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Ananta Centre is pleased to launch a new initiative, a monthly newsletter focusing on major political and economic developments in Central Asia. This region is of crucial importance to India's long term interests. Our effort will be to keep you informed and updated on the developments in the region and their implications for India. We hope you will find this initiative informative and useful. We look forward to your comments.

HIGHLIGHTS

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Introduction

The five Central Asian Republics (CARS) viz Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan attained independence at the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although they are collectively referred to as CARS because of the geographical space they occupy, there are many differences, as also similarities, between these countries.

Some significant similarities between the five countries are as follows:

- None of the five countries wanted independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. They did not have to fight for their independence like some others e.g the Baltic States. On the contrary, independence was handed over to them on a platter which they accepted somewhat reluctantly. Their hesitation stemmed from their lack of confidence that they would be able to survive, let alone flourish as independent states because their economies and societies were closely meshed and intertwined with Moscow and other Republics of the Soviet Union. A poll was conducted in some of these Republics just around the time that Soviet Union was breaking up in which more than 90% of the population of the republics voted against severance of their ties from the Soviet Union. However over the last twenty five years since they achieved independence, all these countries have in varying degrees carved out their individual identities, engaged in nation building and consolidated their statehood.

- These five countries were the last to declare independence from the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan declared independence on 16th Dec, 1991; Turkmenistan on 27th Oct, 1991; Tajikistan on 9th Sept, 1991; Uzbekistan on 1st Sept, 1991, and Kyrgyzstan on 31st Aug, 1991.
- All the 5 countries are land locked in fact doubly land locked because their neighbours are also land locked. This was a compelling reason why these countries felt that they would not be able to survive as independent nations. The generally accepted dictum has been that for countries to integrate substantively with the world economy and develop fruitful economic relations with the outside world, they need to have access to warm-water seas. These countries hence felt that it would be difficult for them to prosper as they did not have access to seas. Most of the five Republics have been able to convert this liability into an asset by making their territories available for laying a web of ambitious infrastructure projects like highways, railways, roads as well as oil and gas pipelines, criss-crossing from East to West and North to South to connect industrial and production hubs with consumer markets. Last few years have seen highways and railroads traversing from the East in China through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Europe, Russia, Iran and the Middle East. Similarly oil from Caspian Sea offshore facilities in Kazakhstan and gas from Turkmenistan is being shipped by pipelines to the western region of China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.
- All the five countries are richly endowed with natural and mineral resources. While Kazakhstan has huge commercially viable quantities of most minerals like coal, oil, gas, uranium, gold, lead, zinc, iron ore, tin, copper, manganese, chromite, bauxite and several more. Turkmenistan contains the world's fourth largest reserves of natural gas while also having significant quantities of cotton, uranium, petroleum, salt and sulfur. Uzbekistan is richly endowed with gas, uranium, cotton, silver and gold while both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have significant supplies of fresh water whose potential is yet to be exploited fully. Kyrgyzstan has significant reserves of gold, uranium, mercury and lead. The five countries have been able to exploit their resources in varying degrees.
- There has been a continuity of national leadership in four out of the five republics. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has been the President and undisputed leader of Kazakhstan since 1989, even before the country attained independence. President Emomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan has been at the helm of affairs since the end of the civil war in the country in 1994. President Islam Karimov was the President of Uzbekistan till his demise at the age of 78 years on 1st September, 2016. Smooth transition took place with election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as President on 4th December, 2016. In Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov was President from independence of the country in 1991 till his sudden death in 2006. He was followed by President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow in 2006 who continues to be the incumbent President. Kyrgyzstan is the only country to have undergone a change of regime via the Tulip Revolution which saw the replacement of Askar Akayev who was President since 1991 with Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2005. Bakiyev himself was ousted by a popular uprising in 2010 which saw the temporary installation of Roza Otunbayeva as President. Following Presidential elections in 2011, Almazbek Atambayev was elected as the President. He will complete his term in 2017 when elections for the next President are expected to take place.
- All the five republics have been by and large peaceful and stable throughout the twenty five years of their independent existence except for the civil war in Tajikistan in the early '90s, the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan in 2005 which according to government sources was triggered by Islamist forces, and the outbreak of sectarian clashes in the South of Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Although terrorist groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb-ut-Tahrir and others are present in the Ferghana valley, they have not been very active or effective in creating disturbances. This could however change if violence due to the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan increases and spreads to other countries in the region.
- The five republics have been largely secular and liberal so far. There have not been too many instances of religious militancy or extremist violence in any of the countries. Some of these countries have however started showing signs of religious fundamentalist tendencies which are resulting in tension and violence in society. Recent Islamist engineered attacks in Aktobe, Kazakhstan in June 2016 are worrying for a country that has been peaceful for much of the last 25 years.

Track record of these countries on socio-economic development is mixed. Kazakhstan with its vast mineral resources has done better than others. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have lagged behind. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are closed and controlled societies. Uzbekistan is a potential leader in

Central Asia, but has difficult relations with its neighbours, namely Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on water issues, and Kazakhstan in contention to become the pre-eminent power in the region.

Religious extremism, fundamentalism and terrorism pose challenges to all these societies and to regional stability. Issues like water security, borders, environmental degradation and migration have become acute. Central Asian republics face serious threat from illegal drug trade emanating from Afghanistan. Traditionally, Central Asia has been an arena of "great game". The modern version is being played out even today. Russia, China, US, Turkey, Iran, Europe, EU, Japan, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan have substantial security and economic stakes in the region.

