A BLUEPRINT FOR INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Focus: **India and Central Asia**

*Responses, Articles*

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India's central Asia policy lacks holistic vision. Any effort to locate the area from an Indian perspective require, first, a redefinition of the existing parameters in Central Asia; and second, from a re-interpretation of the existing balance of power to portend possible policy options and alternatives.

The question of what Central Asia means to India can be addressed from at least three perspectives: historical, geopolitical and cultural. Analyzing these elements in detail will not only explain the main determinants of India's policy towards Central Asia but also reveal options, obstacles and limitations.

From a historical perspective, one should accept that partition of the subcontinent in 1947 pushed India to the periphery of Central Asia and constrained its strategic options. While partition has influenced Indian domestic foreign policy greatly, its more profound impact has been on Indian foreign policy. After the creation of Pakistan, India was cut-off from its historical and natural neighbours: Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. If India today wants to overcome this negative legacy and put forward a new strategy for powerful and influential India in Central Asia, a new way of analyzing the region is a must.

From a geopolitical perspective, it is possible to argue there are three big players and three middle-tier players in Central Asia. The big players are Russia, China and the US (through their presence in Afghanistan). The middle players are Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. In this geopolitical setting, India is an outside power, and may influence the key questions in Central Asia in a mostly indirect way.

There is also a cultural element originating from India's own strategic thinking that shapes its policy towards Central Asia. A widely held view in the Indian strategic community is that “India's status is given, not earned”. This has led many within the Indian political elite to take the rhetoric of a 'Rising India' as an objective reality and to expect that others, especially those in Central Asia, to recognize India and act accordingly. The time has come to challenge this ‘given” status, because this
expectation has undermined India's Central Asian policy. More specifically, it has created a romanticized perspective within India about Central Asia. Curiously, the Indian foreign policy analysts and tend not to query how the Central Asian republics see and perceive India.

India's foreign policy towards Central Asia has two characteristics. First, it has been generally mild and cautious, although it has become more assertive after the Chinese diplomatic offensive started in the region around 2005. Since then, India understood that despite the rising power rhetoric, its ability to shape the politics in Central Asia was very limited. With China and Pakistan hostile, it is almost impossible for India to directly exert influence in Central Asia. The prime case here is in Afghanistan. This feeling of isolation accentuates India's need to develop a new and cohesive strategy. Discussions about this new strategy have been fitful and intermittent arguably because the basic question of what India wants from the region has not been answered.

Second, India's Central Asia policy has been ad hoc in nature and reactive rather than taking a pro-active stance toward developments. In order to avoid this reactive-ness and to be pro-active, India should define its position and priorities vis-à-vis other players in Central Asia. Does India want to balance the big players such as China and Russia in Central Asia? Or does India seek to balance middle players like Pakistan and Iran?

From a realist perspective, the possibility of India's balancing of the big players in Central Asia sounds like a stretch. However, whether India should balance the middle players in the area or not is a question that is directly related to Pakistan, since India has excellent relations with Turkey and Iran. A new Indian strategy towards Central Asia should conceive of the region beyond Pakistan and China, and develop a policy of building inroads of cooperation with the middle-tier players, especially with Turkey and Iran. India's cooperation with Russia and the US in Central Asia is beneficial, but it is unlikely to secure the foreign policy posture India desires.
On the other hand, cooperation with Iran and Turkey might be beneficial for India for various reasons. First, Turkey and Iran are making significant strides in Central Asia in the political, economic and energy realms. Turkey's inroads are especially striking. In September 2010, the presidents of Turkey and the Turkic republics decided to establish a new political mechanism — the Turkic Leaders Summit — which will have its secretariat in Istanbul.

Currently, India's principal foreign policy focus continues to be dominated by Pakistan and China. As such, it has overlooked ways to influence Central Asia through different channels such as cooperating with middle-tie countries. For that to happen, India should work to improve relations with at bilateral level first. In India, there is a feeling that West Asia is of lesser interest for Delhi’s foreign policy tsars. If India seeks greater influence in Central Asia, it needs to show more interest in developing relations with key West Asian states. After all, the nomenclature, "West Asia" connotes that Turkey and Iran are not far away lands.