

India and Tajikistan: Towards a New Strategic Partnership

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Introduction

On September 3, 2012, India escalated ties with Tajikistan, a nation that shares its periphery with Afghanistan, to that of strategic partnershipⁱ after consultations between Dr. Manmohan Singh and President Emomali Rahmon were held in New Delhi during the latter's four-day visit to India. The two leaders discussed the ongoing political transition in Afghanistan, and were determined to intensify the counter-terrorism mechanism between the two countries.ⁱⁱ On the issue of terrorism, President Rahmon was in agreement with India that the perpetrators of crimes committed such as those that happened during the terrorist attack in Mumbai in November 2008, must be aggressively prosecuted.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to the text of the Joint Statement that was released, both the sides deliberated upon issues of international importance with regard to strategic relations and counter-terrorism. It thus reads:

“Reaffirming that international terrorism is a threat to global peace and security, the sides condemned those who support terrorism and underscored that those aiding, abetting and sheltering terrorists were as guilty of acts of terrorism as their actual perpetrators. They stressed the need to work jointly towards eliminating the menace of terrorism including exchange of information, data, financing of terrorism and related matters. They emphasized the

need for enhanced dialogue between security agencies. Both sides further emphasized the need for adoption of 'Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism' by the UN General Assembly in the near future. They agreed to continue consultations between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and to coordinate their efforts within the framework of the JWG on Combating International Terrorism in this regard. With the tragic losses suffered in the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai particularly in mind, both sides called for the active prosecution of the authors of such crimes and their accomplices, and urged that they be brought to justice expeditiously."^{iv}

"The sides discussed the situation in Afghanistan and the challenges emanating from the region, including the existence of safe havens and sanctuaries for terrorism and drug trafficking, and reaffirmed the importance of sustained peace and stability in the country, particularly, in the context of the proposed withdrawal of ISAF forces in 2014 from Afghanistan. The sides stressed that the issue of restoring peace and stability in Afghanistan was inseparably linked with regional security. The sides emphasized their support to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in establishing an independent, peaceful, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan. The sides emphasized the need to promote the process of restoration of peace in Afghanistan with participation of all sides concerned. The sides agreed that regional economic cooperation through implementation of infrastructure and other projects, proposed during the RECCA V Conference in Dushanbe (March 2012) and the Investment Summit in Delhi (June 2012) would play an effective role in the economic recovery of Afghanistan."^v

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It may be prudent to observe over here that the strategic partnership may have emanated primarily from Tajikistan's apprehension of the resurgence of the Taliban during recent times, and the possibility of their return to political power in Kabul after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014. As it has been mentioned earlier, Tajikistan shares its boundary with Afghanistan which has proved to be detrimental for the country in more ways than one.

Historically, diplomatic relations between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of India were established on August 24, 1992. In May 1994, India opened its diplomatic mission in Dushanbe and Tajikistan opened its embassy in New Delhi in June 2003. During recent times, regular exchanges of visits at the highest level have taken place. Former President Pratibha Patil visited Tajikistan in September 2009, former Prime Minister Vajpayee visited Dushanbe in November 2003 and President Rahmon visited India (for the fourth time) in August 2006. The two countries have consultative mechanisms such as (a) India-Tajikistan Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (b) Joint Working Group on Counter-Terrorism and (c) Foreign Office Consultations.^{vi} In July 2012, the External Affairs Minister of India, S.M. Krishna visited Tajikistan. His visit to Dushanbe was the first by an Indian External Affairs Minister in nine years. Strategic ties have grown stronger since 2002, especially on counter-terrorism and defence co-operation. The two countries have a joint working group on counter-terrorism. Further, Tajikistan, which shares over 1,400 km border with Afghanistan, faces threat from Taliban-linked terror groups like Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.^{vii}

During the current meeting, while there was barely any mention of the Ayni airfield, which India helped rebuilt, the two sides agreed that New Delhi would build a Friendship Hospital in southern Tajikistan for both military and civilian use. A joint statement, issued after the meeting, stated that "with the tragic losses suffered in the November, 2008, terrorist attacks in Mumbai particularly in mind, both sides called for active prosecution of the authors of such crimes and their accomplices and urged that they be brought to justice expeditiously."^{viii} The leaders also stressed the need to work jointly towards eliminating terrorism including exchange of information, data, financing of terrorism and related matters and emphasised the need for enhanced dialogue between security agencies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be stated that mutual interests of both the countries have been crucial in forging this strategic partnership. Not only is Central Asia an extremely volatile region but is also a decisive factor in international politics with the gradual withdrawal of international troops from the Afghan soil. The future of Afghanistan is at present a matter to reckon with especially in light of the recent resurgence of the Taliban, and it is in this context that Tajikistan emerges as an extremely important player in the area since it shares its borders with the former. India has for a very long time been trying to build inroads into Central Asia not only for economic but also for strategic purposes. Closer relations with Tajikistan would prove immensely beneficial in the long run if the changing politics of Central and South Asia is taken into account with a focus on the menace of terrorism emanating from groups such as the Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).

ⁱ "Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Republic of Tajikistan," Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, New Delhi, September 3, 2012, at <http://www.mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=190019983>, on September 4, 2012.

ⁱⁱ "India, Tajikistan to strengthen counterterrorism mechanism," *The Times of India*, New Delhi, September 4, 2012, at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-09-04/india/33581436_1_india-and-tajikistan-president-emomali-rahmon-ayni, on September 6, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} "Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Republic of Tajikistan," *op. cit.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} "India – Tajikistan Relations," *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, at <http://mea.gov.in/mystart.php?id=50044531>, on September 11, 2012.

^{vii} "Tajik-India Relations," *Embassy of the Republic of Tajikistan*, New Delhi, at <http://www.tajikembassy.in/tajik-india-relations.html>, on September 11, 2012.

^{viii} "India, Tajikistan to strengthen counterterrorism mechanism," *The Times of India*, *op.cit.*