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INDIA CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

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INDIA- CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

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India's ties with Central Asia can be traced back to the ancient Silk Road, along which goods, people, and ideas flowed. While the dissolution of the Silk Road limited exchanges between the two, there is a renewed effort to reconnect New Delhi with the region.

In the last decade, Central Asian nations have also been looking for viable partners particularly in economic and security sectors. Both sides share interests in tackling radicalization and terrorism, curbing illicit trade, and exploring opportunities for economic cooperation.

India's deep-rooted bonds with the region provide the perfect opportunity for both sides to capitalise on the existing relationship and find new and innovative ways to enhance the current partnership.

India has increased its outreach to Central Asia in recent times to improve India-Central Asia relations. The leaders of the 5 Central Asian nations (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) have been invited to the 2022 Republic Day Celebrations.

CENTRAL ASIA: LOCATION

The Central Asia Region stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east, and from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north. It includes five countries namely **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan** which are collectively referred to as the **Central Asian Republics (CARs)**.



INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA RELATION: A HISTORY

- India has had a long history of political, cultural and commercial relations with Central Asia, facilitated by its geographical proximity to India and the passage of the Silk Route through them.
- Politically, this ranges from the Kushan Empire, which spanned across the territories of modern Central Asia and India to the Mughal conquest of India during the early 16th century.
- Economically, not only did Central Asian cities – such as Ferghana, Samarkand, and Bukhara – play an important role in the Silk Road connecting India with China and Europe.
- Buddhism was central to this connection in ancient times whereas Sufism from Central Asia to India.
- The present Central Asian Countries came into existence after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. India was one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relationships with the CARs in 1991-92; however, there was a lack of rigour in the ties in the 1990s. The

situation began to improve in the 2000s and has gained pace since then.

IMPORTANCE OF INDIA- CENTRAL ASIA RELATION

- **Geopolitical significance:**

- The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan along with growing influence of China in South Asia is a threat for India's Interest in the region. India can counter these developments with its strong presence in Central Asia.
- changing geopolitics of the region, particularly the formation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the external security threats to the region.
- Central Asia serves as a land bridge between Asia and Europe, making it geopolitically axial for India

- **Defence cooperation:**

- These shared security interests were a driving force behind India's engagement with the region. Some commentators suggest that this was articulated through a 'Look North Policy' that emphasised shared concerns along with a desire to promote stability and cooperation without causing harm to any third country.
- In 2002, India and Tajikistan signed a bilateral defence agreement, as part of which India refurbished Ayni, a disused Soviet airbase.
- India's military cooperation with other nations in the region has been significant, but far more limited. Tashkent has been an arms supplier, with India acquiring six Ilyushin-78 in-flight refuelling aircraft from Uzbekistan.

- officers from the region having attended courses at India's military institutions, infrastructure assistance to military training institutions in the region, as well as the establishment of field hospitals.
 - India conducted its first ever joint military exercise with Kyrgyzstan, Khanjar, in 2011
- **Economic Interest:**
 - The Central Asian countries provide trade and investment opportunities in multiple sectors like IT, Pharmaceuticals, Tourism etc.
 - The **Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC)** Program provides technical assistance and training in areas such as banking, remote sensing and information technology etc in the premier institutions in India.
 - **Energy Security:**
 - India being an import-dependent nation for its energy requirements needs to have a strong relationship with these countries for strengthening its energy security.
 - Central Asia is **rich in energy resources, including oil, coal, and natural gas**. Kazakhstan is the **largest producer of uranium**. Uzbekistan also has large uranium reserves.
 - In 2008, Kazakhstan supported India in obtaining India-specific exemption to allow civil nuclear cooperation with the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) countries.
 - **Agricultural Sector Cooperation:**
 - Central Asia has huge cultivable areas lying barren and without being put to any productive use, offering enormous opportunity for cultivation of pulses. Indian agribusiness companies can set up commercial agro-industrial complexes in Central Asia.

