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India's passage through Central Asian steppes needs rethink

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The steppes of Central Asia give away their secrets only grudgingly. The deserving ones have to convincingly show their capacity for persistence and tenacity – and, of course, sheer audacity. That was how Genghis Khan succeeded in conquering Bukhara.

Nonetheless, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's whirlwind tour of Central Asia – five «Stans» in 5 days – serves a purpose insofar as it is a region where India is traditionally well regarded but, paradoxically, chose to remain a marginal presence on the political or economic landscape. Any gain that Modi makes, howsoever marginal, will still be a positive gain, since he

is starting with a relatively clean slate.

Modi will be henceforth sitting down with the Central leaders annually under the canopy of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO] to discuss regional security and cooperation. A structured relationship is in the making. The Central Asian countries have been uniformly enthusiastic about India's SCO membership, given Russia's strong backing (or canvassing) for it in the recent years.

Decision-making is exasperatingly slow in those parts – even by Indian standards – and is highly centralized at the pinnacle of power. In Inner Asia, personal equations do matter and Modi is an exceptionally good communicator. That is to say, Modi's regional tour could herald the beginning of a new chapter in India's relations with the Central Asian states, provided we go about it purposively.

People have noted that every trip – at least, most trips – Modi makes and every word he utters while abroad, is with one eye on matching China's influence as a rising power. A good case can be made that this Central Asian tour should be an exception to such thumb rule.

The regional stability and security scenario warrant that India works closely with China to give ballast to its traditionally close relations with Russia. No doubt, despite the western propaganda, Russia still remains the dominant presence in the Central Asian political landscape and it will remain so for a foreseeable future under President Vladimir Putin who gives topmost priority to Moscow's dealings with that region.

As things stand, it will be virtually impossible for Modi to wean Central Asia from China's influence even if he were to try to do that. Time lost is lost forever. If China is second only to Russia and has elbowed out the United States as the great power with the most influence in the Central Asian region, it is largely because Beijing has tried to behave with much savoir-faire.

China's leaders have sought to win over the Central Asian counterparts by demonstrating respect combined with easy familiarity. The former Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao (1991-1995), an erudite mind with a sense of history, had understood that. But he was an exception and there was no follow-up. Clearly, the absence of high-level visits between India and the Central Asian region was not the result of distance that separates the two.

The heart of the matter is that India has not taken an interest in the region intrinsically. India's considerations have been relative – in relation to Pakistan's activities in the region, counterterrorism, or, more recently, the preponderant Chinese influence in Central Asia. Which made India's engagement with the region episodic. The Central Asian leaderships have understood this and have probably got accustomed to it.

In some other respects, though, the Indian and Chinese diplomacy in the

Central Asian region have common features. Like China, India too has not

tried to bind the region to it by way of economic «integration», or sought to manipulate political

outcomes to its advantage, and Delhi also scrupulously avoided all discussions of domestic political affairs.

Yet, the Central Asian states have increasingly found China to be a more attractive foreign partner. How did that happen – because, when it all began in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, Indian diplomacy in the newly independent «Stans» had all the advantages of being the inheritor of the romance of Indo-Soviet friendship, while Chinese diplomacy faced the daunting task of coping with the huge backlog of the animosities of the Soviet era?

First and foremost, China relates to Central Asia with the sense of immediacy of an immediate neighbor, which India has lacked. Apart from considerations such as the Uighur problem, militant Islam and terrorism, Central Asia is a key source of energy and mineral resources for the Chinese economy and a trade partner, and the Silk Road is a vital communication link of immense strategic significance connecting China with the world market.

Most important, the stability and security of Xinjiang depends on Beijing's equations with the «Stans». Then, of course, the region as a whole also happens to be a theatre where the complex Sino-Russian relationship, which has a tumultuous history, pans out in the post-cold war era braving concerted western attempts to create discord between Moscow and Beijing.

Delhi would do well to study closely the ten-day victory lap by China's president Xi Jinping to four Central Asian countries in September, 2013 – Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Not once did Xi invoke directly or indirectly the «Great Game». Instead, he signed a series of economic agreements with each of the four countries in the fields of infrastructure, trade and finance and energy.

The Chinese investments in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are estimated to be in the region of \$30 billion, while Xi signed contracts worth at least \$51 billion.

