

India and Central Asia: Growing Convergence and Challenges

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Abstract

Both India and Central Asia have shared their age old historical and cultural relations in the past. In the contemporary times the Central Asia, owing to its proven vast natural resources and strategic location, has become an important area for different major and regional powers to leverage their economic and geopolitical interests. Central Asia's geographical proximity with Afghanistan and Pakistan also extends its security importance for India. India has been a late comer in this region as compared to other powers. However, for the last two decades, there have been emerging developments leading India to increase its engagement with Central Asian states.

India's growing energy needs, instability in Afghanistan, China's growing influence in Central Asia have become important factors for shaping India's Central Asia policy. India has articulated 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP) for serving its active political, economic and security interests in the region. India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to five Central Asian states have added new dynamics in its Central Asia policy. Against this backdrop, the present paper tries to examine India's emerging geo-economic, geostrategic and geopolitical interests and challenges in the Central Asia.

Key Words: Central Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Economic Union, International North South Transport Corridor.

Introduction

The Central Asia, being a distinct region, comprises five sovereign Central Asian Republics (CARs) namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Geographically, Central Asian region is linked to China in the east, the Caspian Sea in the west, Afghanistan and Iran in the south and Russia in the north. The region is having 7 crore 59 Lakhs population and covers an area of 4, 004, 451 square kilometres.¹ In the historical perspective, after half of the nineteenth century onwards and until the disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR) in 1991, these five countries had been under the Soviet Union political control. Although, following the event of 1917 February Revolution, the Central Asian countries had been looking to their own nation states but the dream was crushed by Soviet Union authoritarian regime. From 1925 to 1936 the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Collective name of Central Asia) was divided into five autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics namely, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek and all of them remained under the same status until their independence in 1991.²

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India-Central Asia Relations

India and Central Asia have had their age-old history of relations since antiquity. There is ample evidence supporting close relationship between the people of North India and the Oxus civilization leading them to settle across Afghanistan and Central Asia back to the Bronze Age (2300-1700 BCE). The ancient Silk Road, which connected India with Central Asia, not only facilitated trade but also prospered knowledge and development of innovation between the two regions. Buddhism travelled from India to Central Asia and spread to other parts of Asia. The Bamiyan Buddhas that had stood in central Afghanistan since the beginning of the 6th century until their destruction by the Taliban in March 2001 are just one example of this heritage. The Kushan Empire had its unified political control stretching from Central Asia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and larger part of India's Gangetic Plain.³

The medieval Indian history is shaped with impacts from Central Asia. It is because of the attacks of the Muslim rulers from Central Asia to establish their Muslim rule in India. Mahmud of Ghazni invaded India several times with an objective to plundering Indian wealth.⁴ Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur came from Central Asia and established Mughal Empire in India in 1526. The influence of the last Mughal Emperor Muhi-ud-Din Muhammad Aurangzeb extended to Kabul and Badakhshan.⁵ In the British colonial period, the Central Asian region became the zone of strategic rivalry between the Russian Tsarist and British India Empires for increasing their strategic influence in this region. This rivalry is also known as the "Great Game" competition in the 19th and second half of the 20th century. In 1947, the partition of India and later on Pakistan's control over Pak Occupied Kashmir (POK) left India with no direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.⁶

Post-independence, India's relations with Central Asia, mediated and forwarded through Indo-Soviet special friendship and cultural exchanges, remained the main feature of their connection. Indian music and movies had great popularity among the Central Asian people.⁷

A New Era after the Disintegration of the Soviet Union

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the initiative of establishing Indian diplomatic missions in all the five Central Asian states started a new period of India's political relationship in the region. The goodwill legacy owing to Soviet Friendship became helpful for New Delhi, as independent Central Asian states considered India an important partner for their fight against emerging destabilizing forces in the region. Probably, it was for this reason that the leaders of these states first visited India, outside the former Soviet bloc, in 1992. India had great expectations that goodwill in the region would help bring better results to its political and economic interests with these energy rich states.⁸

India's secular identity with diverse culture was idealistic in the way of nation building and consolidation of statehood for the presidents of Central Asian countries and they consider India a strong partner in their future journey.⁹ Indian leadership also tried to consolidate this priority with its new policy approach towards Central Asia. India's then Prime Minister P.V. Narsimha Rao visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 1993 and Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan in 1995, leaving only Tajikistan as it was in the grip of Tajik Civil War from 1992 to 1997.¹⁰

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In Turkmenistan in September 1995, the Indian PM, P.V. Narsimha Rao, announced that for India, Central Asia is an area of high priority, where we Indians aim to stay engaged far into the future. Further he added “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.” This announcement of Rao was in the light of the articulation of India’s “Look North” policy for Central Asia.

