
UNIT 11 INDIA AND CENTRAL AND WEST ASIA

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

Central Asia and West Asia are important regions in the present day world. The two regions together possess more than two thirds of the world's proven oil reserves and a considerable amount of natural gas, which are vital for the functioning of modern industrial society. Oil imports account for nearly two thirds of India's oil consumption and more than half of this comes from

this region (mainly the Persian Gulf). Hence, this area is crucial for India's energy supplies. Geographically, the two regions connect the Asian landmass to Europe and Africa and major trade routes crisscross them. Historically, they have been the entry point for people and cultures that have deeply influenced our civilisation and added to its rich tapestry. In recent times, this whole area is considered vulnerable to the rise of religious extremism and terrorism. This has serious implications for India in view of our 130 million Muslim populations and the ongoing militancy in Jammu and Kashmir. Pakistan's attempt to increase its influence in these countries adds to our concern. In view of their geographical proximity and historical linkages, the two regions are often referred to as India's extended neighbourhood. In spite of many commonalities, Central Asia and West Asia are two distinct regions and should be dealt with separately. This Unit examines India's relations with the two regions in several important aspects.

11.2 CENTRAL ASIA: A BACKGROUND

11.2.1 Geographical Setting

Central Asia mainly consists of the five republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (which will be the focus of the present unit), though geographical contiguity and ethnic\cultural affinities prompt some people to include Afghanistan, Mongolia and the Tibet and Xingjiang provinces of China as well. The above-mentioned five states emerged as independent entities on the international scene as a consequence of the Soviet disintegration in 1991. They have a total area of about 4 million square kilometers, which is considerably larger than India. But their combined population is just 55 million.

11.2.2 Economy

Apart from oil and natural gas, the region has been a major producer and exporter of agricultural products like cotton, wool, meat, animal skins and leather goods. It also has considerable deposits of minerals such as uranium, gold, silver, iron ore, coal, copper, zinc, lead and manganese among others. As part of the Soviet Union, the area witnessed impressive socio-economic progress. But the economic system was centralised and closely linked to the mainland Russia. The disruption of these ties and the emigration of experienced and trained managers, engineers, technicians and other professionals, who were mainly Russians, have created problems. All these countries are transition economies and going through the difficult process of liberalisation and privatisation. They welcome external participation in the region in terms of skilled manpower, technology and investment.

11.2.3 Polity and Society

A strong presidency, with a weak legislature and judiciary, dominates the political systems of all these countries. Press and political opposition are mostly ineffective. Democracy is yet to take roots. All the five states are grappling with the problem of national identities. There are attempts to create new identities based on religion or language. The region has witnessed a general revival of Islam. Except Tajikistan, all other states are Turkic speaking. But these Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkic movements are resisted because the present leadership would like to preserve the existing boundaries and the modernity acquired during the Soviet period. The countries of Central Asia went through more than a century of *Tsarist* Russian and then the Soviet rule. The preservation

of their newly acquired independence and territorial boundaries is the foremost priority for each one of them.

11.2.4 Geo-Strategic Importance

Because of its geo-strategic location at the crossroad of Russia, China, West Asia and Europe, and its hydrocarbon and other mineral resources, the region is witnessing an intense rivalry for influence among important global and regional powers, namely, the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India and Pakistan. This is often referred to as the “New Great Game”. Lack of an outlet to the sea makes these states vulnerable to intimidation from their neighbours, especially Russia, through which most of the existing trade and transit routes and oil pipelines pass. Search for alternative transit routes to minimise their dependence on Russia induces them to look towards their other neighbours. And the desire to reduce the influence of these neighbours, apart from the need of an economic and technological assistance, persuades these states to welcome the US and other Western powers.

