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India's Defence Diplomacy In Central Asia: Nature And Challenges

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Abstract:

This paper examines India's defence diplomacy with Central Asian countries, focusing on their evolution and strategic significance. Central Asian Countries situated at the heart of Eurasia and often been the subject of power struggles among global powers due to their Geo-strategic location as it links the Asia with Europe. Apart from this, Central Asian region is also important because of its instability due to terrorism, drug trafficking and extremism. Over the past decade, India has expanded its military engagement with countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan through regular joint exercises, military training programmes to focus upon counter-terrorism, extremism. These exercises and programmes reflects defence cooperation between India and the Central Asian republics, particularly in the context of regional instability in Afghanistan and the evolving geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia.

This study traces the development of defence diplomacy of India and Central Asia from their initial stages to current time, highlighting their objectives and diplomatic implications. Central Asian States situated at middle of Eurasia and don't hold direct geographical linkages with India, so limited in scale compared of engagements India has with major powers, these military exercises, high level visits of defence cooperation etc serve as an important tool for security cooperation and defence diplomacy. This paper argues that India's defence diplomacy in Central Asia, though limited in scope, represent a strategically significant important tool to strengthen security ties, enhance regional stability, and reflect India's growing engagement in the Central Asian Republics.

Keywords: Defence Diplomacy, India, Central Asia, Security Cooperation, Counter-Terrorism Cooperation, Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Introduction:

Central Asia occupies a strategic position in Eurasia and hold importance for global and regional players, because it connects South Asia, Russia, China, Middle East and Europe. Central Asia has always hold important place in Indian defence diplomacy, particularly in the context of regional instability in Afghanistan, drug trafficking, extremism and the shifting geopolitical dynamics. In this context joint military exercises, military training programmes, high level visits have emerged as an important component in India's defence diplomacy.

Defence Diplomacy emerged in the post-Cold War period and the term defence diplomacy officially defined in the UK's 1998 Strategic Defence Review (SDR) White Paper. According to this paper defence diplomacy as the peaceful use of defence resources in positive way to achieve the outcome of bilateral and multilateral relationships. Defence diplomacy evolved from military diplomacy, military diplomacy focused primarily on the role of defence attaches and formal military representation while defence diplomacy emphasizes on defence dialogues, training and capacity building programme related to defence, defence industry cooperation, joint military exercises. Through these engagements, states seek to enhance cooperation and building trust. In this way defence diplomacy is very important tool to foster long term cooperation among states (Drab 2018, 59-61).

Defence diplomacy evolved as a global concept of security policy, its interpretation varies across state to state depending upon their strategic priorities. In this context India has its own strategic priorities and geopolitical dynamics. In case of India's defence diplomacy is a combination of military and civilian defence institutions it includes both coercive and cooperative dimensions. After the independence India's orientation was non-aligned, after the cold war era India shifted its approach and engaging more actively in regional and global security affairs. India's defence diplomacy operates through multiple instruments under coercive defence diplomacy India has limited military actions under the shadow of nuclear deterrence but under cooperative defence diplomacy India working on multiple levels such as joint military exercises, defence line of credit to partner countries, defence dialogues, track 1 engagements, multilateral naval exercises. Thus India reflects a blend of both coercive and cooperative engagement which representing its objective of advancing its strategic interests and partnership oriented policy (Thomas 2021,10-11).

In the context of Central Asia, India's defence diplomacy focused more upon cooperative engagement. Central Asia is important for India in the perspective of security reasons, particularly in the light of concerns of terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking. Given the Geo-strategic location of Central Asia and India's limited geographical access, the preferred approach for India is joint military exercises, dialogue, and capacity building. Central Asia remains a theatre of great power politics due to the competition among global powers, so India follows cooperative approach through bilateral and multilateral defence initiatives to secure its strategic interests.

Research Methodology:

This study is based upon qualitative research methodology to examine India's defence diplomacy in Central Asia. This study analyzes the evolution of defence cooperation of India with each Central Asian States to understand the nature and strategic significance of India's defence diplomacy, as well as the challenges in the region. This is primarily based on secondary sources, including books, journals, official documents, press releases. Additionally, the study follows descriptive and analytical approach to examine the evolution of India's defence diplomacy.

