**India and Central Asia**

**An overview**

Chitra Rajora, PhD Scholar,

 Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India

**Abstract**

One of the key factors determining the dynamics of the present world politics is the entry of rising giant countries, in particular India, into its foreground. Rapid and sustainable economic growth allows India to systematically strengthen its influences in the international arena through an active foreign policy both at the regional and global levels. India pays special attention to cooperation with various international organizations and associations like: OSCE, SCO, and UNO and the objectives of the article are to study the priorities of India in the development of interaction with these organizations and connections, to identify external and internal factors influencing its interests as well. On the other hand, this article also highlights that after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Indo- Pakistan rivalry for influence in Afghanistan emerged with renewed vigor, stimulating the strengthening of traditionally close ties between India and Afghan Tajiks and interest in developing cooperation with Tajikistan. Security issues have long been prioritized over other issues in Central Asia towards Afghanistan. The main agenda in Central Asia is to address potential threats from the spread of Afghanistan, increased migration flows from Afghanistan, and the root causes of youth radicalization and terroism through several funding instruments.

For India’s side, A significant obstacle faced by India in the development of relations with the countries of Central Asia remains the difficult access to them, for their raw materials and markets of the region. Pakistan has been blocking the land transport links between India and Afghanistan, and China is limiting trade between India and Central Asian countries through Xinjiang. As a result, trade between India and the country of Central Asia is carried out mainly in a ‘roundabout way’ through the ports and transport network of Iran. Over a decade old trans-Afghan gas pipeline project has not moved off the ground, financing of which is becoming impossible due to instabilization in Afghanistan. This concerns India as well as Central Asian countries, thus forcing them into mutual engagement in multiple domains, for containment of instability in the region.

# Background

Both India and Central Asia are strongholds of different civilizations. Central Asia has Slavic, Turkish, French, Arab, and Indian cultures, which is why it is called the Heartland of Eurasia. Central Asia has been a center of attraction in the world due to its geographical location.  “A lively example is that Central Asia has been considered as a supplier of energy to world superpowers like; China, USA, Iran and UK, where even India hasn't remained untouched by this.” Central Asian countries have been following prudent foreign policy to establish their international legitimacy.

India has always put forward "Connect Central Asia" and "Extended Neighborhood" strategies from time to time to maintain its strong position in the region. Under this, effective political, economic and humanitarian connectivity between India-Central Asia countries (reciprocity). But a stable terrestrial relationship is yet to be forged. India has always extended its hand to provide grants and loans with Central Asian countries. A clear example of this is. Notably, Uzbekistan was offered a preference loan in the amount of $1 million for infrastructure development. The Central Asian country India, as an influential actor in Asia countries, is a A rapidly growing economy and a successful investor, an example of this is evident in the new format of the 2019 India-Central Asia Ministerial Dialogue, the first meeting of which was held in Samarkand.

India's 26th January’s Republic Day Parade, which gives a hint towards the changing direction of India’s foreign policy, was used by it through invitation to all heads of state from the five Central Asian Republics (CARs). But the pandemic intervened, limiting their engagement to the first-ever India-Central Asia Summit, which took place online on 27 January 2022. All countries agreed on holding the summit once every two years, the next expected in 2024.

Apart from having strong cultural and historical ties, India is also playing an important role by establishing a significant presence in the region, despite the lack of convenient connectivity routes. As a result of this geopolitical reality, there has been a decrease in investment in the energy sector in both countries. India has been investing in two big projects to provide access to gas reserves in the region for better connectivity by INSTC and TAPI Pipeline thereby building new energy trade routes to India. Another important aspect is India’s role in Central Asian centered multilateral forums and organizations such as CICA, SCO, and EEU. The region has become an important partner of the European Union (EU) due to the important geographical location of Central Asia at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The Central Asian regions, particularly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are rich in energy, most of which is still untapped, where even the European Union is interested.

