

India's Central Asia "Push" under Narendra Modi Government

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Abstract

India-Central Asia relations have got an upward push since Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government came to power in India in the year 2014. The fact that Central Asia is now the fulcrum of India's "Act North" policy stems from PM Modi's half a dozen visits to the resource rich Central Asian Republics (CARs) in the last six years, on different occasions, and for different purposes with the historical state visit in July 2015 as the precursor. The opening up of Chabahar port as India's gateway to Central Asia, India becoming a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and strengthening political and diplomatic relations through high profile political and diplomatic visits and signing of Strategic Partnership agreements showcase the sustained efforts of Modi's "New India" to keep alive its vital stakes in this important region. Keeping in view the growing Chinese presence, India has finally shown astute leadership in pursuing its national and global interests in Central Asia.

Keywords: India, CARs, Modi, Act North, Strategic Partnership, historical-cultural link

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Introduction

The CARs have attracted considerable global attention after their independence in the year 1991 because of a) end of Cold War following disintegration of former Soviet Union; b) creation of a peculiar geopolitical and geostrategic situation; c) their natural resources, especially oil and natural gas, which became a potential alternative for Persian Gulf petroleum resources; and d) revival of Islam. Big powers (USA and Russia) and regional powers such as China, India, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan started making efforts to nurture their respective interests and accordingly devised strategies to establish their presence in Central Asia thus paving way for what is often dubbed as “New Great Game”. India, which is not a party to this 21st century power struggle in Central Asia, has understood well the post-Cold War realities and its vital interests in this resource-rich region, with which it has strong civilisational connection. The NDA government under Modi studied India’s Central Asia venture in the past 29 years and accordingly made a proactive approach to translate its deep-rooted bonding with Central Asia into a meaningful relationship that suits both India’s interests in the region and fulfils the expectations and aspirations of the CARs as well. Prime Minister Modi, who reiterated that “Central Asia does have ancient roots with India and now occupies a significant place in India’s future,” (Putz, 2015) became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit all the five CARs in July 2015 in a single visit spanning over a week that heralded the beginning of new age economic, security and strategic cooperation partnership with the CARs. Besides meeting the top-notch political leadership of these republics, attending several cultural programmes and addressing the Central Asian

leaders, Prime Minister Modi signed several agreements [Turkmenistan (eight), Kazakhstan (five), Kyrgyzstan (four), Uzbekistan (three), and Tajikistan (two)], which include the important civil nuclear cooperation agreement with Kazakhstan, and defence agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, several business deals and economic cooperation agreements (Chand, 2015: pp.12-13).

PM Modi's focus on Central Asia has assumed importance because of the massive Chinese presence and influence in South and Central Asia (Stobdan, 2015), which is considered as the main stumbling block for India's efforts to consolidate its position as a major player in and around the region. Even India's quest for energy resources of the CARs (Turkmen natural gas, Kazakh oil and uranium, Uzbek natural gas and uranium, and Tajikistan's hydroelectricity) to secure her energy security could not be realized successfully. Further, the shattered security situation in South and Central Asia has given fatal crack to the citadel of peace in the region and is a cause of major concern for India. Amidst such grave concerns, key strategists of Modi government felt the growing convergence between USA and India in the global corridor in general and South and Central Asia in particular may augur well for Indian efforts in Central Asia. While the USA hesitates to see the CARs falling under the exclusive influence of either China or Russia, India is unwilling to see growing Chinese influence in the Central Asia region (Pant, 2015).

Against this background, this paper argues that India-Central Asia link has got an upward push in the last half a dozen years of Modi government. The fact that Central Asia is now the fulcrum of India's "Act North" policy stems from PM Modi's half a

dozen visits to the resource rich Central Asian Republics (CARs) in the last six years, on different occasions and for different purposes, with the historical visit in July 2015 as the precursor. The paper describes that the opening up of Chabahar port as India's gateway to Central Asia, India becoming a member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), welcome developments with regards to International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan India (TAPI) pipeline, and strengthening political and diplomatic relations through high profile visits and signing of strategic partnership agreements showcase the sustained efforts of Modi's "New India" to keep alive its vital stakes in this important region. Keeping in view the growing Chinese presence and influence in South and Central Asia, India has finally shown astute leadership in pursuing its vital interests in Central Asia, the paper adds.

