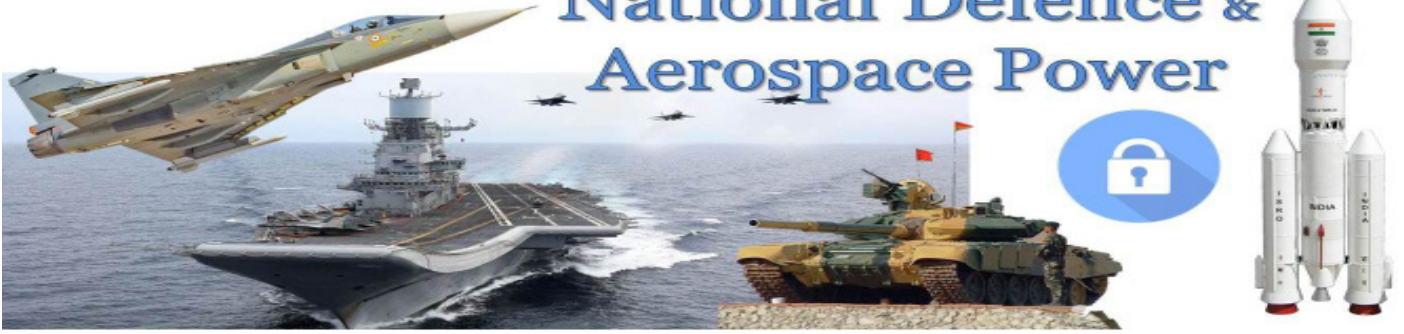




National Defence & Aerospace Power



SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FIRST INDIA-CENTRAL ASIA SUMMIT

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Amidst rapidly emerging geopolitical shifts, India hosted the 1st India-Central Asia summit with the Presidents of five Central Asian Republics (CARs) in a virtual mode. The summit reflected not only a renewed momentum in India-CARs relations but also India's acknowledgement of the Central Asian region's importance in its foreign policy calculus. Indian Prime Minister (PM) Shri Narendra Modi, in his opening remarks, stated that "Central Asia is central to India's vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood and wished to provide an effective structure to this relationship and prepare an ambitious roadmap for the same".¹ In this endeavour, the decision was taken to institutionalize the summit mechanism and hold it bi-annually, to convene annual meetings

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at the foreign minister, trade minister, culture minister and National Security Adviser (NSA) level and to set up an India-Central Asia Secretariat in New Delhi to support this new mechanism.² The adoption of a well-crafted approach with a set vision is one of the key outcomes from this summit, as a structured format has now been established to take things forward. Building on the already existing India-Central Asia dialogue mechanism at the Foreign Ministers level and "The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue", organised by India on November 10, 2021, with the participation of National Security Advisers (NSAs)/Secretaries of

Security Councils of all the five Central Asian countries, Russia and Iran,³ the summit served as an important platform to evaluate, revitalize and strengthen the partnership. The brief aims to discuss and evaluate the significance of the decisions taken during the summit.

Improving Economic Ties

Low trade turnover between India and Central Asian countries remained one of the major concerns among all the leaders. Therefore, further development of trade and economic cooperation was considered one of the main priorities. In this context, a focused approach on the 4Cs- Commerce, Capacity enhancement, Connectivity and Contacts rightly described India's endeavour to work in this direction.⁴ To accelerate business linkages, understand the markets, investment opportunities and business regulations in India as well as in Central Asian countries, India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC) was launched in February 2020.⁵ So far, two meetings of ICABC have been convened, and it has been agreed that four Joint Working Groups (JWGs) will be formed in the sectors of energy, pharmaceuticals, life-sciences, healthcare, and agro-food processing. Textiles, tourism, urban infrastructure and transport, civil aviation, and information technology were regarded as other areas of priority.⁶

Moreover, as a part of India's contribution to the socio-economic development of the CARs and to give a boost to its Connect Central Asia Policy, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed at the bilateral level for the implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) for socio-economic development in CARs, based on grants assisted by India.⁷ During the 2nd India-Central Asia Dialogue meeting (virtual) of the Foreign Ministers, India had extended a \$1 billion Line of Credit; for the 3rd meeting, the senior officials of the respective countries were mandated by their ministers to fasten the process for a speedy progress.

