

AIR Spotlight - India Central Asia Summit

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 [IAS exam](#) preparation. In this article, an interview discussing the “India Central Asia Summit” is featured.

Participants:

- Ashok Sajjanhar, Former ambassador
- Nilova Roy Chaudhury, Journalist

Context:

- Indian Prime Minister hosted the first-ever India-Central Asia summit, in a virtual format with five Presidents from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
 - This summit coincided with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries.
 - This is the first engagement of its kind between India and the Central Asian countries at the level of leaders.
- The Joint Declaration, Delhi Declaration was adopted by the leaders that enumerates their common vision for an enduring and comprehensive India-Central Asia partnership.

Indian Prime Minister's remarks at the summit:

- Acknowledging the progress in ties made between the two countries, the Indian Prime Minister called for the need to define three goals for the summit to provide an ambitious vision for the relationship going ahead.
 - Mutual cooperation between India and central Asia was necessary for regional security and prosperity.
 - Given the fact that India considers Central Asia as part of its extended neighbourhood, Central Asia is central to India's vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood. There should be focused efforts to give an effective structure to the cooperation, which will pave the way for the establishment of a platform for regular interaction among all stakeholders. The Indian Prime Minister proposed a number of high-level exchanges between the two sides, including biannual summits and annual meetings of the Foreign, Trade and Cultural Ministers and Secretaries of Security (National Security Advisers) which was accepted by all members.
 - To prepare an ambitious roadmap for the cooperation between India and Central Asian countries including the adoption of an integrated approach for regional connectivity.
 - A Joint Working Group on the [Chabahar port](#) project was constituted.

Significance of India-Central Asia Relationship:

Extended neighbourhood:

- Though India and the Central Asian region countries do not have land connectivity they can be considered a part of their extended neighbourhoods.

Mineral resources:

- The Central Asian countries are endowed with rich mineral resources like oil, natural gas and uranium. India could get a source for importing the fossil fuels while Central Asian countries will find in India reliable buyers of their production.

India as a balancing factor:

- Engagement with India provides an opportunity for the Central Asian countries to balance the influence of China and Russia in the region, especially that of China which has been expanding its footprint very fast in the region.

Cooperation on the Afghan issue:

- The developments in Afghanistan have a bearing on the Central Asian countries as well as India.
- India and the Central Asian countries share common concerns and common objectives in broader terms on the Afghan issue. This includes the need for ensuring the formation of a truly representative and inclusive government, combating terrorism and drug trafficking, and preserving the rights of women, children and minorities. The Afghan issue is critical for regional peace, security and stability.
- The countries agreed to set up a Joint Working Group (JWG) of senior officials for closer collaboration on the Afghan issue.
- The Afghanistan issue has been discussed at the National Security Advisers meet of India-Central Asian countries as well as at the meeting of India-Central Asian Foreign Ministers.

Importance of the summit level talks:

- India and the Central Asia region has enjoyed cultural, historical and civilization links for a long time including from the days of the silk route to up to the Soviet era. However, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian countries, the relationship between India and Central Asian nations has remained subdued despite goodwill between the two regions. The new push through summit level talks can provide an impetus to this relationship.
- India and Central Asian nations have been interacting at different levels lately like the NSA level meeting and Foreign minister-level meeting. The Leadership level summit meeting will provide more depth and impetus to the relationship given that most of the important decisions in the Central Asian countries are often taken by the Presidents.
- The summit is symbolic of the importance attached by the leaders of both sides to a comprehensive and enduring India-Central Asia partnership.
- Though India and four of the five Central Asian countries are part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a separate summit level talk between India and the five nations is critical due to the following reasons.
 - Turkmenistan is not a member of the SCO.
 - SCO is dominated by Russia and China.

- SCO addresses larger topics and might not be the right platform to discuss India-Central Asia specific issues.

Challenges:

Connectivity challenges:

- Connectivity to Central Asia remains one of the major challenges to deepening the relationship between India and the region given that India lacks direct land route access to the region. Pakistan has been reluctant to provide land route access.
- The alternate route of connectivity through Chabahar port in Iran and Afghanistan to Central Asia has not made much progress and the recent takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban has further impacted this alternate route.

Conclusion:

- A robust relationship between India and Central Asian nations can help reap rich dividends in the domain of security, energy, economic opportunities, and geopolitics for both sides. Hence this relationship between India and the Central Asian region will remain one of the most important relationships in the coming times.

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