Literature Review:

The review of literature for this study is given below

Author explains defence diplomacy as a post-Cold War instrument that emphasizes on peaceful military engagement, trust-building, and long-term security cooperation (Drab 2018).

Author analyses defence diplomacy in the Indian context and distinguishes between its coercive and cooperative dimensions in advancing foreign policy objectives (Thomas 2021).

Author explains India-Kazakhstan relations have developed into a more structured strategic partnership, particularly in the areas of energy cooperation, uranium supply. He emphasizes that despite strong political ties and high-level visits, defence potential between the two countries remains underutilized. The author highlights Kazakhstan's strategic location, resource wealth, and growing regional influence as opportunities for India's deeper engagement in Central Asia (Sajjanhar 2013).

Author explains Kazakhstan's foreign policy through the lens of "multivectorism," describing it as a strategy of omni-enmeshment with this strategy Kazakhstan balance the relations with major powers like Russia, China, and the United States. The authors argue that this approach helps Kazakhstan to safeguard its sovereignty (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva 2020).

Author explains the Uzbekistan foreign policy under Islam Karimov as a form of "defensive self-reliance" and consistently prioritized sovereignty, and limited external dependence (Fazendeiro 2017).

Author examines the India and Uzbekistan defence partnership. He highlights that the relationship evolved from modest post-1992 cooperation into more structured strategic partnership such as initiatives of joint military exercises, high level visits, military training programmes. Author also explain the defence cooperation with angel of Afghan instability (Radjabov 2025).

Author examines the relationship of India and Tajikistan and explains the strategic and security cooperation among both nations particularly in the post-1996 context the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan. This paper highlights the geostrategic location of Tajikistan and its importance for India (Firdous 2017).

Author examines the relationship of India and Central Asia in security and defence cooperation. Author highlights that India is strategically cooperating in many fields but its remain limited due to the geographical constraints (Gupta 2022).

Author analyses security in Central Asia through Regional Security Complex Theory which explains that Central Asian region never operated as integrated security alliance instead it author described as a “security quasi-complex” which means the security concerns of Central Asia is not deeply interconnected in security regional framework (Burnashev 2015).

Apart from these books and articles this work is also based on the high level visits of countries, ministry of external affairs websites, international reports, bilateral agreements of India with each Central Asian Countries.

India’s Defence Diplomacy in Central Asia:

To understand the defence diplomacy of India towards central Asia, it is necessary to analyse the nature, and evolution of its defence relations with each central Asian country separately because Central Asian countries have not evolved into a unified security framework.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan occupies an important position due to its strategic significance and Kazakhstan has the largest economy in the region and represents 58% of the region’s total GDP. Kazakhstan follows multi-vector foreign policy and maintains balance diplomacy with other countries, this helps Kazakhstan to avoid over-reliance on any single power. Kazakhstan has pursued “omni-enmeshment” the meaning of this term is strategically engaging major powers such as Russia, China, the United States and regional players to prevent dependency (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva 2020, 978). Within this multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan has diversified its defence partnerships and India has emerged as an important partner in the domain of counter-terrorism, military training and joint exercises. So the bilateral framework of both countries based on mutual strategic interests and regional stability. India and Kazakhstan established diplomatic relations in 1992, India was among the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of Kazakhstan. Both nations elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2009 by adopted a Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership which set an foundation for defence and security cooperation (Sajjanhar 2013, 6). While earlier high-levels visits focused primarily over strategic and energy dimensions such as both countries signed an Agreement on Cooperation in Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy.

