

Indian thrust in CA

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Indian PM Atal Behari Vajpayee's 14 November visit to Tajikistan has coincided with the establishing of the first permanent military base at Ayni, about ten km northeast of capital Dushanbe. The first ever visit by an Indian prime minister to the Land of Pamirs, Tajikistan, and onto neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, this will be India's first ever air base in a foreign country, post-Sri Lanka. It is now being overhauled as part of "deepening India-Tajik defence cooperation." India is also to write off a bilateral debt of \$10 billion and provide Tajikistan a grant of \$5 million and loan of \$25 billion.

Significantly, Indian and Tajik troops also held joint exercises in February 2003. In past April, the Indian defence minister and defence secretary had secretly visited Dushanbe in pushing this project towards completion.

Tajikistan and its eastern mountainous neighbour, Kyrgyzstan, are already hosting Soviet bases on their territories. Pakistan, the closest neighbour to any Central Asian state through the mountainous Wakhan corridor, views this development with concern. It is said that President Pervez Musharraf had raised the issue with President Emmomali Rakhmanov before the June 2002 CICA summit in Almaty, Kazakhstan but to no avail.

Economically, Central Asia is a powerhouse and Indian companies "look keenly" to invest in oilfields, refineries and pipelines in the region. The facility will be useful in ferrying men and material to oil installations where Indians are involved. Landlocked Tajikistan is the most impoverished of the CARs. It acts as a "gateway to Afghanistan from the north" while Kyrgyzstan is on the famous Silk Route. Lacking in oil and gas, it has the potential to export hydro-power. Like other CARs, it was disrupted by the disintegration of former Soviet Union and faced a civil war after attaining independence. It has nearly 10,000 Russian troops stationed along its 1,206 km border with its southern neighbour along northern Afghanistan. Incidentally, this porous border snakes across some of the world's highest mountains and is regularly penetrated by drugs and arms traffickers and religious extremist groups. After independence, its cotton industry's output fell drastically. Moreover, woefully short of service industries, economic managers, capital, food and consumer goods, it needs help from many countries like India.

After the CARs independence, India's primal interests centred upon regional powers such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It was rather late in opening diplomatic links with Tajikistan. For example, it was only in July 1993 that its Consulate was opened in Tashkent. It got upgraded to an embassy and started operating and was accredited to Tajikistan, as its Almaty mission was to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan in Dushanbe and Bishkek in May 1994. The former Tajik prime minister Mr Abdul Malik was the last Central Asian leader to visit India in mid-Feb 1993 during which he signed six agreements. This was in marked contrast to Pakistan that hastened in setting up diplomatic links

with the CARs after their independence.

Indian interests were on concerns about tensions brewing along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border and possible spill over in Kashmir. Their role in Tajik internal affairs was signified in the late 1990s when Moscow was keen to invite India as an observer to the ongoing intra-Tajik political dialogue along with others, viewing it as a "force of moderation." An Indian ministry of foreign affairs spokesman in 1994 said: "We cannot afford to have a passive role in Tajikistan."

The Indian outreach in Tajikistan is increasingly seen as an attempt to outflank Pakistan by cultivating relations with the latter's neighbours - Tajikistan and Afghanistan. While Pakistan should not begrudge India from cultivating relations with others, the recent heavy military purchases from Israel and Russia are viewed as hegemonic designs in the region and beyond. While all nations tend to look after their economic interests, and that includes an economic giant like Japan, who has not relied on seeking foreign bases and military deployments.

"The epicentre of terrorism lies in our neighbourhood," said the Indian foreign minister Yashwant Sinha. Moreover, George Fernandes recently referred to both India and Tajikistan "facing identical threats" through "regrouping" of al-Qaeda and Taliban elements in Afghanistan.

India has relied on its claim of historical connection with the Mughal dynasty, post-independence liberal/secular traditions and "special relations" with the Soviet Union. In undivided India, Jawaharlal Nehru visited some of these republics and came back impressed with the socialist experiment of then Soviet system.

Today, it seems, India like the Gulf states, views the region as its "extended backyard." No wonder in early November, the visiting Foreign Minister Mr Yashwant Sinha, while in Tashkent remarked: "For us, Central Asia is our immediate strategic neighbourhood ... our increasing engagement is aimed at peace and prosperity in Central Asia."

Pakistan's critical failure and unfavourable developments in Afghanistan are mainly responsible for this Indian advances with some of the CARs, including Tajikistan. Pakistan's failure lies in not being able to restrain and restrict India from coddling these states. A country deficient in resources and wracked by civil war, the tiny backward republic of Tajikistan remains highly vulnerable. However, this development has not come overnight, but is the result of incremental steps taken by India. Together with India, the US and Soviet military staging posts are granted, and the Indian and Tajik sources, while denying granting of military bases, assert that the Chinese sensitivities were accorded due consideration. After all, China borders Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan on its west.

In fact, fortuitously for India, the US, CARs, China and Russia today share common perspectives on extremist Islam in their own territories and are wary of any "regrouping" of fundamentalist al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in neighbouring Afghanistan. Pakistan, for its part, is a lead-

ing country in the fight against international terrorism and the Musharraf government seems to be taking some stringent measures at home to curb these elements. However, there is no denying that Pakistan remains tainted with past association with the Taliban regime, notwithstanding over 500 al-Qaeda elements apprehended and handed over to the US. Also, anti-US sentiment runs deep in Pakistan that has two major pro-Islamic governments holding power on western borders.

Some top US analysts think that any major act of terrorism launched against US or even India by any of Taliban/al-Qaeda extremist elements could easily implicate Pakistan and may trigger punitive US response. The situation is very fluid and any untoward major event could be used against Pakistan by the neo-cons ruling the roost in Washington. Pakistan thus is left with little margin for "further errors." It is also said that Pak-US relations are based on flimsy grounds of a single agenda of anti-terrorism.

India has skilfully capitalised on 9/11, and, besides normalising relations with all major powers, is now assiduously cultivating the immediate neighbours of Pakistan. While Musharraf government is trying desperately to kindle outside interest in Pakistan, lure business and investment, assuage the anxieties of the outside world about instability in Pakistan, it is charged that he is not "doing enough" and that he still wants to maintain lever by influencing events in Afghanistan.

The fact stands out that where nuclear shadows cast their ugly and ominous shadows, domestic investors, what to speak of outsiders, would be loath to invest. For this political normalisation at home is a sine qua non to Pakistan's deepening political malaise. Were this not to materialise, President Musharraf's solo performance cannot succeed. He should have undertaken some drastic steps in his first year of absolute power to initiate sweeping reforms and end Pakistan's besiegement — both diplomatic and strategic. Nuclear weapons, our national asset and pride, are not geared to meet insidious and latent threats.

Foreign policy is the obverse of domestic policies. Pakistan needs to limit state military power, reduce debilitating tensions with neighbours, move fast on economic reforms, ensure rule of law, good governance, launch massive education and take ruthless but sincere steps towards curbing religious militancy. Moreover, building civil societies, guarantee of religious rights of minorities, embracing of free markets and women empowerment are crying needs of the hour.

Today, many Pakistanis are turning cynical, lamenting that the "Central Asian bus has been missed for good." Albeit late, it is hoped that forthcoming visits of heads of states of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in mid-December should help remove certain misgivings and help rectify the ground lost in the region.

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