



Vivekananda International Foundation

India-Tajikistan Relations: The Security Factor

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About the Author

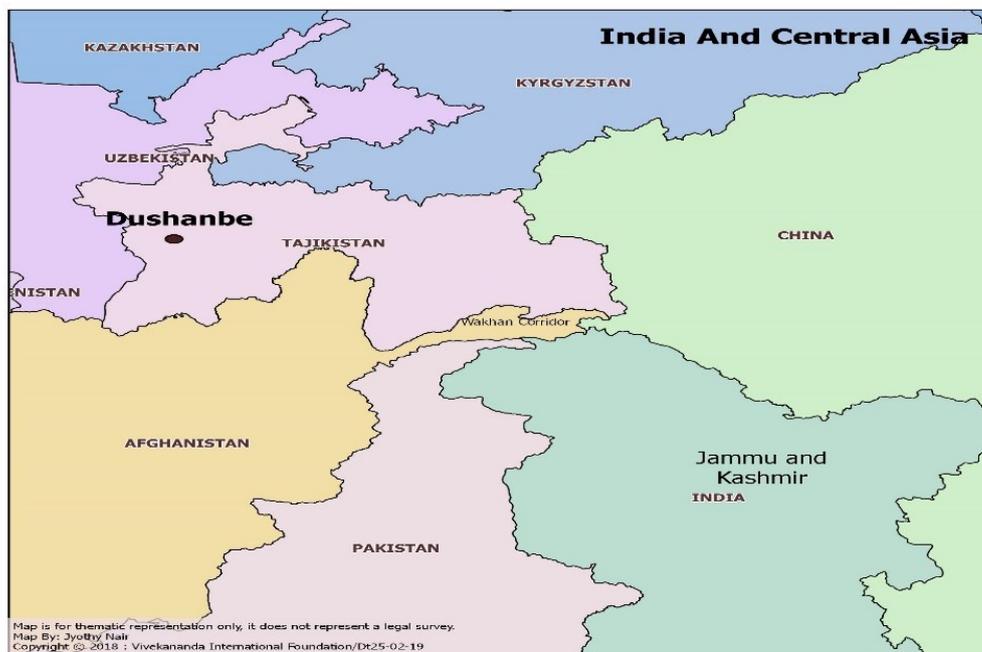


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India-Tajikistan Relations: The Security Factor

Introduction

India and Tajikistan share great historical and cultural relations. Tajikistan was a part of Kushana and Persian Empires which had close cultural linkages with the Indian subcontinent. During the Islamic rule in India, Persian language and Sufism from Turkestan got assimilated into the Indian society which contributed to the base of cultural and linguistic cooperation in the modern times. Today, Tajikistan is an extended neighbour of India and is geo-strategically significant for India's Central Asia policy. Lack of direct connectivity between the two countries has been the biggest hurdle in developing cooperation between them. However, constant efforts and common security challenges arising from the region, bonded India and Tajikistan together in their security arena. Tajikistan shares long and porous border with Afghanistan and is always been on the verge of spread of extremism and terrorism in its territory. India also faces direct threat from radical forces being supported and propagated by Pakistan within its territory and in Afghanistan as well. Therefore, India-Tajikistan cooperation in security and defence sector has been fundamental for expanding their political and economic relations.



Considering the importance of the region, former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee paid an official visit to Tajikistan in 2003. This was the first-ever visit by any Indian Prime Minister to Tajikistan. During this visit 'Extradition

Treaty’ and ‘Agreement of Cooperation in field of Terrorism’ was signed which is considered to be a milestone in bilateral security cooperation. This high-level visit was followed by former President Pratibha Patil’s and former Vice President Hamid Ansari’s visits to Dushanbe in 2009 and 2013, respectively. Consistent bilateral high-level visits between the two countries have given impetus to the comprehensive cooperation. The Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has visited India several times since 1995. His recent state visit to India took place in December 2016¹. The Tajik President’s visit to India in 2012 is considered as a landmark in Indo-Tajik bilateral relations as both countries unfolded their bilateral relations to the level of ‘Strategic Partnership’ in order to enhance cooperation on an extensive scale of areas including political, cultural, economy and trade, social welfare, defence, security, tourism and science and technology.

