

**INDIA'S ROLE  
IN KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR  
FOREIGN POLICY**

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## ABSTRACT

**A**fter the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan's economy was weak since most of the industrial enterprises were located in Russia. To attain economic growth, Kazakhstan crafted a unique foreign policy known as the multi-vector foreign policy, which facilitated an easy inflow of direct foreign investments into the state economy. After economic liberalization in 1991, India took a serious interest in Cen-

tral Asia, and since then the two nations have come a long way marked by complex interdependence in the international arena. They have demonstrated a successful and sustained upward trend in their bilateral relationship through soft power, trade and long-standing historical connections. Thus, the prospects of mutual cooperation between Central Asia, particularly Kazakhstan, and India are quite promising in the near future.

**KEYWORDS:** *multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan, India, soft power, Central Asia.*

## *Introduction*

The economy of the newly independent Kazakhstan was in a miserable condition as it was closely tied to Russian economy. The country was forced to align itself with Russia due to the mere fact that it used to be a part of the Soviet Union. Moreover, after the disintegration, important industries, including pharmaceutical companies came under Russian control and Russian military helped to secure the extensive border with China. The presence of a large population of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan and the country's dependence on the Russian alliance to use its oil pipeline infrastructure allowed Russia to assume a position of the "big brother," a source of assistance and a partner to collaborate with. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan soon realized the need to accommodate the interests of influential powers, i.e., the United States and China, and, subsequently others. The interests of the other powers were properly endorsed and aligned in the country's multi-vector foreign policy. Kazakhstan realized that Russia could not provide the much-required technical and financial assistance to develop its industrial resources. Thus, in the course of elaborating and implementing a foreign policy, the first president Nursultan Nazarbayev shaped the national identity of Kazakhstan to pave the way for economic development and to consolidate his power.<sup>1</sup> India, which is one of the fastest growing economies of the world and an influential player in the developing world, a country with deep-rooted historical connections with Kazakhstan, growing bilateral trade and no major conflicts, is a favorable partner in the multipolar world, and this partnership can prove mutually beneficial in the long run.

## Connecting Past and Present

Historically, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent interacted closely. Kanishka, a Kushan king, paid immense attention to Buddhism and even the Ferghana valley was a part of his kingdom

<sup>1</sup> See: P. Ipek, "The Role of Oil and Gas in Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Looking East or West?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 7, 2007, pp. 1179-1199.

during the golden period of his rule. Thus, it can be said that Buddhism spread to Central Asia through the Kushan kingdom during the early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the relations between Central Asia and India thrived in the first two centuries of the Mughal rule. It was through an extensive exchange of culture and ideas that people from two geographically separated areas found a sense of interconnectedness. Over the years, the Mughal and Central Asian cultures have enriched each other through individuals who traveled between the two regions for various purposes: as treasure hunters, merchants, researchers, tourists, migrants moving out of the region due to regional instability or ostracism at home. Mughals are considered the direct descendants of Timur and thus trace their origin from the Central Asian region. Mughal patronage and close contacts with the Naqshbandi Sufi order are well-documented. Pilgrimage to the tombs of Muslim saints became another important reason for travel; Abdullah Kabuli was one of those who travelled to Ahmedabad, Lahore, Multan, Delhi, Agra and Kashmir. The Mujavaba<sup>3</sup> literary tradition became common during this era. Apart from cross-border movements of people, the caravans carried the messages of poets, rulers and other important people to-and-fro between the land of Uzbeks (Central Asia) and Mughals (India).

Pictorial arts in the form of miniature paintings illustrate the synthesis in architecture, handicrafts, jewelry, tools and weapons and, most importantly, give a general picture of the lifestyle. Mir Sayyid Ali, who founded the Mughal School of Painting, also travelled from Central Asia to the Mughal court to work for Akbar. Greek astronomy and Unani medicine penetrated the Indian subcontinent as a result of this cultural exchange.

