



## China's Outreach in Central Asia

**For Prelims:** C+C5, [Buddhism](#), [Silk Route](#), [SCO](#), [Russia-Ukraine](#), [CSTO](#)

**For Mains:** China's Outreach in Central Asia and India's Stand.

### Why in News?

Recently, China has conducted a 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 China with the region since the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#).



### What is the China-Central Asia Engagement?

- **C+C5:**
  - The **first C+C5 summit held in Jan 2022** marked the **30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations** between China and Central Asian nations.
  - China's historical trade and cultural links with the region date back to the **ancient [Silk Route](#)**.
- **Significance for China:**
  - The region **provides China with a market for cheap exports** and overland access to markets in Europe and West Asia.
  - Central Asia is **resource-rich, with massive reserves of gas, oil, and strategic**

**minerals** such as uranium, copper, and gold.

- China has also prioritized its relationship with these countries to ensure **peace in [Xinjiang Autonomous Region](#)**, which forms its frontier with Central Asia.

▪ **BRI and Investments:**

- China has been investing heavily in Central Asia through its **[Belt and Road Initiative](#)**, which includes projects in oil and gas, transportation, digital technology, and green energy.
- While China's investments have provided opportunities for economic growth in the region, there has also been resentment towards China due to its **treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang and concerns about its increasing presence** and land acquisitions.
  - Despite this, Central Asian governments have not joined international campaigns against China's treatment of its Muslim minority.
- China is now the region's **foremost trading partner, with talks underway for further transport and logistics projects** linking all countries in the region to China's seaports.

## How are C5s Balancing their Relationships with Russia, China and West?

▪ **Heavily Dependent on Russia:**

- The region is heavily reliant on Russia, which is also the **main provider of security through the [CSTO \(Collective Security Treaty Organisation\)](#)**.
- However, the CSTO's unity is weakening, and the **conflict in Ukraine** has raised **concerns about the consequences of Russia's security** relationship with Central Asia.
  - In 2022 **Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO military exercise** that was to be held on its territory last year, and **none of the five Central Asian countries have openly taken Russia's side** in the conflict.
- Nevertheless, Russia has increased its trade with the **region as it seeks to reduce its dependence on European imports.**

▪ **China's Increasing Engagement:**

- China has been increasing its engagement with Central Asia, leading some to speculate that Beijing is taking advantage of Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine to expand its influence in the region.
- While Russia may be concerned about Chinese expansion, there was no visible indication of this.

▪ **Seeking towards West:**

- Central Asian countries are seeking to develop trade relations with the West, including the European Union and the United States.
- However, the region's **landlocked geography and limited transport infrastructure have hindered** this effort.

## What is India's Stake in Central Asia?

▪ **Cultural and Ancient Ties:**

- The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia from the 3rd century BC to the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. From the export of Buddhism to the lasting influence of Bollywood, India has **shared old and deep cultural ties with the region.**

▪ **Security:**

- In December 2022, officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan arrived in India for the **[first India-Central Asia meeting of national security advisors](#)**.
  - It highlighted the India-Central Asia relationship, emphasizing their common shared interests, such as stabilizing the **security situation in Afghanistan and reinforcing territorial integrity.**
- India has also attempted to boost its security presence in the region by **renovating military bases in Tajikistan.**
- If operational, the airbases would offer **India a strategic advantage against its two adversaries: China and Pakistan.**
  - Tajikistan is located close to the Wakhan Corridor, which connects Afghanistan and China, as well as **[Pakistan Occupied Kashmir](#).**

▪ **Extended Neighborhood Policy:**

- In 2022 India demonstrated its commitment to its **["Extended Neighborhood Policy \(ENP\),"](#)** which calls to diversify its geopolitical partners and diplomatic goals, and its

willingness to engage its Central Asian partners on a multitude of fronts.

- The ENP was launched in 2014 and seeks to build a web of partnerships and economic cooperation with neighboring countries.
- The policy emphasizes **India's commitment to promoting regional stability, peace, and prosperity** through mutually beneficial cooperation with its neighbors.
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):**
  - India joined [SCO](#), as a full member in 2017.
    - SCO also includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
  - The grouping provides India with a forum to establish **security relationships with Astana, Bishkek, and Tashkent**, adding on to robust ties with Tajikistan.
- **Connectivity as a Challenge:**
  - While India has trading ties with the C5, 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.

## Way Forward

- India must prioritize building long-lasting and reliable partnerships with Central Asian states, particularly in the face of **ongoing geopolitical challenges**. Security will remain a focal point for bilateral relations, but it is important for India to establish links through **transit, trade, investment, and people-to-people** connections.
- **India should take advantage of the vulnerabilities that the region has been exposed to** due to crises such as Russia's war in Ukraine and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.
- **Joint counterterrorism efforts** can help New Delhi establish itself as a consistent partner and monitor adversaries from a closer range.
  - However, India must also **work on other issues to supplement the security aspect** and ensure that the relationship with Central Asia is not susceptible to geopolitical, economic, or domestic pressure.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

### Prelims

**Q. What is the importance of developing Chabahar Port by India? (2017)**

- (a) India's trade with African countries will enormously increase.
- (b) India's relations with oil-producing Arab countries will be strengthened.
- (c) India will not depend on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- (d) Pakistan will facilitate and protect the installation of a gas pipeline between Iraq and India.

**Ans: (c)**

### Mains

**Q. A number of outside powers have entrenched themselves in Central Asia, which is a zone of interest to India. Discuss the implications, in this context, of India's joining the Ashgabat Agreement. (2018)**

**Source: IE**

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