11.3 INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

11.3.1 Historical Ties

India’s contacts with Central Asia go back to the Indus Valley civilisation, which had links with the ancient civilisation of Turkmenistan. The Aryans, according to one-school of historians, came to India from Central Asia. Buddhism was the dominant creed in the area before the advent of Islam and afterwards its influence can be seen on the Sufi tradition which took roots in Central Asia and percolated back to India. The ancient Silk Route, which connected China with the European markets, passed through this region. India was also linked to this trade route. Many of the ruling dynasties of India, including the Greeks, Shakas, Kushans, Huns and the Mughals, came from or via Central Asia. Central Asian influence can be seen in areas, such as, architecture, music, cuisine and literature. This ceaseless flow of people was interrupted in the 19th century when the British colonised India and the Russians conquered Central Asia. The rivalry between the two empires is generally known as the “Great Game”. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 and India’s independence in 1947, these contacts were partly restored. India was among the very few countries that were allowed by the Soviet Union to have trade and cultural contacts with this area. Indian consulates were opened in Tashkent and Almaty, the capital cities of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan respectively. Indian films and music were very popular throughout Central Asia. India enjoys considerable goodwill among the people of the region, which is reflected in the speeches and the writings of Central Asian leaders and writers alike. This “cultural capital” is India’s natural advantage in dealing with these states.

11.3.2 India’s Security Concerns

After September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the United States, there are mounting international concerns about religious extremism and global terrorism. Countries in and around Central Asia have been particularly affected by it—India in Kashmir, Russia in Chechnya, China in Xinjiang and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Ferghana valley. Tajikistan endured a long drawn civil war between the government and Islamic militants and the Uzbek president Islam Karimov barely

escaped an assassination attempt in February 1999. Afghanistan under the Taliban, supported by Osama bin Laden's *Al-Qaeda* and Pakistan, was thought to be a safe haven and training ground for these Islamic militants. Hence, the Central Asian States readily joined America's war against terror. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have offered military bases, and Kazakhstan has given other facilities to the US. The Taliban have been overthrown but the war is far from over. There are reports that they are still strong in some areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan and are trying to regroup. Apart from religious fundamentalism and cross border terrorism, there are other problems, like drugs and arms trafficking, which affect India and Central Asia besides other neighbouring states. India has formed joint working groups on terrorism with a number of countries including the US, Russia, China, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. India's prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Kazakhstan in June 2002 to take part in the summit of the "Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia". The signing of the Declaration on "Eliminating Terrorism and Promoting Dialogue among Civilisation" has been a major gain for India.

11.3.3 Bilateral Contacts and Visits

The leaders of the Central Asian Republics visited India within months of their becoming sovereign states. For the Uzbek and Kazakh presidents, it was their first official visit abroad. In fact, president Karimov of Uzbekistan came in 1991 even before the formal declaration of independence and again in January 1994 and May 2000. President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan came in February 1992, again in December 1996, and then in February, 2002. The Kyrgyz president Akaev visited New Delhi in March 1992 and April 1999. President Niyazov of Turkmenistan was in India in April 1992 and February 1997. Because of the Civil war, the prime minister of Tajikistan could come to India only in February 1993, followed by the Tajik president Rakhmanov in December 1995 and in May 2001. The Indian prime minister, Narasimha Rao paid return visits to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in May 1993 and Kyrgyzstan in September 1995. There have been innumerable visits of officials, business and cultural delegations, and scientists and scholars from both sides.

11.3.4 Economic Cooperation

Both India and Central Asia have economic complementarity in terms of resources, manpower and market. India's main exports to Central Asia have been drugs and pharmaceuticals, tea, machinery and instruments and readymade garments. Major imports from the region are iron and steel, gold and silver, non-ferrous metals and fibres. India can provide its skilled manpower and expertise in fields like banking, insurance, construction, technical education and financial management.

Following are the major areas of cooperation.

