

The First India-Central Asia Summit

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Summary

The first India-Central Asia summit took place virtually on 27 January 2022, commemorating 30 years of diplomatic ties. The summit was the first engagement at the leadership level between India and the Central Asian Republics. This elevation of ties came shortly after the third India-Central Asia Dialogue at the foreign ministers' level, which was organised in December 2021. This paper examines the motivations behind the recently renewed vigour of New Delhi to build stronger relations and strengthen economic and security cooperation with Central Asia.

Introduction

The Central Asian region is most often associated with being Russia's post-Cold War cultural and security "backyard", and China's new "Far West", awash with Chinese investments through the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). From the Indian perspective, the familiar interpretations are of a "Greater Central Asia" linked to South Asia as part of the extended neighbourhood of the subcontinent.¹ For a long time, New Delhi preferred a bilateral approach towards the Central Asian Republics (CARs), with the primary objective of continuing connections with the post-Soviet space and acquiring gas and oil resources from the energy-rich region. Political and economic linkages between India and Central Asia have remained fragile and limited due to various factors, such as the lack of mutual attention, India-China competition on energy resources and the war in Afghanistan.

Compellingly, India's recent interest in the CARs – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – stems from the imperative to be involved in developments in Afghanistan. Given the likelihood of increased Taliban involvement in the region in the near future, India has realised the need to be more active in regional affairs and gamble for a stake in the evolving security matrix. This renewed engagement between India and the CARs is unlikely to yield dividends for New Delhi, but the cost of disengagement is higher, with India risking being left out of South-Central Asian developments.²

India's renewed zeal to improve ties is welcomed by Central Asia, for example, on 19 December 2021, the Central Asian foreign ministers decided to attend the India-Central Dialogue instead of the Foreign Ministers meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) hosted by Pakistan, despite being OIC members.

¹ Marlène Laruelle, "Foreign Policy and Myth-making: Great Game, Heartland, and Silk Roads", in *Mapping Central Asia: Indian Perceptions and Strategies*, edited by Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 8-9.

² C Raja Mohan, "India and Central Asia: Connectivity and Security", Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), Brief No. 898, 31 January 2022, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-and-central-asia-connectivity-and-security/>.

Situated in a strategic location with close proximity to Europe, Afghanistan, Russia and China, the CARs have become adept at pitting powers against each other to maximise security guarantees and economic benefits. With the United States' (US) withdrawal from Afghanistan, the CARs have lost their negotiating leverage with Russia and China, as well as a security buffer against threats emanating from Afghanistan.³ The present security challenges – the new Taliban-led Afghanistan and the rise of the Islamic State – have thrown an international spotlight on the region, allowing the CARs to capitalise on opportunities and acquire more cooperation and assistance from regional stakeholders. Collaboration with Delhi, another major player in the neighbourhood, would additionally help the CARs to avoid excessive dependence on Beijing and Moscow.

Common Security Concerns over a Taliban-led Afghanistan

During his opening remarks at the first India-Central Asia summit, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi stressed that “Central Asia is crucial to India’s vision of an integrated and stable, extended neighbourhood.”⁴ Earlier, in November 2021, Delhi invited the CARs to attend its Dialogue on Afghanistan, and the summit introduced the formation of a Joint Working Group (JWG) on Afghanistan at the senior officials’ level. Indeed, with the takeover of the Taliban, engaging Central Asia has become a vital component of the Modi administration’s strategy in Afghanistan.

For the CARs, the security threat from Afghanistan is undeniably high despite the Taliban’s repeated assurances that there is no danger emanating from Afghan borders. Since the fall of Kabul in August 2021, the CARs have been scrambling for cooperation, international aid and implementing border control measures to mitigate the flow of refugees and limit potential crossover of militants from Afghanistan. In January 2022, Tajik intelligence services reported more than 40 terrorist training grounds with over 6,000 militants along Afghanistan’s north-eastern province which borders Tajikistan.⁵ By and large, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have established direct communication and bilateral ties with the Taliban administration in Kabul. Dushanbe’s attitude towards the Taliban remains hostile and cautious to protect its borders against terrorism and extremism.⁶

With the renewed vigour for enhanced cooperation and strategic convergence in preventing “terrorism, extremism and radicalisation in the region”, India and Central Asia are now better positioned to plan and coordinate counterterrorism operations. Throughout the past year, conversations between India and the CARs have increasingly emphasised on the

³ Richard Boucher, “Memoir | Where is Central Asia, anyway?”, *Eurasianet*, 17 December 2021, <https://eurasianet.org/memoir-where-is-central-asia-anyway>.

⁴ PM’s Opening Remarks at the first meeting of India Central Asia Summit, *Prime Minister’s Office*, 27 January 2022, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-opening-remarks-at-the-first-meeting-of-india-central-asia-summit/?comment=disable.