Further, India's contribution to capacity building and human resource development of CARs through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme is significant. Thousands of students from the Central Asian region have been trained under this programme. To give it a further boost, the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Dr. Jaishankar, proposed to increase the number of seats for CARs, as per their requirements and conduct customized training programmes in the areas of counter-terrorism, cyber-security, energy and space, etc. for the professionals from the CARs.⁸ In line with these initiatives, during the Summit meeting, it was proposed that India will further invite 100 member youth delegation from all the CARs every year and train the diplomats. This will further help in strengthening people to people contact.

The significance of all the above-mentioned initiatives lies in the fact that the decisions to pursue most of these initiatives were taken during the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue at the foreign ministerial level in 2019. Now, these have been promoted to the next level at the bilateral as well as regional level, indicating India's resolve to

engage with CARs closely. Earlier, India's low level of diplomatic engagement in the region was considered one of the main reasons that our relationship could not reach its desired level. However, now, India-Central Asia Dialogue and Summit has provided an important platform to discuss and fructify the issues of mutual concern. Nonetheless, the challenge of physical connectivity looms large.

Issue of Connectivity

Regarding connectivity, India has always considered Central Asia as its extended neighbourhood, but the lack of direct physical borders with them has always remained a big impediment to forging closer economic ties. India's connectivity with the CARs has been restricted by the Himalayas in the north and hostile relations with Pakistan in the west. On the other hand, the CARs are also land-locked countries. Thus, the issue of connectivity assumes great importance between India and the CARs. In fact, the leaders at the summit agreed upon the fact that "further development of mutual connectivity is essential for enhanced trade and commerce between India and Central Asian countries in the context of their land-locked nature and lack of overland connectivity with India...therefore, connectivity projects deserve priority attention and can be a force multiplier for the trade and economic cooperation..."⁹

Nonetheless, India is trying to reach out to Central Asia through projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar Port. Central Asian countries, too, have expressed their interest in developing and strengthening connectivity between South and Central Asia. Consequently, connectivity initiatives like INSTC, Chabahar Port, Ashgabat Agreement, and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) were also deliberated upon during the meeting. Talks centred around the possibility of including Chabahar Port within INSTC and facilitating trade through Shahid Beheshti Terminal at Chabahar Port between India and Central Asia and beyond. This is a viable idea because Chabahar Port can be connected to Central Asia by rail and road through Iran, and INSTC traverses through the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. In fact, Turkmenistan's President proposed to include Turkmenbashi Port within the framework of INSTC.¹⁰ To address the issues of improving the logistic networks and promoting joint initiatives and creating new regional and international transport corridors, the decision to create a Joint Working Group on Chabahar Port was taken during the summit meeting.¹¹

India's accession to the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018 further strengthened New Delhi's connectivity initiatives as it will help India utilize the existing transit and transport corridors to facilitate its commercial interactions with the Central Asian region. The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) transport corridor could be an important route under the Ashgabat agreement. It was operationalised in December 2014 to become a

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linked corridor of INSTC. The route links the Caspian Sea to the Indian Ocean through Bandar Abbas and Chabahar Port in Iran.

It should be noted here that though all the Central Asian countries are a part of the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), connectivity through INSTC and Chabahar Port will give them an opportunity to diversify and lessen their dependence on any one country.

Afghan Crisis: A Common Concern

The Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, and the resultant chaos, pose new challenges and risks to the security and stability of both India as well as CARs. Both are affected by this regional development, and at the same time, they are also concerned about the subsequent humanitarian crisis. Recognising their shared views and concerns, i.e. the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, preserving the rights of women, children and other minority groups, combatting terrorism and drug-trafficking, the central role of the UN and providing immediate humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people, the leaders agreed to set up a joint working group of senior officials on Afghanistan.¹²

Cultural and Civilizational linkages

Based on age-old cultural and civilizational connections between India and the CARs, all the leaders emphasised on the promotion of cultural cooperation between India and Central Asia. Although close historical, cultural, and spiritual connections have always been a strong bonding factor between India and Central Asia. The Indian film and television industry have remained instrumental in facilitating warm and closer people to people ties. Also, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has further helped in strengthening the linkages with Indian culture. Besides, India holds a very positive image of a friendly and secular country in the region with no expansionist designs. Therefore, the sharpening of these softer edges demands greater attention.