Uzbekistan: Key Pillar of India's Engagement in Central Asia

Uzbekistan's importance as the key pillar of India's engagement in Central Asia and an important ally in Asia was ironically felt, when Prime Minister Modi chose Tashkent as the first stop of his Central Asia sojourn on 6-7 July 2015, where he emphatically stated: "I have begun my journey in Uzbekistan. This underlines this nation's importance for India, not just in the context of this region, but also more broadly in Asia" (Media Statement., 2015). Further, it reminds us the interests and high hopes the Uzbek political leadership under Islam Karimov had generated in 1992, a few weeks after the creation of CARs in December 1991, looking at India in high esteem, which culminated in a State visit to India as the first Central Asian Head of State after independence. While hailing the historic-cultural relationship between the two

countries, both Prime Minister Modi and President Karimov reached an understanding on a wide range of issues to further deepen Uzbekistan-India strategic relations, mutually beneficial bilateral cooperation in various fields, as well as international and regional issues of mutual interest. The Joint Statement between the two leaders highlighted 16 important issues, the most important being defence cooperation (Joint Statement between Uzbekistan and India., 2015).

Both India and Uzbekistan have not looked back since then and have made sincere efforts to take forward their relationship to a new high. It is imperative to highlight how the new found India-Uzbek friendship has got mentions in three consecutive SCO summits(2016, 2017 and 2018). While at the Tashkent SCO summit in 2016, India finalised its accession agreements of the SCO, which now highlights India's engagement with Eurasian region, India became a member of SCO at the Astana SCO summit in 2017. Further, during the Qingdao (China) SCO summit in 2018, PM Modi articulated the foundational dimension of Eurasia as being "SECURE" (Security of our citizens, Economic development for all, Connecting the region, Unite our people, Respect for Sovereignty and Integrity, and Environment protection issues) (Prime Minister's Intervention in Extended Plenary of 18th SCO Summit, 2018), which is likely to guide India's future engagement with the region, and Uzbekistan is believed to play a constructive role in this process.

Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, like his predecessor Islam Karimov, kept on stressing the age-old bonding between the two countries as key during a couple of visits to India in the span of three months - first the September-October 2018 State visit

wherein 17 agreements and MoUs were signed (Tayal, 2018), and second in January 2019 representing Uzbekistan as a partner country at the 3-day Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit. President Mirziyoyev concretised the long-pending uranium deal on 18 January 2019 with India's Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) and Uzbekistan's Novoi Minerals & Metallurgical Company exchanging contracts for long-term supply of uranium ore concentrates (Chaudhury, 2019). This "Strategic Partnership" between the two nations marked the "starting point for a new era in relations between India and Central Asia" during the First India-Central Asia Dialogue in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) on 12 January 2019, a meeting of Foreign Ministers from India, all the CARs and Afghanistan. This historic meeting of great strategic minds of the participating countries a) reaffirmed "centuries-old ties between the peoples of India, Central Asia and Afghanistan", b) dubbed themselves as "natural partners", c) underlined the need to develop a "modern and comprehensive partnership", which was envisioned by Prime Minister Modi during his landmark visit in 2015; and d) set up the "India-Central Asia Development Group" to take forward "development partnership" between India and the CARs (Press Statement by EAM., 2019). Indo-Uzbek security concerns and recalibration of their defence partnership got a major boost when the inaugural Indo-Uzbekistan Joint Field Training Exercise (FTX)-2019, otherwise called as DUSTLIK-2019, was held from 4 to 10 November 2019 at Chirchiq Training Area during India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Tashkent (Exercise Dustlik, 2019). The aforesaid developments in the last six years put Uzbekistan in high pedestal making it the lynch-pin of India's northern neighbourhood policy.

