

Department of Personnel

# Sinha visit boost to Central Asia ties

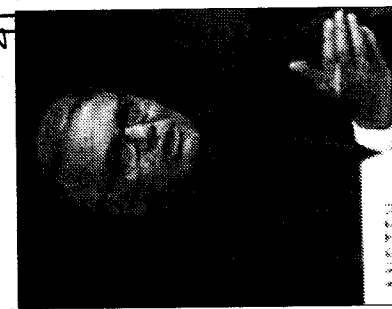
**Mr. Roy Chaudhury**  
in New Delhi

Feb. 3. — India has begun a rediscovery of the central Asian republics over a decade after they emerged as independent states, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, of which they were part, collapsed. The just-concluded visit of the external affairs minister, Mr Yashwant Sinha, to Tajikistan and Kyrgyztan, the first ever by an Indian foreign minister to the region, was a follow up to Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee's visit to Kazakhstan last June (for the CICA summit in Almaty), and signals India's decision to actively engage the region.

There are a host of reasons for the interest in the region; strategic, political, economic and historic.

Strategically, central Asia affords India a chance to actively cooperate in securing its borders from the widening menace of terrorism, while containing the specific threat from its immediate western neighbour, increasingly being recognised as the world's "epicentre of terrorism". Cooperation with the region also fulfils India's energy requirements. With increasing instability in the Middle East and the Gulf, India needs to cultivate stable sources of oil and gas imports in a hurry.

Mr Sinha launched a joint



Mr Yashwant Sinha

working group (JWG) to counter terrorism, with Tajikistan, and the pattern of cooperation outlined will be a model for the other republics. In Dushanbe, the Tajik capital, Mr Sinha said "new challenges have emerged. New directions have to be found against terror which wounds the borders, and strikes the innocent".

Politically, cooperating with the central Asian republics, primarily Islamic democracies, allows the government to show that there is nothing anti-Islamic in its campaign against terror.

Economically, the region affords India's technological skills and products a vast new market, while recent initiatives (for trade and transit routes via Iran) will help cut distances, and consequently, costs, and make Indian products more viable.

Once the pipelines get firm up, competitive prices for the sale of their power, oil and gas can ensure that India's economic development gains pace.

Historically, these countries were where the ancient Silk Road went.

In this context, in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, Mr Sinha outlined how India, Iran and Afghanistan have agreed to develop a "new Silk Route" to enhance trade and people-to-people contacts with central Asian countries.