- Central Asia is facing many challenges in food security; Indian expertise in the field can be a game changer in the region.
- Commercial farming is another important area where India and CARs can cooperate.
- India's experience in boosting food and milk production and modernising agro-techniques under the green and white revolution can prove a panacea for Central Asia.
- **Security:**
 - **Terrorism, drug trafficking and radicalization** have been a matter of concern for India and Central Asian countries alike. This has especially become a major concern in the context of the Taliban taking control of Afghanistan

DEVELOPMENTS IN INDIA - CENTRAL ASIA RELATIONS

- **INTERNATIONAL NORTH - SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR (INSTC)**
 - India, Iran and Russia in 2000 launched INSTC to develop a new trade route that would help in cutting the costs and time in moving cargo between Russia and India. It is a 7,200-kilometre multi-modal project with thousands of kilometres of all-weather highways. Many countries have now come on board which include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and several European countries.

Fig: INSTC



- **CHABAHAR PORT, IRAN:**

- In 2003, India and Iran announced the development of the Chabahar port. This was launched to serve as an alternate route to Central Asia.



- **Ashgabat Agreement:**
 - The pact was signed in 2011 by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar and aimed at developing the shortest trade route between the Central Asian republics and Iranian and Omani ports. India joined the Ashgabat agreement in 2018 to diversify its connectivity options with Central Asia.
- **TAPI pipeline (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India):**
 - It was launched to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan to India with transit through Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, it has been stalled since 2006 due to a lack of support from Pakistan.
- **Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC):**
 - India launched ITEC programme to provide assistance to the CARs countries in the area of IT, Management, journalism, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and banking.
- **Connect Central Asia policy:**
 - It was launched in 2012 and aimed to enhance India's political, economic, historical and cultural connections with Central Asia.
- **Defence Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPA):**
 - India signed the SPA with three of the five CARs—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—to stimulate defence cooperation and deepen trade relations.
- **Military exercises:** New Delhi has engaged with Central Asian Republics in the defence sphere through military exercises. Indian Air force also operates Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan in cooperation with the Tajik Air Force.

CHALLENGES IN INDIA- CENTRAL ASIA RELATION

- **Connectivity Issue**

- CARs are landlocked countries and India lacks direct connectivity with them which makes the realisation of the true potential of India-Central Asia relations difficult.
- There are obstructions of physical connectivity due to Pakistan's hostility and Afghan instability for its desultory attitude towards Central Asia.
- India's current trade volume with Central Asia is minimal, and cannot be increased without substantially improving transport connectivity.

- **Growing Chinese Influence:**

- Beijing has made considerable inroads into the region, boosting trade and investment. The Belt and Road Initiative has given great impetus to Chinese ambitions in this region.
- Trade between India and Central Asia is very low (US \$2 billion) compared to Chinese trade with the CARs, which amounts to approx. US \$100 billion.

- **Instability in Afghanistan:**

- Taliban's presence in Afghanistan and its proximity to Pakistan may become a cause of concern for India's outreach program in Central Asia. India has reached out to CARs to secure its interests in Afghanistan.
- Porous border and unbridled corruption along with the proximity with regions of soaring opium production (Golden Crescent) makes the region a powerhouse for drug and money trafficking.
- India's foreign policy has been more focused on the bigger powers such as Russia and the United States (US) and in dealing with challenges from China and Pakistan. Thus, CARs got less attention in the past.

WAY FORWARD

- India can undertake steps to enhance connectivity through the air and digital modes.
- **Leveraging India's Soft power:** India has a **lot of goodwill in the CAR countries**, which could be utilised to expand its influence. Emphasis should be laid on maintaining **cultural and people to people contacts**.
- India should make **efforts to step up multilateral engagement** with Central Asian partners using the synergy of existing forums like the SCO, Eurasian Economic Community (EEC).
- The **Connect Central Asia Policy** must be implemented speedily with high-level visits, strategic partnerships, comprehensive economic engagement, partnership in the development of energy and natural resources to ensure India's strategic interests.
- Measures such as **relaxing visa regimes, establishing schools and universities, strengthening tourism, Investment in the agriculture sector** can significantly improve India's position in the region.

CONCLUSION

Central Asian countries have been keen to have India as a partner as they have sought to diversify their strategic ties. They have admitted New Delhi into the Ashgabat Agreement, allowing India access to connectivity networks to facilitate trade and commercial interactions with both Central Asia and Eurasia, and also access the natural resources of the region. Rising anti-Chinese sentiments within the region and security threats from the Taliban allow New Delhi and Central Asia to reimagine their engagement. India cannot afford to lose any time in recalibrating its regional engagements.



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