The “Look North” policy initiative was a parallel framework of India’s “Look East” policy towards South East Asia by promoting India’s long term interests in Central Asia beyond its immediate neighbourhood of South Asia through the instruments of civilization links as well as an image of secular, democratic and multicultural plural society.¹¹

However, India’s ‘Look North’ initiative remained passive in realizing the advantage owing to some problems like instability in Afghanistan, rising militant activities in Jammu and Kashmir and the dissolution of different coalition governments at the Central level in New Delhi within a short course of time.¹² Thus India’s Central Asia policy remained limited to counter Pakistan from creating an Islamic bloc in Central Asia with its friendly regime of Taliban in Afghanistan and extending military co-operation to Tajikistan for fighting against Islamic forces in the region.¹³

Acceleration in Relationship

In the beginning of the 21st century, the political stability and positive results of economic reforms introduced in early 1990s pushed India to accelerate its relationship with Central Asia to meet its growing energy needs and other economic benefits. The economic cooperation from both sides also made it necessary for them to strengthen their security co-operation in areas of terrorism, drug trafficking etc.

In addition to these two economic and security interests, the evolving geopolitical developments, in which China emerged with high range economic partnership in Central Asia, also forced India to increase its presence in the region. All this gave India’s Central Asia policy a new activism than its earlier policy that confined largely to security concerns. More importantly, the Central Asian countries responded positively to India’s active strategic, economic and geopolitical shifts in their region.¹⁴ India’s outreach to Central Asia consolidated more in 2005 with its engaging as observer member in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional organization of Eurasia.¹⁵

A significant development for strengthening the engagement took place, when Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited India in January 2009 as Chief Guest on the occasion of the Republic Day parade. This visit also resulted into signing of Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) between India and Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan also agreed to supply Uranium to India. The signing of this agreement further motivated India to sign such agreements with Uzbekistan in 2011 and Tajikistan in 2012. So, today except Turkmenistan, India has been successful in concluding strategic partnerships with all four Central Asian states, signifying its outreach in the region. The five countries also stand with India for its permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).¹⁶

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In the consequent years, Central Asia, being a part of India's extended neighbourhood, became a key focus of India's foreign policy to increase its long-term engagement in this Eurasian region, both bilaterally and collectively. In June 2012, India announced its 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP), which is a comprehensive plan from the Indian side to build-up its strong political, economic, and people-to-people relationship with Central Asian states as, so far, India had a limited engagement in this region as compared to other powers such as Russia, China and the U.S.¹⁷

Connect Central Asia Policy

The major components of the 'CCAP' are-

- (i) In order to build strong political relations with Central Asian states, both bilaterally and multilaterally, there will be a regular exchange of high level visits from two sides.
- (ii) In the economic field, India is committed to fulfilling its energy demands from Central Asian countries through better transportation connectivity along with expanding better banking infrastructure under the favourable policy environment, if available.
- (iii) India would make efforts to expand its regional cooperation in Central Asia through its engagement with SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Custom Union.
- (iv) India and Central Asia can strengthen their security co-operation through different joint efforts which include fighting against terrorism, close discussion regarding Afghanistan, military practices and research programs.
- (v) In the medical field, India will setup civil hospitals and clinics in Central Asian countries for better medical facilities to the people of this region.
- (vi) In the field of higher education, India will setup a Central University in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) to deliver world class education in areas like Information Technology, Management, Philosophy and Languages. India would also setup a Central Asian e-network with its hub in India, to offer tele-education, and tele-medicine, correspondence with Central Asian Republics.
- (vii) For the development in tourism and cultural interaction, India will increase its air flights to Central Asian countries to promote people-to-people relationship.

In a complete analysis it is observed that 'CCAP' is a consolidated strategy from the Indian side to secure its long term political, economic, strategic interests while using maximum soft power engagement in the region.¹⁸

Recent Developments

Focusing on the shifting of geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic realities in the Central Asian region, India in recent years has made some significant developments to strengthen its ties with five Central Asian countries. India is working ahead in this direction both bilaterally and regionally. Indian foreign policy under the Prime Minister Narendra Modi is functioning in a manner to convert its

external engagement into internal development and then after this development will help India to stand with global powers at the international level. India seems to be ready to gain its national interests while dealing with whatever situations emerging in the global-political scenario. The Indian Prime Minister has given his special attention to increase the engagement with its immediate and extended neighbourhood. Since the Central Asian region has been recognised as Indian extended neighbourhood, it calls for special attention.

The Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to all the five Central Asian countries in July 2015 highlighted the importance of 'Connect Central Asia Policy' and highly prioritised engagement with Central Asia, which has great geo-economic, strategic and political importance for India.¹⁹ The visit made it clear that all five countries are equally important for India under its strategic considerations.

After the independence of Central Asian countries, it was the first time when any Indian PM ever made his incorporated visit to all the five countries. PM Modi acknowledged the importance of Central Asia for India's future. He reminded that the two sides have shared the heritage of their linkages since the ancient time and envisioned moving forward. This visit also motivated India to have its greater presence and play an active role in the region.²⁰

Regionally, India's full membership of SCO in June 2017 has raised its status as an emerging player in Eurasia. The full membership would help India to play a decisive role in securing its interests in the regional cooperation. On the economic side, India is pushing its desire for integrating with Eurasian market and negotiating feasibility of a free trade zone agreement with Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)²¹.

The development of the second India-Central Asia Dialogue digital video meeting between the foreign ministers of the two sides, which was held on 28th October 2020, resulted into assessment of the last year meeting and India provided US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit for developmental projects on priority in the sectors of connectivity, energy, IT, healthcare, education, agriculture etc. for the Central Asian region. Extending its cooperation, India offered to provide grant assistance for implementation of high Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) with an aim to promote socio-economic development in the countries of the region. The two sides exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual concern and enhancing cooperation under the framework of UN and other multilateral forums. The participating foreign ministers of Central Asia welcomed the contribution of India and also acknowledged New Delhi's humanitarian and medical assistance to their countries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic.²²

India's Emerging Geo-Economic Interests in Central Asia

India and Central Asian countries have a lot of economic potential to meet the needs of one another. All the Central Asian countries are gifted with wide range of natural resources like hydrocarbons, uranium and other minerals. They are highly rich in uranium, hydroelectricity, oil, natural gas, coal, gold, lead, zinc, iron-ore and many more. In order to maintain its sustainable economic growth, India requires uninterrupted and increasing needs of energy supply to its different sectors of economy for their growth.²³

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Today, India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world with its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) crossing an annual growth rate between 7 and 8 percent every financial year and is targeted to reach 9 percent in the coming years. To keep this increasing growth sustained, it will certainly be affected by growing demand and uninterrupted supply of energy resources in oil and gas etc. Keeping in view the projected five-time growth of its economic size as compared to its current level in terms of aggregate GDP and population growth, India's total energy demand is expected to rise far more in consumption by the year 2040.²⁴ India is too much dependent on import of oil and gas from the outside world as domestic oil and gas production has been much less than its consumption owing to lack of technology for exploration and limited human resources. Therefore, rising energy needs make it necessary for India to diversify its sources of energy supply and imports from energy rich Caspian Sea of Central Asian region.

The main source for importing gas and oil has been the West Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, Iraq and UAE. The West Asian region remains risky in terms of peace and stability and can any time become problematic for energy supply. This kind of situation may have potential cause for putting negative impact on Indian economy.²⁵ India has shortage of electricity power supply not only to reach every household but also to meet the everyday increasing demand owing to expanding industrialisation and agricultural consumption in the country. The Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, rich in hydrocarbon resources while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, having a lot of hydropower potential, could help India to diversify and become reliable source of energy supply at lower prices along with achieving the 9 percent economic growth, if there is proper connectivity between the two regions.²⁶

Besides these energy resources, several other areas such as mining, construction industry, information technology, pharmaceuticals, services, agriculture and food processing also provide a lot of opportunities for Indian investment and economic cooperation in the region. Furthermore, this can help bring transformation of social and economic development in these Central Asian countries. The changing economic environment in the region with prolonged recession in Europe, financial crisis in Russia, fall in oil prices etc are opening new vistas of opportunities for India-Central Asia trade partnership to grow.²⁷

Despite having a lot of scope for expanding the economic co-operation, India's trade with Central Asia has remained below expectations. The main difficulty for this has been due to the absence of viable physical connectivity with the region as the neighbouring Pakistan does not allow its territory for transiting Indian goods to Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. India's recent efforts to make fully functionalise the Chabahar Port and International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) projects in near future and joining Ashgabat Agreement are parts of improving its connectivity with Central Asia.²⁸ Over the years, India has tried to renew and enhance its energy and economic cooperation with Central Asia. India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) obtained 25 percent share in 2011 in the Satpayev offshore block in the northern Caspian Sea region of Kazakhstan.