“Tej Kadam” with Kazakhstan

The immense importance and regular focus India has been giving to Kazakhstan in the last quarter century, be it trade, energy or strategy, makes her one of its key political, economic and strategic partners in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, which caters to more than 80 per cent of India's uranium requirements, has already provided 9,000 tonnes of uranium in the last 9 years and would not only provide the rest 1,000 tonnes of uranium in 2020, but also renew the pact for uranium supply to India this year (India and Kazakhstan to Renew Uranium Supply Contract, 2019), a positive signal for India. It is heartening to note that both the countries are marching towards a “new horizon” and guiding their 2009 Strategic Cooperation Partnership to a new height with *Tez Kadam* (literally meaning quick steps) (Tej Kadam, 2015), the Indo-Kazakh Joint Statement signed during the Modi's Astana visit on 7-8 July 2015. Both the countries inked two agreements (including the Defence and Military-Technical Cooperation), two MoUs and the most important one, the long term contract between India's Department of Atomic Energy and JSC National Atomic Company (Kaz Atom Prom) for sale and purchase of natural uranium concentrates (List of Agreements signed, 2015). In global political arena, unstinted Kazakh support for India's membership of SCO at its Astana summit on 8-9 June 2017, Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in June 2016, and India's bid to become one of the Permanent Member of UN Security Council (UNSC) is gracefully accepted, and in return India had extended wholehearted support to Kazakhstan for a Non-Permanent member of the UNSC in 2017-2018. Bulat Sarsenbayev, former Kazakh Ambassador in India, notes down three important

highlights of Indo-Kazakh cooperation under Modi government a) Modi's State visit to Kazakhstan in 2015 and other high profile visits have spurred bilateral economic cooperation; b) Modi's participation in 2017 Astana SCO Summit and the opening of EXPO 2017 has added a new impetus to relationship; and c) within the ambit of Indo-Kazakh Defence and Military-Technical Cooperation, Kazakhstan for the first time could be able to participate in a UN Peacekeeping Mission in Lebanon in 2018 as part of an Indian battalion (Sarsenbayev, 2019). The last six years of mutual trust and understanding between the two largest nations of South and Central Asia have brought many hopes for their countries, region and the world as well.

From Turkmen Gate to Turkmenistan: India's Search for Energy Security

While giving specific reference to Delhi's Turkmen Gate that symbolizes 450-year Indo-Turkmen linkage, Prime Minister Modi, during his visit to Ashgabat on 10 July 2015, reiterated Turkmenistan's indispensability for India's energy security. While discussing bilateral, regional and international issues with Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov that resulted in seven bilateral agreements, the highest with any CAR during this visit. In their Joint Statement, the two leaders hailed the Defence Cooperation Agreement and exuded confidence that this agreement would provide a framework for intensifying bilateral defence and security cooperation through exchanges of high and mid-level visits, training and dialogue between the defence ministries of both countries and other relevant organizations, thus bringing a new momentum to the bilateral partnership in the defence sector (Joint Statement between Turkmenistan and India,

2015). Prime Minister Modi's visit, the first such visit since 1995, brought high hopes for the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, otherwise known as "Peace pipeline" or "Trans-Afghan pipeline", to become a reality. Dubbing TAPI as a significant initiative in Indo-Turkmen relationship, Prime Minister Modi hinted at the possibility of land-sea route through Iran for the TAPI pipeline. Prime Minister Modi also expressed India's keenness to invest heavily in Turkmenistan's energy sector, besides proposing Turkmenistan to be part of International North South Transport Corridor (*The Economic Times*, 2015). India formally became a member of "Ashgabat Agreement" on 3 February 2018 to work on the establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor along with other member countries (Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) (India-Turkmenistan Relations, 2018). With regular touch with the Central Asian political leadership, sincere efforts and prompt action Modi government has made Turkmen leadership and people feel the respect India confers on this country.