⁵ “Tajik leader emphasizes the necessity of creating a security belt around Afghanistan”, *Asia-Plus*, 12 January 2022, <https://asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/security/20220112/tajik-leader-emphasizes-the-necessity-of-creating-a-security-belt-around-afghanistan>.

⁶ Claudia Chia and Zheng Haiqi, “Tajikistan’s Opposition to the Taliban: Rhetoric of Threat?”, ISAS, Brief No. 872, 11 October 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/tajikistans-opposition-to-the-taliban-rhetoric-or-threat/>.

development of a common regional approach to Afghanistan due to this shared fear of spillover effects from deteriorating security in Kabul. Previously, India formed a JWG on counterterrorism with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and signed a military-technical cooperation agreement with Kyrgyzstan. The first joint military exercise between India and Kazakhstan took place in November 2016.

Further, the recent improvement in India-Russia ties has had a positive influence on India-Central Asia relations, making India-Russia security cooperation in Central Asia an appealing option.⁷ Notably, in December 2021, Delhi and Moscow discussed joint defence production in the CARs using the existent Soviet-era defence factories.⁸ Considering that both the CARs and India use Russian-built equipment, trilateral defence and military cooperation could improve interoperability and foster alignment in defence industrial policy.

Attempting to build South-Central Asia Connectivity

Another highlight of the summit was the joint call to give “priority attention” to connectivity projects and address the lack of overland connectivity between India and Central Asia. It is important to remember that connectivity projects and aspirations between India and Central Asia have been in the works for a long time. From as early as 2002, then Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee spoke about India’s ‘New Silk Route Initiative’ to build “a new Silk Road of Friendship and Cooperation between India and Central Asia.”⁹ Former Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher, has also stated that in the 2000s, American officials attempted to link electricity and hydropower from Central Asia to Pakistan and India but ultimately failed due to security woes and differing plans of the CARs on their respective connectivity to other parts. Writing in December 2021, he bemoaned that “those connections remain dreams”.¹⁰

In June 2012, India announced the ‘Connect Central Asia Policy’ (CCAP) in an effort to revive stagnant India-Central Asia ties and introduced a broad-based approach to connect with the CARs in an array of sectors from information technology to energy and cooperation on Afghanistan.¹¹ After Modi became prime minister in 2014, his administration continued with the CCAP directive and accelerated connections with the landlocked region. Modi visited all five CARs in July 2015 and announced a slew of projects and agreements to strengthen India-Central Asia cooperation.

⁷ “India, Russia to expand cooperation in Central Asia, says envoy”, *The Hindu*, 29 August 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-russia-to-expand-cooperation-in-central-asia-says-envoy/article36166715.ece>.

⁸ “India, Russia discuss joint defence production in Central Asia”, *The Economic Times*, 27 December 2021, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-russia-discuss-joint-defence-production-in-central-asia/articleshow/88513922.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

⁹ Opening remarks of Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the Press Conference in Almaty, 5 June 2002, <https://archivepmo.nic.in/abv/speech-details.php?nodeid=9128>.

¹⁰ Richard Boucher, “Memoir | Where is Central Asia, anyway?”, op. cit.

¹¹ Keynote address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue, 12 June 2012, <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/Keynote+address+by+MOS+Shri+E+Ahamed+at+First+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>.

In the years since, Delhi has announced several lines of credit to the respective CARs, the most recent of which was a US\$1 billion (S\$1.34 billion) credit for the region to pursue priority projects in connectivity, energy, information technology and healthcare in 2020. The motivations behind these major economic undertakings were largely driven by Indian concerns about growing Chinese investments in Central Asia under the BRI and political shifts in the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Another step forward in connectivity occurred in 2018 when India formally signed the Ashgabat Agreement, a multimodal transport agreement aimed at creating an international transport corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf.¹² The agreement synchronises the Delhi-led International North-South Transport Corridor, including the Chabahar port, to the CARs. During the summit, the CARs agreed to India's proposal to establish a Joint Working Group on Chabahar Port, which is a promising sign for India.

Interestingly, the summit took place just two days after Beijing celebrated its 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic ties between China and Central Asia, during which Chinese President Xi Jinping promised US\$500 million (S\$672 million) in assistance to the CARs and pledged to grow trade to US\$70 billion (S\$94.9 billion) by 2030. The budding relationship between the Taliban and Beijing also threatens India's security interests given that India has weak connections with both parties. Therefore, it would not be surprising if Delhi was again facing pressure to counterbalance Chinese presence and economic clout in its extended neighbourhood.

Rekindling the TAPI and Trade

The summit rekindled interest in the 1,814 kilometres long Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Initially, Washington conceptualised the TAPI in the mid-1990s as a means of curtailing Russian monopoly on gas in the region. The Asian Development Bank completed a feasibility study of the TAPI in 2005, deeming it viable and deciding to finance it. The pipeline would deliver natural gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan and Pakistan into India if successfully operated. The project was stalled due to the troubling security situation until Modi's visit to Central Asia in July 2015, which set forth the momentum for the official launch of the TAPI in December 2015.¹³ In February 2018, the first phase of construction on the Afghanistan-Pakistan section began.

