

AIR Spotlight - India Central Asia Connect & External Affairs Minister's Visit to the Region

AIR Spotlight is an insightful program featured daily on the All India Radio Newsonair. In this program, many eminent panellists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in the [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, the discussion is on the External Affairs Minister's visit to the Central Asian region and India's relations with that region.

Participants:

- K P Fabian, Former Diplomat
- Simran Sodhi, Journalist

Context:

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's three-nation tour to Central Asia was intending to further expand bilateral ties and discuss key regional issues including the developments in Afghanistan after the [Taliban](#) seized control of the war-torn country following the exit of US forces.

Background:

- India has maintained a strong relationship with Central Asian countries.
- India's ties with Central Asia can be traced back to the ancient Silk Road, along which goods, people, and ideas flowed.
- In 1955, the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru visited Kazakhstan when Central Asia was part of the Soviet Union.
- India shares historical as well as cultural relationships with Kazakhstan. [Buddhism](#) spread from India to Kazakhstan and Sufi ideas came to India from there.
- Now, India also shares political, diplomatic, and technological relationships with Kazakhstan as well and there is scope for betterment in this field.
- The Foreign Minister during his tour had "constructive" talks with the top leadership to boost bilateral ties, including defense cooperation, and discussed global issues like Afghanistan.

Security Concerns regarding Afghanistan:

- The concern regarding the issue of Afghanistan is not only a concern for India but it is significant to all the countries that are close to Afghanistan and even to the countries that are not geographically close.
 - The reason behind this is that terrorism is a threat to the whole of civilization and if the soil of Afghanistan is used for terrorism, it is a matter of concern for the entire international community.
- Hence, cooperation from the entire international community is required and in particular from our friendly countries in Central Asia who have a say in the current situation of the region.

Russia and China on Afghanistan:

- The Central Asian countries have an important role to play in the matter of Afghanistan. Except for the terror groups, there is nobody else who would benefit from increased [terrorism](#).
- China is worried but it is working closely with Pakistan in Afghanistan and the Taliban leadership has assured China that they would not give any assistance to the rebels in China as China has a large Muslim population on which China is alleged to have committed human rights violations, especially in the Xinjiang region.
- It is a complicated matter and we have to wait and watch for further actions.
- Russia also has reasons to worry and the statements made by Russia show an urge to solve disputes in Afghanistan.

External Affairs Minister's Visit:

- The External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visited Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in October 2021.
- In Kazakhstan, the Minister participated in the 6th Ministerial meeting of the Conference of Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA).
- The visit to Armenia is the first-ever visit of an Indian External Affairs Minister to the country.

India and Kyrgyzstan:

- After the independence of the Kyrgyz Republic on 31 August 1991, India was among the first to establish diplomatic relations in 1992; and the resident Mission of India was set up in May 1994.
- Kyrgyz Republic supported India in securing full membership in the [Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\)](#) and also supports India's bid for a permanent seat at the UNSC.
- Both countries share common concerns on threats of terrorism, extremism, and drug-trafficking.
- Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, the two countries have signed several framework agreements, including on Culture, Trade and Economic Cooperation, Civil Aviation, Investment Promotion and Protection, Avoidance of Double Taxation, Consular Convention, etc.
- Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi had visited the Kyrgyz Republic in July 2015 during his historic Central Asia visit.
- Prime Minister also paid an official visit to the Kyrgyz Republic in June 2019 after the conclusion of the SCO Summit. During the visit, India and the Kyrgyz Republic established Strategic Partnership and signed the Joint Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership.
 - Following documents were signed during the visit:
 - Bilateral Investment Treaty.
 - Road map on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Republic of India and the Kyrgyz Republic for the Five-Year period (2019-2024).
 - MoU on Cooperation in the field of Health, MoU between Export-Import Bank of India, and the Investment Promotion and Protection Agency of the Kyrgyz Republic.
 - MoU between India and the Kyrgyz Republic on cooperation on Information and Communication Technology.

- MoU on cooperation in the field of Legal Metrology, MoU between Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS) of India and National Institute of Strategic Studies (NISS) of the Kyrgyz Republic.
- Technical assistance under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Program, particularly in terms of human resources development, is an important component of India's economic involvement in the Kyrgyz Republic.

India and Kazakhstan:

Trade relations:

- Kazakhstan is the ninth largest country in the world and it is very rich in minerals except for hydrocarbons.
- India imports approximately 80 per cent of Uranium from Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is India's largest trade and investment partner in Central Asia.
- The India-Kazakhstan Inter-Governmental Commission (IGC) established in 1993 is the apex bilateral institutional mechanism for developing trade, economic, scientific, technological, industrial, and cultural cooperation between the two countries.

Political relations:

- The first President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev visited India in February 1992. Thereafter, he has visited India in 1993 (transit visit), 1996, 2002, and 2009. He was the Chief Guest at the Republic Day parade in New Delhi on January 26, 2009, and PM Modi has also visited Kazakhstan.

Cultural relations:

- India and Kazakhstan enjoy close cultural relations that manifest in the popularity of yoga, Indian films, dance, and music in Kazakhstan. Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Astana is engaged in various cultural activities, including conducting yoga, dance, and music classes; the celebration of Indian festivals. India provides scholarships in various disciplines under the ICCR Scholarship programs for students from Kazakhstan.

Development Assistance:

- India provides capacity-building assistance to Kazakhstan in various specialized fields under the ITEC program sponsored by the Ministry of External Affairs.

Consular:

- India and Kazakhstan have an agreement on visa-free entry for Diplomatic and Official Passport holders. Since April 2018, Kazakhstan has introduced a 72-hour visa-free regime for transiting Indian nationals.

India and Armenia:

- Armenia imports rice, precious stones, textile, jewellery, plastics & electronics from India and on the other hand India imports precious and semi-precious stones, copper and copper products, aluminium and aluminium products, chemical industry products and non-thresh metals from Armenia.

- There is an Armenian street in Chennai and an Armenian community is present there.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its importance for the Afghanistan issue:

- China is a very important player in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and it is known that the agenda of China on the matter of the Afghanistan situation does not coincide with the agenda of the international community.
- But, the SCO is a very important organization in the Central Asian region so we have to wait & watch.

India's trade relations with the Central Asian countries:

- It is said that India's relation with the Central Asian countries will be deepened if there would be an increase in trade but India faces a connectivity issue in the region.
- If the [Chabahar project](#) moves forward and India would be able to connect with Iran, then the trade between India and this region would increase.

Way Forward:

- The Central Asian region has been strategically very important to India and recently its importance has only increased because of the Taliban issue in Afghanistan.
- Taliban has to respect human rights, women's rights, and the democratic rights of the people of Afghanistan.
- Proper diplomatic and economic pressure will be able to change the Taliban's behaviour and for this purpose, India, the Central Asian countries, and the rest of the world should work together.