

India's Central Asia outreach

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Paper - II
(International Relations)

- ❖ NSA Ajit Doval's meeting with his Central Asia counterparts this month is part of India's push to widen and deepen ties with countries in the region. The outreach is aimed at ensuring security, and political and economic benefits from the engagement.

National Security Advisor (NSA) Ajit Doval hosted a meeting of his counterparts from five Central Asian countries — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan — in New Delhi on December 6. All countries except Turkmenistan sent their NSAs, Ashgabat was represented by its ambassador in New Delhi.

The meeting, which took place in the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the security situation in Afghanistan under the Taliban, flowed from the first India-Central Asia virtual summit of January 27 this year. The leaders of the Central Asian countries had been invited for the Republic Day celebrations, but their in-person participation was scuttled by the Omicron-led Covid surge in India.



Engagement With Central Asia

The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia from the 3rd century BC to the 15th century AD. From the export of Buddhism to the lasting influence of Bollywood, India has shared old and deep cultural ties with the region. In 1955, during a 16-day visit to the erstwhile Soviet Union, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru travelled to Almaty, Tashkent, and Ashgabat, all of which became capitals of newly-independent countries after the 1991 collapse of the USSR.

Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1992, and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995. In 2003, Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the first Prime Minister to visit Tajikistan; he had travelled to Kazakhstan in the previous year. Manmohan Singh visited Uzbekistan in 2006, and the Kazakh capital Astana in 2011.

Despite India's focus on its other relationships — the US (nuclear deal), China (2003 border pact), and Pakistan (in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks — diplomatic parts continued to move on Central Asia. India also attended Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summits, which were attended by the Central Asian countries, and put in its request for membership. Focussed engagement began with the “Connect Central Asia policy” in 2012, which received a fillip with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to all five Central Asian countries in July 2015.

Battle For Strategic Space

Central Asia has always been seen as Russia's backyard — some 20-30% of the population is of Russian origin, and Russian is spoken widely. Central Asia is extremely rich in mineral and natural resources. Kazakhstan has one of the biggest reserves of uranium, besides stores of coal, lead, zinc, gold, and iron ore. The Kyrgyz Republic is rich in gold and hydro-power, and Turkmenistan has one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas. Tajikistan has huge hydro-power potential and Uzbekistan has gold, uranium, and natural gas.

In 2010, a former general in the People's Liberation Army, Lt Gen Liu Yazhou, wrote: “By custom, people group Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan together with Xinjiang into the Central Asian region. This is a rich piece of cake given to today's Chinese people by Heaven.” That China's President Xi Jinping chose to visit four Central Asian countries on his first overseas trip in September 2022 after two years of Covid-related disruption, underlines the strategic importance of this region.

For India, engagement with the Central Asian countries is important because of a range of reasons — security cooperation after the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan; to counter China's influence in the region;

Central Asia

- ➔ Central Asia is a region in the continent of Asia that extends from the Caspian Sea in the west to China and Mongolia in the east and from Afghanistan and Iran in the south to Russia in the north. The former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan come under this region. Central Asia has historically been closely related to nomadic peoples and the Silk Road. It has acted as a 'crossroads' for the movement of people and exchange of goods and ideas from Europe, West Asia, South Asia and East Asia.
- ➔ The Silk Road connected the peoples of Muslim countries, Europe, South Asia and East Asia, due to which the location of Central Asia intensified the struggle between tribalism and traditionalism and modernization. Due to the strategic, economic, social, political, cultural importance of Central Asia, in the year 1843, the geographer Alexander von Humboldt mentioned "Central Asia as a separate region of the world for the modern world".

India and Connect Central Asia Policy

- ➔ The Central Asian region is considered part of India's "extended neighbourhood". Faced with China's growing presence, India formulated its Connect Central Asia policy in 2012, a broad-based approach including political, security, economic and cultural ties.
- ➔ The primary goal behind the Connect Central Asia policy was to reconnect with a region that has a long shared history with India. The key elements of this policy cover a number of important issues including political cooperation, economic cooperation, strategic cooperation, regional connectivity, information technology (IT), cooperation in education, people-to-people contacts, medical cooperation and cooperation in regional groupings.

plans for connectivity with Europe including the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC); to meet its energy needs (Turkmenistan is part of the proposed TAPI gas pipeline); and for reasons of old cultural links and trade potential.