Keeping this global demand in mind further, India is taking care of its national interests by joining the Regional Organizations and by Coordinating with Central Asia using existing synergies through existing forums such as SCO, EEU, and Customs Union, and accelerating multifaceted activities with Central Asia. For this, India has already proposed a comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, which aims to integrate Indian markets with the Central Asian region. Thus, the greater importance of Central Asia for India also becomes important because of the challenges before both countries, which are a major concern. Militant Islam has shown it's presence in Central Asia and some small terrorist groups exist in this region. Also, Afghanistan’s stability is also a major important issue and area of their cooperation.

India and CARs have a weak link in bilateral relations, due to lack of direct access to the region. Increasing cooperation in areas that do not require a direct land corridor would be mutually beneficial. During the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to CARs in 2015, he underlined the potential areas of cooperation such as IT, e-Network, Pharmacy, biotechnology, textiles, silk, leather goods, mining and Exploration; hydropower and Renewable energy sources and facilitating medical tourism and visa system etc.  These areas have been promoting Indian investments in the CARs. One such option was reflected in bilateral agreements signed during this visit. Before PM Modi’s initiative, the ‘Connect Central Asia policy’ was formulated in 2012.

The purpose of that policy reiterates the commitments of India’s extensive partnership with the countries of Central Asia; there has been significant progress in the relationship between the two regions. The recent activity was held in FICCI at the launch of the India-Central Asia Council on February 06, 2020. Going through this dialogue India’s External Ministry said that “within the framework of the India-Central Asia dialogue, the Government has been committed to a vibrant partnership but to realize this industry must play its role.” On October 29, 2021, a virtual meeting of the Foreign Ministers of India and Central Asian countries took place, during which the participants discussed issues of regional development. In particular, the topic of conversation was the development of transport corridors and the fight against coronavirus, as well as security issues. As the ministers noted, such a diplomatic platform is “a sought-after and effective mechanism for expanding regional cooperation.” Another milestone, January 27, 2022,  the first ever India-Central Asia summit took place. It was chaired by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The summit was attended by the leaders of all five Central Asian republics - the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Due to the pandemic, the forum will be held in the format of a videoconference (MEA 2022). In this regard, Sadyr Japarov, Kyrgyzstan President said that Kyrgyzstan supports the initiative of the Indian side to hold a dialogue “India - Central Asia” at the level of heads of state in the anniversary year. I believe that this event will contribute to the further development of mutual and fruitful regional cooperation” (Kyrgyzstan Foreign Affairs, 2022).

**History**

India and Central Asian countries have fruitfully enjoyed cordial relations during the existence of the Silk route. Both sides have a very long history, culture and economic connection through the silk route which not only connected the people and business but also let the thoughts, culture and beliefs flow freely from one region to the other. Looking at the past relation of India and the central Asian region, one such connection is that the religion of Buddhism, having its origin in India, was appreciated by the people in central Asia, and similarly, many *Sufi silsilahs* popular in India have their connection with that region. If you discuss the bilateral relations of India and Central Asia, then an existing example of remnants of such a relationship is the Turkan Gate, which was built in Delhi in 1650.

Even ancient Indian texts speak of challenges that were represented by people outside the Himalayas or the Hindu Kush as Uttara-kuru (located on the territory of Kyrgyzstan). “Thus, numerous descriptions of the region are found in various Hindu- Buddhist texts, which shows that since the time of the Sakas or the Indo-Scythian tribes, the links between India and Central Asia have remained uninterrupted.” The texts also mention the great trade route known as Uttarapath, which connected the Indo-Gangetic plain with the southern edge of the Eurasian continent, through ancient Takshashila and Gandhara (Modern Pakistan and Afghanistan).

