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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## INDIA'S SOFT POWER ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA : ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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#### Abstract

This paper analyzes India's soft power engagement in the context of Central Asia. This paper explains the importance of soft power in contemporary period where everything is interconnected in such context soft power is as important as hard power. India shares historical and cultural ties with Central Asia and India's diaspora network is also strong in Central Asia. This paper discusses how India is leveraging its soft power through capacity building programs, educational initiatives, etc. Additionally, the paper examines the interest of external power like US, Russia, China in Central Asia and China's role as challenge for India, as China is geographically and culturally linked to Central Asia. This paper argues that India's soft power provides an important foundation for engagement, still India is unable to achieve its goal in Central Asia.

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#### Introduction:-

Central Asia refers to the geographical region situated in the middle of the Asia. It includes five countries : Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan. Central Asia holds significant importance due to its Geo-strategic location and abundant natural resources. The geography of Central Asia is important for India in order to linking with Russia and Europe. India put lot of efforts to bolster its connectivity with Central Asia through many ways example Connect Central Asia Policy, the development of INSTC(International North South Transit Corridor), becoming member of Ashgabat Agreement, so Central Asia holds important position for India. In contemporary time Central Asia increasingly shaped by hard power competition but due to geographical constraints India is also working on its soft power because Soft power does not look geographical boundaries but cultural and historical connections. Shashi Tharoor argues in Pax Indica that the influence of India in global arena more in attraction than domination deriving from its cultural heritage, values.

Soft Power is very important concept in contemporary time, in contrast to earlier period where thinkers like Niccolo Machiavelli advised prince that it is more important to be feared than loved. In Contemporary world Soft Power is as important as Hard Power. The term Soft Power was 1<sup>st</sup> used by Joseph Nye in his 1990 book , Bound to Lead : The Changing Nature of American Power. According to Joseph Nye "Soft Power is the ability to get what you want through attraction than coercion or payment . So Soft Power is very important for India to increase its influence in Central Asia.India and Central Asian Nations shares historical and cultural relations with each other that extends far beyond contemporary relations. Historically, India and Central Asian region were closely connected through Silk

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Route. This Silk Route not only facilitated for transportation of goods, but also exchanged religion, culture, and ideas, the spread of Buddhism is a great example. During the medieval period, these connections were strengthened through religious-political interactions. After Buddhism, Sufism entered India from Central Asian region and connected both regions intellectually. These connections were further deepened with the arrival of Babur from Fergana Valley and the establishment of Mughal Empire in India. After the independence of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister, visited Central Asia in 1955. This visit took place when Central Asian region were under Soviet Union and this visit signified the importance of Central Asia. India was among the first nations to recognize the independence of these five Central Asian countries. After the independence of Central Asian nations, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1992 and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995. This engagement further strengthened under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who became the first Prime Minister to visit all five Central Asia nations in 2015, marking the importance of Central Asian Region.

### **Methodology:-**

This study adopts a qualitative research method to examine the soft power strategies of India in Central Asian Nations after their independence, this study adopts historical, descriptive and explanatory methods to analyse the achievements and challenges of India in the region . This study is based on secondary data which includes books, articles, official reports related to India and Central Asian Nations.

### **Literature Review:-**

**The review of literature for the study is based on the following themes:-**

#### **Soft Power:-**

Soft power is very important concept in contemporary world , power is not only limited to military capabilities or economic coercion(hard power) but also based on attraction. Effective policies based on the combination of soft power and hard power. Soft power as the ability to get desired outcomes through attraction rather coercion or payments. Soft power primarily based on culture, political values, policies In contemporary world where everything linked with each other soft power becomes more important.(Nye) In this book writer explains that India's influence is based on its cultural heritage , democratic values , rather than domination. Tharoor highlights India's soft power shaped from its diaspora, bollywood, yoga, intellectual assets.(Tharoor)

#### **External Factors:-**

This book analyzes post cold war Geo-politics where global powers strategically pursued influence in Central Asia. It examines the region's significance for various powers- China, US, Russia, India, Iran, Turkey and how Central Asian states have balanced the influence of these major powers.(Patnaik) This journal explores Vladimir Putin's two decade in Central Asia, offering indepth discussion on Russia's involvement in the Central Asian region.(Hess)

#### **India's Relation with Central Asia:-**

This paper emphasizes the deep-rooted historical , cultural linkages between India and Central Asia. This book highlights the role of Buddhism, Sufism and the historical exchanges between India and Central Asia. It concludes that the relationship between India and Central Asia is not merely contemporary but historically and civilizational in character.(Amit Singh) This analyzes focuses on India's relations with Russia and Central Asia during the end of cold war.(Anita Singh)

