

India-Central Asia Relations: Growing Convergences

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In recent years, India-Central Asian relations have been witnessing significant strides in bilateral cooperation that has cascading effects on regional and multilateral geopolitical dimensions. The geographical proximity of Central Asian countries to India in conjunction with its geopolitical sensitivities, allows for New Delhi's growing strategic interests in the region. In recent times, there have been momentous convergences between India and the Central Asian Region that manifest the rapidly changing geostrategic dynamic in bilateral and multilateral relations between India and Central Asian countries that consist of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The significance of the region to New Delhi reflects increasing geopolitical and geo-economic engagement between the two sides in conformity with India's Extended Neighbourhood Policy. The implications of such growing cooperation are transformational for the region having global ramifications. Over the years, the urgency exhibited by India and Central Asian republics to integrate multidimensional issues of mutual concerns in the overall ambit of the shifting international environment and accompanying strategic imperatives provide new opportunities to heighten and diversify the evolving relationship between the two sides into higher levels while articulating a new vision and viable road map. India's assuming G-20 presidency with effect from December 1, 2022, along with becoming a full-time member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, opens up new avenues of heightened cooperation between the two sides based on the principle of shared progress, sustainability, and inclusiveness.

India and Central Asian Alliance – Unlimited Potential

India and Central Asia have been witnessing deep-rooted historical, cultural, political, and economic relations that have, over time crystallized into a stable,

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mature, and transformational partnership. In recent times, Central Asian countries have been looking for viable partners having strong credentials, especially in defence, security, and economic domains. On the other hand, New Delhi has been emboldening its Extended Neighbourhood Policy in the sensitive western frontier, especially in the context of emerging challenges arising out of recent security concerns in Afghanistan and its cascading repercussions overlaps with the existing geopolitical sensitivities of Central Asian region. Additionally, India's increasing priority for heightened energy cooperation and enhanced presence in the Central Asian region by promoting trade and territorial connectivity perfectly matches and reciprocates the concerns of Central Asian nations. All these factors have been in effect towards propelling the willingness and determination of the two sides to come closer and build a strong base for robust cooperation in multifarious issues of mutual concerns.

India's growing global aspirations, visibility and critical contributions to various multilateral forums, along with the rigorous pursuit of a well-articulated Extended Neighbourhood Policy, have triggered New Delhi to look beyond its borders whereby the Central Asian region sets the solid platform for India to leverage its political, economic and cultural connections towards playing a leading role in Eurasia.¹ The region is rich in natural resources such as petroleum, natural gas, coal, and uranium which are highly in demand. People-to-people contact has been another major area of focus that aims at creating a strong interface in socio-cultural dimensions while promoting higher education in each other's countries.² Central Asia enables India to expand its presence in the resource-rich region to fight terror and disrupt forces effectively while seeking peace, stability, energy security, and economic prosperity.

In recent times, the two sides have been making concerted efforts to scale up strategic cooperation in areas such as defence and security; trade, investment, and connectivity; economic development; development of industrial partnership; energy security; regional issues of mutual interests such as emerging challenges arising out of Afghanistan security scenario and more recently prolonged Russia-Ukraine War.³ Such diplomatic endeavours get emboldened because of convergence between the two sides in combating terrorism, curbing illicit trade, enhancing connectivity, sharing information technology, and collaborating in the healthcare, and education sectors.

India's historical bonding with the region and people-to-people connections provide a great opportunity for the two sides to capitalise on the existing relationship and find new and innovative ways to take the current partnership onto a higher pedestal.⁴

Momentous Convergences – Creating Roadmap

India's proximity and growing convergence on issues of mutual concern with the five Central Asian countries have been reflected in heightened cooperation in addressing emerging geostrategic challenges in the post-Covid-19 emerging world order. In the timeline of the last decade, India has shown enhanced interest and activism in the Central Asian region because of its huge energy resources, strategic geopolitical nomenclature, and more recently in countering China's rising influence in the region. With the unveiling of the "Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP)" in 2012, leading to the formation of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, there has been renewed momentum towards accelerated cooperation on diversified areas of mutual concerns sustainably and inclusively. After a relative dormancy of CCAP for three years since its inception, the relations between India and the Central Asian countries experienced a remarkable upswing when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all five Central Asian countries back-to-back in July 2015, which eventually acted as a catalyst towards a heightened trajectory of strategic partnership.⁵