During his official visit to Central Asian region in July 2015, Prime Minister Modi visited Tajikistan and leaders of both countries discussed ways to accelerate cooperation in the field of defence, connectivity and in eradicating menace of terrorism. During the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit in Tashkent in June 2016, Prime Minister Modi met President Emomali Rahmon again and invited him to visit India. President Rahmon visited India in December 2016 and had a substantive meeting with Prime Minister Modi, during which the progress of bilateral relations was re-evaluated and renewed. Both leaders recently met with each other during the 18th SCO Summit in Qingdao, China and reviewed bilateral cooperation and regional security and political situations. In October 2018, Indian President Sri Ramnath Kovind along with a high-level delegation paid an official visit to Tajikistan and met with his Tajik counterpart; defence and security remained the key points of discussion between the two leaders.

These bilateral visits and discussions have led to the emergence of a better bilateral cooperation framework between the two countries in spite of missing direct connectivity. India is working towards bridging this gap of connectivity by investing in the development of Chabahar port in Iran and International North South Corridor (INSTC). India’s multi-billion humanitarian and developmental assistance to Afghanistan is also intended to stabilise the country as without a stabilise Afghanistan India’s aspirations of connecting with Central Asia cannot be achieved.

India’s apprehension over the dissemination of Islamist extremism from Pakistan and Afghanistan has been an issue which brought India and Tajikistan together on this front since Taliban rule. Moreover, the US-led NATO forces withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and afterwards led to an uncertainty surrounding Afghanistan which has further paved the way for collective security imperatives as a priority for both India and Tajikistan. Pakistan’s militants extended

their support to the militant groups of Central Asia such as ‘Hizb-ut-Tahrir’ (HT) and ‘Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’ (IMU) which has made Tajikistan cautious because it shares borders with Afghanistan and is separated from Pakistan only through a 14-km long territory known as Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan.² Moreover, defence sector of Tajikistan is still in an infantile stage, therefore, Russian Federation keeping its own interest of curbing extremism which could probably spread to its territory, has an agreement with Tajik Government to secure the Tajik-Afghan border. Similarly, India and Tajikistan have common security challenges for continuing act as a team on the counter terrorism front keeping aside geopolitical pressures and hesitations aside.

Diplomatic and Political Relations

Diplomatic ties between India and Tajikistan were established in August 1992.³ India’s ‘Look North Policy’ in 1990’s and ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ launched in 2012 reflected India’s strategic interest in the Central Asian region. However, bilateral relations did not gather much momentum in the recent past. This region is considered being of high priority by almost all the governments in India, but India’s visibility in the political and economic spheres of Central Asia has been undermining.

Convergence of economic, cultural and security interests between India and Tajikistan have led to the development of cooperation in the recent years. Consecutive visits from both sides accelerated the momentum of bilateral diplomatic and political relations. There are four key bilateral consultative mechanisms through which bilateral cooperation between Indian and Tajikistan is reviewed and discussed:-

1. *Foreign Office Consultations* (Third round of discussions held in Dushanbe in November 2016),
2. *Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism* (Third session took place in Dushanbe in June 2017),
3. *Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation*, (10th meeting of the Commission took place on 28-29th January 2019 in Dushanbe) and
4. *Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation* (Sixth meeting held in New Delhi in August 2017).

In 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi’s visit to five Central Asian Republics is considered to be a fresh attempt to rejuvenate the age-old cultural and historical ties with this region. Moreover, it remained crucial as it was the second visit by any Indian Prime Minister after PM Vajpayee. Both countries signed agreements to

enhance cooperation in the field of cultural and educational collaboration. Subsequently, in December 2016, when Tajik President visited India, bilateral cooperation between the two countries reached new heights with the signing of three significant documents. One of the most significant agreements signed during his visit was on ‘Cooperation in Combating Terrorism and Extremism’. Another agreement on exchange of financial intelligence on money laundering and terror financing was signed as it had direct links with terrorism. Both sides considered the need for monitoring these aspects as well. An agreement on ‘Avoidance of Double Taxation’ to promote economic and business exchanges was also signed. In addition to this, an announcement was made that a *Bilateral Investment Treaty* to enhance economic partnership has also commenced.⁴ The Indian President visited Tajikistan in October 2018 and signed MoUs and Agreements of Cooperation in Peaceful Use of Space Technology for Development, Disaster Management, Renewable Energy, Youth Affairs, Agricultural Research and Education and Research on Unani Medicine. During his visit, a MoU between the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi and the ‘Strategic Research Centre under the President of Tajikistan’ was also signed.

