

## ***India and Central Asia Defence Cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities***

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India's Central Asia policy, introduced in 2012, has recently seen significant developments. In 2015, Prime Minister Modi's visit to five Central Asian countries boosted India's multilateral engagement with the region. This was hastened further by India's permanent membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017. In Samarkand in 2019, India launched the India-Central Asia Dialogue at the level of Foreign Ministers. During this meeting, many new ideas were presented. As a result, in February 2020, the India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC) was established to address the concerns surrounding the low volume of trade and investment between the two regions. ICABC intended to give some tangible ideas based on observations and analyses to improve trade and economic transactions between India and Central Asia. The first summit between India and Central Asian leaders in January 2023 is a significant development in multilateral relations.

Central Asia is vital to India's energy security and is also a promising market for Indian companies. These countries hold enormous potential for the expansion of Indian manufacturing enterprises and other areas of economic cooperation. A few examples include tourism, information technology, education, and other industries of mutual interest. The people of Central Asia have high regard for India. Despite many opportunities, India's commercial ventures in Central Asia are limited to the pharmaceutical industry. The cause for this is a lack of direct connectivity. To address the connectivity challenge, India invested in the Chabahar port in Iran and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

Afghanistan has long been a source of concern for India and Central Asia. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, and the installation of a transitional government in Kabul posed new challenges for

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regional security. Cooperation between India and Central Asia on Afghanistan has become imperative. In November 2021, New Delhi convened a regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, in which five Central Asian nations, Iran, and Russia, sent their National Security Advisors (NSAs)/Heads of Security Council to participate in the dialogue. The success of this security discourse solidified India's position in the regional security apparatus.

The mutual security concerns posed by the changing regional and international landscape compel India and the Central Asian republics to work towards strengthening defence cooperation. In the defence sector, initial interactions emphasised common threats like religious extremism, terrorism, narcotic-funded violence, and transnational crime. India's military cooperation with Central Asian countries has been notable; but it is far from exhaustive. The region's overall military cooperation is largely constrained to military education, exercises, infrastructure, and training.

India has increased defence cooperation in the region, with a defence attaché deployed in each of India's Central Asian embassies. In 2011, India and Kyrgyzstan held their first joint military drill. During Prime Minister Modi's 2015 visit to the five Central Asian nations, India strengthened the institutional foundation for bilateral defence cooperation. The visit led to the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), and agreements for defence and military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

The Central Asian region is now facing new challenges due to emerging geopolitical changes in the region, such as the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Furthermore, interstate rivalries over borders (between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) have caused significant regional turbulence. These factors have contributed to these countries' desire to diversify their defence sector. Russia is regarded as Central Asia's security guarantor; but Beijing and Turkey are challenging Moscow's position. China has been supplying Central Asian countries with small arms. Similarly, Turkish drones are very popular in the region. Turkish drones can be found in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The defence budget of the Central Asian countries has also gone up in recent years. Kazakhstan's military spending increased by 4.50% to reach US\$ 1,618 million in 2021 from the previous year's US\$ 1,548 million.<sup>1</sup> The military budget for Kyrgyzstan was US\$ 125 million in 2021. Kyrgyzstan's military spending grew at a 9.0 percent annual rate from US\$ 26 million in 2002 to US\$ 125 million in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Tajikistan spent US\$ 82 million on its

military in 2021. Despite significant fluctuations in recent years, Tajikistan's military spending tended to rise from 1998 to 2021, reaching US\$ 82 million.<sup>3</sup> Uzbekistan's military spending increased by 2,560.79 percent between 2003 and 2018, from US\$ 54 million to US\$ 1,440 million.<sup>4</sup>

Given recent developments in relations between India and Central Asia, the defence sector has a lot of growth opportunities. India's attempts to indigenize its defence sector through the Make in India Program, as well as Central Asia's expanding defence requirements, complement each other. As a result, in addition to training and exercises, joint defence production, military medicine, and other types of expanded defence cooperation are now required. This article examines the current state of defence and security cooperation between India and Central Asia, and makes some recommendations.