Thus a unique regional backdrop became available for Xi to dramatically unveil China's initiative – the Economic Corridor of the Great Silk Road. It has struck a favorable chord with the Central Asian leaderships.

In sum, India too should focus on fostering economic cooperation by constructing transport infrastructure, increasing trade and removing barriers to trade and strengthening the role of national currencies in mutual trading.

Xi suggested the possibility of creating a free trade zone with the Central Asian region. Can't India think on those lines, too? At the people-to-people level, China has offered scholarships for 30000 students from the SCO countries. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation program pales in comparison.

In the ultimate analysis, therefore, much depends on what Modi can offer by way of an economic partnership. The Central Asian states are not in desperate need of Indian military assistance. The Collective Security Treaty Organization commits Russia as the provider of security for the region. But on the other hand, the priority for the Central Asian states would be economic

cooperation and access to the Indian market.

Modi announced a billion-dollar credit line to Mongolia during his recent visit to that country. Can't a similar gesture be made during the forthcoming visit? Mongolia may be an esoteric landlocked country and an oasis of Buddhism in the heart of Asia, but the Central Asian states are actually India's «extended neighborhood».

India lacks a «big picture» in its diplomacy toward the Central Asian region. Had it been otherwise, India would have understood a long time ago that without an access route, all the rhetoric about partnership with that region would remain vacuous.

Clearly, a strong relationship with Iran and Russia remains an essential underpinning for India's Central Asian policies. It is over two decades since Delhi first began talking about an access route to Central Asia via Chabahar Port in southeastern Iran and a North-South Corridor connecting Russia. From all accounts, the work on the project is just about to commence.

Having said that, the normalization between Iran and the West is almost certain to introduce a new dimension to regional politics in Afghanistan and Central Asia. With the lifting of the western sanctions against Iran, it is entirely within the realms of possibility that Tehran may be open to collaboration with western companies that are involved in Afghanistan and the Central Asian region.

The government's media briefings in Delhi highlight the spectre of the Islamic State [IS] in Afghanistan as a principal leitmotif of Modi's conversations with the regional leaders. Central Asia has put in place fairly credible mechanisms to counter the threats of extremism, separatism and terrorism. Both Russia and China are active on this front. The SCO has developed its own mechanisms, too.

The temptation is always there to do some Pakistan-bashing on the pretext of «countering» the IS. But it will be a folly to do that, since the Central Asians are increasingly averse to taking sides between India and Pakistan. Besides, the threat posed by terrorism and Islamism is very real for the Central Asians and is not the stuff of rhetoric and propaganda, and, therefore, India needs to think through carefully as to what additionality it can bring on to the table to supplement the robust mechanisms the region already has in place to fight terrorism.

The imperative need is to work closely with Russia (and China). But then, India also needs to factor in that it is a liability to flaunt its closeness to the US' regional policies. In the steppes, there is great weariness about «color revolutions» and the US' record of manipulating the extremist Islamist groups as geopolitical tools. There are misgivings that refuse to go away that the Islamic State is a creation of the US to provide an alibi for intervention in the region.

That brings us to a concluding point. India needs to rethink its approach to China's «Belt and Road Initiative». Standing aloof and sulking is not going to help matters. With or without India's cooperation, the Chinese strategy will work and there is broad acceptance of it even in the West.

Russia and China have recently decided to integrate their respective regional approaches in

Eurasia in terms of integrating the Moscow-led Eurasia Economic Union project with Beijing's grand Silk Road plans to develop Central Asian infrastructure and economies as a gateway for China to link with Europe. The Sino-Russian entente on this score will have profound impact on the geopolitics of Central Asia.

Simply put, any strategic ambiguity in regarding participation in the «Belt and Road Initiative» poses the danger of rendering India all but irrelevant in the Central Asian region. Again, one way of working around the problem will be to coordinate with Russia.

Against the backdrop of India's induction as a full SCO member country, the best outcome of Modi's Central Asia tour would be if his cogitations with his counterparts helps stimulate the Indian regional strategy to work on a new paradigm of regional cooperation attuned to the contemporary realities in world politics. Simply put, the core template of India's Central Asia policies ought to be to develop a strong matrix of cooperation and coordination with Russia, which has been India's traditional ally and with whom India has almost one hundred percent congruence of interests with regard to the issues of regional security and stability.