

Initiatives of the Recent Past between India and Eurasia

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Introduction

Eurasia is considered the largest continent, by some, as it is identified by its vastness, which encompasses Europe and Asia. Eurasia as such is not a new idea. Though Eurasia has emerged over a long period of time, there is no clear demarcation of its shared international understanding of what actually constitutes the Eurasian region. Many countries have evinced interest in the region in the recent past. The ever-growing might of China and the challenges it poses in the region made the USA rethink its strategic commitments to Eurasia.

With Russia's influence on the wane and the Ukraine war continuing unabated without any truce in sight, China's growing assertiveness in India's neighbourhood, be it in Afghanistan, Bhutan, and its expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative have put her in a position of influence in the region.¹ China has now become a major player in Eurasia. The efforts of China to pool its full potential in asserting its influence across Eurasia is there for everyone to see.

India has consistently focused over the past 30 years on improving its ties with the countries in the Eurasian region, in general, and Central Asian countries in particular. Needless to add here that traditionally, India had close ties with the countries in the region and it had sustained momentum since then. A major push India could make was in 2021 when there was a sustained momentum in India's traditionally close ties with Russia and other countries in the Eurasian region. There were regular exchanges and visits between India and Eurasian countries to improve relationships in different spheres. The Indian External Affairs Minister (EAM) visited Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Georgia for bilateral meetings as well as to attend multilateral events. During his visit to Georgia on July 9–10, 2021, EAM handed over the holy relic of St. Queen Ketevan to the Georgian side.

Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Vladimir Norov visited India on February 24–25, 2021, and India Minister of State Meenakashi Lekhi visited Uzbekistan from September 23–26, 2021. These visits and exchanges between India and countries in the Eurasian region cemented our mutual understanding and relationship.²

The negative impacts of the pandemic in 2021–22 did not deter the forward march of India in 2021–22. India could witness sustained momentum in its traditionally close ties with Russia and other countries in the Eurasian region. Bilateral cooperation was reinforced by intensive engagements under the UN, BRICS, SCO, G-20, CICA, and initiatives like the India-Central Asia Dialogue.

During 2021–22, visits of the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, to India for the 21st India–Russia Annual Summit and the holding of the first India–Russia 2+2 Dialogue of Foreign and Defence Ministers, as well as the 20th meeting of the India–Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation in New Delhi on December 6, 2021, were successful. There were two telephone conversations between the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President in 2021.

There were a number of regular high-level exchanges between India and Russia at the ministerial and senior official levels, including a number of virtual meetings during 2021. There was an official exchange of visits by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to India from April 5–6, 2021, and the Indian EAM visited Russia from July 6–7, 2021.

Likewise, there were active engagements with the countries in the Eurasian region. For example, the Indian EAM visited Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Armenia, and Georgia for bilateral meetings as well as to attend multilateral events. It is to be noted that the Indian Prime Minister hosted the first ever India-Central Asia Summit virtually on 27 January 2022, which was attended by the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Republic of Uzbekistan, coincided with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries.³ These regular exchanges during 2021–22 took India's relationship with the countries in the Eurasian region to greater heights.

The EAM addressed the Sixth Meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) States held in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, from October 11–12, 2021. India's thoughts on advancing security and cooperation in the Eurasian region, such as on the menace of terrorism and the situation

in Afghanistan.⁴ These developments showcases initiatives of India in furthering its interests in Eurasia.

In 2021, India has made efforts to develop its Eurasian strategy during its Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, where India's National Security Advisor and his counterparts from Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, Russia, and China are expected to join the discussion. But Pakistan and China skipped the meeting. India can understand the reluctance on the part of Pakistan to engage with India on Afghanistan, which brings out the persistent problem with Islamabad in shaping a new Eurasian strategy.

Developing Eurasian policy

According to a school of thought, India must focus on the same lines as Japan and South Korea in developing our Eurasian policy. It is stressed that if India's new maritime geopolitics is all about taking forward Indo-Pacific initiatives, Eurasia is all about how we calibrate our continental strategy. It is high time India comes up with an integrated approach to set a strong foothold in Eurasia, overcoming many contradictions in its path between and among the USA, Europe, Russia, China, Iran, and the Arab Gulf. It is argued that India's greater strategic activism in the region would result in opportunities opening up in all directions in Eurasia.