The Indian PM Narendra Modi inaugurated the exploratory drilling of this oil block when he visited

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all the five Central Asian states in July 2015. His visit was also a part of resource diplomacy to attain energy security for Indian economy as Kazakhstan agreed to supply 5,000 tonnes of natural uranium to India by 2019. This made Kazakhstan third high rank partner in supplying the natural uranium to India after Canada and Australia. India already had signed this kind of agreement with Kazakhstan in January 2009 to import 2100 tonnes of natural uranium for the time period 2010-2014. Another notable progress in economic co-operation is the beginning of the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline in December 2015. Once completed and operational, this pipeline will help in meeting the rising energy needs of India and Pakistan where consumption is expected to double by 2030.²⁹

Although, connectivity has been a challenge, India's total trade with CARs has witnessed an almost three time jump from US\$ 481.6 million in 2009-10 to US\$ 1.3 billion in 2018-19, with India's exports to the region amounting to US\$ 442.5 million and imports amounting to US\$ 863 million in 2018-19. The sharp increase in Indian imports from the region is due to increased crude oil imports from Kazakhstan, which is partially attributed to a reduction in India's crude oil production. The exported goods to Central Asia comprise pharmaceuticals, machinery and mechanical appliances, coffee, tea and spices, electrical machinery and mechanical equipments. India's imports from Central Asian states include mineral oils, pearls, precious or semi-precious stones, iron and steel, ores, slag and fertilisers.³⁰

India, under its soft power approach, is also trying to deepen cultural links with Central Asian states. Indian Bollywood cinema, Hindi films have significant role in promoting Hindi and Indian culture in the region. Cultural links and goodwill can play an important role in tourism and people-to-people relations between the two sides besides leading to their greater contribution in political and economic engagements.³¹

India and Central Asia Geostrategic Interests

After the demise of Soviet Union, the Central Asia, particularly the Fergana Valley region, became an operating centre for Islamic extremism and its inter-linking to drug trafficking emanating from the Taliban rule in Afghanistan. Afghanistan and Central Asia are parts of India's "extended neighborhood" and the transnational nature of the Islamic groups and terrorism in the region is seen by New Delhi as great security threat to its national security, particularly in Jammu and Kashmir. Peace and stability in Afghanistan is important for India to connect with Central Asia.

Tajikistan, separated from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir by only a small strip of Afghan territory, is particularly vulnerable to the extremist forces.³² Three Central Asian states Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share more than 2,000 kilometer (Km) and of which Tajikistan alone shares 1200 Km porous border with Afghanistan and they fear possible spillover impacts into their region from the northern neighbor.³³

The evolving political situation in which Taliban, supported by Pakistan, has emerged as political power in Afghanistan. It has refreshed memories for India of Taliban's old role in providing safe haven for militants of Pakistan based terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-

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Mohammed (JeM) and to infiltrate in the Kashmir Valley. These militant groups have also been involved in fighting alongside the Taliban and the Haqqani Network against the U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan.³⁴ India's recent actions of abrogation of article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir on 5th August 2019 and earlier in February same year Balakot airstrikes have increased the scope of hostility between New Delhi and Islamabad. Considering its past record of hostility, it is certainly feared that Pakistan will keep its efforts of militancy kicking in a more sophisticated manner in Kashmir. At a time when internal and external trends of new militancy are shaping their movement in Kashmir after the death of Burhan Wani in 2016, there is a threat of the evolving Afghan conflict and possible rise of Islamic terrorism in Central Asia could have its far more spillover impacts on internal security of Jammu and Kashmir.³⁵

Additionally, in the recent years the establishment and rise of the Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), a branch of the self-proclaimed Islamic State along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and operating its activities in South and Central Asia, has changed the existing security challenge in the region. The IS-K is detrimental to India's security interests in Afghanistan and the region more broadly as it claimed responsibility for an attack on Gurudwara in Kabul, in March 2020 and one of the operatives was from the south Indian State of Kerala.³⁶ The five Central Asian countries account for the third largest source of foreign recruits with more than 4,000 fighters having fled to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other Islamic extremist groups in Iraq and Syria. After the U.S.-led military forces defeated the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, there is a serious concern of possible return of Central Asian fighters to their home countries, which could result into rise of domestic jihad and instability in the Central Asian region.³⁷