The direct focus on defence cooperation was witnessed during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, both sides reaffirmed their cooperation in counter-terrorism, military training, defence exchanges. The renewal of the agreement on uranium for peaceful purposes further reinforces strategic trust. The strengthening of defence and security dialogue was further expanded through regular military exercises, most notably joint exercise is KAZIND, initiated in 2016 and conducted

periodically to counter terrorism. After this India joined Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017 and Kazakhstan supported India, through the SCO under the framework of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) both countries work in the direction to combat extremism and separatism. In recent years, the trajectory of India and Kazakhstan in terms of defence cooperation has expanded beyond military exercises and high level meetings. Recently both nations organized a defence industry seminar in Astana to brought together India and Kazakh defence industries and officials to explore the opportunities for co-development , technology transfer. So these initiatives shows India and Kazakhstan working in long term strategic consolidation.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan holds important position in Central Asia, geographically it is located at the centre and its role in regional security is important for India. Uzbekistan foreign policy evolved with time, after the independence Uzbekistan pursued a model of “defensive self-reliance” under president Islam Karimov which focused on limited military blocs and minimizing external influence. After the death of president Islam Karimov Uzbekistan changed its foreign policy of isolationism to multi-vector foreign policy under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. This transition marked an important shift in strategic orientation of Uzbekistan with a great focus on strategic partnership with external players. Within this evolving framework India emerged as a significant defence partner. India-Uzbekistan defence partnership gradually evolved into a structured strategic partnership, which they officially declared in 2011, although defence engagement began in the late 1990s through high level visits and security consultations which gradually evolved to include structured counter-terrorism. Counter-terrorism cooperation further strengthened bilateral defence ties, particularly due to the instability in Afghanistan. Military training and education are also important area of cooperation among both countries for example Uzbek officers attending professional courses at the Indian Military Academy. Apart from this India and Uzbekistan established the Joint Working Group(JWG) on Defence which further boosted the defence cooperation of both nations and launched the joint military exercise Dustlik in 2019 and this exercise conducts periodically. These cooperation between both nations not only limited to formal agreements, but evolved in more structured partnership.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan holds particularly strategic importance for India due to its border proximity with Afghanistan and shares common concerns regarding terrorism, regional instability. Tajikistan foreign policy is multi-vector in nature and is balancing its relations with external powers. Tajikistan has security partnerships with major powers particularly with China and Russia. In Central Asia, Tajikistan has the least military capabilities, however, it remain strategically important in terms of security due to its geographical proximity with Afghanistan and it is the gateway for drugs moving from Golden Crescent (it officially comprises Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, these countries produce illicit opium). So in this context Tajikistan is very important for India and its regional stability. India was one among the nations to recognize the sovereignty of Tajikistan after its independence in 1991.

However Tajikistan became central to India's strategic importance after the Taliban takeover in 1996. The strategic importance of Tajikistan reflected in active involvement in supporting of Northern Alliance and in the development of defence infrastructure in Tajikistan, particularly the refurbishment of Ayni Airbase near Dushanbe and the presence of India at Farkhor Air Base is historically significant because it was the first military base of India outside its territory. Over time this engagement expanded through defence training, capacity building and regular security consultations. Apart from this both nations formed Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation in 2002 and another Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism formed in 2003 for combating international terrorism, and recently India and Central Asian countries formed Joint Working Group on Chabahar Port in 2021 to handle regional security and connectivity.

Thus India and Tajikistan defence diplomacy strengthened with time in response to evolving regional realities.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan follows multi-vector foreign policy and it has heavily reliance on Russia and balancing role with China and India and NATO to address regional instability, border security and extremism. The military doctrine of Kyrgyzstan emphasis on internal stability, counter-terrorism and border protection. This doctrine also acknowledges the shifting in great-power dynamics in Central Asia. In this context Kyrgyzstan seeks to diversify its partnership, although it maintained its traditional relation with Russia but it also engaging with other actors including India particularly through joint military exercises such as Khanjar initiated in 2011 to strengthened their defence ties and to combat terrorism. Within this broader framework, India has emerged as reliable partner of Kyrgyzstan since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. This partnership strategically upgraded after the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 and 2019, these visits reflect the importance of Kyrgyzstan. Over time this relationship strengthened defence collaboration of both nations expand in more areas such as Khanjar joint military exercise conducts periodically, training programmes for Kyrgyz personnel in Indian defence institutes, the creation of the Joint Working Group on Defence in 2023, indicates that bilateral defence cooperation has move towards the more structured strategic engagement.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's foreign policy is largely shaped by its doctrine of "permanent neutrality" which was recognized by the United Nations in 1995. Since then Turkmenistan keeps its involvement limited in military blocs and international conflicts. It focus more on safeguarding its internal stability and sovereignty. Within the framework of Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality doctrine, India's relationship with Turkmenistan on security and defence gradually evolved as compared to other Central Asian Countries. Since 2014 both countries gradually strengthened cooperation in areas such as military capacity building, counter-terrorism. The visit of Indian Prime Minister in 2015 marked an important phase in the relationship of both states, this visit enhanced strategic, economic cooperation.