#### **India as Soft Power:-**

This paper presents the Soft power of India in Central Asian region. This paper analyses how India is shaping public opinion with its soft power approach.( Kumar) This paper analyzes the Connect Central Asia Policy importance for India and Central Asia, and how Soft power initiatives of India strengthen engagement with Central Asian Region.(Singh and Kaur) This paper highlights the importance of Chabahar Port as strategic instrument in India's connectivity with Central Asia and also discusses the U.S. sanctions on Iran which the uncertainty of project.(Saha)

#### **China's Factor:-**

This paper highlights the China's engagement with Central Asia beyond economic engagement for example the Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges , promotion of mandarin language etc, this shows China's presence as significant in the region.(Jimenez-Tovar and Lavicka)

### **External Powers in Central Asia:-**

Central Asia holds significant importance for regional and global players due to its Geo-strategic location and natural resources. Central Asian Nations gained their independence after the collapse of Soviet Union. After the independence there was a power struggle among various global powers especially U.S., Russia, and China all aiming to increase their presence in Central Asia. U.S. initial policies towards Central Asian Region based on security concerns, after the terrorist attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001 U.S. established its military bases in Central Asia. As U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan declined U.S. influence in Central Asia weakened, now U.S. shifted towards more modest realistic engagement. Russia and China both are regional power and culturally linked with Central Asian Region. Russia considers Central Asia important because this region is crucial for its regional security. Russia led initiatives in Central Asia such as C.I.S.(Commonwealth of Independent Nations) which shows shared history, C.S.T.O.(Collective Security Treaty Organization)for military cooperation, E.A.E.U.(The Eurasian Economic Union) for economic cooperation. However Russia's relative economic presence has gradually declined after sanctions in response of Russia Ukraine war. In present scenario China has the biggest economic presence in the region, strengthen its presence in the region through many policies such as Belt and Road Initiative(B.R.I.) to improve connectivity, Sanghai Cooperation Organisation(S.C.O.) to improve stability in the region, simultaneously China expanded its Soft Power through cultural engagements , people to people ties.

China is making huge investment in the region, according to the data of the China General Customs Administration, the Chinese trade turnover with the countries of the region increase upto 89.4 billion U.S. dollars at the end of 2023, which is 27% higher than the level of 2022. Central Asia attracts not only China, Russia, U.S., regional players are also in line for example Iran promoted religion revivalism and Turkey which emphasizes on ethnic connection.

For the U.S., China and other powers geopolitics is a tool to pursue larger global strategic objectives that can be achieved if Central Asia is brought under their influence, these objectives include containment of rival power, anti-terrorism etc. For Russia, geopolitical strategy in Eurasia is defensive in nature and is an existential issue.( Patnaik, ) In addition to the major global and regional power's engagement with Central Asian Region, India's involvement in the region also evolved over time. India perceives Central Asia with its concept of "Extended Neighbourhood", India is engaging in various aspect with Central Asia making investment, deals and increasing connectivity.

In case of Kazakhstan the signing of Indo-Kazakhstan Nuclear Cooperation Agreement is one of the historic agreements. In the last ten years Kazakhstan has supplied 9,000 tonnes of uranium, India also signed long term uranium supply agreement with Uzbekistan in 2019. Other countries of Central Asian Region are also important for India, Turkmenistan endowed with world 4<sup>th</sup> largest natural gas reserves to supply gas India signed TAPI project in 2002 but failed due to ongoing tension between India and Pakistan. The last two countries Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are rich in hydropower power sources, in 2022 bilateral trade with kyrgyzstan was nearly US dollar 118 million with India's export amounting to US dollar 107 million and import at US dollar 11 million, with respect to Tajikistan India working in infrastructure projects.However, India's engagement not solely defined by material capabilities historically India shared deep civilization, intellectual exchanges. So India is also working on its Soft Power engagement with Central Asian Region.

### **India's Achievement as Soft Power in Central Asia:-**

#### **Cultural Diplomacy of India:-**

India's soft power engagement with five Central Asian Nations is deeply rooted with its historical and civilizational linkages, which are consistently emphasizes on official documents. The MEA(Ministry of External Affairs) documents of India and kazakhstan highlights the relation dating over 2000 years, the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and Sufi ideas from Central Asia to India. Building upon shared history and culture India has undertaken several initiatives in Central Asia some of them are mentioned below-

- In Kazakhstan the yoga conducts by Swami Vivekanand Cultural Centre is premier institution under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations(ICCR) and international Yoga Day was celebrated in 21 cities in 2024.
- In Uzbekistan the Lal Bahadur Shastri Centre for Indian Culture(LBSCIC) trains hundred of yoga students annually.
- In the Kyrgyztan Republic , the Mahatma Gandhi - Manas Library established
- In Turkmenistan PM Narendra Modi inaugurated a yoga and traditional medicine centre in Ashgabat and unveiled bust of Mahatma Gandhi.
- In Tajikistan the Swami Vivekanand Cultural Centre in Dushanbe offers kathak, tabla and hindi classes.

