



## India, Buddhism and Geopolitics in Central Asia: *Regaining Centrality*

**Proposal to Establish The Takshila University for the Study of Indo-Central Asia Culture to Promote World Peace in the 21st Century**



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## ***Summary***

India has to shed the current approach of understanding Central Asia steadfastly through a Western prism. The practice has obscured rather than clarified our interests. India should redesign its platform to lay the groundwork for evolving an enduring policy goal in Central Asia. It should translate its "soft power" into a strategic framework and make it the linchpin of India's policy goals in Central Asia. Central Asia was always a fertile ground for Indian thought and culture to grow. Explorers are unearthing fresh evidence of a robust Indian cultural presence in the region. It is only by invoking these elements that India could seek an advantageous term and favourable atmosphere to enhance its national interests in the region. The Government of India should embark on a fresh initiative of establishing a University in Central Asia to re-harness and promote India's traditional interests in the Eurasian continent for long-term benefit. The university should be named after the ancient Takshila University or any other ancient institution that had played a historical role in promoting Indian culture in Central and East Asia.

## Introduction

The Eurasian region, which has thus far remained a backwater of the global economic and political mainstream, is rapidly changing in the face of increased international and inter-regional efforts to break its longstanding isolation. The continuous thrust on energy is resulting in increased capital flows and expansion of regional trade. The spate of Chinese investments and trade is triggering large-scale infrastructure, shipment of goods and flow of people across the region - a phenomenon aptly compared with the earlier waves of flow of capital and human traffic from the United States to Europe.

But geopolitics, eerily reminiscent of the “Great Game”, is once again engulfing Central Asia, with major external powers jockeying for influence to maximize their energy security stakes in the region. Their manoeuvres include direct energy encouragement tactics to control energy both at source and their supply routes. The game has become more palpable after the US entry into the region in 2001. Both the United States and Russia have opened their military bases and increased their military contacts with Central Asian states. China has raised its profile in Central Asia through economic, energy and military cooperation under the SCO’s auspices. Of course, the stage is not yet getting set for a clash of major power interests, but owing to the persisting rhetoric, probably intended, perhaps its inevitability cannot be just wished away.

Interestingly, the major powers, in their pursuit of a realist strategy, have not discounted altogether the application of their ideologies and ideals. To justify its entry the United States has combined its national interests with propagation of “liberal democracy”. Many have viewed that energy interests had motivated Washington to covertly support ‘colour revolutions’ in the CIS since 2004. To expunge the US “regime change” policy, Russia and China had intensified the SCO’s operational framework and its security and economic charters. Moscow had saved Karimov from his dissidents in 2005, and now Kyrgyzstan is seeking Russian intervention to end the ongoing political and ethnic conflict.

As for China, its strategy so far has been to gradually encroach upon the Eurasian space without eliciting opposition from Russia. Beijing is currently pursuing the “non-interference” principle to rationalize its goals in the region. In its diplomacy, Beijing has treated the Central Asian states as equal partners, engaged them into international and Asian groupings, and is now offering them a multiple interlocking of economies while nurturing the SCO as a linchpin for its energy policy. In a short time China has managed to remove its negative “China threat” image and gained an air of respectability in the region. The regional states have accepted China as a constructive and reliable partner and have offered China’s CNPC many energy contracts on a long term basis.

## India's Influence and Stakes in Central Asia

Central Asia was historically a zone of India's civilizational influence. Buddhism had flourished across the vast Eurasian steppe at one point of time. Monasteries dotted along the Silk Route had greatly served as both cultural and commercial outposts. They provided merchants with resting facilities and capital loans to carry out commerce. They had also patronized artisans engaged in fine art, gems cutting business running from Iran to China. But following the Arab conquest of Central Asia in the seventh century, Buddhism had to make a retreat from such a vast area.

In the 1990s India had made a good beginning by opening five Indian missions and formulating the "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" towards Central Asia. Several Prime Ministerial visits in the early 1990s, instituting cooperation agreements and providing substantive development aid and technical support had formed a good part of India's policy.

India's intention so far has been not only to position itself but also to respond to the great power diplomacy in Central Asia. Efforts have been made not only to acquire stakes in energy but also in Central Asian uranium reserves. Importantly, Central Asia did factor into India's regional security calculus, especially in the context of Pakistan and Afghan stability. Bilateral Joint Working Groups (JWG) on counter-terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were signed. Attempts were made to expand defence cooperation with the Central Asian states for joint production of military hardware and military training. Initiatives were made to improve transport connectivity with the region. New Delhi also provides modest development assistance to Central Asian countries and shares its technological achievements and experiences with them, besides several programmes to support their capacity building and human resource development.