In January 2019, the Minister of External Affairs of India, Mrs. Sushma Swaraj participated in the first India-Central Asia dialogue at Foreign Minister Level held in Samarkand Uzbekistan, which included Foreign Ministers of five Central Asian countries; Afghanistan’s Foreign Minister also participated as a special invitee. Participating countries discussed ways to boost comprehensive cooperation with an emphasis on exploring ways to increase economic involvement of India in development and business sector of Central Asia. Moreover, developing connectivity possibilities between India and Afghanistan and Central Asia to further enable smooth trade and economic activity between the participating countries was also on the agenda. Mrs. Swaraj, while describing, how the development partnership of India’s with other countries has been crucial for the development of cooperation, stated, “*I proposed to set up India-Central Asia Development Group at G-to-G level to take forward this partnership*”.⁵ Consistent efforts of India to connect with Central Asian region, economically, culturally, politically will surely accelerate the cooperation in the coming years.

Defence and Security

Tajikistan, strategically located at the crossroad of Central and South Asia, shares almost 1,400 km. of border with Afghanistan beholds significance for India’s geopolitical and foreign policy objectives, especially when the Taliban took over Kabul in the mid-1990s. There were clear evidences of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency’s support to the Taliban, and even Pakistan considered

Taliban as a legitimate regime in Afghanistan. Consequently, both India and Tajikistan found convergence of interest at this time to cooperate to fight against these forces by extending their support to anti-Taliban force, *the Northern Alliance*. India and Tajikistan share similar concerns about extremism and terrorism which threaten these two secular and multi-ethnic states. Therefore, trends and complexities in Afghanistan and in Pakistan have security implications for both the countries. If Afghanistan again falls to radical elements, Tajikistan would be the next target and it would have spillover effects on other CARs. Likewise, radical influence in Afghanistan has strategic implications for India as well. On one hand it would threaten Indian investments in Afghanistan, and on the other it would upsurge cross border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir.⁶

Pakistan's unbending position on sponsoring terrorism and providing safe havens to radical forces, US forces withdrawal and resurgence of Taliban in Afghanistan are the factors which would have serious security implications for India and Tajikistan. In this background, both countries underscored the need of enhanced mutual assistance to deal with the impending security challenges in the region. They ensured to work together towards combating terrorism and extremism through exchanging information, data and monitoring routes and finances of these radical forces. India and Tajikistan are also committed to develop dialogue between their security agencies along with piloting regular meetings at Foreign Ministers level to discuss the regional security issues. Moreover, synchronised efforts within the framework of the JWG on Combating International Terrorism and Defence Cooperation have also been a significant development of their bilateral relations.⁷

India ran a military hospital at the Farkhor Air Base (which made it the fourth country after US, Russia and Germany in having a foreign military base) during the late 1990s near the Afghan border in Tajikistan, which was used to provide medical assistance to the injured Northern Alliance fighters.⁸ However, when NATO established the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission, India closed the hospital at Farkhor. In 1999, two serious events which threatened the internal and external security apparatus of India were the Kargil War and the Hijack of IC-814 Airplane, respectively. After these events, realising the strategic importance of Tajikistan for its own security implications, India focused towards bridging the gap of cooperation. Former Prime Minister Vajpayee's visit to Tajikistan was somehow intended towards achieving this goal.

In 2003-2010, India helped in the refurbishment of the Ayni Base located some 17 km from Dushanbe in Tajikistan spending around US\$ 70 million. Some media houses, mainly Pakistani and Chinese, speculated that India's military presence at Ayni Air Base was directed towards obtaining a 'strategic foothold' in

Central Asia and due to this, it helped Tajikistan refurbish Ayni by building a control tower, three new hangars and an extended runway. Pakistan, fearing a possible encirclement by India, registered its serious concern to the Tajik Embassy in Islamabad regarding this issue for which Tajik Government ensured that India would not use Ayni Air Base for its military purpose. Russia also opposed India's military deployment in Tajikistan. On several occasions, the Tajik Government has ruled out any possible Indian military deployment in its territory.⁹ The refurbished Ayni Air Base with state of the art navigational and defence technology was formally opened in September 2010. Its runway was extended to approximately 3,200 meters with the intention that all types of aircraft could land there.¹⁰