Khawaja Khawind Mahmud was from Samarqand, and he studied Unani medicine in Iran before working at the court of Babur. His brother Khawaja Yusuf's descendants, commonly known as the Sharifi family in India, practiced Unani medicine in the 17th and 18th centuries<sup>4</sup>. Music as well as sports, i.e., wrestling matches, also connected the two territories for years. Humayun's tomb is a vivid example of interconnectedness in the architectural sphere,<sup>5</sup> which confirms that 16th-17th century developments in India were not purely a Mughal phenomenon, but, rather, a result of complex interpenetration of Central Asian and Mughal cultures.<sup>6</sup>

With the advent of the British, this contact largely broke off, only to be revived in 1991-1992 after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The persevering efforts of the British colonialists to break the bond between Central Asia and India failed. As Khilnani rightly pointed out, "socialism reached India not from Britain, but from Russia."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, even during the British rule the cultural and conceptual exchange persisted. Therefore, the author believes that the rich history of interaction between the Central Asian region and the Indian sub-continent should form the basis of the contemporary relationship between India and Kazakhstan. Political scientist Peter Evans notes that "the desire to predict is part of social science."<sup>8</sup> Hence, looking at their successful history, one can predict a successful and mutually beneficial relationship in the near future.

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<sup>2</sup> See: K. Sadikov, "On the Expansion of Buddhism in Central Asia," *Academia*, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> See: R. Foltz, "Cultural Contacts Between Central Asia and Mughal India," *Central Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1998, pp. 44-65.

<sup>4</sup> See: H.A. Hameed, *Exchanges Between India and Central Asia in the Field of Medicine*, Department of History of Medicine and Science, Institute of History of Medicine and Medical Research, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 39-41.

<sup>5</sup> See: J.D. Hoag, "The Tomb of Ulugh Beg and Abdu Razzak at Ghazni, A Model for the Taj Mahal," *Journal of the Society for Architectural Historians*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1968, p. 241.

<sup>6</sup> See: R. Foltz, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup> See: N.M. Khilnani, *Realities of Indian Foreign Policy*. ABC Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984, p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> See: P. Evans, "The Role of Theory in Comparative Politics: A Symposium," *World Politics*, Vol. 48, No. 1, October 1995, p. 3.

## Reasons for the Success of Indo-Kazakh Relations / Accommodation without Conflict

India can no longer be considered a “reclusive porcupine.”<sup>9</sup> It plays an important role in the functioning of all international organizations, while witnessing an unprecedented economic growth, which was only slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, India has considerably developed its “hard power” by increasing defense expenditures, conducting nuclear tests<sup>10</sup> and refusing to become a signatory of NPT while adopting a foreign policy of non-alignment. Although a nuclear power, India follows a “no first use policy” which guarantees a “no-war” approach, which allows it to be seen as a reliable economic partner. At the same time, the role played by non-state actors and Track II Diplomacy cannot be ignored. Business groups, middle-class population, students and professionals have all played a major role in integrating India into the global order.<sup>11</sup> Considering terrorism a common threat, the two countries can jointly develop anti-terrorism strategies and engage in military exercises. Furthermore, as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, Kazakhstan has decided to support disarmament. In that case, India should use the instruments of soft power diplomacy to nurture strong bilateral relations.

The domestic policies are focused on generating and maintaining the two national identities through the integration of people from various regional and linguistic, class and racial groups into one whole.<sup>12</sup> Further, the new state is moving slowly towards democratization and although India “does not believe in exporting democracy,”<sup>13</sup> it should nevertheless help Kazakhstan in fostering it.<sup>14</sup> In the 21st century war is a threat to economic development, since the true nature of power is defined not by military strength, but by a country’s economic growth, which is a crucial factor for developing nations. Thus, economic competition opens up opportunities for cooperation.

Currently the region is witnessing a New Great Game among Russia, China, U.S., Turkey, EU, Japan, Pakistan and India.<sup>15</sup> All these actors want to carve out a sphere of influence to meet their own energy requirements. In the context of the New Great Game, Kazakhstan has pursued a balanced foreign policy and worked to develop its economy, especially its hydrocarbon industry. While the country’s economic outlook is improving, Nursultan Nazarbayev maintains strict control over the country’s politics<sup>16</sup>. He does so through various state apparatus<sup>17</sup> by which he calls for foreign direct investments allowing to freely invest within the country but restricts them to misuse its resources.. However, the state is still facing challenges at various levels. It is facing problems of Islamic funda-

<sup>9</sup> R.M. Chilamkuri, *Crossing the Rubicon: The Shaping of India’s New Foreign Policy*, Penguin, Delhi, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See: T.C. Schaffer, et al. “Partnering with India: Regional Power, Global Hopes,” in: *Challenges and Choices*, Strategic Asia Series, 2008-2009.

<sup>11</sup> See: A. Sinha, “Partial Accommodation without Conflict: India as a Rising Link Power,” in: *Accommodating Rising Powers: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. by T.V. Paul, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 222-245.