Kyrgyzstan: The New Strategic Partner

Kyrgyzstan's constant support to India for securing the full membership of SCO and India's bid to become the permanent member of the UNSC exemplifies the friendship and relationship between the two countries. During a visit to Kyrgyzstan on 11-12 July 2015 as part of his Central Asia tour, Prime Minister Modi assured Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambaev to tender any kind of help and support Kyrgyzstan expects from India. India and Kyrgyzstan signed two agreements and two MoUs, the most important being the agreement on defence cooperation, which aims at "deepening cooperation between India and Kyrgyzstan in

matters relating to defence, security, military education and training, conduct of joint military exercises, exchange of experience and information, exchange of military instructors and observers.” Both the sides agreed to continue bilateral military exercise “Khanjar 2015” (India-Kyrgyzstan Joint Military Exercise, 2015) as an annual affair, besides calling for exchanges in joint expedition by the armed forces of both countries (Joint Statements between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of India, 2015). Kyrgyzstan’s importance for India was felt further, when top Cabinet Ministers of Modi government visited this CAR one after another: i) Home Minister (Rajnath Singh) and External Affairs Minister (Sushma Swaraj) at the Heads of Emergency Departments of the SCO member states on 24-25 August 2017; ii) External Affairs Minister (Sushma Swaraj) on 3-4 August 2018, iii) Defence Minister (N. Sitharaman) at the Meeting of Defence Ministers of SCO member states on 28-30 April 2019; and iv) External Affairs Minister (S. Jaishankar) at the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of SCO member states on 21-22 May 2019. The year 2019 witnessed Indo-Kyrgyz relations at its pinnacle when a) Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov visited India on invitation as one of the honourable guests at Narendra Modi’s swearing in of second term as India’s Prime Minister on 30 May 2019, the only Central Asian leader; and b) PM Modi visited Kyrgyzstan on 13-14 June 2019 (just two weeks later) to take part in Bishkek SCO Summit 2019. Out of the 15 agreements/documents signed between the two countries, main highlights were strengthening defence cooperation and preparing a five year roadmap for trade and economic cooperation. More importantly, the Joint Declaration designated the year 2021 as “Year of Culture and

Friendship” between the two republics. Kyrgyzstan, which remained non-descript for India for most of the time in the last three decades, became an important segment of Modi government’s overall policy in the region, when the two countries agreed to uplift their bilateral relations to the level of “Strategic Partnership” (India-Kyrgyz Bilateral Relations, 2019).

Tajikistan: Fulcrum of India’s Strategic Interests in Central Asia

Tajikistan, India’s immediate and nearest Central Asian neighbor, has remained strategically important since its independence in 1991 because of a) geographical border with three sensitive regions such as Afghanistan, Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir and China’s Xinjiang province; b) frequent turmoil since 1991 in the form of civil war, Islamic extremism and terrorism; c) Pakistan’s efforts to influence Tajikistan in favour of its robust Central Asia policy and d) Chinese dominance in Tajikistan’s economic and security affairs. Tajik President Imomali Rahmonov was the first Central Asian leader to respond to India’s Connect Central Asia policy during his state visit to India in 2012 that transformed the 20-year long Indo-Tajik bilateral relations into “strategic partnership”. Three year later, Prime Minister Modi held out hands of friendship when Tajikistan was chosen the final destination of his Central Asia visit in July 2015, the second such visit by an Indian Premier since Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2003. The Joint Declaration signed between the two countries emphasized the need to fight against the inimical forces of extremism and terrorism and thus vouched for a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Counter Terrorism (List of Agreements Signed during Prime Minister’s Visit to Tajikistan, 2015). Prime Minister Modi reiterated India’s commitment to support Tajikistan’s defence

capacity to enhance stability and security under the ambit of Indo-Tajik defence agreement (2002), as religiously done earlier by India in building a military outpost at Farkhor, adjoining the Tajik-Afghan border, and repairing and maintaining Ayni airbase (Joint Statement between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of India, 2015). Two interesting political exchanges through high profile visits are notable here. Prime Minister Modi and President Rahmonov met on the sidelines of Tashkent SCO Summit (June 2016) and Qingdao SCO Summit (June 2018) and exchanged pleasantries that resulted respectively in Tajik President's sixth India visit (December 2018) in last two decades, and Indian President Ramnath Kovind's first visit to Tajikistan (October 2018).