- i) **Energy:** India has emerged as the sixth largest energy consumer in the world and according to one study, its energy consumption is growing at the rate of 6 per cent per annum. The country imports nearly two thirds of its petroleum requirements. Central Asia and the Caspian region are emerging as an alternative source for the supply of oil and natural gas. The main oil and gas deposits in Central Asia are found in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Oil and Natural Gas Commission of India is preparing to participate in the prospecting of oil in Darkhan and Kurmangazi exploration blocks in the periphery of the Caspian Sea in Kazakhstan. India would also bid for a presence in the Asibekmola and Kozhasai natural

gas fields. Turkmenistan, which has considerable gas reserves, is keen to build a gas pipeline through Pakistan to India.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have enormous hydel resources. In Tajikistan, each sq. km. of the territory has up to 2 million KW hours of hydel resources, which is a huge figure. The government of Kyrgyzstan has an ongoing programme to develop small and medium size hydel power stations. The country looks towards India as a future source of finance and technology in this effort and above all as a large market for supply of hydel energy.

In the times to come, India will be one of the biggest consumers of energy. In this respect, the idea of creating an Asian energy community has been floated which aims at bringing together the main producers and consumers of oil, gas and energy resources.

ii) **Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare:** Another key area of cooperation between India and Central Asia is pharmaceuticals and healthcare. Mainly due to its efficiency and cost advantage, India has a competitive advantage in the global market in this field. Some of the Indian companies exporting pharmaceutical products to Central Asia are Claris Life sciences, Ranbaxy, Dr Reddys Labs, Lupin Laboratories, Unique Laboratories and Aurobindo Pharma. Some of these companies are planning to set up manufacturing units in Central Asia itself. The pharmaceutical factory of the Kazakh-India joint venture Kazakhstanpharma is in the process of completion in Almaty.

iii) **Other Areas of Cooperation:** Information technology (IT) and technical training are the areas where India can make substantial contribution to the Central Asian states. Already there are agreements in this regard with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. India is building a software technology park in Kazakhstan. A memorandum of understanding has been signed between Kyrgyzstan and the Indian company Edurite Technologies for cooperation in the field of IT education. Under the ITEC programme India has allotted slots to all Central Asian countries for the training of their candidates in selected Indian institutes.

Tourism, space-technology, defence cooperation, food and cotton processing, environment, disaster management and telecom are other emerging areas of cooperation.

iv) **Obstacles to Economic Cooperation:** Despite considerable potential, the level of actual trade and investment between the two regions has been very low. The entire Indian exports to Central Asia is less than two per cent of its total exports while the imports account for only 1.5 per cent of the total Indian imports on an average basis. One of the main hindrances in the way of economic cooperation between India and Central Asia has been the non-availability of hard currency and the lack of conversion facility services. To overcome the scarcity of currency India has extended credits to each of the Central Asian states. But it has either not been fully utilised or is considered insufficient. Lack of proper information channels and mechanisms has also been one of the impediments in furthering cooperation. However, absence of direct rail, road or sea link has been the most important obstacle in India's relations with Central Asia. The existing route through Black Sea is time consuming and costly, though time tested and reliable. The shortest and most economical route for India would be through Iran. Iran has fairly good networks of road and railway, which are directly linked to Central Asia through Turkmenistan. India signed an agreement with these two countries in February 1997 to enable the movement of goods from Indian ports to Bandar Abbas in Iran and then on to

the Central Asian regions by road and rail. The route is already in operation. Some problems that have cropped up are likely to be tackled in course of time. Another transit route, which is being discussed these days, is from Ladakh in India through the Xinjiang province of China to Kyrgyzstan. But India does not have a road-link from Ladakh to Xinjiang as yet.

To sum up, despite its historical and cultural ties, coupled with common security concerns and considerable potential for economic cooperation, India has not been able to make its presence felt in Central Asia.