India has supported the professional development of Turkmen armed forces through the ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation) under a 2015 Defence Cooperation Agreement. Although defence cooperation remains limited as compared to other Central Asian Countries, however the cooperation is gradually strengthening with Turkmenistan's neutrality-based foreign policy.

Challenges to India's Defence Diplomacy in Central Asia:

India's defence diplomacy in Central Asia has strengthened gradually through joint exercises, training programmes, and high level meetings. However, the relation of India and Central Asian Countries and their engagement in defence cooperation are shaped by structural and geopolitical constraints inherent to the region. While bilateral cooperation between India and Central Asia has created visible momentum, even though broader regional environment puts limits that influence the growth of India's defence partnerships.

One major structural challenge arises from the nature of Central Asia is regional coordination. The region does not function as a unified regional security community. Instead, security coordination among the five states remains limited and largely based on nationally focused. As Rustam Burnashev argues, Central Asia can be understood as a "security quasi-complex," where interstate security interdependence is weak and regional structuring remains underdeveloped (Burnashev 2015, pp. 110–111). So its important for India's defence deplomacy to be based on bilateral relations rather than integrated regional mechanism bilateral engagement offers flexibility, it reduces the possibility of broader regional institutionalisation. This defence diplomacy clearly visible in India and Central Asia's engagement. A second challenge is rooted in the domestic political structures of Central Asian states, the regime of Central Asia is authoritarian in nature so security decision-making in the region is often closely linked to elite-level considerations. In such systems, defence partnerships are approached are shaped by concerns regarding sovereignty, political sensitivity, and internal control. This political systems limits expansion and the trust of cooperation is gradually enhancing, rather than large-scale military integration.

Geopolitical competition further complicates India's engagement. Central Asia occupies an important position in the Eurasian geopolitics due to its location. Russia continues to maintain significant military and institutional influence in the region both Russia and Central Asian Nations have soviet legacy, while China's expanding economic and strategic presence has reshaped regional dynamics. India's defence diplomacy therefore works within an already structured strategic environment. This does not exclude India, but it requires a structured and carefully balanced approach.

Geography presents another structural limitation. India lacks direct land access to Central Asia and depends on indirect connectivity routes, this affects logistical coordination, defence-industrial cooperation. So due to lack of geographical direct link, India faces higher strategic costs in maintaining defence ties with the region.

Finally, the increasing security concerns related to Afghanistan, terrorism, and external threats continue to influence regional priorities. While these shared concerns create opportunities for cooperation, they also reinforce cautious security postures among Central Asian governments, limiting the scope of deeper military commitments.

These structural, domestic, geopolitical, and logistical constraints shape the character of India's defence diplomacy in Central Asia. India's engagement has therefore evolved as incremental, confidence-building, and capacity-oriented rather than expansive or alliance-driven. The trajectory reflects not weakness, but adaptation to the specific realities of the regional security environment.

Conclusion:

India's defence diplomacy in Central Asia reflects gradual expansion in strategic cooperation yet it is meaningful because it is based on regional dynamics of Central Asia. India is cooperating through many ways such as joint military exercises, institutional dialogues, defence agreements, military training programmes. However the nature of Central Asian Countries structured through domestic politics and external geopolitical dynamics. So India's engagement has not evolved as alliance-building or hard power projection, but as strategic defence diplomacy based on mutual respect, and trust-building. Overall, India's defence diplomacy is balancing in nature which balances the ambition with structural realities. India is focusing on long-term partnership rather than competing for dominance in the region.

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