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Looking north: Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

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Introduction

Analysis of the nascent international agency of regional powers that have global intentions has become a topic of growing significance in the study of world affairs—a development facilitated by the break-up of the Cold War order, which has allowed a number of actors to extend their international roles and outreach. India features prominently among those actors and its agency in global life is subject to growing public, policy and scholarly scrutiny. Its relations with Central Asia contributed to this increasing interest in the practices of India's 'enlightened self-interest' in its *extended neighbourhood*.

India's outreach to Central Asia offers insight into the country's *strategic culture* and the modes of security governance that it fashions. The region, thereby, becomes a prism for teasing out both the underpinnings of New Delhi's external strategies and the discourses through which they are articulated owing to India's encounter with the Central Asian agency of other international actors—especially Russia and the People's Republic of China. In other words, the region provides a transformative context for assessing the emerging roles and attitudes of India's global agency. At the same time, it also reveals that Russia and China are increasingly becoming the 'significant others' on the horizon of India's Asian outlook.

In Indian foreign policy parlance, the country's aspirations in Central Asia have been brought together under the narrative framework of the 'Look North' policy.[1] As its appellation suggests, the constructs of the Look North policy indicate a desire to emulate India's 'Look East' approach to South-East Asia, seen elsewhere. On the one hand, just like in the case of its relations with South-East Asia, the narratives of the Look North policy intend to demonstrate India's ability to 'break out of the claustrophobic confines of South Asia'.[2] On the other hand, unlike the Look East policy, the Look North approach to Central Asia has remained mostly a discursive platform for Indian pundits and commentators rather than an actual government strategy.

Thus, it has to be noted from the outset that this chapter undertakes an assessment of the narrative construction of India's involvement in Central Asia, revealing something of the 'mythmaking and international relations of a rising power'.[3] The chapter proceeds with an

outline of the discursive modalities of the Look North policy. The investigation draws attention to the significance of the post-Cold War trajectories of India's foreign policy-making on its relations with Central Asia. This contextualization makes possible the engagement with the narratives of India's confrontation with the growing significance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Central Asia. In particular, the encounter with the SCO reveals the complex attitudes informing India's relations with Russia and China in the post-Cold War period. The chapter concludes by demonstrating the relative lack of *influence* in India's Central Asian agency. The contention is that New Delhi's international image has few appealing attributes that regional states in Central Asia might be tempted to emulate.

The narrative outlines of India's Look North policy

During a visit to Turkmenistan in September 1995, the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao announced that 'for India', Central Asia was an area 'of high priority, where we aim to stay engaged far into the future. We are an independent partner with no selfish motives. We only desire honest and open friendship and to promote stability and cooperation without causing harm to any third country'.[4] Rao's proclamation offers a glimpse into the discursive genesis of the Look North policy.[5]

Most commentators insist that India's engagement with Central Asia is a function of the country's historical interactions with the region. Thus, the 'long-standing historical ties encompassing the political, cultural, economic, and religious dimensions' form the premise for the current international relations between New Delhi and the region.[6] Yet, alongside these proclamations of extensive historical associations, observers have also acknowledged that while 'Central Asia is closer to New Delhi then Chennai or Bangkok, Tashkent and Almaty ring a distant bell when the names pop up in casual conversations'.[7] Such attitudes indicate that even after the break-up of the USSR, New Delhi only very gradually began to develop an understanding of Central Asia's importance to the dynamics of South Asian affairs. This realization seems to have been one of the underlying features in the transformation of India's post-Cold War foreign policy.

In this context, the articulations of India's Look-North to Central Asia have come to stress the need for a 'proactive and meaningful policy that accords top priority to the region'.[8] Thus, the narrative exploitation of the legacies of the past by Indian foreign policy elites discloses a strategy that aims 'to remind the new generation in Central Asia that India is not new to them but rather a very old friend'.[9] Consequently, India is presented as a model for Central Asian states. It is claimed that in their search for 'support and constructive cooperation',

> India stood as an attractive direction to relate to. India was not only a multiethnic, multicultural, resilient society with vast experience of managing delicate intra-ethnic relations, but also a secular and democratic polity. [At the same time], India was geographically distant, but culturally and historically close, without any record of an intrusive or aggressive behaviour towards the newly emerged Central Asian republics.[10]

Such statements indicate that the Look North policy did not emerge in a vacuum, but was profoundly implicated by the post-Cold War trajectories of India's foreign policy-making. The formulation of a country's international interactions offers discursive platforms for the manifestation of national self-positioning on the world stage and the re-contextualization of historical narratives to the exigencies of the present. The following sections sketch out these dynamics.