11.4 WEST ASIA: A BACKGROUND

11.4.1 History

West Asia is the most volatile and conflict prone region in the world at present. In the past it witnessed the birth of three great religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—and some of the greatest civilisations in human history. The region saw high watermark of achievement under the Babylonian and Iranian Empires in the ancient times and the Abbasid and Ottoman Empires in the medieval times. The decline of the Ottoman power during the 19th and early 20th centuries led to an increase in the influence of British, who considered it as the “western flank” in the defence of India. However, with the discovery of oil in Iran at the beginning of the 20th Century, followed by more substantial finds around the Persian Gulf, the region became the focus of interest for the old as well as emerging great powers.

11.4.2 Politics and Society

Although Islam is the religion of majority of the people of West Asia, the region has significant sectarian and ethno-cultural diversity. Broadly speaking, there are four distinct ethno-cultural entities in the region, namely, the Turks, Persians, Arabs and Israelis. The first two account for the states of Turkey and Iran. The Arabs are spread over more than 20 states across West Asia and North Africa. Israel is a Jewish state that came into existence in 1948. While the *Shias* dominate Iran, the *Sunnis* are preponderant in all the Arab States, except Iraq and Bahrain, which have *Shia* majority under *Sunni* rule. These divisions have led to tension and conflict in the region. There have also been rivalries within the Arab world. After the Second World War, the secular, anti-colonial and pro-Soviet forces led by Nasser’s Egypt and *Baathist* Syria and Iraq dominated Arab politics. Their defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, coupled with the oil price hike in 1973 strengthened the position of the oil rich conservative Gulf monarchies that were closely allied with the West.

The main conflict in the region is on the question of the Arab-Palestinian demand for independent statehood. This is opposed by Israel that accuses them of terrorism. The US is generally considered sympathetic towards Israel. Arab defeat in the 1967 and 1973 wars and the failure of Israel-Palestinian negotiations are regarded by many to be the root cause for the rise of terrorism and religious extremism in the region. There are other factors, such as rising population, socio-economic stagnation, and absence of mechanism for popular participation in majority of the states that have led to popular alienation. The dominant US presence in this region (particularly in the Muslim Holy places) has been deeply resented by the people here. This has prompted the US to withdraw its forces from Saudi Arabia.

11.4.3 Geo-Strategic Situation

The United States increased its presence after the British withdrawal from the region in 1971. Initially, the US tried to build up Iran under the Shah as the guardian of Western interest. The Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 brought a staunchly anti-West regime into power. It was considered a grave threat to the pro-West Gulf monarchies. This, along with the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan during the same year, gave a pretext to the US to increase its physical presence in the area. Under the 'Carter Doctrine,' the US claimed the right to military intervention. The Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) and Central Command (CENTCOM) were strengthened for this purpose. The end of the Cold War and the Soviet disintegration led to an absolute US preponderance in the region. This was clearly manifested during the Kuwait crisis of 1991. The US led forces not only militarily defeated Iraq and expelled it from Kuwait, but also placed it under strict United Nations mandated economic sanctions. Since then Iraq and Iran were considered the main threats to Western interest in the region. This culminated in the second Gulf war and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime as a result of the US-UK military action for regime change, in March-April 2003.

11.5 INDIA AND WEST ASIA

West Asia is important for India because of its geographical proximity and historical-cultural affinity, as well as present day security concerns and economic interest.

11.5.1 India's Economic and Security Concerns

- i) **Oil Supplies:** Uninterrupted supply of oil at reasonable prices is vital for India's economic health in view of its heavy dependence on imports from the region. Any conflict in the region, such as the Arab-Israeli war, Iran-Iraq war and Kuwait crisis, is likely to contribute to the disruption of oil supply and/or price hike, imposing additional burden on the Indian economy.
- ii) **Remittances:** There are more than 3.5 million Indian migrant workers in the Gulf region. Their annual remittance is to the tune of a few billion dollars and is among the highest foreign exchange earners for the country. Their well being is a major concern for India. Any tension in the region, or in India's relations with these countries, may have negative consequences for these migrant workers and also for the Indian economy.
- iii) **Religious Extremism:** The ascendancy of conservative religious elements in the region is a cause for grave concern to India in view of its large indigenous Muslim population and the militancy in Kashmir. Pakistan, under the slogan of Pan-Islamism, tries to exploit the situation. It is evidenced by the growing sympathy shown by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) with Pakistan's stand on Kashmir issue.
- iv) **Commercial Links and Trade Routes:** India has substantial trade with West Asia. The liberalisation of the Indian economy has given further boost to these commercial links. The region accounts for more than 20 per cent of our imports, mainly hydrocarbons, and 10 per cent of our exports, which include wheat, non-basmati rice, textiles, and engineering and manufactured goods. The Indian construction companies have got some contracts in the region and there are ample opportunities in view of the reconstruction work in Iraq. The