This momentum had further culminated into profound magnitude during the first-ever India-Central Asia Summit held on January 27, 2022, when the Heads of State and Governments of all partner countries discussed proposals of mutual interest to strengthen cooperation, especially in areas of defence and security, trade and connectivity, development cooperation, medical and healthcare cooperation, energy security, cultural and people to people contacts, apart from unanimously reiterating their strong support for a peaceful, secure and stable Afghanistan with a truly representative and inclusive government for the preservation of security and stability in the region.⁶ Keeping in perspective the heightened rigour and extensiveness of the growing engagement between India and Central Asian countries, it can be well argued that the two sides have now been all set to work in tandem to preserve geostrategic equilibrium and power balance in the India-Central Asia corridor that constitutes New Delhi's western neighbourhood, which eventually is perceived to have long-term implications in regional and transglobal paradigms.

India-Central Asia Engagement – Accelerated Momentum

With India and Central Asian countries embarking on robust cooperation in shaping the geopolitical architecture of the region, the India-Central Asia Dialogue mechanism has been instrumental in consolidating the strategic

relationship with a spirit of shared progress. Keeping in perspective the vital stakes that the two sides hold in heightening diplomatic engagement, it is distinctly observable that the India-Central Asia Dialogue series at the Foreign Ministers level has been making steady progress in moving the relations forward with consistency and spirit of shared progress. Since the landmark visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to all Central Asian countries in 2015, three rounds of the India-Central Asia Dialogue have taken place to date. Each of these meetings has built up momentum in accelerating the speed and extensiveness of strategic collaboration, culminating in the first-ever India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022.

The first Dialogue that was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in January 2019 initiated the process with renewed determination towards identifying multifarious measures enabling substantially enhancing India's economic engagement in business and economic development of Central Asia in conjunction with exploring viable means of connectivity that would allow for higher levels of trade and investment commitment in India-Central Asia corridor. The First Dialogue culminated in important initiatives including the establishment of an India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC).⁷

During the second India-Central Asia Dialogue held in October 2020, emphasis was given to promoting trade connectivity and development cooperation between the two sides, apart from identifying mechanisms to fight the Covid-19 pandemic jointly. Deliberations also focussed on India's USD 1-billion line of credit to Central Asian countries for priority projects in connectivity, energy, IT, healthcare, agriculture and education with the overall objective to enhance New Delhi's active engagement as a responsible and transparent development partner.⁸ The Central Asian countries appreciate India's providing financial assistance for the implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP) for expediting socio-economic development in the region as part of promoting shared prosperity and heightened collaboration as envisaged by the Central Asia policy.⁹

The third India-Central Asia Dialogue held in December 2021 has been instrumental in facilitating further consolidation of strategic interests between the two sides, especially in the context of the development of new complexities in regional and transglobal geopolitical architecture that encompasses the emerging security concerns in Afghanistan, changing dimensions of the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic strategic shifts and alliance formation, all of which having politico-economic ramifications in the region.¹⁰ The deliberations further explored new avenues for cooperation based on mutual interests and

the need to deepen strategic engagement in the “4cs”— commerce, capacity building, connectivity, and contact — that encompass the contours of security and terrorism, trade and economy, development partnership, energy security, healthcare, and climate change.¹¹

The third India-Central Asia Dialogue made definitive headway in strategizing connectivity issues in terms of developing viable transit and transport potential in the India-Central Asia frontier, thereby providing significant impetus to the logistics network of the region. Concurrently, the meeting formally touched upon the optimum usage of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) in conjunction with Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITTC) to enhance connectivity between India and the Central Asian countries.¹² On the energy security paradigm, the Dialogue reiterated a longstanding commitment towards capacity building and energy trade enhancement between the two sides. While New Delhi is cognizant of the huge endowment of energy resources in Central Asia, especially in large reserves of coal, natural gas, mineral resources, and crude oil, the two sides extensively deliberated on heightened collaboration towards the enhancement of energy trade prospects and clean technology.¹³ In this context, the priority given towards heightened collaboration between specialised national institutions in areas of renewable energy and information technology is a significant step forward emanating from the third India-Central Asia Dialogue towards achieving energy security in the region.¹⁴