<sup>12</sup> See: Y.I. Rudenko, “Current Status, Problems and Prospects of India-Kazakhstan Cooperation in Political Sphere,” *FPRC Journal*-10, No. 2, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> M. Rakhimov, “Regional Cooperation in Central Asia and Perspective of Central Asia-India Relations,” in: N.R. Khan, *India, Central Asia and the World Powers*, Primus Books, 2013, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> See: S. Rosato, “Explaining the Democratic Peace,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 3, August 2005, pp. 467-472.

<sup>15</sup> See: N. Kaushiki, “The New Great Game and India’s Connect Central Asia Policy: Strategic Perspectives and Challenges,” *Journal of International and Area Studies*, December 2013, pp. 83-100.

<sup>16</sup> See: A. Tripathi, “The Great Game that Never Ends: China Emerges as Leading Player in Kazakhstan,” *Artha-Journal of Social Sciences*, 2017, Vol. 16, No. 4 [61-77ISSN0975-329X][[https://doi: 10.12724/ajss.43.4](https://doi.org/10.12724/ajss.43.4)].

<sup>17</sup> See: A. Gupta, *India and Central Asia: Need for a Pro-active Approach*, IDSA, New Delhi, 2013.

mentalism and drug trade and human trafficking from its relative proximity to Afghanistan and the weak border controls in the Central Asian states.<sup>18</sup>

Also, one of the disadvantages lies in the fact that it is a landlocked country. For this very reason, it always has tried to accommodate other powers for its economic development. Thus, it is planning for a revival of the ancient Silk Route and building better bilateral relations with countries like Russia and India. Institutions like the G-Global is one such example. The Astana Economic Forum is eager to work out a strategy to bring more countries into a broader structure extending G-20 into G-Global. Former president Nursultan Nazarbayev believed that the number of member countries should be increased so that it would be able to make major trade-related decisions and search for global anti-crisis solutions.<sup>19</sup> To that regard, the current Prime Minister of the country Askar Mamin has already set up a coordinating council to attract Indian investments. The creation of institutions is necessary because they allow to support acceptable behavior on the part of the states and thus avoid major conflicts.<sup>20</sup>

## **Bilateral Connections: Politics, Culture, and Economy**

Cultures and ideas flowed throughout the Silk Route through trade and commerce.<sup>21</sup> India had bilateral contacts with Central Asia owing to its connection with the ancient Silk Route, although the relationship was more cultural than economic. Bilateral connections were fully revived under Pamulaparthi Venkata Narasimha Rao's government. Embassies were opened in Almaty and New Delhi in 1992 and 1993, respectively.<sup>22</sup> When it comes to cultural exchange, the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Nur-Sultan deserves a mention. It provides dance, yoga, instrumental and Hindi language classes, organizes Bollywood movie screenings, performances by visiting troupes and celebrates Indian festivals, among other things. Films, art and culture have constant facilitated mutual ties between the two countries. Indian society and family values at large have always encouraged and impressed the people of Kazakhstan. Beyond culture, a number of scholarships are also available for Kazakhs for higher studies in the Indian universities under the auspices of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR)<sup>23</sup>, the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and the Indian Council of Social Science Research. Cultural ties are getting even stronger with the visits by diplomats from India to Kazakhstan and vice versa. Visits by high-level diplomats and politicians show a deep-rooted interest and interdependence. Further, exchanges at an academic level lay a foundation for a deeper relationship and future growth. An increasing number of scholarships on both ends and cultural exchange will definitely lead to increased mutual trust, understanding and innovation.

The two countries are also cooperating in the scientific, industrial and technological fields. Joint working groups have been created for the eight sectors, namely: Counter Terrorism, Trade and Eco-

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<sup>18</sup> See: D. Lewis, "High Times on the Silk Road: The Central Asian Paradox," *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2010, pp. 39-49.

<sup>19</sup> See: G-Global (2015, December). *G Global*. Retrieved from G-Global: The Concept of G-Global Initiative, available at [[https://kazatu.edu.kz/assets/i/docs/global\\_2\\_en.pdf](https://kazatu.edu.kz/assets/i/docs/global_2_en.pdf)].

<sup>20</sup> See: J.J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in: J.J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> See: S. Behera, "India's Encounter with the Silk Road," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 51, 2002, p. 5077.

<sup>22</sup> See: Ministry of External Affairs, December 2018 [[https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/december\\_2018.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/december_2018.pdf)].