Towards this end, hosting regular film festivals, translation of literary works, digitization of manuscripts, restoration of works related to cultural heritage, etc., are critical.¹³ At the same time, there is a need to highlight the various facets of medieval art and culture, Sufi traditions through different cultural events so that exclusivity of close cultural and civilizational connections between India and these republics can be maintained. A value-driven cultural policy could help in strengthening the bonds between India and the CARs.¹⁴

Conclusion

Clearly, the first-ever India-Central Asia summit at the highest level was about finding ways and means to overcome the persistent obstructions for a productive economic

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relationship and strengthening mutual cooperation in political and security spheres. The outcomes of the meeting do suggest that there is considerable interest among all in deepening the ties. The Central Asian region is important for India for its energy requirements, to checkmate radicalism, extremism and drug-trafficking emanating from Afghanistan, strategizing its connectivity with the region and creating a geopolitical space in the region. Similarly,

India needs to make its position in the region on the basis of its own strengths. Hence, a consistent approach in its engagement with the region at all levels could bear positive results amidst big challenges.

India figures prominently for Central Asian Republics looking to diversify their regional relations. Therefore, India's attempt to institutionalise the summit mechanism and press the button on issues of utmost importance is very timely. However, this is not going to be an easy ride because the Central Asian region's advantageous geopolitical location and abundance of natural resources have made it a potential source of competing interests among various global/regional powers. Some of the neighbouring major powers have already strengthened their positions in the region on the economic and security fronts. So, India needs to make its position in the region on the basis of its own strengths. Hence, a consistent approach in its engagement with the region at all levels could bear positive results amidst big challenges.

Notes:

¹ "PM's Opening Remarks at the first meeting of India Central Asia Summit", 27 January, 2022, https://www.pmindia.gov.in/en/news_updates/pms-opening-remarks-at-the-first-meeting-of-india-central-asia-summit/?comment=disable. Accessed on 29 January, 2022.

² "India-Central Asia Virtual Summit", 27 January, 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1793068>. Accessed on 28 January, 2022.

³ "Joint Call on Prime Minister by National Security Advisers/ Secretaries of Security Councils attending the "Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan", 10 November, 2021, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1770732>. Accessed on 04 January, 2022

⁴ "India ready to take ties with Central Asia to next level: EAM", *United News of India*, 19 December, 2021, <http://www.uniindia.com/news/india/india-ready-to-take-ties-with-central-asia-to-next-level-eam/2597207.html>. Accessed on 20 December, 2021

⁵ "Joint Statement of the 2nd meeting of the India- Central Asia Dialogue", 28 October, 2020, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33148/Joint+Statement+of+the+2nd+meeting+of+the+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>. Accessed on 21 December, 2021.

⁶ “India- Central Asia business council launched”, *Outlook*, 06 February, 2020, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/indiacentral-asia-business-council-launched/1727841>. Accessed on 21 December, 2021. Also see, “India and five Central Asian Countries to focus on developing air corridors, promote collaboration in health sector: second India-Central Asia Business Meeting”, 28 October, 2020, <https://fikki.in/pressrelease-page.asp?nid=3944>. Accessed on 20 December, 2021.

⁷ “Joint Statement of the 3rd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 December, 2021, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34705/Joint+Statement+of+the+3rd+meeting+of+the+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>. Accessed on 20 December, 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit”, Ministry of External Affairs, 27 January, 2022, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773/Delhi_Declaration_of_the_1st_IndiaCentral_Asia_Summit, Accessed on 29 January, 2022.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ P. Stobdan, “India- Central Asia Summit needs right outlook”, *The Tribune*, 26 January, 2022, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/comment/central-asia-summit-needs-right-outlook-364417>, Accessed on 29 January, 2022.



Centre for Air Power Studies

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