With the Taliban now in control of the Afghan state's resources, the group's support is needed for South-Central Asian economic connectivity. Considering the potential economic dividends of US\$500 million (S\$672 million) annually to Afghanistan, the Taliban has publicly promised to oversee the implementation of TAPI.¹⁴ However, even if the Taliban could provide security guarantees for the pipeline within its territory, other security concerns in

¹² At the moment, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, India, Pakistan and Oman are signatories to the Agreement.

¹³ "TAPI Shareholders Agreement Signed at Groundbreaking Ceremony", *Asian Development Bank*, 15 December 2015, <https://www.adb.org/news/tapi-shareholders-agreement-signed-groundbreaking-ceremony>.

¹⁴ "Taliban vow to protect TAPI gas pipeline project in Afghanistan", *The Express Tribune*, 31 October 2021, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2327211/taliban-vow-to-protect-tapi-gas-pipeline-project-in-afghanistan>.

other geographical areas, such as the resurgence of secessionist movements and armed militancy in Balochistan, impede the project.¹⁵ Recently, on 2 February 2022, the ethnic Baloch separatist group, Baloch Liberation Army, which has been fighting for the rights and independence for ethnic Baloch areas from Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the attacks on two security posts in the province.¹⁶ The India-Pakistan rivalry adds to implementation challenges, as underlying resource competition and divergent security interests make cooperation on a sensitive cross-border pipeline difficult.

Importantly, for the realisation of South-Central Asian connectivity and boosting trade, peace and confidence building must first be built among all participants, including Tehran, Beijing and Moscow. Infrastructure projects and investments may temporarily aid in the development of relations and set the tone for heightened regional connectivity, but the long-term success of these economic imperatives and regionalism are dependent on strong foundations of peace.

On the economic front, current trade from the Central Asian region accounts for less than one per cent of India's total global trade. Trade figures remain remarkably low despite bilateral engagement since the 1990s. While India has assisted the CARs through its Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme and the periodical organisation of business events and trade shows, its overall economic engagement and investment have been patchy and limited.

Table 1: India's Trade with Central Asian Countries 2015-2021 (in US\$ million)

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Kazakhstan	504.84	642.17	1,032.81	851.91	2,458.29	1,030.92
Kyrgyzstan	26.9	31.92	59.53	32.6	30.46	43.87
Tajikistan	32.24	42.26	74.24	26.52	23.8	54.51
Turkmenistan	115.5	78.92	80.46	66.27	37.89	60.64
Uzbekistan	152.5	154.23	234.39	328.14	247.06	295.01

Source: Department of Commerce – Export Import Data Bank (accessed on 5 February 2022)

Amongst the CARs, Kazakhstan is India's largest trade partner, with the bulk of the trade consisting of uranium supply. So far, the initiatives between India and Central Asia have primarily been on a state-to-state basis with low levels of commercial or people-to-people contacts. The establishment of the India-Central Asia Business Council in 2020 would hopefully increase opportunities for discussions and exchanges.

¹⁵ Shakoor Ahmad Wani, "The New Baloch Militancy: Drivers and Dynamics", *India Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (September 2021): pp. 479–500.

¹⁶ Asad Hashim, "Pakistani forces battle gunmen after Balochistan checkpost raids", *Al Jazeera*, 3 February 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/3/pakistani-forces-battle-gunmen-after-balochistan-checkpost-raids>.

Conclusion

Some questions remain, such as whether India arrived in the region too late. If this is the case, how does Delhi overcome its belated agency to establish a meaningful presence in Central Asia? Further, how will Delhi navigate the club of authoritarian regimes prevalent in Central Asia?

While none of the CARs has a good track record on human rights and democratic governance, each has a significant role in stabilising Afghanistan; thus, India has no choice but to engage. In addition, India's relative silence on the January protests in Kazakhstan demonstrates that India is not looking to influence the regimes. Delhi appears to be quite comfortable with the "Shanghai Spirit" embodied in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which is based on equality, mutual trust, territorial sovereignty and non-interference into domestic affairs.

With increased pressures and attention from the international community, a regional consensus on stability and counterterrorism between India and Central Asia may be easier to build now. India should prioritise deepening security cooperation with the three CARs that border Afghanistan – Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – to contain security threats and build meaningful leverage for future contingencies.

Strengthening relations with the CARs provides an opportunity for India to gain more friends and elevate its influence in the region dominated by China and Russia. Furthermore, the economic integration between India and Central Asia fits well into the Eurasian paradigm envisioned in the Russian-led 'Greater Eurasia Partnership'. Trilateral cooperation between India, the CARs and Russia could boost South-Central Asia connectivity while also providing an alternative partnership vis-à-vis China. With increased India-Central Asia interactions, the leaders of the CARs would have to tread carefully between Delhi and Beijing in order to avoid being forced to choose between the two powers.

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