The Indian President Ram Nath Kovind visited the Ayni Air Base during his October 2018 visit, which indicated India's interest in expanding its presence at this base. Almost 150 Indian personnel have been posted in Ayni. Kovind met the Indian Air Force contingent at the base. With India's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and its keenness on stabilising Afghanistan in collaboration with Central Asian states and Russia besides expanding the counter-terror partnership, boosting facilities at Ayni will be of added advantage.¹¹



President Shri Ram Nath Kovind at Ayni Air Base, Tajikistan, October 2018
(Source: Facebook Page, President of India)

Tajikistan being a member of Russia-led CSTO is constrained to provide any military base to any other country. However, since the collapse of Soviet Union, on the request from Tajik Government, Russia has been solely responsible for guarding the Tajik-Afghan border. Russia guards the Tajik Skies and has 201st Motorised Rifle

Division stationed at three locations; near Dushanbe, Qurghonteppa and Kulob (close to Afghan border). According to a 2012 bilateral government agreement signed between Tajikistan and Russia, the Russian troops would remain at the base until 2042.¹² Russia's objection to India's request to operate the Ayni Air Base was directed towards its recalcitrance as India proceeded closer to USA. China and Pakistan has serious protestation regarding India's military presence in Tajikistan because China shares border with Tajikistan and Pakistan is separated from territory with only 14-km stretch of Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan. Having disputes with both China and Pakistan and having achieved significance military cooperation with Tajikistan is crucial for India's geopolitical strategy in the region, however, it heavily depends on India's maintaining close relations with Russia. Indian interest in renovating the Ayni base have not materialised till now. India has not been permitted to use the Ayni as it is a foreign military. However, looking at the state of events that have been folding in Afghanistan in recent time, India could get the opportunity to use this airbase for military deployment.

Defence cooperation between India and Tajikistan is considered one of the main pillars of their bilateral relations. India provides military training to a substantial number of military, officers and cadets from Tajikistan at its National Defence College and Indian Military Academy. India also setup India-Tajikistan Friendship Hospital near Qurganteppe, Tajikistan where Indian doctors and medical staffs are engaged in providing medical care to the civil and arms forces patients. India has also extended material help and contribution to the military and security infrastructure of Tajikistan.

Although, India and Tajikistan are secular nations, they constitute a substantial number of Muslim populations and therefore, are highly vulnerable to the rise of threat of terrorism, religious fundamentalism and radicalism to regional peace and security. Keeping this as a matter of high priority, the Indian President, during his visit to Tajikistan in October 2018 met with the Tajik President, and the leaders of both countries stressed on increasing cooperation, which is crucial for eliminating the threat of terrorism in all its forms and expressions. Condemning the terror sponsoring, financial backing, assistance and safe haven to the radical forces anywhere in the world; both leaders ensured their keenness to adopt the 'Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism' by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and reiterated obligations to combat the three evil forces of terrorism, extremism and radicalisation through bilateral cooperation. In this context, close cooperation between the security agencies and security councils of the two countries was highlighted. Both leaders displayed their consummation on the useful discussions that took place during the meeting of Joint Working Group on Defence Cooperation held at Dushanbe on July 26th 2018. It was also noted that long-

