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Center Asia  
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# India, Tajikistan to set up JWG on counter-terrorism

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By Amit Baruah

**DUSHANBE (TAJIKISTAN), NOV.14.** India and Tajikistan today agreed to extend road links from the Iranian port of Chabahar through Afghanistan into Tajikistan, set up a joint working group on counter-terrorism, reconstruct the airport at Ayni and intensify defence cooperation.

After detailed talks with the Tajik President, Emomali Sharifovich Rakhmanov, the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, announced that India would also extend assistance for the "infrastructure requirements" of the Military Training College in Dushanbe.

"We are cooperating well in the field of defence training. We have agreed to institutionalise contact between our armed forces in specialised areas," the Prime Minister said at a press conference with Mr. Rakhmanov.

During his day-long visit, Mr. Vajpayee also said a decision had been taken to upgrade the airport at Ayni.

According to Mr. Rakhmanov, \$5 million of a total assistance package of \$40 million announced by India would be a grant towards reconstructing the airport at Ayni, northwest of the Tajik capital, which would serve as an alternative to Dushanbe.

He said that Tajikistan had approached Russia and other multilateral organisations to make the airport usable again, but had received a positive response when they contacted India.

Pointing to the strategic significance of Dushanbe, the Tajik President said that during the anti-terrorism operations in Afghanistan, aircraft of many countries used the Dushanbe airport.

Highly-placed sources in the Prime Minister's delegation told *The Hindu* that the Ayni airport project was a "small" one. They, however, made it clear that India's cooperation with Tajikistan, apart from the

strict bilateral dimension, had to be seen in the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

On the new highway project, the sources said the idea, which would involve the concurrence of Afghanistan, was to take the highway from Chabahar-Kabul-Kunduz-Badakhshan into Tajikistan.

(India and Iran are currently constructing the link road from Chabahar port into Afghanistan).

In his remarks, the Prime Minister said the road project would have to involve three countries, a reference to Afghanistan as the third nation. A working group would deal with the issue in detail.

He revealed that the financial assistance package included a credit line of \$25 million, which could be used for mutually agreed industrial and infrastructure projects.

"Our relationship in the present day is built on a shared commitment to democracy, secularism and the rule of law. We have common concerns in the region," Mr. Vajpayee stressed.

The Prime Minister and Mr.

Rakhmanov also witnessed the signing of seven agreements, including an extradition treaty, the setting up of an Indo-Tajik Information Technology Centre and an accord on tourism cooperation.

The Tajik side expressed its belief that India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) would add to the strength of that group when it decides to take a new member, a joint declaration issued by the two sides said.

For some time now, India has been keen to join the SCO, and the Tajik formulation takes that desire a step forward. Tajikistan also reiterated that it supported India's entry into the United Nations Security Council as a permanent member.

On the formation of a joint working group on counter-terrorism, the declaration said this would help in combating international terrorism, organised crime, money laundering and illegal trafficking in weapons.

"In this context, they (India and Tajikistan) reiterated that terrorism cannot be justified on any ground whatsoever. Terrorism is an attack on the human rights and citizens of the world.

It must be condemned unambiguously and eradicated wherever it exists. The sides also condemned the supporters of terrorism and those that finance, train or provide support to terrorists."

Calling for an Afghanistan free from outside interference, the two countries expressed concern at the challenges to security being mounted by the former Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements "with support from outside".

They reiterated their determination to continue providing economic "and other assistance" to contribute to peace, stability and reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Tajikistan extended support to India to promote and strengthen international peace and security, including mutual understanding and cooperation in South Asia.

Calling for increasing trade between the two countries, the declaration said considering the vast hydro-electric potential of Tajikistan, it was felt that a beginning should also be made to cooperate in this sector.

# New highway to link India, Tajikistan

Press Trust of India

*India*  
*Central Asia*  
*15/11*

DUSHANBE, Nov. 14. — Underlining its strategic interests in Central Asia, India today set up a Joint Working Group with Tajikistan to combat international terrorism with the two countries deciding to intensify their defence cooperation and to build a highway linking them through Afghanistan and Chabhar port in Iran with the sea link completing it.