### **Kazakhstan**

In 1991, India was one of the first countries to recognise Kazakhstan's independence. One year later, in 1992, diplomatic ties were established. Kazakhstan is India's most important trade partner in the region. According to the statistics, bilateral trade in 2019–20 totalled US\$ 2.45 billion, representing a 188.56 percent growth from the previous year.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that, as of 2020, around 700 legal firms and branches with Indian capital participation are registered in Kazakhstan. FICCI and the Chamber of International Commerce of Kazakhstan created a Joint Business Council (JBC) to enhance trade, economic, and investment relations between the two nations.<sup>6</sup>

Defence cooperation between India and Kazakhstan includes annual joint military exercises, bilateral visits, and cadet youth exchange programs. India has provided training to hundreds of Kazakh soldiers. Both countries successfully conducted a company-level joint military exercise named "PRABAL DOSTYK" in 2016 in Kazakhstan. 'PRABAL DOSTYK' 2017 Bakloh was conducted in Himachal Pradesh in November 2017. The joint military exercise was renamed "KAZIND 2018," which took place in southern Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup> KAZIND 2019" between India and Kazakhstan army was held in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh. This was the fourth edition of the annual military exercise. The fifth edition of "KAZIND-21" was held from August 30 to September 11, 2021, at Training Node, Aisha Bibi Kazakhstan.<sup>8</sup> This exercise focused on countering insurgency and terrorism in an urban and rural environment. Although these military exercises have expanded mutual trust and confidence between the two countries, there is still much to explore in this field.

Defence manufacturing and production are where India wants to cooperate with Kazakhstan. There have been discussions between the defence ministers of both countries on these issues. It is expected that with the increasing economic and commercial engagements between the two countries, defence production and manufacturing will also receive a boost.<sup>9</sup> In April 2021, the Defence Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Lieutenant General Nurlan Yermekbayev, visited India, and met with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Subsequently, in bilateral talks, the focus was on bilateral defence cooperation, capacity building, training, and military exercises. Both leaders agreed to look into the prospects of a defence industry partnership.<sup>10</sup>

On October 15, 2020, India and Kazakhstan held a webinar. The webinar's topic was "Make in India for the World, India-Kazakhstan Defence Cooperation: Webinar and Expo". FICCI organised it under the Ministry of Defence's Department of Defence Production. This webinar was part of a series arranged with friendly foreign countries to enhance military exports and reach a 5 billion US\$ Defence export objective over the next five years. The webinar was attended by Ambassadors from both nations as well as top military personnel from both countries. They discussed the need to capitalise on chances for co-development and co-production, and meet often.<sup>11</sup>

In this webinar, Ashok Leyland Limited, L&T Defence, Bharat Forge, Zen Technologies, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Elcom Innovations, Alpha Design Technologies, and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) made company and product presentations on major platforms/equipment such as artillery systems, radars, protected vehicles, missiles, and air defence equipment, training solutions, and so on. BEL has also announced intentions to establish a representative office in Kazakhstan.<sup>12</sup>

Handling situation in Afghanistan is yet another area for cooperation between India and Kazakhstan. India has invested in the infrastructure development and capacity-building process in Afghanistan. Similarly, Afghanistan plays a crucial role in the regional security of the Central Asian region. The provisional Taliban government has no signs of differing from the Taliban of the 1990s, ultimately leading to many repercussions. Therefore, India and Kazakhstan need to work more closely in regional security matters.

### **Uzbekistan**

With the transition in leadership in Uzbekistan, New President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has attempted to revitalise India-Uzbekistan relations. This was well supplemented by Prime Minister Modi's attempts to strategize India's

Central Asian policy. On September 4–7, 2018, following Uzbekistan's former Uzbek Defence Minister, Maj. Gen. Abdusalam Azizov's visit to India, bilateral defence cooperation moved in a forward direction. India and Uzbekistan agreed to increase counter-terrorism cooperation through joint military exercises, military education, and military medicine. The plan for 2019–20 included collaborative Special Forces training, military engineering training capsules for Uzbeks, and air force exchanges to aid in the growth of Uzbekistan's Qarshi Aviation School. India has also aided in establishing an India Room at Uzbekistan's Armed Forces Academy in Tashkent.<sup>13</sup>

During Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's visit to India in October 2018, both nations expressed their commitment to expanding Defence industrial cooperation. It has been decided to undertake joint military training exercises to reinforce the counter-terrorism framework. Military medicine and military education cooperation have also been permitted. In addition, both nations have resolved to form a Joint Working Group (JWG) to strengthen mutually beneficial defence-related operations. Both countries agreed to establish a Defence Wing at the Uzbek Embassy in New Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Tashkent and Samarkand on 1–3 November 2019, and held bilateral discussions with his Uzbek counterpart, Maj. Gen. Bakhodir Kurbanov. A MoU on Military Medicine was signed. As a follow-up, an MoU on Military Education was signed in October 2018. Two institutional levels MoUs — for collaboration in training and capacity building — were also concluded. Dustlik I, the first-ever bilateral military exercise between India and Uzbekistan, was launched by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh from 4 to 14 November 2019 in the Chirchiq training area near Tashkent.<sup>15</sup>

The Second edition of the India-Uzbekistan joint military exercise, DUSTLIK II, was held in March 2021 in Foreign Training Node Chaubatia (Uttarakhand). The exercise included forty-five soldiers from the Uzbek and Indian armies. Under UN mandate, both contingents shared their experience and abilities in counterterrorism operations in mountainous/rural/urban scenarios. Commencing on March 17, the exercise ended with a 36-hour joint validation exercise on March 18, 2021. The validation exercise served as a testing ground for soldiers from both armies as they faced the obstacles faced in actual operations in such circumstances.<sup>16</sup> In March 2022, the third edition of the joint training exercise was held in Yangiariq, Uzbekistan.

On the 27th and 28th of February 2019, India and Uzbekistan convened their first annual Joint Working Group on Defence in New Delhi, which was

followed by a visit by the Indian Defence Secretary to Tashkent in March 2019. India has provided a US\$ 40 million Line of Credit to the Republic of Uzbekistan as part of defence industrial cooperation. New Delhi also hosted two defence industrial workshops in September 2019 and November 2020, with the participation of members from both the public and commercial sectors.<sup>17</sup>

### **Tajikistan**

India-Tajikistan relations have mostly been cordial. Regular high-level visits between the two nations have strengthened bilateral ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations on August 28, 1992. Deeply ingrained historical and cultural ties have contributed towards expanding and broadening the relationship to a higher platform. The partnership between the two countries spans all spheres of bilateral activities, emphasising enhancing cooperation in the military and defence sectors. Gradually, Defence cooperation between India and Tajikistan has become one of the main pillars of their bilateral relations.<sup>18</sup> India provides military training to a substantial number of military officers and cadets from Tajikistan at its National Defence College and Indian Military Academy. India has also set up India-Tajikistan Friendship Hospital near Qurghonteppa, Tajikistan, where Indian doctors and medical staff provide medical care to civilians and patients of the armed forces.<sup>19</sup>

Between 2003 and 2010, India contributed roughly US\$ 70 million to the modernization of Tajikistan's Ayni Base, which is located around 17 kilometres from Dushanbe. In September 2010, the refurbished Ayni Air Base — with cutting-edge navigation and defence technologies — was publicly launched. Its runway was expanded to roughly 3,200 metres in order to accommodate all sorts of aircraft. During his October 2018 visit, Indian President Ram Nath Kovind visited the Ayni Air Base, indicating India's intention to extend its presence at this base. Almost 150 Indian troops have been stationed in Ayni. At the base, President Kovind met with Indian Air Force troops. Increasing facilities at Ayni will be beneficial, given India's interest in stabilising Afghanistan in cooperation with Central Asian countries and Russia as well as growing the counterterrorism partnership.<sup>20</sup>

### **Kyrgyzstan**

During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Kyrgyzstan in July 2015, India and Kyrgyzstan signed four significant agreements, including enhancing defence

cooperation and holding annual military exercises. Prime Minister Modi appreciated the Indo-Kyrgyz Joint Military Training Exercise 'Khanjar', and commented that the same should be held annually. However, the Joint military exercise is the only significant achievement of India's defence cooperation with this country.