Modi Government's Central Asia Thrust: Major Takeaways

The most telling achievements of India's policy towards Central Asia under the NDA government led by Prime Minister Modi in the last six years have been manifold and mostly strategic in nature. During several visits to Central Asia and interaction the leaders of CARs, Prime Minister Modi has not only had trade, commerce and economic development with the CARs in mind, but has also felt the indispensability of security and stability for achieving this. On the economic front, the major push Modi government gave to CARs was the revival of International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a 7200-km-long multi-modal (ship, rail and road) transportation system for connecting the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and thence to Russia and North Europe, which was formalised in 2002. The INSTC can reduce the time and cost of container delivery by 30-40 per cent and once the flow of goods from the two Iranian ports begin the corridor will be able to move 30 to

50 million tons of goods per year (Stobdan, 2017). With the opening of Iran's Chabahar Port, that INSTC aims at boosting trade of USD 170 billion from India alone (60.6 billion USD in export and 107.4 billion USD in import). Further, India's trade with Central Asia has witnessed a steep increase to a combined 2.25 billion USD by the end of 2019.

On the energy front, two important developments have been witnessed: firstly, as per the Indo-Kazakh civil nuclear cooperation agreement signed on 6 July 2015, Kazakhstan has supplied India with 5,000 tons of nuclear fuel in the 2015-2019 period, which is more than twice it had provided during the period from 2010 to 2014 (2,100 tons) (Joint Statement between Uzbekistan and India during the Prime Minister's Visit to Uzbekistan, 2015); and secondly, some hopes for construction of TAPI were realized when Turkmenistan agreed to lead the TAPI Pipeline Company, a consortium that was incorporated in November 2014 by Turkmenistan (85% interest), Afghan Gas Enterprise (5%), Inter State Gas Systems (5%), and Gas Authority of India Limited (GAIL) (5%) that finally culminated in the first phase (215 kms) TAPI gas pipeline laying from Mary, near Galkynysh gas field (Turkmenistan) to Afghan border on 13 December 2015. All the four parties signed on the investment agreement in February 2016 to develop the project, which facilitated the beginning of construction of Afghanistan-Pakistan section of the pipeline in February 2018 at Islim Cheshme (Serhatabat) near Afghan border (TAPI Gas Pipeline Project, 2019).

Further, the defence and military deals with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan assume significance because of the exponential rise in religious extremist forces in Kyrgyzstan and

Tajikistan. Even the National Strategy for Prevention of Violent Extremism and Countering Terrorism for 2020-2024 adopted and designed by Turkmenistan, the first CARs to do so, hints at the non-traditional security threats to the region (News, mfa.gov.tm, 2020). It has been reported that thousands of youth from Central Asia, especially Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, who had joined the Islamic State in 2014 onwards have now returned back to their respective countries after the fall of the terrorist infrastructure. However, it is apprehended that this sorry state of affairs may lead to a dangerous situation in Central Asia, which will ultimately spill over to adjacent regions, including India, a victim of cross-border terrorism for the last three decades. At this juncture, Modi government's emphasis on dealing with the menace of terrorism and extremism with iron hands gels completely with the genuine concerns of the CARs. And for both India and the CARs, working bilaterally, trilaterally or multilaterally or within the ambit of UN or regional organizations like SCO has been given top priority. In this context, establishing Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism (Indo-Tajik) and regular military drills (Indo-Kyrgyz) shows the resolve of the political leadership in India and the CARs.

India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given a major boost to India's age-old historic-cultural linkage with Central Asia. In the last six years, Prime Minister Modi has only talked about four commonalities between India and the CARs: "common interests", "common issues", "common heritage", and "common historical space", which he believes would create a sense among the Central Asian leadership as well people (Dash, 2015). It is a well-known fact that India-Central Asia relations have been multi-

dimensional, deep, old and continuous from the ancient times till date. Modi's India has revived the high expectations the Central Asian leadership had from India after independence in 1991. At that critical juncture, the Central Asian leadership looked at India with awe and respect, and described India as a much avowed neutral actor with many virtues, a natural ally and an emerging global power. The major advantage with India at this point of time, according to one former Indian diplomat, was its soft power status with a plethora of virtues such as democracy, secularism, non-alignment, plural society, eclectic culture and significant technological and scientific advancement (Bhadrakumar, 2013). In this age of globalization, economy may be ruling the roost, but culture matters the most. India's cultural contact with the people of the CARs has been the mainstay of its relationship with the region. The present Indian government promotes culture as the fulcrum of her contact, cooperation and coordination with the CARs. The admiration, respect and friendliness both Central Asian people and Indians have towards each other is well known. This could be the basis of people-to-people contact between the two regions.