India-Central Asia Summit – A Milestone

The first-ever India-Central Asia Summit held on January 27, 2022, propelled an ambitious vision and formulation of a viable roadmap for the coming years while focussing on a concrete action plan towards further enhancing and consolidating strategic cooperation. The timing of the Summit coincides with the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the Central Asian countries. The Summit is considered a watershed event that demonstrates the strong resolve and determination of the Leaders of respective partner countries in shaping the trajectory of robust partnership towards an impactful and sustainable manner. The January 2022 Summit also accounted for the far-reaching ramifications in determining much-needed stability, security, and geostrategic equilibrium in New Delhi’s north-western frontier, thereby, showcasing the efficacy of India’s “Extended Neighbourhood Policy” in addressing the emerging challenges in the region under the spirit of reformed multilateralism and

transparency in global governance.¹⁵ The Summit opened the door for identifying and exploring new dimensions of strategic cooperation in the India-Central Asia diaspora in an era attributed to geopolitical shifts and alliance formation. In essence, the Summit visualised a win-win strategy wherein India manifests an alternative large market for Central Asian countries, while the region itself emboldens New Delhi's search for defence, security, economic, and energy cooperation in the extended neighbourhood. It is also envisaged that robust collaboration between India and Central Asia charts out a defining moment towards combating any hegemonic and destabilising forces that threaten to disrupt geostrategic equilibrium in the region.

Furthermore, as part of providing renewed vigour to the ongoing institutional cooperation, the Summit proposal to establish the "India-Central Asia Centre" in New Delhi to function as a Secretariat for convening the India-Central Asia Summit biannually is a welcome step forward.¹⁶ On similar lines, the proposal initiated at the Summit for the creation of an "India-Central Asia Parliamentary Forum" to enable robust deliberations between the legislatures of these countries while promoting people-to-people connections showcases the potential for transformational impact across the diaspora in an inclusive and sustainable manner.¹⁷ Concurrently, the two sides agreed to organize a number of activities, including the issuance of joint postal stamps to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries.¹⁸ All such decisions are momentous decisions that symbolise the reach and extensiveness of socio-politico-economic synergy that exhibit profound convergence.

Cornerstone of Strategic Cooperation

Diplomacy, Defence and Security

Defence and security concerns are paramount in shaping the trajectory of India-Central Asia strategic cooperation because of the potential threat the two sides face arising out of the destabilisation forces operating in the region. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, India's interests in Central Asia have greatly increased towards maintaining stability and security in the region. Very recently, the two sides, while calling for upgrading the existing defence and security partnership, have emphasized conducting joint counter-terrorism exercises to achieve a "World Free of Terror".¹⁹ Both India and Central Asian countries consider Afghanistan a common security concern. After the Taliban took over power in Kabul, terrorism, cybersecurity and narcotics are considered critical in adversely affecting the collective security of India and Central Asia.²⁰

The two sides arrived at a broad ‘regional consensus’ on establishing representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, providing humanitarian assistance for the people of Afghanistan, and preserving the rights of women, children, and other national ethnic groups and minorities²¹ are important components of growing security and diplomatic cooperation. The decision to establish a Joint Working Group (JWG) to monitor the developments in Afghanistan having a wider security perspective is a concrete step towards enhancing diplomatic and security collaboration. Defence and military engagement between India and Central Asia were strengthened by the signing of Memorandums of Understanding and Agreements for defence and military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Central Asia in 2015. Several joint military exercises, military education and training programmes, and counter-terrorism exercises in mountains and urban-rural environments have been conducted between India and Central Asian countries. For instance, very recently, with an objective to accelerate the momentum of defence cooperation in September 2021, India and Kazakhstan carried out the Fifth edition of the annual bilateral joint military exercise KAZIND-21 to strengthen military diplomacy.²² The two sides also decided to engage in defence-related joint production and co-development.²³ Concurrently, India has recently refurbished the Gissar Military Aerodrome, its first overseas base operating along with Tajikistan to provide strategic lift-up to joint military operations and training.²⁴ Moreover, the fact that India has appointed Defence Attaches in all five Indian missions in Central Asia²⁵ bears testimony to the strong determination that New Delhi bestows towards propelling defence, security and diplomatic cooperation between India and Central Asian countries.

Trade and Connectivity

The development of mutual connectivity to enhance trade and commerce between India and the Central Asian countries in the context of landlocked geographical terrain and insufficient overland connectivity facilities was a major area of deliberations during the January 2022 Summit. As the connectivity projects were visualised by the Leaders as a “force-multiplier for trade and economic cooperation, and contacts between countries and people” that need to be upgraded with top priority.²⁶ India as a member of both the International North-South Transport Corridor, and the Ashgabat Agreement has taken steps to operationalize the Shahid Beheshti Terminal at the Chabahar port in Iran to provide secure, viable and unhindered access to the sea, thereby facilitating trade connectivity for the Central Asian countries.²⁷ The two sides are also

determined to utilise optimally the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as well as Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITTC) to enhance connectivity between India and Central Asian countries.²⁸