A Treaty of Extradition was among eight documents signed between India and its closest neighbour in Central Asia at the conclusion of talks between Prime Minis-

ter Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee and Tajikistan President Mr ES Rakhmanov, who hailed these decisions as the "opening of a new page in the ancient bilateral ties".

A Joint Declaration on Friendship and Cooperation signed by Mr Vajpayee, the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Tajikistan since it broke away from the erstwhile Soviet Union 12 years ago, and Mr Rakhmanov condemned "supporters of terrorism and those that finance, train or provide support for terrorists".

Indicative of the desire of the two countries to construct a highway that will link them on an "urgent basis" was the decision to set

up a working group for this. Mr Vajpayee announced an economic package of \$40 million, including a credit line of \$25 million to Tajikistan.

India will also assist in infrastructure development of the Military Training College in Dushanbe.

Besides the Declaration and the Extradition Treaty, the six other agreements signed included accords on cooperation in tourism and Information Technology and an MoU on establishment of Indo-Tajik IT Centre. Instruments of Ratification for agreement on Mutual Legal Assistance in Legal Matters and Bilateral Investment Promotion were also exchanged.

# India, Tajikistan agree to step up defence ties

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**Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee and Tajikistan President Rakhmanov exchange documents after signing an extradition agreement at Dacha in Dushanbe on Friday as external affairs minister Yashwant Sinha and security advisor Brajesh Mishra look on.**

## 'No military base'

**Dushanbe:** Tajikistan on Friday brushed aside reports that India was setting up a military base in the Central Asian country, saying Indians were only assisting in the renovation of a military airfield, near here. The clarification came during Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit that took place amidst reports that India had set up a military base at Ayni in Northern Tajikistan. PTI

# Central Asia is central

India's renewed focus on this region makes strategic sense in terms of the future

<sup>95-8</sup>  
**I**NTERESTINGLY, Prime Minister Vajpayee made his way to Dushanbe, the capital of the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, via Moscow. The prime ministerial route assumes significance in that it seemed to reiterate an old engagement even as it set out to deepen a relatively new one. But this said, India has its own distinct compulsions in evolving a 'Look Central Asia' policy that has to necessarily be separated from those of Russia, which incidentally is also looking to play a more pro-active role in Central Asia as the revival of its base near Bishkek last month underlined.

India is no stranger to this region, of course. But in the earlier era, the relationship with Central Asia hinged on the broader one this country had with the Soviet bloc. A great deal has changed over the years, not least of all the dissolution of what was USSR and the emergence of independent Central Asian states. This in itself would demand a paradigm shift in this country's ties with the nations of this region and the Ayni military base, now being readied in Tajikistan, has come to symbolise the importance with which India is viewed as a strategic partner in that country. There is another factor, too, which needs to be taken into account. The defeat of the Taliban regime and the rejection of the politics

<sup>India - Central Asia</sup>  
of religion has led to a decided reconfiguration of political forces in the region. Finally, there is also the renewed recognition that energy is synonymous with national security and it is expedient on the part of a nation of almost continental proportions to safeguard its energy interests in order to secure its future. India has already tied up with Tajikistan's neighbour, Kazakhstan, for oil exploration projects and there could be a further consolidation of this process with Vajpayee's visit to Dushanbe.

Building a sustainable relationship with the region would take time and considerable diplomatic energy. But there is opportunity in the air and it is fitting that the pilots of Indian industry and trade have been quick to discern it. The Indian embassy in Dushanbe, along with the Confederation of Indian Industry, is staging a three-day "Made in India" trade show that will showcase some of the country's best known brands. This is consistent with the new trade thrust of Indian diplomacy. We have seen the success of this approach in South Africa and China, and Central Asia is expected to respond with similar enthusiasm. Already India has a decided presence in Tajikistan's markets, and we in turn could benefit from its natural wealth and strategic location.

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Sinha at the India-Central Asia meet in Tashkent. PTI

## Sinha roadmap to bring C Asia closer

**EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE**  
NEW DELHI, NOVEMBER 6

**EXTERNAL** Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha today underlined the importance of Central Asia from the Indian perspective, saying that New Delhi was looking at greater economic engagement with the region.

At the India-Central Asia Conference at Tashkent, Sinha outlined the plan for a 200-km road between Zaranj and De-laran in Afghanistan. "Once this road is complete, it will re-

duce by 1,500 km the distance between India and Central Asia," he said.