Conclusion

Thirty years ago, when the CARs emerged from the ashes of Soviet disintegration, the peculiar situation that occurred in Central Asia was understood (by India) as "purely strategic" and at that point of time, only one thing India wanted seriously and sincerely this strategically located region (Central Asia) not to be dominated by forces inimical or hostile to her (India's) interests, particularly, any encirclement either by China or the lone superpower (US). Similarly, six year ago, when Narendra Modi-led

government in India came to power, the “New India” reiterated that Central Asia, which is an important, “extended”, “immediate strategic neighbourhood” or “near abroad,” (Debata, 2013) should not fall prey to any anti-India element or force, pointing indirectly towards China, which has a huge base and presence in every sector and sphere of Central Asian society. As discussed earlier, Modi has not only visited the region over half a dozen times in last six years on different occasions and for different purposes, but also advised his top Cabinet Ministers and bureaucrats/diplomats to accord priority to the CARs, and the Indian Corporate sector to mull over investing there. Modi’s Central Asia policies, which exemplify India’s commitment on its relationship with Central Asia, are full of new found and promising prospects to cement our ties and reap the ultimate benefit. PM Modi has many firsts to his credit as far as India’s relations with CARs in the last six years are concerned. Firstly, Modi is the first Indian Premier to make state visits to all the five CARs in a single visit; secondly, Modi is the first Indian Premier to visit Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the last 20 years; thirdly, PM Modi is the first Indian leader not to believe in the earlier “wait and watch approach” of India towards an important region like Central Asia; and fourthly, PM Modi is the first premier to replace the post-liberalisation “Look” policy with “Act” policy.

The discussions on India’s relationship with Central Asia in this paper substantially show how Modi government has altered the quarter-century old thesis that India has failed to carve the much required niche in Central Asia despite decades of efforts. Modi government sent out a clear message to the CARs, the entire region and the world as well that India is as an old, neutral and

faithful friend of the CARs, and serious in strengthening multifaceted ties in political, security, strategic, defence, economic, culture and people-to-people contacts with the CARs (Sajjanhar, 2016). India has now established “strategic partnership” with all the CARs, except Turkmenistan, which “manifests in a variety of relationship” and encompasses a “long-term interaction based on political, economic, social and historical factors,” (Gupta and Azad, 2011) and hopefully augurs well for India in coming times.

Chinese strategy to spread its influence across the globe through its military might and economic prowess, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has not yielded the much desired result. World powers like America in its various global policies such as New Afghanistan Policy (20 August 2017) and Indo-Pacific policy gives primacy to India, instead of China. Interestingly, two important points can be elaborated here, which could be advantageous for India to spread its goodwill in Central Asia. Firstly, there is a series of anti-Chinese protests in Central Asian nations such as Kazakhstan (May 2016) and Kyrgyzstan (January 2019) because of factors like a) Chinese labour migration; b) growing economic dependence of CARs on China; and c) mistreatment of Turkic ethnic minorities in Xinjiang (Niyazbekov, 2020). Further, in the Corona pandemic that has taken away nearly 200,000 lives across the world, has exposed China's duplicitous role and surreptitious nature, thus clearly diverting the global opinion as well as global order in India's favour. There is a positive sign for India during the Corona pandemic in 2020, when PM Modi showed his statesmanship and global leadership by providing hydroxychloroquine 55 countries,

including the CARs like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, a gesture dubbed as “high mark of friendship and solidarity” by none other than the Kazakh Prime Minister, Qasym-Jomart Tokayev (High Mark of Friendship: Kazakh President Thanks India.., 2020). India is now rebuilding the faith and trust in the minds of Central Asian people as well as leaders and having an image makeover. India has to cash in on this unwavering faith by the people and political leaders of the CARs. This is high time India, with an astute and assertive leader like Narendra Modi at the vanguard, should march ahead to nourish its vital interests in the South and Central Asian region.

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