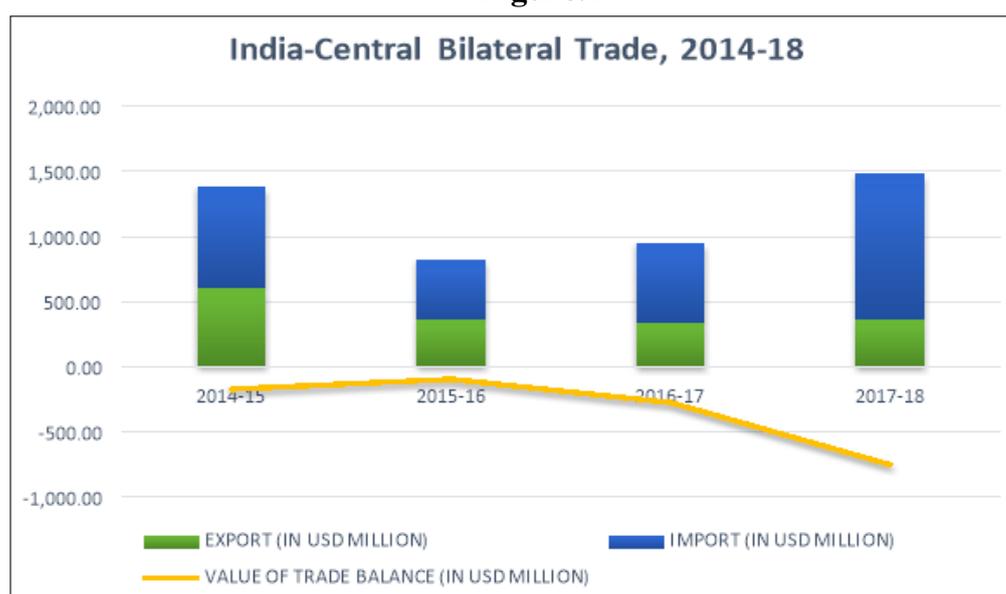
term cooperation in the defence sector was essential for prominently contributing towards safeguarding regional peace and stability. President Emomali Rahmon appreciated India's support in infrastructural development and capacity building of Tajikistan especially in the defence and security field because it is critical for defying upcoming threats and challenges.¹³

In this meeting, both leaders reverberated convergence of their interests in upholding peace and stability in Afghanistan. They also mutually extended their support to the Afghan led, Afghan controlled and Afghan owned peace process which must include the all sections of the Afghan society. The alarming security situation in Afghanistan and the violence and disruptions caused by the fundamentalist groups pose severe concern for India and Tajikistan to continue their engagements through both bilateral and multilateral framework to stabilise Afghanistan. The President of Tajikistan also articulated his admiration for the constructive role that India played in outspreading development assistance, building social and economic infrastructure, parliamentary institutions and human resource development and capacity building in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Economic and Trade Relations

In the absence of direct land connectivity between India and Tajikistan, the common route for passage of goods and materials from India to Tajikistan and vice-versa is through the sea, to the Bandar Abbas port of Iran and from there via Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan by land and then to Tajikistan.¹⁵ However, India's trade with this region is still negligible.

Figure.1

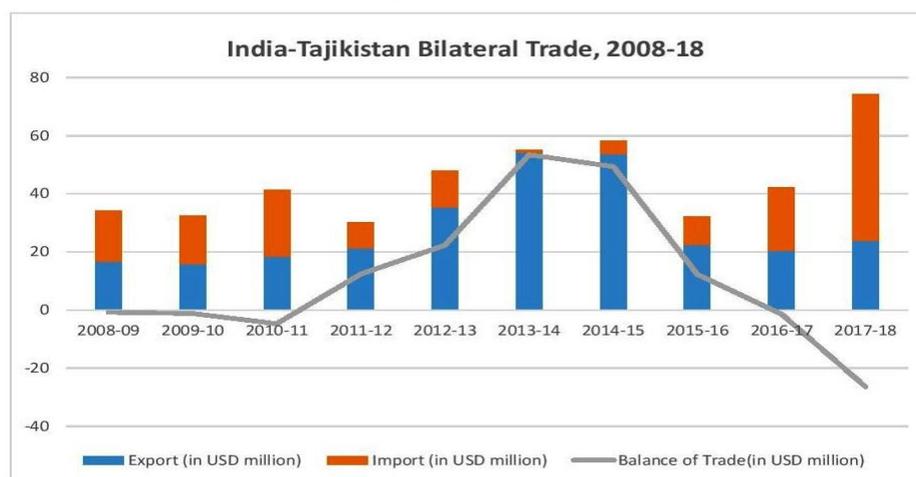


(Source: Export Import data bank, MOC, Govt. of India: <http://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/> Copyright©2018: Vivekananda International Foundation/Dt23-1-19.

Graph by Pravesh Kumar Gupta)

Figure 1 indicates that India's trade with all the five Central Asian countries is miniscule. However, it has been observed that in the recent years due to Indian Government's involvement in Central Asia specially to promote trade and investments would be beneficial in increasing India's trade with the region. If the India-Afghanistan Air freight corridor extends up to Tajikistan it would certainly enhance the bilateral trade.

