



Connect Central Asia Policy



Introduction

Central Asia is the geographical centre of Asia that marks the confluence of the world's four religious ideologies — Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Modern Central Asia consists of five nations: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. All five nations became independent after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

[India and the Central Asian region](#) share a long history. Indian subcontinent and Central Asia share loose trade and cultural linkages, whose beginnings can be traced to the Indus valley civilization. Central Asian region is considered to be the part of **India's "extended neighbourhood"**.

- However, soon after India's partition in 1947, its relations with the Central Asian region suffered a setback as it lost its direct overland access to the region through Afghanistan (POK captured by Pakistan).
- This meant that goods from India bound for the Central Asian region, instead of going through Pakistan and Afghanistan, would have to take much longer routes which usually involved the sea route to Iran and then overland through Iran, rendering economic relations less viable.
- However, after the 1971 signing of the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, friendship and cooperation and subsequent strategic convergence between India and the Soviet Union, allowed India to be able to foster closer ties with the Central Asian Republics.

Background

The region grew in strategic importance to India during the 1990s and particularly over the past decade.

- Since the turn of the century, Central Asia has become increasingly important to India as a **means for maintaining regional stability**, especially in the border areas between Pakistan and Afghanistan.
 - During the 1990s Central Asia was seen as a route for supplying the anti-Taliban coalition, the Northern Alliance, in Afghanistan.
 - The significance of Central Asia has grown as **India has sought to diversify its energy sources** by including such imports from the region.

Northern Alliance

- The Afghan Northern Alliance, officially known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation was a united military front that was formed in late 1996 after the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (Taliban) took over Kabul.
- The Northern Alliance fought a defensive war against the Taliban government. They received support from Iran, Russia, Turkey, India, USA etc.
- The US invaded Afghanistan, providing support to Northern Alliance troops on the ground in a two-month war against the Taliban, which they won in December 2001.
- With the Taliban forced out from the control of the country, the Northern Alliance was dissolved as members and parties joined the new establishment of the Karzai administration.

- In the domain of Indian foreign policy, Central Asia was focused upon under the narrative framework of the **'Look North' policy**. However, the economic slowdown in India and global power competition in Central Asia have discouraged India from playing a major role in the region for a larger part of the 1990s.

Reinvigoration of Relations

Over the past decade, the region has become **the site of great power tussles over energy resources**. At the same time, the world witnessed India's rise as an economic power and a regional power makes it important to prioritise its relations with Central Asia.

It was in this context that India formulated its **Connect Central Asia Policy in 2012**, which is a broad-based approach including **political, security, economic, and cultural connections**.

Connect Central Asia Policy: Key Points

- The key elements of this policy cover many important issue areas, including political cooperation, economic cooperation, strategic cooperation, regional connectivity, information technology (IT), cooperation in education, people-to-people contact, medical cooperation, and cooperation in regional groupings
- The Connect Central Asia Policy is based on - **4Cs: Commerce, Connectivity, Consular and Community**.
- Significance of Central Asia for India:
 - Central Asia is strategically positioned as an **access point between Europe and Asia**.
 - It offers **extensive potential for trade, investment, and growth**.
 - The region is richly endowed with commodities such as **crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, and iron**.
 - The increasing importance of the region's oil and gas resources has generated new rivalries among external powers.
 - Energy security - **uranium and oil and gas**.
 - In pursuance of this India is negotiating on **TAPI pipeline**.
 - India signed a **civil nuclear deal with Kazakhstan**.

- **National security:** India's only overseas airbase lies in **Farkhor, Tajikistan.**
- The economic development of Central Asia has sparked a construction boom and development of sectors like IT, pharmaceuticals and tourism.
 - India has expertise in these sectors and deeper cooperation will give a fresh impetus to trade relations with these countries.
- Central Asia is **neighbouring 'Golden Crescent'** of opium production (Iran-Pak-Afghan) and is also a **victim of terrorism, illegal arms trade.**
 - Instability in Central Asia due to these factors will have a **spillover effect on India.**
 - Therefore India's collaboration and cooperation with Central Asia in this regard benefits the entire region.

Central Asian countries are important for India's bid to become a **permanent member of UNSC.**

- Citing the importance of Central Asia Indian PM visited all 5 central Asian countries in 2015.
- Also, India-Central Asia link will be re-energized due to India's participation in multilateral fora like Eurasian Economic Union, Heart of Asia Conference and [Shanghai Cooperation Organisation](#) (India recently became a permanent member of SCO).
- The region is crucial in maintaining **stability in Afghanistan.**

Challenges for India

- Since Central Asia is not a part of India's immediate neighbourhood and therefore it doesn't share borders with India, the **issue of connectivity** between the two regions becomes of paramount importance.
 - Due to the **landlocked nature of Central Asian states**, there is no direct sea route between India and the region and that too has a huge impact on regional connectivity.
- **China has made deep inroads** ([Belt and Road Initiatives](#)) in the Central Asian republics in terms of investments in and with the region.
- Also, Russia and China's convergence in Central Asia has changed the dynamics of India's relations with Central Asia.
- The other problem is that both **Pakistan and Afghanistan are not secure** and stable countries, so even if India shared good relations with Pakistan, this route to Central Asia from India is not a safe and reliable path for trade and commerce.
- Due to border disputes, ethnic problems and conflict over control of natural resources, Central Asian countries have failed to recognise themselves as a collective regional bloc, like SAARC or ASEAN, therefore it has been difficult for India to formulate a coherent regional policy vis a vis central Asia.

Way Forward

The development of the SCO has confirmed the viewpoint that the region has become the host of a new great game. India in this setting can act as a big player in the region to aid Russia in balancing for both the American and Chinese presence.

- In this context, first and foremost India must establish **seamless connectivity** with the region.
- The signing of Ashgabat agreement, International North-South Transport Corridor, Chabahar port agreement are all steps in the right direction
- Addressing the implementation deficit regarding these multilateral agreements will resolve fundamental geographical problem between India and central Asia.

India's foreign policy must form a critical balance of realpolitik and moralpolitik, so that India not only remains a great power "candidate" but also becomes a great power "status holder" in the region.