Persian Gulf and Suez Canal are the main waterways through which bulk of India's trade is carried out. Hence, the safety of these routes is vital for the country. In the age of air travel and transport, West Asia has become an integral link in India's westbound air service. Iran is emerging as an important transit route in our interaction with Central Asia, as we have already discussed.

11.5.2 Evolution of India's Policy

After its independence, India under the policy of Non-Alignment extended a hand of friendship to the countries of West Asia that were resisting the Cold War pressure to join rival military bloc. This led to close relations with Nasser's Egypt and Baathist Iraq (after 1968). Incidentally, Pakistan, along with Britain, Turkey, Iran and Iraq, became a member of the US supported Baghdad Pact in 1955 (renamed as CENTO after Iraq withdrew following the Revolution of 1958). India's consistent support to the Palestinian cause created a favourable image of the country among the Arab States. This, coupled with the historical ties and the vigorous commercial links, has helped India build vibrant relations with almost all the countries of the area.

- i) **Palestine Issue:** India has extended moral and political support for the creation of a viable state of Palestine alongside Israel. India shares the perception that the question of Palestine is at the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. India became the first non-Arab State to recognise the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as "the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" and allowed it to open its office in New Delhi in January 1975. The PLO Office in New Delhi was accorded full diplomatic recognition in March, 1980. India accorded recognition to the State of Palestine in November 1988 and the PLO Office in New Delhi started functioning as the Embassy of the State of Palestine. In the wake of establishment of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), India opened its Representative Office in Gaza on June 25, 1996, for ensuring effective co-ordination with the PNA. India has supported the Middle East Peace Process since its launch with the Madrid Conference in 1991. It has also endorsed all the subsequent peace agreements between Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinian leadership has been frequent visitors to India. President Yasser Arafat was in New Delhi in August 2001. India has extended financial and technical assistance for development works in Palestine areas. The country offers scholarships to Palestinian students under ICSSR Scheme and slots for training courses under the ITEC Programme.
- ii) **Israel:** Although India had recognised the Jewish State of Israel way back in 1950, it established full diplomatic relations only in 1992. Since then there has been an upswing in the relations between the two countries in view of the common concerns about religious extremism and global terrorism. Israel and India have developed close "cooperation" in intelligence-sharing and "counter-insurgency" operations. India has become a major buyer of Israeli armaments. There is a considerable potential for Indo-Israeli cooperation in the field of science and technology, particularly in areas such as dry land farming. There has been a spurt in high level bilateral visits in the recent times. In 1999, the National Security Advisor, Brajesh Mishra visited Israel and met prime minister Ehud Barak. Home Minister, L K Advani and foreign minister, Jaswant Singh followed him the next year. The Israeli prime minister visited India during the month of September 2003 and both the countries decided to strengthen bilateral relations at the regional and global level to fight terrorism.