India's engagement in Central Asia before 1998

It has to be remembered that while nearly universally perceived as an opportunity for promoting different visions of 'new world orders', for India the crumbling of the Berlin Wall represented 'the loss of an entire world'.[11] New Delhi's external outlook had to confront several predicaments: a) on a pragmatic/policy level, India had to formulate a new international strategy in the absence of its erstwhile ally—the USSR—while at the same time acknowledging the failure of (Nehruvian) non-alignment; b) on a conceptual/strategic level, India's foreign policy-making became frustrated by the increasing tension between 'militarism' (i.e. coercive international stance) and 'moralism' (i.e. co-operative international stance). Consequently, India's policy-making anxiety in the immediate post-Cold War environment attests to the inability to meaningfully accommodate the desire for a more assertive role on the global stage while lacking the confidence that it *can* and *should* do so.[12]

Thus, the 'post-Cold War blues', which infected India's international affairs during the 1990s, made India's relations with Central Asia one of the most conspicuous aspects of its foreign policy ambiguity during this period. The uncertainty dominating New Delhi's outlook had two important implications:

> One was that there emerged a new Central Asia, independent and sovereign, freed from the control of the former Soviet Union, and looking forward to a greater and dynamic engagement with the rest of the world, particularly Asia. The second was a sort of crisis of confidence in India's foreign policy perspective resulting from the collapse of the Cold War framework of global politics and the consequent erosion of the former Soviet Union as a source of foreign policy support.[13]

However, India's failure to engage Central Asia more convincingly in this period is an outcome not only of the 'post-Cold War blues', but also of the formulation of New Delhi's external relations *in reaction to* Pakistan's foreign policy strategies. In 'Indian perceptions', Pakistan has 'vested interests' in pursuing a 'quest for strategic depth vis-à-vis India in Central Asia'.[14] The assertion is that the 'philosophy [of Pakistan's interactions with the region] appears to have always focused on a prescriptive approach as to what *should* happen in or to the Central Asian states within the overall backdrop of deep antagonism against India'.[15] India's Look North to Central Asia has therefore extended a *non-Pakistani* alternative to the region.

Thus, for the better part of the 1990s the 'ill-conceived [and] ill-executed treatment [of Central Asia] as a counterpoise between India and Pakistan' has tended to befuddle New Delhi's foreign policy-making.[16] In particular, the framework of India's Look North policy illustrates New Delhi's inability to obviate both the legacy of mistrust between India and Pakistan as well as the very real barrier posed by Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Thus, while 'neither India nor Pakistan is an immediate neighbour of Central Asia', the export of the conflict between New Delhi and Islamabad to Central Asia can be described as an 'avoidable small game'.[17] Moreover, the policy attitudes that dominated India's strategic thinking on Central Asia for much of the first post-Cold War decade indicated that New Delhi's foreign policy outlook was influenced by the constraints of its South Asian context. Thus, for most of this period, India's foreign policy formulation remained in the grips of conceptual tensions, strategic uncertainty and geopolitical limitations, which hampered the extension of a coherent policy towards Central Asia.