In addition, Central Asia was perceived in India with military overtones- as a frequent springboard for invasions of India. Ancient texts and treatises have mentioned relentless threats coming from the northwest of India. “The great epic of Mahabharat and the ancient Pali texts vividly described the dynamics of threats posed to India from the region. It seems clear that almost every foreigner, including the Greeks, Turks and Mughals, except for the native Mongols, carried out military campaigns into India through Central Asia steppe.” In The Middle Ages, until the Timurid period (XIV century) the region was the epicentre of world power, the dominance and influence of which extended to India and later Babur founded the Mughal Dynasty in India in the XVI century. During the 18th and 19th centuries the Russian Empire reached the northern Outskirts of India which led to the ‘Great Game’ with the British Empire.

Thakharchistan (Tokharistan) in Central Asia was a state which was dominated by Indian cultural and Buddhist religions. Central Asia scholars used to come to India during the middle-ages. And fourthly, Indian music and cinema have been highly appreciated by the people of the Central Asia region.  India was one of the countries who enjoyed relations with the Soviet central Asia region. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the newly independent nations started to stabilize their nation. Besides, since their independence, the republics have been engaging with the countries in the region and beyond, and India is among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with them.

**Importance of Central Asia**

For India, maintaining a long-standing, time-honored partnership with Russia has become essential to its external security and security in general, as it is heavily dependent on arms supplies from Russia for defense purposes. But these ties, too, have changed rapidly with the changing global situation. The spirit and rhythm of the old Indo-Russian ties inevitably weakened. As the economies of both countries have gone through difficult periods of structural change, foreign policy orientations have also undergone a significant transformation. Nevertheless, the geostrategic imperative of India's proximity to the geographic space of Eurasia remains relevant.

One of the biggest things is associated with this region which is full of energy and the "Heart of Asia". Geographically, the Central Asian countries are endowed with significant hydrocarbon and mineral resources and are close to the territory of India. The Central-Asia region in view of this special feature and world demand, especially and as such, Kazakhstan is the largest producer of uranium and has vast reserves of gas and oil. Turkmenistan has the fourth largest gas reserves in the world. The central countries come to the major member countries of The Great Game. And in the present situation, under The New Great Game, the countries of Central Asia consider the richness of important hydrocarbon and mineral resources as part of their strategy and project by China and other countries. India is also no exception to this. Countries in Central Asia see mutual benefits with India because of India's economic and energy security needs, although the lack of direct surface and road connectivity is affecting economic connectivity. India and the countries of Central Asia have opportunities and challenges present in the current bilateral relations.

India’s diplomatic relationship with Central Asia countries highlights the close ties Kazakhstan has enjoyed with India in the last two decades including the recent high-level visits of 2015-2016. On the other hand, diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan have been highlighted by historical and cultural links which makes it a special bond, especially with the introduction of parliamentary democracy in the country.  India has been giving humanitarian aid, credit lines and assistance to central Asia countries for nation-building since the 1990s.

Today, Central Asia is undergoing rapid changes because the world has begun to pay more attention to this energy-rich region. “The influx of capital and the expansion of trade are causing large-scale infrastructure changes in the movement of goods and flow of people through the region, a phenomenon aptly compared to the waves of transformation that occurred earlier in Europe and southeast Asia.  Consequently, great power rivalry has also increased in the context of security and energy availability in the region.” The major powers are framing their responses in different ways to capitalize on a short withdrawal from the region (Hindustan Times News 2022).

**India Regional exploration in Central Asia**

The five ‘Stan’ countries truly support India’s membership in the SCO. In 2015 India was an observer state of Shanghai Cooperation Organization SCO. However, the doubts on the “rules and procedures” for expansion of this (SCO) body continued and it is only when SCO finalized procedures for taking in new members that India could submit its “formal application for the full membership of the SCO” in 2014. India signed the SCO MoU on 24 June 2016. In this spirit, India looks forward to the culmination of the more than decade long association with SCO by participating as a full member at the next SCO Summit of Heads of State in Astana in June 2017. India is expected to benefit from SCO membership given SCO objectives are strengthening relations among member states. Second is promoting cooperation in political affairs, economic, transportation, tourism and environmental protection. Thirdly safeguarding regional peace, security and stability and lastly, creating a democratic, equitable international political and economic order.