New Delhi's Engagement

The recent engagement began with the India-Central Asia foreign ministers' meeting on December 19, 2021. That meeting was held against the backdrop of the fall of Kabul in mid-August last year, and a little more than a month after the NSAs of Central Asian countries, along with the NSAs of Russia and Iran, attended the Afghanistan-focussed Regional Security Dialogue in New Delhi. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan share borders with Afghanistan.

At the December 19 meeting, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar told his Central Asia counterparts that their "concerns and objectives" in Afghanistan were "similar", and their goal was "a truly inclusive and representative government, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, ensuring unhindered humanitarian assistance and preserving the rights of women, children and the minorities". This was followed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's January 27, 2022 virtual summit with the leaders of the Central Asian countries, in which he called for an integrated approach to regional cooperation and flagged Afghanistan as a common concern. Two days earlier, China had hosted these leaders at its own summit, which Beijing had swiftly organised after India's announcement.

Modi and the five Central Asian leaders decided, among other things, to hold a leaders' summit every two years; regular meetings among their foreign and trade ministers; a joint working group on Afghan-

Areas Of Cooperation

- ➔ **Energy:** Kazakhstan is one of the first countries with which India has started civil nuclear cooperation. It has been supplying nuclear fuel to Indian nuclear plants since 2010. Apart from this, the TAPI project which is important in meeting the energy needs of India.
- ➔ **Security and Defence:** India holds annual military exercises with some Central Asian countries. "Khanjar" is an annual joint military exercise between India and Kyrgyzstan. "Kajind" is an annual joint military exercise between India and Kazakhstan.

Connectivity:

- ➔ Development of International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). INSTC is a multi-mode network of ship, rail and road routes for freight movement between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia and Europe.
- ➔ To become a member of the Ashgabat Agreement. Ashgabat houses a multimodal transport agreement between India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to create an international transport and transit corridor to facilitate the transport of goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. This agreement came into force in April 2016.

How will India benefit from this union?

- ➔ Building trust through this cooperation provides another counterweight to the engagement of China and Pakistan.
- ➔ This will help India fulfill its aspiration to play an active role in its extended neighborhood as well as contain China's growing influence in Eurasia.
- ➔ India will get an opportunity to play its due role in stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan.
- ➔ To promote India's economic integration with Central Asian republics, which is in line with India's Connect Central Asia policy. The member countries of the grouping are rich in energy resources – both hydrocarbons and uranium.
- ➔ India's possible participation in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) would be an added advantage to make this partnership more fruitful.

istan; joint counter-terrorism exercises between India and interested Central Asian countries; and a group to operationalise the use of Chabahar port by all five countries.

Imperatives Now, For future

China, which has a direct border with the region, has a bilateral trade of \$50 billion with Central Asia, and has made major investments in these countries with its Belt and Road Initiative. India's trade with the region is a paltry \$2 billion. The lack of overland transport access — with Pakistan blocking the way — is a major challenge to India's Central Asia plans. India wants to integrate the INSTC with Chabahar port in Iran to access the resource-rich region. The NSAs, who generally focus on security issues, discussed these connectivity corridors at the December 6 meeting.

From the security perspective, the NSAs discussed the challenges of extremism, terrorism, and radicalisation in the region. Central Asia is seen as the northern boundary of the Islamic world, and with the Taliban's return in Afghanistan, the threat of radicalism and possible regrouping of the Islamic State poses a serious security challenge for the countries in the region. NSA Doval said financing is the "lifblood" of terrorism, and countering it should be a priority.

India does not want the post-Soviet space to be captured by the Chinese, and the NSAs engagement is a key mechanism in Delhi's toolkit. In June 2002, Vajpayee had said in Almaty that the new "Silk Route Initiative" of India's foreign policy seeks to build a new Silk Road of Friendship and Cooperation between India and Central Asia. Twenty years later, New Delhi remains on the road, and on the job.

Expected Question

Que. Which one of the following Central Asian countries do not share a border with Afghanistan?

- (a) Kyrgyzstan (b) Uzbekistan
(c) Tajikistan (d) Turkmenistan

Answer : A

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: Recently a meeting of National Security Advisors of India and Central Asian countries has been held in India. Looking at geopolitics, geo-economics, and strategic importance, evaluate the relations between India and Central Asian countries.

Answer Format :

❖ **Introduction (40-50 words)**

Give a brief account of the meeting of National Security Advisors of India and Central Asian countries.

❖ **Main Body (140-150 words)**

State the geo-politics, geo-economics and strategic importance and evaluate the relations between India and Central Asian countries.

❖ **Conclusion (40-50 words)**

Give a balanced conclusion.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.