Sinha pointed out that India was one of the first countries to have missions in all Central Asian countries. "Our desire for multiple transport links with Central Asia is in tune with our economic progress... India has become a major centre for outsourcing."

Of the 10 scholarships of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, two would be given to Central Asian scholars, he said.

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# Hot destination: Central Asia

P. STODAN

**A**FTER successful diplomacy in Southeast Asia, India is now primed to replay its historical role in Central Asia after a gap. A series of initiatives are on the anvil. The prime minister will visit Dushanbe, our defence minister will head for Bishkek and Astana and our foreign minister to Tashkent within a short span of three weeks. These visits underline India's new policy towards Central Asia. Apart from this, the Delhi-based Institute of Defence Studies will be hosting at Tashkent a conference on India and Central Asia, in the first week of November.

There is no doubt that India is getting ready acceptance as a reliable partner here. The fall of the Taliban has not only vindicated its policies but also paved the way for deepening ties. This is just as well, because a number of "outside" powers have been noticed traipsing in and around a region which, without doubt, is part of India's zone of strategic interest.

US activism on the grand chessboard of Central Asia has invited responses from Russia in an area it considers as part of its traditional sphere of influence. On October 23, Russia formally returned to its old garrisons with a new military base at Kant airport, near Bishkek. The rapid deployment force stationed in Kant under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation is primarily de-

signed to deliver a sobering message to terrorists. But could it also be an attempt to blunt NATO's expansion in the region? Putin has made many changes to Russia's Central Asia policies. Unlike Yeltsin, he is seeking a re-engagement, if not quiet acceptance, in the space occupied by the former USSR. He is winning long-term energy contracts and offering unemployed youth from Central Asia recruitment in Russia's armed forces.

China, too, is reacting sharply to unfolding events. Recently two military exercises were held here by the China-sponsored Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Some have seen these as Beijing's answer to the growing US military presence in the region. China, recently, has also revived its interest in the energy sector by bagging a major oil contract in Kazakhstan.

The growing activism of Russia and China in Central Asia comes at a time when the US has forcefully signalled the importance of energy to security. Hence there are growing fears that the US military presence in Central Asia, with the "laudable" goals of handling terrorism and promoting security, may also have oppor-



tunistic aspect. These could include, for instance, control over the politics of the region. Further, this US military presence could create "lily pads" for deploying rapid mobile forces to intervene in local conflicts; which may

in turn inflame young minds and give a fillip to terrorist outfits in the region that are now in retreat.

There is also a residual, lurking apprehension in many Central Asian countries that dependence on fickle US policies could be counter-productive. There is some basis for such an apprehension. Some go to the extent of saying that US would dump Central Asia and plonk for Pakistan as its subedar for the region. NATO's entry into Afghanistan, which is rather in proximity to J&K, is another factor that needs monitoring.

It would also be very interesting to observe how China and Pakistan develop their engagement and relationship with NATO in Afghanistan as well as Central Asia. The current balance of advantage seems to indicate that as long as NATO sorts out the destabilising elements in Afghanistan, its presence would be alright. But if it withdraws due

to an unacceptable number of body bags or domestic politics in its member-states, the resurgence of Taliban would be inevitable. One has to watch for duplicitous moves by Pakistan which, clearly, has been running with the hounds while hunting the hare for the US.

This reconfiguration in the region is a compelling reason for India to reclaim its geopolitical rights and responsibilities in Central Asia. Its engagement here over the past 11 or so years pre-dates the total paralysis of Pakistan's Central Asia policy based on religion. Islamabad is lying very low indeed and the clergy it send in droves are highly unwelcome, more so after 9/11, since there is a common understanding that Pakistan continues to be the global epicentre of terrorism. Therefore, India need not waste time on the Pak factor in forging ties with Central Asia.

This writer would argue that the exposure of the issue of Jammu and Kashmir must become part of the Indian government's initiatives in Central Asia. There are many cultural and historical linkages and new opportunities as well — as, for instance, the possibility of the opening of a new energy highway along the Sinkiang-Ladakh frontier. We need to trace our steps with deliberation as we prepare to engage with this region in a closer manner.