The most significant step was taken by the SCO summit on 17 September 2021, a regular meeting of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was held in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, in which the President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, also took part. According to the presidential press service, the topics of the summit were the issues of sustainable development of the participating states, maintaining stability in the space of the organization and in the world, as well as strengthening cultural and humanitarian cooperation. The meeting was chaired by the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon. As a result of the SCO meeting, 30 documents were signed, including the Dushanbe Declaration on the 20th anniversary of the SCO, the decision to start the procedure for admitting Iran to the SCO, granting Qatar, Egypt and Saudi Arabia the status of dialogue partners, a memorandum of understanding between the SCO Secretariat and the Eurasian Economic commission and others. Speaking at the meeting, Sadyr Japarov said that over 20 years, the SCO has achieved "concrete results and significant success." According to him, a lot of work is being done to maintain security and stability in the SCO space. He urged special attention to the formation of a security belt in the region. Zhaparov also said that Kyrgyzstan stands for the early prevention of a military conflict and the establishment of peace, tranquility and stability in Afghanistan, both in the interests of the most “long-suffering” Afghan people, and the countries of the region and the international community.

Despite this, the total mutual trade between India and Central Asia was USD 2 billion per year in 2019, if we look at the country towards Central Asia like Kazakhstan – India’s combined trade was over USD 1.5 billion and over USD 400 million was Indian investment.  Kazakhstan’s was a US $ 68 million investment in India; especially in tea, agricultural and pharmacy etc. India-Kyrgyz has steadily established trade relations that their bilateral trade will exceed US $ 30 million in 2019, with both sides accelerating their investment and market territory to declare a US $ 200 million line of credit.

India's trade with Tajikistan reached US $ 75 million in 2017-18 which was a disappointing performance. To further strengthen its ties, India has expanded Turkmenistan's efforts to increase investment in the economic sector, with petrochemicals exports a core of the national economy, an attractive area for Indian investors. Bilateral trade of around US $ 65 million was recorded in 2019. India's economic relations with Uzbekistan are very promising and new areas of investment; Uranium is also being discovered, resulting in trade relations between the two countries amounting to approximately US $ 300 million (India MEA 2020). It is very symbolic that this Summit is taking place in the year of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the countries of Central Asia and India.

According to the Kazakh’s President, this opens up great prospects for realizing favorable opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation, primarily in trade. In particular, the trade turnover between the countries of Central Asia and India in 2020 reached $3 billion. At the same time, the share of Kazakhstan amounted to 80%. “He added, however, current performance still falls short of our overall economic potential. In my opinion, the work of such dialogue platforms as the Central Asia-India summit is of great practical benefit for the progressive development of our countries, as well as the development of effective responses to new challenges and risks. I am sure that this unique format of a productive exchange of views will help bring cooperation between our states to a qualitatively new level, he believes” (Kazakhstan, MFA, 2022).”

**India and Central Asia Countries Total Export (**Values in US$ Million**)**

Region:  CARs Countries

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S.No.** | **Country** | **2020-2021** | **2021-2022(Apr-Nov)** |
| **1.** | **KAZAKHSTAN** | **225.96** | **125.83** |
| **2.** | **KYRGYZSTAN** | **38.71** | **17.79** |
| **3.** | **TAJIKISTAN** | **53.45** | **20.79** |
| **4.** | **TURKMENISTAN** | **60.34** | **82.15** |
| **5.** | **UZBEKISTAN** | **280.07** | **176.22** |
|  | **Total** | **658.52** | **422.78** |

**India and Central Asia Countries** **Total Import (**Values in US$ Million)

**Region:  CARs Countries**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S.No.** | **Countries** | **2020-2021** | **2021-2022(Apr-Nov)** |
| **1.** | **KAZAKHSTAN** | **804.97** | **277.78** |
| **2.** | **KYRGYZSTAN** | **5.16** | **0.91** |
| **3.** | **TAJIKISTAN** | **1.06** | **7.04** |
| **4.** | **TURKMENISTAN** | **0.30** | **2.88** |
| **5.** | **UZBEKISTAN** | **14.94** | **14.58** |
|  | **Total** | **826.43** | **303.20** |