- iii) **Iraq Crisis:** India and Iraq established close political and economic relations during the 1970s and 1980s. Incidentally, both concluded Friendship Treaties with the erstwhile Soviet Union—India in 1971 and Iraq in 1972. At one point of time, Iraq was the source of 30 per cent of India's oil needs and home to 90,000 Indians working there. It was the only Arab country that consistently supported the Indian position on Kashmir. Indian firms got some of the biggest contracts in the country. Hence, the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait presented a difficult choice for the Indian foreign policy. The consequent oil price hike put serious strain on India's balance of payments position. India favoured a peaceful political settlement, but ultimately went along with the UN Security Council Resolutions 661 and 678—condemning Iraq and authorising the use of force against it. Throughout the decade after 1991 Gulf War, India has maintained that “unwise and unjust” UN sanctions against Iraq should be lifted and has been sensitive to the suffering of the Iraqis. During the 2003 Iraq crisis also, New Delhi expressed its concern about the US military action because of its likely human and material implications and its possible impact on oil prices. India wanted that any military action should have UN authorisation. Neither supporting the United States nor openly criticising it for its aggression against Iraq, the Indian government has taken a middle path. However, the two Houses of Indian Parliament in unanimous resolutions (April 2003) deplored the military action taken without the UN authorisation.
- iv) **Iran:** Geographically, historically and culturally Iran has been closest to India, among the countries of West Asia. India enjoyed friendly relations with Iran during the Shah rule, which weakened after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. During the 1990s, India and Iran (under its reform-oriented and pragmatic leadership) have taken steps to build a multifaceted relationship. There has emerged a large consensus between the two countries on various global and regional issues. Incidentally, India's perception of Iran is in congruence with the Russian position, which differs with the US characterisation of Iran as a ‘rogue state’ or ‘axis of evil’. Iran is emerging as India's most viable transit option for trade with Central Asia and even Russia. New Delhi, Moscow and Teheran signed an agreement in St. Petersburg on 12 September 2000 for sending Indian Cargo to Russia via Iran through a ‘North-South Corridor’. There are several bottlenecks yet to be cleared, but once this new corridor becomes fully operational it could boost Indian trade with Central Asia as well as Central Europe. India and Iran have exchanged regular high level visits. India's prime minister visited Tehran in April 2001 and the Iranian president was in Delhi in January 2003 to enhance their bilateral relations.
- v) **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC):** The GCC was formed in May 1981 by the six Gulf monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Bahrain and Oman. It emerged in response to the challenges posed by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (1979). These states are conservative Islamic monarchies, and have come under increasing pressures from extremist Islamic groups and terrorists. This has created a common ground between these countries and India. The GCC has also been among India's top two trading partners. According to the Reserve Bank of India, exports from the GCC to India have increased from US\$ 1.5 billion in fiscal year 1987/88 to an estimated US\$ 6.0 billion in 1999/2000. India's exports to the GCC rose from US\$ 0.5 billion in 1987/88 to about US\$ 3.0 billion in 1999/2000.

11.6 SUMMARY

Central Asia and West Asia have close geographical, historical and cultural links with India. India has vital political, strategic and economic stakes in the region. The area has emerged as an arena of intense rivalry among major global and regional powers. It is also witness to an upsurge in religious extremism and international terrorism. These have serious implications for India's security. In economic terms India is heavily dependent upon oil imports from this region. Remittances from Indian migrant workers have been an important source of foreign exchange. High consumption levels in the countries of these regions (particularly the Gulf) and India's growing export in the age of liberalisation and globalisation have created immense opportunities for Indian business and industry. India's presence and influence in this region would be a crucial step in the direction of becoming a global player.

11.7 EXERCISES

- 1) Explain the geo-strategic importance of Central Asia.
- 2) Explain India's historical ties with Central Asia.
- 3) Write a short note on India's policy towards the Palestine issue.
- 4) Discuss the emerging India-Israel relationship.
- 5) Comment on India's response to the Iraq crisis.
- 6) What is the significance of Iran for India's relations with Central Asia?
- 7) Comment on India's security concerns in Central Asia.
- 8) What are the major areas of economic cooperation between India and Central Asia?
- 9) Identify the main obstacles in India's economic interaction with Central Asia.
- 10) What are India's main security and economic concerns in West Asia?