<sup>23</sup> See: Embassy of India, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, n.d. [<http://www.indembastana.gov.in/page/icc/>].

conomic Cooperation, Defense and Military Technical Cooperation, Information Technology, Hydrocarbons, Textiles, Tea Debt and Space Cooperation. India and Kazakhstan share a trade relationship, which is currently negligible, although important to both sides and should be fostered. As per the 2017 data, trade between the two countries totaled \$981.8 million, including approximately \$757 million in exports from Kazakhstan, and \$225 million in exports from India. When it comes to science and technology, India has sent a draft cooperation plan for 2016-2018, which is under consideration by the Kazakhstan government. In space cooperation, the ISRO and the National Space Agency of Kazakhstan have signed an MOU in 2009. In 2017, a 1.7 kg Technology Demonstrator Nano Satellite that was built by Al-Farabi Kazakh National University was launched by ISRO. In 2009, a civil cooperation agreement was signed, according to which 2,100 tons of uranium were supplied to India by the end of 2014. An agreement on Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy was also signed during PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Kazakhstan in 2011.<sup>24</sup> These facts suggest a possibility of promising economic cooperation.

Security and defense issues become crucial in reinforcing the relationship between any two countries. So much so, it becomes an instrument of state policy and in that regard, defense cooperation between India and Kazakhstan can lead to mutual progress. Therefore, it is vital to build strategic partnerships in the field of security and defense. The pharmaceutical industry is another booming sector in both countries owing to the positive business environment. Export commodities from India to Central Asia include tea, ready-made garments, cotton yarn, jute goods, while India imports iron and steel, fruit, and other goods. from Central Asia.<sup>25</sup> This reveals a sustainable economic growth that promises enhanced economic opportunities in the future. A number of English language teachers from India are also employed in Central Asia, assisting the regional youth to become global leaders of the future.

## Energy and Beyond

One of the agendas of adopting a multidimensional foreign policy, namely the multi-vector foreign policy, is to reap the economic benefits that the energy sector has to offer. Therefore, the interaction in the energy sphere that is at the nexus of India and Kazakhstan's relationship can be further strengthened to mutual advantage. For instance, Indian oil giant Oil and Natural Gas Corporation has shown interest in buying a large share of an oil-producing firm in Kazakhstan.<sup>26</sup>

When a country's economic progress is tied to its non-renewable resources, like it is in Kazakhstan, the economy will have to deal with inflation in the long run owing to the depletion of such resources. In other words, moving away from the use of fossil fuels and other non-renewable energy sources and adopting sustainable ways of development are the only ways forward. One of such ways is to become a part of the International Solar Alliance, a joint endeavor of France and India. Moreover, the value of the currency being tied to its natural resources and global warming and climate change in the contemporary scenario justifies the need to devise sustainable development plans. In Kazakhstan, low oil prices in the 1990s directly affected the tenge, thereby leading to currency devaluation in 1999.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Kazakhstan should be developing other sectors, such as the agricultural, chemical and cotton industries.

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<sup>24</sup> See: Ministry of External Affairs, December 2018.

<sup>25</sup> See: I.A. Mir, "India's Trade Potential with Central Asia: An Application of Gravity Model," *International Journal on World Peace*, Vol. 31, No. 3, September 2014, pp. 53-69.

<sup>26</sup> See: D.R. Chaudhury, "New Milestone in Indo-Kazakh Trade to Further Boost Kazakhstan Social Sector Spendings," *The Economic Times*, New Delhi, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> See: R. Pomfret, "Kazakhstan's Economy since Independence: Does the Oil Boom Offer a Second Chance for Sustainable Development?" *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 6, September 2005, pp. 859-876.

## *Conclusion*

To balance out the interests of Russia, China and the U.S., India needs to find a significant place in the multi-vector foreign policy of Kazakhstan. Further, India has to make the maximum efforts to forge better ties with Kazakhstan, propagating the hope that the two countries will help each other in bad times. A country like India should focus primarily on its soft power, i.e., Bollywood when it comes to engagement with the Kazakh population. It is important here to note that actors like Jitendra, Raj Kapoor, Mithun Chakraborty are enormously popular in Kazakhstan, and India should harness this cultural capital to wield power in the international arena. There is always complex interdependence and mutual tensions between states, which result in mutual deterrence, as seen in the Cold War era. Therefore, both countries can pave the way for economic, cultural and social development using diplomacy as a tool and trade as a means.

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