

India and Central Asia: Connectivity and Security

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Summary

The maiden summit between India and the five Central Asian states put renewed emphasis on deepening cooperation on connectivity and security. The summit, organised to mark the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, signals a political ambition on both sides to lend a strategic dimension to their ties. However, translating the goals on connectivity and security into tangible outcomes is likely to remain a challenging task.

The first-ever summit between India and the five leaders of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – was about overcoming the persistent obstacles to a productive economic relationship and finding a new basis for political engagement and security cooperation between India and the region. The [Delhi Declaration](#) issued at the end of the summit called for the construction of a “long term, comprehensive, and enduring India-Central Asia partnership” between the two sides. The emphasis was on two important issues – promoting physical connectivity to boost trade between India and Central Asia and expanding security cooperation. That the two sides are back to basics in the engagement underlines the problems in building a strong foundation for a sustainable relationship in the last few decades.

India was among the first countries to recognise the Central Asian Republics (CARs) when they found themselves independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Unlike most major powers, India had privileged access to Soviet Central Asia thanks to Delhi’s special relationship with Moscow during the Cold War. Delhi, therefore, had hoped for a quick flowering of ties when it moved to establish diplomatic relations with the new regimes. Despite the much celebrated historical and civilisational relationship with Central Asia and the rekindled geopolitical romance with it, India has struggled to build a productive relationship with the region.

As the United States’ enthusiasm for promoting democracy in Central Asia dimmed within a decade after the region broke out of the Soviet orbit, it became clear that Russia’s institutional links with the region’s establishments were strong and enduring. Moscow’s familiarity with the Soviet-era elites that ran the newly independent republics continued to give Russia a privileged hand in the region. Where Russia went on to dominate the political and security landscape of the region, and China seemed to deepen its economic imprint, India appeared increasingly marginal to the region. Meanwhile, a rapidly rising China, which shares more than 3,000 kilometres of frontier on the eastern flank of Central Asia, became an important economic partner for the region.

Two days before the Central Asian leaders’ summit with India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi, they had a similar meeting with the Chinese President Xi Jinping. China hopes to boost bilateral trade to [US\\$70 billion](#) (\$94.9 billion) by the end of this decade. India’s annual trade with the region, in contrast, has been stuck at around US\$2 billion (\$2.7

billion). As the leaders noted, the commercial engagement between the two sides is way below potential, and they called for “concerted efforts” to “boost trade and investment”.

Although occasional moves were made to establish bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation, India could not make a dent on the region’s geopolitics. But the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has given a fresh impetus to the two sides to strengthen cooperation in addressing “the common challenges of terrorism, extremism and radicalization”.

While Prime Minister Modi made a major effort in 2015 to boost bilateral ties by undertaking a tour of all the five CARs, the initiative to convene a summit with the five leaders in Delhi on the occasion of the annual Republic Day celebrations signalled Delhi’s renewed determination to raise India’s profile in the region. But the surging third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the shift to a virtual mode.

That the leaders of the five CARs, four of which are already part of the so-called Shanghai Cooperation Organisation led by Russia and China – India is also a member – are willing to engage India in a separate format suggests that there is considerable interest in deeper ties with India. Although Delhi’s weight may not match that of Moscow or Beijing in the region, India does figure prominently in Central Asia’s strategy of diversifying their regional relations. [Contrary to the widespread perception](#), Delhi does not see itself in competition with Beijing for influence in Central Asia. Its focus is on overcoming the structural barriers to a larger Indian role in the region and seizing the few possibilities that come its way.

As it looked to revitalise ties, the summit’s focus was on two important themes. In the first, the leaders addressed the principal constraint on developing commercial ties — lack of connectivity between India and land-locked CARs. Pakistan’s refusal to give overland trade and transit facilities to India and the political instability in Afghanistan mean the natural routes between India and Central Asia are blocked. The two sides have now set up a joint working group that will intensify the effort to use Iran’s Chabahar port to promote “free movement of goods and services between India and Central Asia”. The Modi government has invested in the [development of a terminal at the Chabahar port](#) in the hope of turning it into a critical node in the commercial engagement with Central and Inner Asian regions.

Complementing the focus on overland connectivity is the emphasis on security. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan has shaken the Central Asian governments, all of whom are vulnerable to the forces of violent religious extremism. The shared interest between India and Central Asia in containing the forces of destabilisation emanating out of Afghanistan is encouraging the two sides to institutionalise political coordination and deepen security cooperation. The challenge now is to turn the proclaimed political will into tangible outcomes. The establishment of a joint working group on Afghanistan at the summit is only the first step.

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