

TRACING THE PATH OF CHINA'S DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA, AND WHERE INDIA STANDS

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Paper - II
(International Relations)

Earlier this week, China convened an online meeting of trade ministers of the grouping known as C+C5 — China and the five Central Asian republics, namely Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. It was the latest in a series of diplomatic engagements by Beijing with the region since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Last month, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan received Nowroz messages from President Xi Jinping, who also invited them to the meeting on April 18. An in-person C+C 5 summit is on the cards — perhaps in Xi'an next month — along with China's flagship Belt and Road Forum, which has a substantial Central Asian component. Foreign Minister Qin Gang has announced that his ministry is working "to ensure the success of [the] two major diplomatic events...to show the distinctive character of China's diplomacy".



China and Central Asia

The first C+C5 summit was held in virtual format on January 25 last year, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Two days later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted a virtual summit of the C5 — India's first engagement with the Central Asian nations collectively at the highest level.

China shares a long history of trade, cultural, and people-to-people links with the Central Asian region, which lies on the ancient Silk Route. Modern China's involvement with the region began with the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, when it moved deftly to formalise its boundaries with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, as well as Russia.

Diplomatic relations were established in January 1992, and China's relationship with the region was institutionalised as the Shanghai Five, the forerunner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Over the next two decades, China's interest in the region grew rapidly. Central Asia was a readymade market for cheap exports, and gave China overland access to markets in Europe and West Asia. The region is resource-rich, with massive gas and oil reserves, and strategic minerals such as uranium, copper, and gold. It grows foodgrains and cotton. China also had another priority in its relationship with these countries — to ensure peace in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, which forms its frontier with Central Asia.

With Russia grappling with the economic aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Central Asian republics welcomed China's attention. The region's political and economic dependence on Moscow had ended abruptly. The transition to an open economy was tough, and there was unemployment and poverty throughout the region. In the 2000s, Chinese investments helped to upgrade Soviet-era infrastructure and carry out development works in these countries.

Xi's Belt and Road:

To the landlocked region, China offered access to the Pacific Ocean and East Asia. President Xi launched his Belt and Road Initiative, a modern version of the Silk Road, during his 2013 visit to the Kazakh capital Almaty. As many as 51 BRI projects are said to be located in the country, which plays a critical role as a transit hub for China's trade with Europe.

Beijing has also pumped billions of dollars into Uzbekistan and the other three smaller countries in the region. These investments cover projects from oil and gas exploration, processing and manufacturing, and rail, road and seaport connectivity to digital technologies and green energy including solar power. And the authoritarian regimes in these countries were comfort-



About Central Asian Countries:

Central Asian nations emerged on the world map after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan that broke away from the Soviet Union are collectively known as the Central Asian countries.

Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan shares borders with Russia to the north and China to the east. It is a vast country the size of Western Europe. Its capital is Astana.

Kyrgyzstan: Kyrgyzstan is bordered by Kazakhstan to the north, Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan to the southwest, and China to the east. Its capital is Bishkek.

Uzbekistan: Uzbekistan is bordered by Kazakhstan to the north, Tajikistan to the east, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to the south. Its capital is Tashkent.

Turkmenistan: Turkmenistan is bordered by Afghanistan to the southeast, Iran to the southwest, Uzbekistan to the northeast, Kazakhstan to the northwest, and the Caspian Sea to the west. Its capital is Ashgabat.

Tajikistan: Tajikistan is situated between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and China. Apart from this, only the narrow Wakhan Corridor of Badakhshan province of Afghanistan separates it from the northern part of Pakistan. The capital of Tajikistan is the city of Dushanbe.

able that China, unlike the West, asked no questions about their governance or human rights record.

China's expansion in Central Asia has not been without friction points. Beijing's targeting of the Muslim population of Xinjiang has triggered resentment in these countries, where Islam is the principal religion. The Uighur live across Central Asia, and Xinjiang has significant Kazakh and Uzbek populations that have been affected by the Chinese crackdown.