India's "Connect Central Asia Policy" is committed to strengthening strategic and security cooperation with the Central Asian states besides their close consultations on Afghanistan. Defense cooperation with the region covers the areas of military training, joint research and counterterrorism coordination. India has joint working groups on counterterrorism with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which meet regularly and coordinate to exchange intelligence and data. There also exists cooperation from the Indian side for setting up of a joint military research centre in Kyrgyzstan and a military hospital in Tajikistan.³⁸ India has signed defense and security cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan and provides military training to Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek cadets and has been conducting joint military exercises with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Khanjar series) to boost their military capabilities. During PM Modi's visit to the Central Asian states, the joint statements emphasized the Indian and Central Asian common interest of ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan necessary for the prosperity and development of the South and Central Asian region. Despite their common challenges, the military cooperation between the two regions is not in a position to fight effectively against non-traditional security threats. India, now being the full member of the SCO, is expected to play an active role in dealing with the common goals of the member nations to combat the threats of terrorism, separatism and extremism.³⁹

Central Asia's Geopolitical Importance to India

The Central Asian region has a strategic location that lies at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, the

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Persian Gulf, the Middle East and the Far East. It is also surrounded by some of the fastest growing economies in the world including China, Russia and India which quest for their larger influence in the region. After the Soviet demise, this region, owing to its strategic location and being endowed with huge energy resources, has become an arena of competition and cooperation among the different major powers like U.S., Russia, China and regional powers like European Union, Iran, Pakistan and India to increase their strategic hold in the region. The scholars have given this emerging geopolitical competition a new name of "New Great Game". The new game is different from the old one as it involves both international and regional powers who are not competing for the territorial expansion but to control energy resources to gain strategic position in the region.⁴⁰

Russia has been a traditional dominant player in the Central Asia and is asserting its role against 'Western' attempts to contain Moscow in the region that is known as Kremlin's sphere of influence or the 'near abroad'. China has emerged as leading economic player in the region. It has invested heavily in connectivity and energy projects in the region. Central Asia has become the central part of the Chinese newly launched ambitious project of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), linking Beijing with Europe via Central Asia. Owing to the leading economic partner, the Central Asian states fear Chinese strategic objectives in their region in the years to come. The similarity between Russian and Chinese interests has brought them to co-operate with each other to overcome the U.S. and European Union's geopolitical pressure against them in the region.⁴¹ The present-day geopolitical conditions coupled with the stakes that India has in the region make it necessary for the policy makers to take immediate steps to enhance the strategic position of India.

The challenge for India's geopolitical interests in Central Asia possibly comes through the Sino-Pak alliance and they strategically attempt to encircle both India's rise and security in South Asia. China's strong foothold in Central Asia and its strategic alliance with Pakistan will challenge India's security and energy interests in this region. This also extends New Delhi's concerns as it can help China to unfold the balance of Asian security with having larger geopolitical strength in its favor.⁴² India is objecting to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key part of the Chinese ambitious project of BRI as it passes through the disputed land of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to which India claims its sovereign territory. The CPEC will connect the Chinese city of Kashgar in Xinjiang to the Gwadar port in Baluchistan province of Pakistan. Located at a short distance, India has seen this Gwadar port as a potential competitor to New Delhi's investment in developing the Chabahar port in Iran and its strategic implications to linking the Central, South and West Asia to each other alongside the western Indian Ocean region. Both Chabahar port and the INSTC projects are important factors for India's economic integration with Eurasian region as well as their strategic and economic counter balance to the Chinese string of pearls strategy expanding through the BRI initiative in the Indian Ocean region.

Therefore, it is important for India to improve its physical connectivity as well as increased economic, strategic and regional cooperation with Central Asian states in order to create more geopolitical space for itself in the region. ⁴³ India's full membership in the SCO has increased scope to extend its role and rebalance the Chinese growing influence in the region. India can help Russia to become an

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alternative for reducing Moscow's over relying on China and balance the geopolitical equations in its favour as possible.⁴⁴

Conclusion

No doubt, India's old history of civilized links in the region has its potential to cement contemporary ties with Central Asian states but it largely depends on how India can become a strong economic player and help the regional states to diversify their economic partnership which is currently dominated by China. Expanding economic partnership will also help India to promote its strategic influence in the region. Although, India's full membership in SCO and PM Modi's visit to Central Asian states have capitalized the potential of 'CCAP' but still it has a long way to go to transform the set objectives into reality since India is a late comer in this region. The Taliban coming into power in Afghanistan has given an upper hand to Pakistan and China against India's economic and security interests in the region. It is important for India how it deals with the Taliban in near future and secure peace and stability in the region where Afghanistan has to play a key role.

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