Energy Cooperation

Over the years, India and Central Asian countries are determined to strengthen energy cooperation that largely defines the contours of the evolving relations. The two sides have reiterated their steadfast commitment towards the optimal harnessing of energy resources to ensure energy security for the countries inclusively and sustainably with a spirit of shared progress. The January 2022 Summit is a turning point in bolstering energy cooperation between India and Central Asia. As the Central Asian region is endowed with rich energy resources, especially crude oil, natural gas, coal, and minerals, and New Delhi's energy requirement is expected to rise exponentially in years to come, a distinct urgency was perceptible in the deliberations.²⁹ Importantly, bilateral agreements between India and Kazakhstan³⁰ as well as Uzbekistan³¹ signed in 2019 regarding the supply of uranium are major developments towards ensuring energy security. Concurrently, India and Central Asian countries have recently also emphasised the necessity to establish cooperation between specialised national institutions in areas of renewable energy, information, and digital and advanced technologies.³²

Other Multifarious Areas of Cooperation

In addition to the above-stated crucial areas of strategic cooperation, other issues of strategic convergence encompass healthcare, education, information technology, pharmaceuticals, and climate change. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the two sides' commitment to rebuild healthcare infrastructure and medical cooperation in promoting transparent global governance bears special significance in fighting global health challenges that have cascading impacts on multifarious dimensions. On education, information technology and climate change – issues, the two sides are working closely to enhance cooperation for the shared progress of the region.

Conclusion

Over the years, the contours of the India-Central Asia relationship have displayed transformational implications whereby growing convergence has the potential to bring about a paradigm shift in the geostrategic dynamics in India's extended neighbourhood. The very fact that the foreign ministers of

the five Central Asian nations visited New Delhi in December 2021 to attend the third India-Central Asia Dialogue despite the threat of the Omicron variant while side-tracking the overlapping meeting of foreign ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation bears testimony to the importance they accord to relations with India. In a reciprocal gesture, India's original decision to invite five Central Asian Leaders as Chief Guests to attend India's Republic Day ceremony in January 2022 showcases determination for growing engagements and placing high priority on strengthening the ongoing dimensions of cooperation.

Notes:

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- ² <https://indbiz.gov.in/india-central-asia-dialogues-aim-to-boost-bilateral-trade-bilateral-defence-cooperation/>
- ³ Debasis Bhattacharya, "India-Central Asia relations: Growing convergence brings relations to strategic heights", Raisina Debates, Observer Research Foundation, January 11 2022, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-central-asia-relations>.
- ⁴ <https://carnegieindia.org/2019/12/01/realizing-india-s-strategic-interests-in-central-asia-pub-80576>
- ⁵ <https://mea.gov.in/articles-in-indian-media.htm?dtl/25484/PM+Modis+Central+Asia+tour+brings+region+back+into+focus>
- ⁶ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1793068>
- ⁷ https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/first-india-central-asia-dialogue-to-be-held-in-uzbekistan-119010900813_1.html
- ⁸ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-extends-1-billion-credit-line-to-central-asian-countries-for-priority-projects/story-K84RcSGHpIbWhLsJ0pxm7N.html>
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- ¹² https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34705/Joint_Statement_of_the_3rd_meeting_of_the_IndiaCentral_Asia_Dialogue
- ¹³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/20/central-asia-electricity-trade-brings-economic-growth-and-fosters-regional-cooperation>
- ¹⁴ https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34705/Joint_Statement_of_the_3rd_meeting_of_the_IndiaCentral_Asia_Dialogue

- ¹⁵ Debasis Bhattacharya, “India-Central Asia Summit: “Shaping geopolitics in the extended neighbourhood”, Raisina Debates, Observer Research Foundation, January 11 2022, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-central-asia-summit/>
- ¹⁶ https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773/Delhi_Declaration_of_the_1st_IndiaCentral_Asia_Summit
- ¹⁷ <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-central-asia-summit-to-be-held-every-2-years20220127220935/>
- ¹⁸ https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773/Delhi_Declaration_of_the_1st_IndiaCentral_Asia_Summit
- ¹⁹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-central-asia-summit-looks-at-upgrading-existing-defence-partnership/articleshow/89171494.cms?from=mdr>
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- ²¹ <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/india-central-asia-to-form-working-group-on-afghanistan-tapi-pipeline-talks-back-on-table/814652/>
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- ²³ Council of Strategic and Defence Research Report. 2022.
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