

## 2nd India-Central Asia Dialogue: RSTV - India's World

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**Guests:**

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3. Maj. Gen. Dhruv C. Katoch (Retd.), Director, India Foundation

### Context

- The 2nd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue was hosted virtually by foreign minister S Jaishankar and saw the participation of his counterparts from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and also the first deputy foreign minister of the Kyrgyz Republic.

### Details

- Among the highlights was the announcement of an additional \$ 1 billion line of credit by India for Central Asian countries.
- India provided humanitarian and medical assistance to the Central Asian partners in their fight against the pandemic.
- All ministers called for the settlement of the Afghan conflict on the basis of Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace process.
- According to MEA, they also expressed similar sentiments on combating [terrorism](#) by destroying safe havens, infrastructure, network and funding channels and underlined the need for every country to ensure that their territory is not used to launch terrorist attacks against other countries.

### Background

- India was one of the first countries to recognise the Central Asian Countries after they became independent with the [collapse of the USSR](#) in 1991.
- In 1992, India which had the cultural linkages (in terms of people to people contact, trade, and commerce) expanded the diplomatic presence in this region and established economic and political relationship as part of India's "extended neighbourhood".
- India in the past had also initiated the 'Connect Central Asia' based on political, security, economic and cultural connections.
  - The primary objective of this policy was re-connecting with the region which has a long shared history with India.
  - Its focus areas also included regional connectivity, information technology (IT), cooperation in education, people-to-people contact, medical cooperation, and cooperation in regional groupings.
- India's 'Connect Central Asia Policy' was reinforced in 2015. Since then there has been significant progress in cooperation, particularly in the fields of defence, energy and connectivity.

### Strategic importance of Central Asia

Central Asia is strategically positioned as an access point between Europe and Asia. Prior to independence, the Central Asian countries were part of the Soviet Union. Britain and the Soviet Union wanted to keep a check on each other's expansionist policy and used Afghanistan as the buffer.

- For India to reach Central Asia, the direct route would be the land routes passing via Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since Pakistan's hostility with India is evident, overland connectivity with Central Asia remains problematic.
- Therefore, India has to reach these countries with the help of the [Chabahar port](#) connect to Afghanistan and eventually reach these countries.
- Terrorism and increasing radicalization in the *West Asian region* ([Syria's civil war](#) and the rise of the *Islamic State (IS)*) and Afghanistan can have a spillover effect on these countries. The governments and the local rulers would not be in a situation to handle and control the spread of radical forces.
- If peace and tranquillity are disturbed, India might face the brunt of radicalism emanating from this region. Thus India's agenda in Central Asia includes tackling the menace of religious fundamentalism and trans-border terrorism.

### **Economic Importance**

- India's ties with Central Asia can be traced back to the ancient Silk Road.
- The Central Asian Region is known for its abundant oil and natural reserves, and vast mineral and natural resources.
- To facilitate the transport of goods between India and Central Asia via Iran, India has successfully built the Chabahar port. With this, we are not only connecting with Afghanistan but it's a door to Central Asian countries as well.
  - India has also acceded to the Customs Convention on International Transport of Goods under cover of TIR and joined the Ashgabat Agreement.
- But the overall implementation revolves around limiting the spread of radicalism and establishing peace in this region.

### **Central Asia and its other Neighbours**

#### **1. Afghanistan**

- Instability in Afghanistan due to terrorist activities and drug trafficking continues to be a serious security concern for the region.

#### **2. Russia and China**

- Two major powers that border the Central Asian countries include Russia and China.
- China with its expansionist policy and belligerent attitude is eyeing for new regions on the basis of historical facts.
  - China is looking to capture the Pamir region in Tajikistan. China says it lost Pamir during the last years of the Qin dynasty.
- It also seeks to control important water resources in the region by constructing dams for generating hydroelectricity, thereby controlling the region's economy.
- Threat to Russia:
  - The apparent official endorsement has worried Tajikistan, reports say the development has even drawn attention in Russia, which considers the central Asian countries to be part of its strategic backyard.
  - However, in recent decades Beijing has stepped up investments in Central Asia and this has worried Russia about losing its special relationship with countries in the region. The latest claim is supposed to further make Russia nervous.

### **Influence of China on Central Asian Countries and its impact on India**

- China has made deep inroads in the Central Asian republics in terms of *investments*.
- India's lack of visibility in the Central Asian region can also be accorded to the geographical aspect.

- Absence of direct land connectivity and absence of financial clout in the Central Asian region allows Chinese products to enter Central Asia with relative ease and provide a tough competition to India.

### **Way Forward**

- India has the potential to revitalize the economic relations by increasing foreign investments in this region.
  - Air connectivity has to be expanded and explored as it helps the tourism sector as well.
  - Digital Connectivity by establishing contact in the field of Telemedicine can be thought of.
  - India should work with Iran to expedite the working of Chabahar Port and work with countries to establish peace in Afghanistan
  - Finally, they have to build goodwill and enhance the relationship with all the central Asian countries.
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