Central Asian Republics

Kazakhstan: With a land area of about 2.7 million sq kms (85% of India's territorial area of 3.3 million sq kms), Kazakhstan is the 9th largest country in the world. It is sparsely populated with a population of 17 million. It shares the world's largest land boundary with Russia of 7,400 kms and of 1,500 kms with China. Its per capita GDP in 2015 was US\$ 9,800 with total GDP of US\$216 billion. Kazakhstan has been severely hit by recent fall in energy prices, slowdown in international economy, recession in Russia and weakening of Chinese economy. These factors have affected the economies of other Central Asian nations also as their export earnings have suffered and remittances from migrant earnings have declined sharply.

Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan has a land area of 200,000 sq kms and is the second smallest country in Central Asia after Tajikistan. It has a population of 6 million. It is richly endowed with water and immense hydropower potential. Its GDP is US\$7.4 billion and per capita income in 2014 was US\$1,100.

Tajikistan: It has a total area of 143,000 sq km and a population of 8.6 million. Tajikistan is blessed with large quantities of fresh water. About 60% of fresh water reserves of Central Asia occur in Tajikistan. Its total GDP is US\$9.2 million and per capita income is US\$ 900.

Turkmenistan: It has an area of 488,000 sq km and is the second largest country in area in Central Asia after Kazakhstan. It has the smallest population in Central Asia of 5.4 million. It has a total economy of US\$ 48 billion with a per capita GDP of US\$ 6,600.

Uzbekistan: Uzbekistan has a total land area of 447,000 sq km with a population of 31 million, largest in Central Asia region. Its GDP is US\$ 62.6 billion with a per capita income of US\$ 2,100.

As compared to Central Asian States, India has a land area of 3.3 million sq kms (7th largest in the world) with a population of 1.25 billion, the second largest in the world. India's economy is US\$ 2.4 trillion, the seventh largest in the world but expected to grow to 5th position by 2020. In purchasing power parity terms, India is the 3rd largest economy in the world at US\$ 8 trillion, after China and USA. It is the fastest growing major economy in the world with annual GDP growth of 7.5%. It is highly deficient in energy resources which are available in plentiful in CARs.

Significance of Central Asia for India

India has several millennia old historical, cultural and civilisational links with Central Asia. Brisk trade of goods, ideas and thoughts took place from India (and China) to Central Asia and beyond over the Silk Road from 3rd century BC to 15th century AD. Buddhism travelled to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Western China from India through the Silk Road. Alexander of Macedonia, Kushans, Babar, Mughals and Sufism are evidence of vigorous links between India and the region over the ages. India and CARs enjoyed vibrant economic and cultural ties when the latter were a part of the Soviet Union.

India has not been able to take full advantage of its close linkages with this region because it does not share a land boundary with these countries. To overcome this obstacle, several initiatives which have been in the pipeline for many years have now been fast-tracked. Two of the most significant are the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port.

In current times, Central Asian Republics constitute the extended neighborhood of India. Security, stability and prosperity of this region is intimately linked with that of India.

Peace and security in Central Asia is critical to peace and stability in India. This is inextricably linked to peace in Afghanistan. Three Central Asian Republics viz Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan share borders with Afghanistan. Talks between Afghanistan, Pakistan, USA and China to persuade Taliban to enter into negotiations with Kabul are drifting aimlessly. It is necessary to evolve an inclusive regional solution for ensuring peace in Afghanistan. For this, India and Central Asia need to collaborate with other regional powers like Russia, Iran, China and Pakistan as also with USA and EU to promote security and stability in Afghanistan.

Terrorism, religious extremism and radicalisation particularly of the youth in these countries, rise of Taliban, advent of Daesh and presence of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hijb-ut-Tahtir (HuT) etc pose a huge threat to peace and security in the region. Although the region has been largely stable since the five countries gained independence, the threat of extremist, fundamentalist influences seeping into minds of young women and men is rapidly increasing. India notwithstanding its huge diversity has been able to counter these destabilising influences effectively because of its cultural heritage and legacy, its acceptance of diverse views and thoughts, its value-based education system etc. India and Central Asia can collaborate to mutual benefit to strengthen the fabric of their social, inter-ethnic, inter-racial structures so that extremist and divisive pressures are contained and minimised.

India is an energy deficit country. This region is extremely well endowed with energy resources and other mineral and natural resources. Both India and Central Asia are a perfect match for each other. The challenge is to transport the energy resources from these land-locked states to India. Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is an initiative in this regard. India has been importing yellow cake for its nuclear plants from Kazakhstan since 2009.

The region offers significant trade, investment and economic opportunities to Indian business. Indian private sector needs to take aggressive and determined measures in prospecting and exploiting economic potential in these countries through joint ventures, export of services, bidding for World Bank, ADB and other multilateral funded infrastructure projects etc.

Interaction between leaders of India with those of Central Asian Republics since their independence has been inadequate. However, this has been rectified in the recent years. This deficiency would be overcome through India's forthcoming membership of SCO which will provide an opportunity for Presidents of these countries to meet India's Prime Minister annually at SCO Summits. This also has the potential to provide a significant impetus to bilateral ties.

India and Central Asian countries are secular, pluralistic, diverse and peaceful societies. They are natural allies and partners to promote inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-cultural harmony and amity. This is the need of the hour, not only in the region but in the world.

(The views expressed are personal)