Figure.2



Source: Export Import data bank, MOC, Govt. of India :<http://commerce-app.gov.in/eidb/>
 Copyright © 2018 : Vivekananda International Foundation/Dt23-01-19
 Graph By: Pravesh Kumar Gupta

As it is evidently discernible from the above figures that India-Tajikistan trade has been slightly increased in 2017-18 as compared to 2008-09, however, trade deficit of India has also increased in 2017-18. India's trade with Tajikistan as compared to its total trade is substantially insignificant. Indian exports to Tajikistan mainly constitute pharmaceuticals, clothing and apparels, steel and iron and meat and related products. Tajik exports to India are mainly minerals and food-related products. India mainly imports ores, slag and ash, aluminium and organic substances, cotton, medicinal oil and dry fruits. Bilateral trade potential could be achieved once India and Tajikistan develop a way forward for absence of direct connectivity.

China and Russia are two major trade partners of Tajikistan and Tajik economy is mainly based on its remittances received from Tajik citizens working abroad mainly in the Russia Federation. Tajikistan is a part of Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), but it had not helped it much to achieve economic self-sufficiency. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan faced severe civil war which ruptured its economy. However, after the end of civil war and monetary assistance that it received from International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian development Bank (ADB), World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and Islamic Development Bank (IDB) and heavy Chinese Investments helped it to revive its economy. India, on the other hand, is a flourishing

economy having heavy trade potential. However, lack of efforts in expanding trade with the Central Asian Republics (CAR s) has been the key reason for India's low visibility in the region. In recent times, the Indian Government is trying hard to achieve its strategic interest in the region by playing a crucial role in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan and also by opening continuous strategic dialogues with its Central Asian partners.

India's Assistance to Tajikistan

Over the period of time, as the geo-strategic prominence of Tajikistan accentuated from India's strategic point of view, it started getting involved more deeply in building comprehensive development partnerships with Tajikistan. India's development assistance to Tajikistan (almost completely as grants) gradually increased and reached more than one billion since 2006. This development assistance to Tajikistan mainly targeted towards development of power generation and education. In addition to this, India has also extended its development partnership with Tajikistan through disbursing budgetary loans and Lines of Credit (LOC).¹⁶

India extended its humanitarian assistance to Tajikistan during the Tajik Civil War by supplying food and related items. In 2015 and 2017, India granted 100,000 US dollars to Tajikistan as humanitarian assistance for relief from natural disasters. India gifted ten ambulances to various areas of Tajikistan in March 2018 for the improvement of medical facilities.¹⁷ In October 2018, a grant of 20 million US dollars was allocated to Tajikistan through an announcement made by the President of India for execution of mutually identified and viable development projects.¹⁸ Tajikistan is also one of the generously proportioned recipients of the ICCR (Indian Council of Cultural Relations) and ITEC (Indian Technical and Economical Cooperation) scholarship programmes outside South Asian region. Tajik applicants have received almost 1500 ITEC slots and 375 ICCR scholarships until now. For the financial year 2017-18, the Government of India provided sixty additional slots for customised training of Tajik experts in the field of remote sensing.¹⁹

Conclusion

The multidimensional relations that India and Tajikistan developed over the period of time are solely based on mutual trust, respect and confidence between them. However, India needs to play more robust role in economic and strategic spheres of Central Asia by adopting more pro-active Central Asia policy. In 2017, India and Tajikistan commemorated 25th anniversary of the establishment of their diplomatic relations which shows the level of commitments that both countries have for strengthening their bilateral relations. High-level visits from both sides and leadership meets on various multilateral forums, like the SCO provides auxiliary

prospects to enhance engagement in mutual fronts. Political, economic, cultural, military and security cooperation between India and Tajikistan has flourished in the recent years.

However, there is still a lot of potential for expansion and diversification of the bilateral cooperation, which needs to be exploited through consistent dialogue between the government machineries of both the countries and exchange of high-level visits. India and Tajikistan will be effectively impacted by the developments taking place in Afghanistan in the aftermath of peace talks with Taliban. Therefore, there is an imperative for both countries to be engaged with other Central Asian countries which share the same concern in order to handle the upcoming challenges in the region. India's engagements in the Central Asian region are likely to enhance through number of factors including, India's role in development of Chabahar Port and INSTC, its membership of the SCO, and increased bilateral relations with each of the CARs. Therefore, India is required to upgrade its Central Asia policy and cooperation with Tajikistan in all fields. This would clearly augment India's visibility in the regional political and security settings.

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About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

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