GOVERNMENT OF INDIA**:** Ministry of Commerce & Industry

In this regard, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev supported the initiative of the Indian side to create a trade and economic platform at the level of ministers of trade and industry. and stressed that improving the investment climate is one of the components of our economic policy, which underlies the concept of New Kazakhstan. We are interested in attracting investments in such promising areas as the mining and metallurgical complex, agriculture, green energy, healthcare and the pharmaceutical sector.” Consequently, there are two separate Lines of Credit first was announcement for Uzbekistan in 2018 when the Uzbek President visited to India, in which they were signed four project worth US $488 million in the sectors of road, sewerage and IT have been approved for implementation. The second Line of Credited was 2020 worth of US $ 1 billion during the India- Central Asia dialogue for all the five Central Asian countries (India, MEA, 2020)

On December 19, 2021, in New Delhi Ruslan Kazakbaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, held the bilateral meeting with Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, Minister of Foreign Affairs of India in the framework of his participation in the Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of India-Central Asia Dialogue (The Economic Times News 2022). With view to enhancing trade and economic cooperation, the parties agreed to hold a number of Kyrgyz Indian Business Forums both in Kyrgyzstan and India, accelerate negotiation of terms of the credit line worth of 200 million USD and implement joint projects through the grant assistance from the Government of India, such as educational IT center in Bishkek in one of the universities of the Kyrgyz Republic. Then (Indian Express News 2022). In addition, agreements were reached on the following issues: extension of the project “Telemedicine” to all regions of the Kyrgyz Republic and joint archeological research of Buddhist temples in the Kyrgyz Republic. The Foreign Ministers of Kyrgyzstan and India also discussed in detail issues related to the expansion of military-technical cooperation (Embassy of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, 2021).

India’s Line of Credit to CIS

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| S. No. | Year of Approval | Region | Country | Borrower | Amount of credit (in USD mn) | Purpose | Date of the singing of LOC by the recipient with Exim Bank |
| 1. | 2008-9 |  CIS | Belarus | RUE grodno energoBelarus | 55.60 | Reconstruction of Grodno-II power plant project (100-130 MW) | 23-10-2010 |
| 2. | 2018-19 | CIS | Uzbekistan | Govt. of Uzbek Republic | 200.00 | Housing and Social infrastructure projects | 18-01-2019 |
| 3. | 2019-20 | CIS | Russia | Govt. of the Russian Federation  | 1,000.00 | Infrastructure and other Development projects | Not yet signed  |
| 4. | 2019-20 | CIS | Uzbekistan  | Govt. of Uzbek Republic | 40.00 | Financing the procurement of defense equipment | Not yet signed |
|  |  |  |  | Total | 1,295.6 |  |  |

Source: Exim Bank.

“India today is the world's fastest-growing free-market economy, with annual GDP growth of 7.5 per cent. India’s for full membership of SCO with various geostrategic, security and economic considerations. These considerations include “the evolving security situation in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Modi said that “Terrorism is the “single most significant threat” to peace and stability”, connectivity with the Eurasian region, anti-narcotics counterterrorism and, capacity building in the central Asian region and energy cooperation.” SCO, as a platform for discussion, can elevate trust and cooperation between India and the other SCO members. Thus, this regional organization can help serve India’s geostrategic, security and economic interests in the Eurasian region better.”

The SCO organization acts as a bridge to strengthen regional relations between India-Central-Asia countries. Thereby, both the parties wish to share their experience, especially in the economic areas such as banking, capital markets and microfinance. India has since worked on major projects like a pan e-network project to provide tele-education and telemedicine in the region to make this project a success. To enhance connectivity, India is preparing a standard customs protocol to facilitate seamless movement of products on this corridor in consultation with other INSTC members. India signed the Chabahar Agreement to actively address the lack of direct-geographic connectivity, which has further increased other options for both-way connectivity.