If we go through the annual report of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, for 2022–23, we can find that a lot of developments took place in 2022 when our Prime Minister hosted the first ever India-Central Asia Summit virtually on January 27, 2022, which coincided with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the Central Asian countries. In April 2022, our President, Ramnath Kovind, paid a State visit to Turkmenistan, which was the first-ever visit of an Indian President to an independent Turkmenistan. In July 2022, the Indian External Affairs Minister visited Uzbekistan to take part in the meeting of the SCO Council of Foreign Ministers; in September 2022, a 29-member defence delegation of India led by an Additional Secretary, Department of Defence Production (DDP), Ministry of Defence, Government of India, visited Armenia in order to hold negotiations with the Armenian Ministry of Defence. During this visit, contracts worth more than USD 350 million were signed between the Armenian side and the Indian companies.

In 2022, dignitaries from Eurasian countries descended on India. In June, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Adil Tursunov

paid a working visit to India; the First Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus, Sergei Aleinik, visited India on August 5 to co-chair the 7th round of Foreign Office Consultations in New Delhi. Later in November 2022, the then Foreign Minister of Belarus, Vladimir Makei, visited India to co-chair the 11th meeting of the India-Belarus Inter-governmental Commission on Trade, Economy, Industry, Science, Technology, and Culture. These high-level visits helped to move ahead in multilateral relations and forge a strong relationship between India and Eurasian countries. India has been making headway in a constant way through its engagement with the Eurasian countries.

On July 4, 2022, the 8th session of the India-Armenia Inter-Governmental Commission was held in Yerevan when the Armenian delegation led by its Foreign Minister Mirzoyan signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of India and the Government of the Republic of Armenia regarding Indian grant assistance for “High Impact Community Development Projects.” The Indian delegation was led by Secretary West, who also inaugurated the Mahatma Gandhi Centre at the Yerevan State Medical University, developed by the Mission from Aid to Eurasia assistance.⁵

Culturally too, India had put its imprint in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, when the ‘Best of India’ Exhibition, with the participation of more than 60 Indian companies, was organised in cooperation with the Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO) from September 2–12, 2022, and in Ganja from September 17–25, 2022. An exclusive Fashion Show presenting “Indian Creativity on Ramp” was also organised on August 31, 2022, at the JW Marriott Absheron, Baku. Indian companies participated in the Inter-Food Azerbaijan Exhibition from May 18–20, 2022; in the Oil and Gas Exhibition from June 1–3, 2022; and in the Baku Build Exhibition from October 2022. The Mission facilitated the visit of 10 representatives of pharmaceutical companies as well as pharmaceutical regulatory bodies from Azerbaijan to participate at iPHEX-22 from September 21–23, 2022, in Noida. The MD and CEO of ONGC Videsh Ltd. visited Baku in October 2022 to participate in the 15th Verona Eurasian Economic Forum. All these events throughout the year 2022 showcase India’s initiative in extending its trade, commerce, and culture with Azerbaijan.⁶

In 2022, people-to-people and cultural connections and various other activities helped further strengthen between India and Tajikistan. As part of the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of India-Tajikistan diplomatic relations, the Indian Embassy in Dushanbe organised a series of three concerts of Indian music and dance in the parks of Dushanbe. An Indian Film Festival was also organised to celebrate this milestone.

A Friendship Run was also organised by the Embassy and the Tajik Youth Committee on November 20, 2022, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Indian independence and the 31st anniversary of Tajik independence. These events cemented people-to-people contact and further strengthened historic, cultural, and civilizational ties. In November, 2022, a nine-member India delegation participated in the 37th Plenary of the Eurasian Group on Anti-Money Laundering and Combating Terrorism Financing (EAG) held in Dushanbe.⁷

The other country in Eurasia with which India has forged a warm and close relationship is Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov participated virtually in the first India-Central Asia Summit on January 27, 2022. He stressed the need for the creation of Eurasian transport corridors through Central Asia to marine terminals in the Indian Ocean. He also called for setting up a Central Asia-India Medical Association and the creation of an energy bridge between “Central Asia and India”.⁸ There is a need to take these activities forward with the intention of ensuring fruition within a timeframe.