India's engagement in Central Asia after 1998

India's '"forward" Central Asian policy' in the post-1998 period is seen 'as an integral component of its growing military, nuclear, and economic power'.[18] It is also a component of its growing energy needs.[19] However, some Indian commentators argued that despite the proclamations of the region's 'historical belonging' to India's 'strategic neighbourhood', New Delhi was 'not giving sufficient attention to Central Asia'; consequently, 'good intentions have not been converted into substantive relations'.[20] The stated overarching objective of India's Look North policy is the promotion of 'peace and mutual prosperity'.[21] This intent, however, has been buttressed by the twin ambition of: a) maintaining 'the democratic and secular ethos' of the region, because it 'binds India and Central Asia together'; b) evolving 'measures that would safeguard the stability and integrity of Central Asian republics and save them from getting divided and opposing one another'; and whilst confirming the pragmatism of its post-1998 foreign policy, c) India has engaged in strategic bilateral relations in Central Asia in an attempt to overcome its marginalization in the region.[22] The following sections outline these three approaches.

Experience of managing diversity within a secular and democratic polity

Indian commentators have noted that the (violence accompanying the) dissolution of the USSR and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia has 'eroded the legitimacy of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious states'.[23] This observation informs the (tacit) conviction that India is one of the remaining countries that share the characteristic features of the now defunct socialist federations. Consequently, such a realization underpins the responsibility of its foreign policy-making to assert the viability of India's state-building project by demonstrating the relevance and experience in successfully managing its internal diversity through the institutional arrangements of a secular and democratic polity. In other words, India is not 'multicultural by accident', but 'multicultural by design'.[24] Consequently, India's strategic objective in the region is to 'work for the rise and consolidation of democratic and secular polities in Central Asia, because the spill-over of the rise of religious extremism may threaten India's own internal stability and security'.[25]

Indian efforts and expectations, however, have been frustrated by the realization that the Central Asian republics 'were ill-prepared for independence'.[26] Although 'conversant in the art of governance', they suffered from a pronounced democratic deficit which hinders the establishment of 'long-term political and strategic vision' for their development.[27] In this setting, 'state failure remains a concern in New Delhi'.[28] Indian commentators list multiple (and often contradictory) rationalities in their explanation of the weakness of democratic practices in the region. Governments there remain 'undemocratic, dictatorial, authoritarian […] the Central Asian scenario throws little awesome prospects for any radical departure from the present'.[29] Such awareness of the pervasive uncertainty of Central Asian affairs is deeply engrained in the narratives of the Look North policy and informs the encouragement of frameworks for regional co-operation.

Encouraging regional co-operation in Central Asia

Intertwined with the narrative modalities of secularism and democracy, the Look North policy also stresses the significance of regional co-operation to the stability and prosperity of

Central Asia. The proposition of Indian commentators is that 'India should try [to] forge a collective security arrangement and a collective project for the development of all the countries of the region regardless of their policy slants in favour of this or that great power'.[30] This insistence on the unity of Central Asian states reflects Indian perceptions of the pragmatic benefits from (even a rudimentary form of functional) co-operation which 'transforms conventional aspirations into more open, dynamic, and wider practices of peaceful coexistence, collective responsibility, and development'.[31] The fear is that without regional integration, history might repeat itself and Central Asia may lose 'its creative capacity [just like it did] during the sixteenth century, owing to its internecine warfare, internal instability, and external aggressive policy'.[32]

In this respect, there seems to be a significant level of disappointment among Indian commentators that 'the political leadership of these countries has been unable to evolve a mind-set that could be truly characterized as [Central Asian]'.[33] Such a failure tends to be explained through the pursuit of narrow personal gains by nepotistic state elites, which (more often than not) are disguised under the narrative cloak of (ethno-)national interests. Thus, commentators have noted that the failure of Central Asian states to establish a robust framework for regional co-operation illustrates their weak structures of governance.

The regionalization implicit in the discourses of the Look North policy exposes a conviction that it is India's 'purpose to engage more vigorously with an independent Central Asia through cultural structures'.[34] In this respect, some Indian commentators have suggested that the alleged 'homogeneity [of the region] is quite deceptive' and hinders the comprehension of the 'diversity, which is articulated in many different ways' in the convoluted dynamics of Central Asian politics.[35] Thus, the suggestion is that India needs to accompany its regionalizing approach with 'country-specific' strategies targeting the individual Central Asian republics. This understanding informs the discussion of India's bilateral relations with regional states in the following section.