The resentment, including at the increasing presence of Chinese workers and rapid land acquisitions by China in these countries, has periodically boiled over in public protests. But Beijing's clout ensures that these governments put down such eruptions with a heavy hand, and do not join international campaigns, in the UNHRC and elsewhere, against China's treatment of its Muslim minority.

China now jostles with Russia as the region's foremost trading partner. At this week's online trade ministers' meet, Chinese Trade Minister Wang Wentao said trade between China and the five countries had reached \$70.2 billion last year, "a historic high" and a reported increase of 40 per cent over the previous year. China's direct investment in the five countries is now almost \$15 billion, Xinhua reported.

According to reports, talks are on for transport projects and logistics linking all countries in the Central Asian region to Lianyungang seaport on the Yellow Sea in China's Jiangsu province. China is investing in the expansion of the Horgos land port in Xinjiang, adding connectivity into Central Asia and Europe. President Xi is also pressing Uzbekistan to finish the construction of the China-Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan railway, and begin the implementation of the Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China-Laos-Thailand-Malaysia transport corridor.

'Grand Plan' for relations

Xi has reportedly told Central Asian leaders that he is "eager to discuss a grand plan to develop relations" with them. China's stepped-up engagement with the region over the last year has given rise to speculation that Beijing is making use of Russia's preoccupation in Ukraine to push Moscow out of its own strategic backyard.

For three decades, the "stans", as they are sometimes colloquially called, have sought to balance old ties with Russia and new relations with China, and with the West too. The region is still economically dependent on Russia, which is also Central Asia's net security provider, even though the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), comprising six countries, three of them in central Asia, is fraying somewhat — and the Ukrainian invasion has given rise to fears that a security relationship with Moscow could prove to be a double-edged weapon.

Last year, Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO military exercise that was to take place on its territory. None of the five Central Asian countries have taken Russia's side explicitly in the war, preferring instead to re-

About Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is an organization that is determined to play an important role in European and Central Asian security. It is a military alliance consisting of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

main neutral. But Russia's trade with these countries has increased over the last year, as it attempts to find substitutes for imports from Europe. Russia also has a huge migrant population of Central Asians who bind the region to it in economic dependency.

But if Russia is insecure about Chinese expansion — including a reported Chinese military post on the Tajik-Afghan border — there was no indication of it in the joint statement issued at the end of Xi's visit to Moscow last month. Instead, the two sides said they were “willing to strengthen cooperation, support Central Asian countries in safeguarding their national sovereignty, guarantee national development, and oppose external forces' promotion of “color revolutions” and interference in regional affairs”.

Where does India stand in this situation?

New Delhi made its biggest outreach to Central Asia with last year's summit, but its relationships in the region, including in the SCO, remain security-driven.

While India has trading ties with these countries, it is hobbled by the absence of a land route to Central Asia, with Pakistan denying it passage and Afghanistan being uncertain territory after the Taliban takeover. The Chabahar port in Iran offers an alternative route, but it is not fully developed yet.

There have been suggestions that India should provide connectivity for people and trade in Central Asia through “air corridors”, as it had done for Afghanistan. New Delhi's leadership of the SCO this year may provide it an opportunity to diversify relations with this strategic region.

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Expected Question

Que. Which of the following statement (s) is/are incorrect?

1. The border of Turkmenistan shares boundary with the Caspian Sea.
2. The border of Kazakhstan does not shares boundary with the Afghanistan.

Select the correct answer using the code given below-

- (a) 1 Only
- (b) 2 Only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) neither 1 nor 2



Answer : D

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: China's deepening ties with Central Asian countries has created a concern for India. What options do you think India has to deal with this situation? Discuss.

Answer Format :

- ❖ At the beginning of the question, give a brief introduction to the Central Asian countries and also make a rough map.
- ❖ Describe China's growing relations with these countries.
- ❖ Also discuss the options India should use.

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.