

Acting North in Eurasia: India's Connect Central Asia Policy makes way for Act Central Asia

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India has close [geo-political and geo-cultural](#) relationship with the countries in Central Asia. Despite similar security concerns emanating from Afghanistan and mutual close cultural ties due to geographical proximity, India and the Central Asian countries were unable to impart a geo-economic logic to their relations due to lack of direct connectivity. India had [announced](#) its Connect Central Asia policy in 2012 at Bishkek, seeking to connect with Central Asia through physical, air, people to people and digital connectivity. However, despite its forward looking attitude, the policy suffered due to lack of institutionalised mechanisms to engage Central Asian countries at the political and economic levels. At the same time, connectivity initiatives could not pick pace due to geopolitical strains.

There has been, however, progress in recent years in this regard which culminated in first India-Central Asia Summit (virtual mode) in January 2022. India-Central Asia Dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers was started in 2019 in Uzbekistan. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had visited all five Central Asian countries in 2015 while Minister of External Affairs, S Jaishankar had visited the region in August 2018. The establishment of new political mechanisms in India's Central Asia engagement mark the beginning of India's Act Central Asia policy towards Eurasia in its north. In the last decade, India's political and security engagement intensified with the Central Asian countries as the security situation kept on deteriorating in Afghanistan. For India, Afghanistan and Central Asia form part of same geopolitical space and radicalisation and terrorism in Afghanistan has implications for Indian and Central Asian security.

There is some sort of regional consensus this time that the regional countries would engage the Taliban. The view from Central Asia is that interaction with the Taliban is necessary as an isolated Afghanistan under the Taliban could emerge as a rogue state. It is important not to give any free pass to the Taliban as they have taken no actions so far to indicate any change in their attitude towards inclusive governance. Their actions continue to exhibit a hard line and conservative policy while there is no clear cut distinction in their relations with the other terror groups operating from Afghanistan. There is need for more intelligence exchange between India, Russia, Iran and the Central Asian countries so as to test the credibility of '*Taliban as an autonomous actor*' thesis. India had hosted National Security Advisors from the regional countries in November 2021 under the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue in this regard. India has been a constant supporter of political stability in the Central Asian countries as any signs of political instability could encourage the radical elements to seize political power.

In the ongoing scenario of global '*disorder*', there is an opportunity to reenergise new trade routes and supply lines that could connect Indian and Russian markets through Central Asia. There have been developments in this regard in Iran and Uzbekistan recently. A meeting of think tanks, companies and relevant stakeholders from the countries involved in the

International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) could be organised so as to resolve logistics and other issues.

India and Russia enjoy geo-cultural ties with Central Asia which have been largely positive. India and Russia have been in regular contact at the highest levels in order to coordinate and assess their policy response to security developments in Afghanistan. India's presence in Central Asia does not rub against Russian interests while India has the capability to help the Central Asian countries in areas like medicines and vaccines for COVID-19, food security and climate change. Greenhouse cultivation of seeds, storage technology and drip irrigation are the areas in which India can assist the Central Asian countries to boost their food security. India's initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) and the One Sun One World One Grid could benefit the Central Asian countries to fight climate change. India could also launch a Silk Road Vaccine initiative to help the Central Asian and other Eurasian countries in their fight against the COVID-19. Private universities from India are already operating in Uzbekistan but they do not have departments like security and foreign policy. With some assistance from Indian government, this should be started so that there is a new platform for exchange of views at level of academicians and experts from Central Asia.

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