India's strategic bilateralism in Central Asia

As already suggested, the narratives of the Look North policy indicate a desire to encourage the regional co-operation of the Central Asian states. Such proclamations notwithstanding, India's involvement in the region has been paralleled by a significant level of bilateral relations in an attempt to overcome the constraints imposed by its latecomer status in Central Asian affairs. In this respect, it is Tajikistan that—to all intents and purposes—has become the centrepiece of New Delhi's strategic bilateralism in Central Asia.

The construction of Tajikistan as India's 'gateway to Central Asia'[36] is of complex provenance in the narratives of the Look North policy. The hackneyed point of departure seems to be the observation of a 'millennia-old', 'civilizational relationship between Tajikistan and the Indian subcontinent'.[37] Strategically speaking, however, it is the shared perception of external threats that appears to motivate India's bilateral relations with Tajikistan. Indian commentators explain that the civil war which ravaged the country during the 1990s has been '*caused* by a skilful exploitation of the inter-regional/inter-clan rivalries by forces of Islamic fundamentalism supported by the Pakistan-backed Mujahideen in Afghanistan'; i.e., it was 'a spill-over of the victory of the Mujahideen armed groups in Afghanistan. The jobless Afghan *jehadis* found employment both in Tajikistan and in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir'.[38] Thus, India responded with logistic and military support for the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance through Tajikistan.

Such assistance has been articulated as a strategy for 'strengthening Tajikistan's secular forces in their war against Islamic fundamentalism'.[39] For instance, there have been allegations that India's military outposts in the country were set up as early as the mid-1990s.[40] Framed as an offer of 'humanitarian assistance', in 2000 India formally acknowledged the establishment of a military hospital on the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border at Farkhor, and the widening of a military air-strip near Dushanbe for transport aircraft.[41] More recently, India—still 'quietly, very quietly'—deployed at least one helicopter squadron at its Ayni air-base in Tajikistan to bolster its already existing rapid-response capabilities.[42]

The discourses of the Look North policy legitimize this military outreach by maintaining that 'the nation's strategic interests lie far beyond [its] borders'—a realization that is 'compelling New Delhi to consider the possibility of sending troops abroad *outside of the UN framework*'.[43] Thus, India's military presence in Tajikistan becomes one of the most conspicuous indications of the presumed assertive logic of its post-1998 foreign policy. In this respect, India's involvement in Central Asia exposes an underlying 'revisionist' foreign policy stance—through which New Delhi aims to *revise* the existing patterns in its international environment in order to facilitate the exercise of its own agency.[44]

Thus, the intense ties with Tajikistan reveal India's attempt to carve out a space for its stakes in Central Asia. At the same time, such bilateral relations do not demonstrate a socializing propensity that might become the cornerstone of a more encompassing community of practice in the region. What has been particularly frustrating for the proponents of the Look North policy is that while India's longing for closer relations with Central Asia has largely remained unfulfilled, other actors in the meantime have managed to establish themselves as important partners to the region. The following section details the complex context of such an encounter in India's Central Asian policy.

Shanghaied into co-operation? Indian attitudes towards the SCO

The nuclear confidence of India's post-1998 foreign policy has endeavoured to project the image of a self-aggrandizing state capable of charting its course in the uncertain currents of global politics. However, while Looking North towards Central Asia, India has quickly recognized that it is not the only international actor striving to assert its agency in the region.

It is the awareness of this dynamic context that has made Indian observers particularly perplexed by the seemingly rapid emergence of the SCO as an increasingly sophisticated institutional architecture for Central Asian affairs. The development of the SCO has confirmed the viewpoint that the region has become the host of a 'new great game'.[45] The former ambassador, Kishan Rana, seems to offer one of the clearest explanations of what Indian commentators have in mind when they use this term:

> Visualize a three-dimensional, multiplayer chessboard, where a move by each protagonist produces eddies and backflows that affect all the others, and prompt counter-movements. Factor into this, the time as a fourth dimension, which takes this analogy beyond easy description. [Central Asia] resembles such a turbulent, volatile, and unpredictable scene owing to the mix of cooperation [and] contestation that marks virtually each bilateral relationship. The situation is all the more unpredictable because of the absence of fixed mooring points. [The region] thus offers a heady mix of bilateral, regional, and great power diplomacy, in which the players weave bewildering nets of connections and counter arrangements. Some of the emerging developments appear contradictory, understandable only in a fluid context.[46]

