observed that in the emerging multipolar world order, both countries have expanded cooperation in political, economic, cultural, and defence spheres. While challenges remain in trade and connectivity, the growing strategic engagement between New Delhi and Dushanbe demonstrates the potential for a stronger and more comprehensive partnership. Continued cooperation will not only strengthen bilateral relations but also contribute to peace, security, and development in Central Asia and the wider Eurasian region.

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