However, despite strong commitments having been made pursuant to the high-level discussions, India has recorded less political influence and less economic success in Central Asia. Many international commentators have lately noted that India's relative failure to compete in the energy game is linked to its inability to rationalize its policy goals ideologically for the region. This makes India's Central Asia policy less commensurate to its rising profile on the global stage. India's trade is dismally low (\$500 million) and its investors and businessmen are experiencing a host of difficulties in the region.

Observers have made a strong case for India being one of the biggest stakeholders in Central Asia. India, according to them, enjoys a range of ideological attributes and civilizational justification that could entail huge advantage and potentially facilitate speedy access into Central Asian energy resources. India could offer the principal of peace to rationalize its encroachment on resources in seemingly non-interest-driven terms. This approach combined with India's historical affinity with the region could serve as a compelling alternative to offset conflicting forces, domestic nationalists and potentially be acceptable to regional and

international audiences.

But in doing so, the capacity-gap generated by India itself, such as its uncompromising Western-styled secularism, prohibits cultural linkages across our borders. This has fed religious extremism, lack of perspective and inaction. Lack of institutions and a broad interdisciplinary competence prohibits even the use of spiritualism as a useful instrument. Ironically, India's guiding diplomatic principle is radically shifting away from idealism to realism that makes it even harder to compete with the other powers which are acquiring new norms and ideas to supplement their hard power pursuit.

It is plausible, like in West Asia, that the 21<sup>st</sup> century may witness a possible conflict of interests in Central Asia. The societies in the region might face serious stresses, threats and challenges. In the midst of this impending situation, the voice of peace will still be relevant to international relations and it should be India's destiny to take a lead in it and achieve it. The Eurasian culture of peace can still be preserved and history is full of Buddhist-Muslim friendly interactions and cooperation, alliances and exchange of trade, frequent scholarly exchange and spiritual advancement that were not without advantage to the humanity.

However, India has to shed the current scholarly approach of understanding Central Asia steadfastly through a Western prism. The practice has obscured rather than clarified our interests. India should redesign its platform to lay the groundwork for evolving an enduring policy goal in Central Asia. It should translate its "soft power" into a strategic framework and make it the linchpin of India's policy goals in Central Asia. Central Asia was always a fertile ground for Indian thought and culture to grow. Explorers are unearthing fresh evidence of a robust Indian cultural presence in the region. It is only by invoking these elements that India could seek an advantageous term and favourable atmosphere to enhance its national interests in the region.

## Recommendations

Recognizing this urgent need, a national project with international perspective is presented here for favourable consideration of the Government of India.

- 1) The Government of India should embark on a fresh initiative of establishing a University in Central Asia to re-harness and promote India's traditional interests in the Eurasian continent for long-term benefit. The university should be named after the ancient Takshila University or any other ancient institution that had played a historical role in promoting Indian culture in Central and East Asia.
- 2) The university should draw on an understanding of the past while emphasizing its relevance to the future. Like in the case of Nalanda University, the importance of this project should also be viewed in the context of an Asian renaissance to draw attention to the cultural, socio-economic and intellectual aspects of Asia.

- 3) The objective should be to facilitate the revival of civilizational and cultural linkages between India and Central Asia through intellectual and institutional resources available in both regions.
- 4) The university should be oriented towards evolving India's own understanding of Central Asia. It should aim at broadening India's operational scope, strengthening the Indian strategic position and robust presence in Central Asia, and eventually to make it a catalyst for peace and stability in the entire region.
- 5) The university should be a secular institution with an international status enjoying academic autonomy. The vision of the university would be based on a global philosophy while maintaining local relevance. It should be based on the same conviction to come up as a Centre of Excellence.
- 6) The university should be set up on the pattern of Nalanda University, which was established following the understanding reached at the East Asia Summit meeting in Singapore in November 2007. The university should be established through an inter-governmental agreement between the participating countries. The university should have the following schools upon its establishment:
  - i) Historical Studies
  - ii) Buddhist Studies, Islamic Culture, Sufism, Philosophy and Comparative Religions
  - iii) International Relations & Peace Studies
  - iv) Business Management and Development Studies
  - v) Languages and Literature, and
  - vi) Ecology and Environmental Studies.
- 7) At the functional level, the university could encourage local governmental and non-governmental institutions engaged in scientific and archaeological research on the pattern of programmes drawn up by the UNESCO and European Union.
- 8) It should participate in the project relating to exhibitions, archaeological findings in the region, Semerechie, the Chu Valley, Ferghana Valley and Turkmenistan.
- 9) The university should work towards sensitizing these findings and project them in and outside the region through publications and the media.
- 10) The university should create a data-base and formulate policies to promote World Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.