In recognizing the SCO's uniqueness, some have gone as far as to assert that it is emerging as '*the principal basis for strategic interactions* between Central Asia and the big and medium powers that surround the region'.[47] New Delhi's relations with the SCO, therefore, backstop the debate on 'whether India has an ambition for creating an area of influence' in the region.[48]

In this respect, India's gaining of SCO observer status in 2005 has been interpreted by some commentators as an indication of India's ability to '*dilute* Chinese and Russian influence' in Central Asia.[49] At the same time, others have praised New Delhi for 'choosing to maintain some political distance from the ambitious goals [that] Beijing and Moscow have for the organisation'.[50] Such statements reveal that Indian attitudes towards the SCO are influenced by the persisting tensions between continuity and change, convergence and divergence, and co-operation and conflict underpinning New Delhi's Central Asian outlook. This oscillation is simultaneously confounding and timely. It is confounding because of the enthusiasm and conviction with which opposing standpoints are propounded, very often by the same commentators! At the same time, it is timely because it reveals a diverse range of options for Indian state elites to address the complexity of both Central Asian affairs and global politics.

The contention here is that Indian perceptions of the SCO make conspicuous New Delhi's shifting attitudes towards other international actors which would not necessarily be elicited from the country's bilateral relations with those actors. The discussion of the SCO in the narratives of the Look North policy has zoomed-in on India's encounter with the Central Asian agency of Russia and China. The following sections address this dynamic.

SCO and India's encounter with Russia in Central Asia

Indian perceptions of the SCO's activities in Central Asia reveal attitudes towards Russia that present a more complex picture of the relations between New Delhi and Moscow than their bilateral interactions suggest. On the one hand, Russian support for India's inclusion as an observer in the SCO (and seemingly currently for India's full membership)[51] confirms the perception that the two countries have a shared interest in the stability of Central Asia. This then underpins the awareness that 'Russia would like India to become a big player in the region as a balancing factor for both the American and Chinese presence'.[52]

On the other hand, many Indian commentators assert that Moscow no longer has the overbearing presence in Central Asia that it once had. In this respect, the perceived weakness of Moscow's foreign policy stance towards Central Asia has clashed with the assertiveness of New Delhi's post-1998 external relations. Thus, their interactions within the SCO framework have convinced some observers that 'beyond oil and arms sales, India finds little common ground with Russia'.[53] At the same time, Moscow's willingness to involve third parties—in particular China—in its Central Asian interactions have confirmed Russia's 'loss of its [Central] Asian republics'.[54]

For Indian commentators, therefore, the SCO epitomizes an alliance between Russia and China, which confirms that from Moscow's point of view 'China is a more fitting partner for Russia's multifaceted interests in Central Asia than India'.[55] A significant part of Indian hostility towards Russia's involvement in the region, therefore, derives from Moscow's departure from its usual framework of foreign policy behaviour. Thus, the patterns of divergence in India's encounter with Russia in Central Asia reveal that owing to the exigencies of domestic and global politics, there is very little degree of certainty regarding the future trajectories of New Delhi's interactions with Moscow. What appears certain, however, is that the glory days of the Cold War 'special relationship' between the two countries have petered out.

The SCO and India's encounter with China in Central Asia

For many Indian commentators, China's ability to establish the SCO in 2001 has become one of the clearest indications of the post-Cold War dynamism of Central Asian affairs. The SCO has thereby enhanced the visibility of 'China's economic and political interests in the region [… in the] politics of oil and gas', in which India lost out to China over competition for Kazakhstan energy in 2005.[56] In this setting, India's encounter with the SCO has provoked distinct images of Beijing's regional agency—ranging from a threat, through a partner, to a model. Although not necessarily complementary, such diverse representations cohabit simultaneously within the narratives of the Look North policy.