During 2022, an Indian delegation participated in the three plenary meetings of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) held in February, June, and October. India also participated in the plenary meetings of the Eurasian Group on Combating money laundering (EAG) held in Tashkent from 30 May-3 June 2022, and the Asia Pacific Group on money laundering (APG), held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in July 2022.⁹ As we move ahead in these meetings, we can form a close-knit group and integrate each other in order to find tangible solutions to the issues plaguing our countries in the region.

The Development Partnership portfolio (or Technical and Economic Cooperation), which constitutes India’s aid to various countries, continues to be the focus and priority, with the largest allocation in the Ministry’s budget. In FY 2022–23, of the total budget of Rs. 17250 crore, the Technical and Economic Cooperation Heads (TEC) outlay is 39.13 percent, or Rs. 6750 crore, of which Rs. 6043.77 crore (35.04 percent) is for grant programmes and Rs. 706.23 crore (4.09 percent) is for loans. Aid to Eurasian Countries: Rs. 140.00 crore; only 2.07 percent of the TEC allocation.¹⁰

Free trade agreement (FTA)

If we go by the reports of December 2023, and if we enter into a free trade agreement (FTA) between India and the five-member Eurasian Economic Union, we can expect a much-needed boost to India’s growing

clout in the region. India and the five-member Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU), led by Russia, with Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, are likely to soon begin negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) that is expected to boost New Delhi's exports to the region, particularly in areas such as engineering goods, electronics, and agriculture, making trade more balanced.¹¹ Though discussions were started in early 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they could not continue.

The discussions with EaEU were reflected in the Rajya Sabha (Indian Parliament) in early December 2023, when the Minister of State in the Ministry of Commerce, Government of India, replied: "A number of bilateral meetings have been held with EaEU to discuss the trade agreement. Draft texts and Terms of Reference (ToR) have been exchanged. EaEU's trade data from January 2022 onwards, necessary to determine the scope of the agreement and potential gains from the agreement, is awaited from EaEU."¹² The Eurasian Economic Union comprises the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Russia is not only the largest country in the bloc but also the biggest trade partner, with a share of 98 percent in 2022-23.¹³

Our relationship with Russia has seen exponential growth in 2022-23, when India's imports from Russia increased by 368 percent (year-on-year) to \$46.2 billion, primarily due to an increase in discounted oil purchases. Its exports in the same year were \$3.14 billion, down 3.3 percent. The trade deficit was \$43 billion in 2022-23.¹⁴ Jaishankar, the Indian External Minister, while appreciating the greater focus on exploring new opportunities, referred to the need for more balance and cooperation in different dimensions.¹⁵

In order to improve efforts on a regular basis to improve free-trade agreements, India sought Eurasian bloc trade data from the five Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) nations, as both sides intend to initiate discussions on a free-trade agreement (FTA). This is the input from the people who know about the issue.

If we take the five countries in the Eurasian Economic Union, out of the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, Russia is not only the largest country in the bloc but also the biggest trade partner, with a share of 98 percent in 2022-23. Russia being the strongest partner, strengthening the bilateral commercial relationship between India and Russia would go a long way in furthering trade among the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union.¹⁶

Conclusion

With the change in geopolitics in the region and the completion of two years of the Russia-Ukraine war and nearly 30,000 deaths in the Israel-Gaza war till the end of February 2023, it is difficult to predict what is in store in the realm of relations between India and Eurasia. China is expanding its hold on BRI to establish itself as the most powerful player in Eurasia and aiming to become a global power. The stakes are high for the region. While China is inching ahead in every conceivable sphere, India needs to make efforts to perform better by improving its GDP.

Russia being the largest country in Eurasia and India's long-standing relationship with Russia, which has stood the test of time for decades, is a silver lining in the dark clouds hovering in the region. Both China and Russia are engaged with Europe. Through BRI, China is spreading its tentacles in Europe, and Europe is also drawn closer to China. In this scenario, how Eurasia unfolds itself in the coming years is interesting to watch when we take into account the largest Russian stake in the Eurasian region.

In sum, Chinese influence in the region is a challenge for India. But it is hoped that India's efforts to strengthen itself strategically by addressing the contradictions and challenges while integrating its relationship with the Eurasian countries by way of regular engagements in the last three years show that there is considerable scope for furthering our cause in the region in terms of economy, culture, trade, and commerce.

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