India signed Cultural Exchange Programmes(CEP) with multiple states including Kyrgyz Republic(2022-2026) and Tajikistan(2019-2023). Along with this Indian cinema plays a very important role in cultural diplomacy, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan where Raj Kapoor films and Indian film festivals are regularly organized.

**Capacity Building Programme:-**

India is working in the field of capacity building programme. The most important one is ITEC(Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme) in Tajikistan over 1455 slots utilized, in Kyrgyzstan over 100 ITEC slots allocated annually, in Uzbekistan more than 100 candidates selected under ITEC, in Kazakhstan around 1400 specialist trained under ITEC programme. Another programme of the Indian Government is ICCR(Indian Council for Cultural Relations) under ICCR 392 scholarships awarded in Tajikistan, in Turkmenistan 17 ICCR scholarship awards annually. Apart from these programmes the Government of India established the India-Turkmenistan Information Technology Centre in Ashgabat, USD 20 million grant provided by India to Tajikistan for infrastructure projects including an 8 lane highway in Dushanbe. Additionally, India-Central Asia Summit framework has brought Central Asian students and officials to India.

**Education:-**

Central Asian students study in India under ICCR and ITEC schemes and Indian students also form significant communities in Central Asia. Example in Kyrgyzstan Republic approx 17,400 students, in Tajikistan around 1400 students, in Kazakhstan 9,500 students. Such educational linkages serve an important pillar for India's soft power diplomacy.

**Tourism and Connectivity:-**

Central Asian Nation attracts tourism from India, in order to increase tourism and connectivity the Indian Government extended E-Visa facilities to most central Asian countries. In addition to tourism and connectivity, the Indian Diaspora has a strong presence in Central Asian countries, Indian communities range from 10,500 in Kazakhstan to 1500 in Tajikistan. These communities contribute to strengthening economic and educational linkages.

**Challenges:-**

India's soft power in Central Asia based on historical connections, cultural diplomacy, people-to-people ties, capacity-building programs, however, the biggest problem in front of India is geographical constraint. Apart from this, the external players factor is also important, particularly China. China holds a strong presence in the region because of geographical and cultural proximities. In this context, the major challenges confronting India's soft power in Central Asia can be examined under following points:

**Connectivity constraints:-**

In the Ministry of External Affairs document, the Tajikistan and Turkmenistan lack of reliable land connectivity identified as a barrier to economic engagement. The trade routes through Iran through Chabahar port conceptualized as a strategic alternative. India's 10-year agreement with Iran in May 2024 signed between India Ports Global Limited and Iran Ports and Maritime Organization aimed at ensuring long-term strategic presence. However, the tariff on countries trading with Iran under Trump administration has injected fresh uncertainty. Air connectivity, though improving, still remains limited as compared to China.

**China factor:-**

China has a strong economic presence in the Central Asian region and cultural relations with the Central Asian region. Through economic penetration, Confucius Institutes, urban development, China's influence into everyday life. China provides Mandarin language incentives to provide educational exchange linked to employment, restoration of cultural space. Major difference between Indian and China's soft power is China's more focus on economic leverage as compared to India's.

**Economic weakness:-**

The Tajikistan document states that trade and economic relations are weakest in bilateral ties. India's trade with Central Asian countries is growing but heavily hampered by connectivity issues.

**Regime difference:-**

India's democratic country and Central Asian region characterized by authoritarian regime. This system feature weak democratic institution. This does not restrain India but the structural difference creates friction. Unlike China model emphasized on investment without democratic conditionality.

**Conclusion:-**

India's engagement with Central Asia with respect to soft power is based on shared historical and civilization linkages, cultural diplomacy, and capacity building initiatives. From yoga centres to ITEC programmes, ICCSR scholarships, development partnerships India gradually built its presence in the region that based on attraction than coercion. These initiatives shows the importance of Central Asia. However despite these achievements structural challenges are there and constraints the India to achieve its full potential. Geographical constraint, Uncertainties in projects such as the sanction on Iran by U.S. restricts the Chabahar strategic importance, the China factor intensifies the competition. India's soft power provide strong base to India rooted in its history and culture ultimately the lack of geographical connection is important factor so India's effectiveness depends on strengthening connectivity and strategically deal with great power competition.

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