The visit of Central Asia countries occupies an important place in the visits of the Prime Minister of India in 2015. In the year 2015, the Prime Minister has already indicated his agenda to include this sector on a priority basis. Because economic development in the countries of Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, is mainly driven by the exploitation of hydrocarbon and other mineral resources. This has led to growth in the construction, telecommunications, software and ancillary industries, increasing people's purchasing power and disposable income, allowing them to spend more on both purchase of goods and travel abroad.

On the one hand, Central Asian countries want to diversify their oil economies and integrate them with the global economy. Which will be effective in providing a certain stability to their global-economic development. Just as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have joined the World Trade Organization in Central-Asia countries and Kazakhstan is on the way to become a member. The European Union is Central Asia's largest economic partner, Kazakhstan is the EU's largest trading partner in the region; About 85% of its oil fields are exported to the European Union and it is also the largest recipient of EU direct investment. The European Union receives financial aid for the countries of Central Asia. Another important initiative launched by the European Union is the "Central Asia Investment" programme, which was established in 2007. The initiative aims to encourage small and medium-sized enterprises in the region and promote policies that facilitate investment, open new markets and strengthen competitiveness. Thus, the European Union is helping Central Asia countries to grow the global economy.

Recently, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has been launched and the two Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are its members. Under this initiative, India with its impressive growth rate is seen as a potential partner for the strong economic development of Central Asian countries. Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) came into effect in 2015, which includes Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Armenia. EEU aims to build 176 million people and a market with 4 trillion GDP. Because EEU has a stock of natural resources like oil, gas, minerals, coal, iron and steel. India was invited by Russia to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with EEU countries. The viability of the free trade agreement between India and EEU is being considered. This will give India a well-prepared market and it will be very beneficial for India’s economy.

The CIS country can be a great market for India’s pharmaceuticals, which will provide a great opportunity for the Indian pharmacy industry through the FTA. The FTA will also improve connectivity with India's Central Asian and EEU countries, but to promote trade relations between the EEU members as well as joining the Iran-North-South-Transport Corridor, It will be easy to ensure. Many Indian Businessman doing businesses in Central Asian countries often say that the non- presence of Indian Bank in the republic has been affecting bilateral trade. Alternatively, the business leaders from India can establish a bank on the PPP model with the government and private capitals from the region and India. It will greatly boost the trade and ease business transactions.

Conclusion

This year marks the 30th anniversary of India's diplomatic recognition of the five Central Asian republics, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. India was one of the first countries to recognize the CAR, and Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao made two consecutive visits to the region in 1993 and 1995. Since then, India has developed disparate partnerships with these countries across a range of sectors such as security, culture, education, pharmaceuticals, tourism, hydrocarbons and fissile materials such as uranium, as well as information, cyber and space technology, etc. However, for much of this time, India's physical access to the landlocked CARs was limited. Continued tensions in Afghanistan and India's growing proximity to the United States, as well as Washington's fears and the threat of sanctions on India's investment in the Iranian port of Chabahar, have undermined India's ties to the CAR. India also has a military base in the region, and agreements have been signed for large-scale infrastructure projects. However, these successes are difficult to compare with the successes of China, which has overtaken both India and Russia.

Historical links have been between India and central Asian countries. These civilizations have been close to each other since the time of the silk route. There has been no problem in their diplomatic relations since the last 30 years. There has been no problem in their diplomatic relations since the last 30 years. But keeping in mind the rising demand of India's energy, economic relations with Central Asia countries should be increased and they should be strengthened. India needs to work more actively and abandon its separatist approach towards Central Asia in the context of a holistic and long- term approach. The two countries should discuss and establish projects of mutual interest to establish an India- Central Asia forum to expand the relationship from time to time. The Central Asia fund can also be set up to finance various projects. In addition to making the INSTC effective, Chabahar port needs to be developed on a priority basis as well as linking it to other connectivity-related initiatives in the region.

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