Perhaps the most interesting image of China, provoked by India's confrontation with the SCO, is that of a model. A number of commentators have suggested that New Delhi's encounter with Beijing's agency in Central Asia has produced the image of 'China as a role model' for India's external relations.[57] The realization is that Beijing's experience provides useful instruction for New Delhi's own engagement in the region. Thus, the consideration of SCO in the narratives of the Look North policy suggests that if India is to become the Great Power that it proclaims to be, it needs to learn from (if not emulate) the model set-up by Beijing.

A number of these 'lessons' relate to the structure, process and content of India's relations with the region. Thus, in contrast to India, China's initiatives in Central Asia indicate the development of a sophisticated 'holistic view' of foreign policy-making, which 'embeds the state firmly within the interstate system as an organic and inseparable part, linking the fate even of the inside of the state to the fate or nature of its outside'.[58] Indian perceptions of the SCO, therefore, have provoked a desire to emulate Beijing's ability to 'establish quickly an international reputation for being able to look after itself [and, thus] become a "great power", whereas India's potential remains unrealized'.[59] Consequently, encounter with Beijing's involvement in Central Asia has produced diverse assessments of the SCO within the narratives of India's Look North policy, all of which tend to reflect the difficulties in articulating a foreign policy strategy in a complex world.

Conclusions

The discussion of the narratives of the Look North policy confirms New Delhi's foreign policy desire that India becomes '*a kind of a model* for other countries'.[60] The proclivity towards a discursive projection of India as a blueprint for Central Asian development has become a defining feature of the Look North policy. Yet, as demonstrated, the confrontation with the reality of Central Asian interactions and the involvement of other international actors—especially China—makes conspicuous that New Delhi has little (if any) influence in the region. Not surprisingly, therefore, India's perception of the strengthening of the Beijing-based SCO has further aggravated New Delhi's irritation of international, and regional, acceptance of China as being the next global power. Thus, despite the proliferation of discourses on India's rise to global prominence, the absence of a readily available Indian 'vision' of global politics prevents New Delhi from living up to the expectations generated by such narratives.

The absence of a meaningful power of attraction (*soft power*) has undermined India's international engagement with Central Asia. This has been reflected in 'India's noticeable absence' from Central Asian politics.[61] It is also reflected in India's weak position in what Shen considers 'India's absence from ideological energy diplomacy in Central Asia', in which 'India lacks a unique ideology to increase its influence in Central Asia', and 'India therefore remains a great

power candidate in the region rather than a great power status holder'.[62] The discussion of the narratives of the Look North policy has demonstrated that the discursive construction of India's current external affairs does not project a specific (if any) vision of world order that would distinguish it from the other participants in the 'new great game'. Consequently, the international identity of New Delhi has no distinct attributes that regional actors in Central Asia might be tempted to emulate. The implication, then, is not only that India might remain a 'rising power' for longer than its pundits portend, remaining in 'the class of countries that are always emerging but never quite arriving'.[63] In other words, the analysis of India's relations with Central Asia still does not seem to offer a convincing response to the query of whether India *can change enough* to become a pole of attraction in an international environment marked by extreme turbulence, and a regional environment marked by multiple presences of outside actors.[64]

Notes

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60 S. Dutt, *India in a Globalized World*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006, p.205, emphasis added.
61 M. Bhadrakumar, quoted in E. Kavalski, *India and Central Asia*, op. cit., p.205.
62 S. Chen, 'Great Power Politics: India's Absence from Ideological Energy Diplomacy in Central Asia', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2010, pp. 96, 103. Having lost out to China over Kazakhstani energy, India remains interested in mooted pipeline projects to access Turkmenistani energy, namely the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) and INSC (International North South Corridor, down from the Caspian to Iran's port of Chabahar) projects, though TAPI is threatened by Afghanistan's instability and potential Pakistani obstruction.
63 S.K. Mitra, 'The Reluctant Hegemon: India's self-perception and the South Asian strategic environment', *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol. 12, No. 3, September 2003, p.402.
64 U. Kachru, *Extreme Turbulence: India at the Crossroads*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2007, p.14.