From March 22 to April 4, 2016, India hosted the third edition of the Indo-Kyrgyz joint military exercise, Khanjar-III, in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. The previous two exercises were held in December 2011 in Nahan, India, and in July 2015 in Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan. The two-week military exercise was first conducted at Nahan, India, in December 2011. It is primarily concerned with high-altitude and mountain operations in the context of a counterterrorism mission. It is still an overlooked activity that has received little attention or coverage. The initial edition comprised just 20 Kyrgyz servicemen; however, four years later, in 2015, the second iteration took place in Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan, with an estimated 100 troops from both sides.

In 2017, Kyrgyzstan hosted Khanjar-IV. The fifth exercise, Khanjar-V, was held in India in 2018 in a Counter Insurgency Jungle Warfare School in Vairengte, Mizoram. In 2019, Khanjar-VI was held in Kyrgyzstan. Khanjar-VII took place in India in early February 2020, according to Indian government sources. The eighth edition debuted in mid-April 2021 in Bishkek, with a ceremony attended by the commander of the Kyrgyz National Guards, Colonel Ergeshov Talantbek, and Indian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Alok A. Dimri. According to the news statement, how many troops from either side took part is unknown. Nonetheless, a photo posted on the official Indian Army Facebook page showed around 20 troops from each side, sporting berets and masks and standing behind seated officials and dignitaries.<sup>21</sup> Both sides have benefitted immensely from their respective experiences in Special Forces Counter-Terrorism operations in mountainous terrain through joint exercises.

### **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan and India maintain cordial ties and have strong historical connections. Turkmenistan's contacts with the Indus Valley Civilization have been demonstrated through archaeological findings in south Turkmenistan. Regular high-level visits have helped to develop bilateral relations in contemporary times. Turkmen President, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, visited India in May 2010. On July 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Turkmenistan. Several important Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements, spanning fields like science and technology, defence,

and tourism, were inked during these trips.<sup>22</sup> However, despite signing an agreement to strengthen cooperation in the defence sector, little progress has been made. Among the Central Asian republics, India-Turkmenistan defence and security cooperation is the most limited.

### **Challenges and Way Forward**

- India's military relations with the Central Asian countries have been significant, but somewhat limited. The overall cooperation with the region is mostly limited to military education, infrastructure, and training. There are still many opportunities for India to advance its defence cooperation with Central Asian countries.
- India must strive to execute the defence manufacturing agreements it has inked with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.
- The Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members, may be utilized by New Delhi to advance its defence cooperation. India can also initiate a dialogue process with this regional security grouping or seek its candidature as an observer.
- Russia is the security manager in Central Asia. India shares strong and cordial relations with Moscow. Thus, New Delhi-Moscow cooperation in Central Asia concerning defence and security can be another agenda for multilateral cooperation. Together with Central Asian countries, Russia and India can engage in joint defence production and carry out Military exercises.
- India-Central Asia joint manufacturing of items in the defence sector can also be promoted.
- The India-Uzbekistan military medicine agreement should also be expanded to other Central Asian republics.
- India can also work with its Central Asian partners in exchanging defence expertise and knowledge sharing.
- Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan share a direct border with Afghanistan, and are vulnerable to cross-border security threats. Cooperation in border security as a part of India-Central Asia defence cooperation should be encouraged.
- The establishment of an India-Central Asia Defence Ministers' forum can accelerate cooperation in this sector.



- India-Central Asia NSAs and Heads of the Security Council may also form a forum on defence and security cooperation.
- India-Central Asia joint military training can be another area of security cooperation.
- India-Central Asia Defence Expo needs to be organised to promote business opportunities in this sector.
- India's 40 million USD line of credit for procurement of goods and services by Uzbekistan may be extended to other CARs.

**Notes:**

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- <sup>2</sup> <https://knoema.com/atlas/Kyrgyzstan/Military-expenditure#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20military%20expenditure%20for,average%20annual%20rate%20of%209.00%25>.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://knoema.com/atlas/Tajikistan/Military-expenditure#:~:text=In%202021%2C%20military%20expenditure%20for,million%20US%20dollars%20in%202021>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://knoema.com/atlas/Uzbekistan/Military-expenditure>
- <sup>5</sup> Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India. <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/iecint.asp>
- <sup>6</sup> “India-Kazakhstan Emerging Ties: A look back at 30 years of Strategic Cooperation”, News on Air, January 22, 2022, available at <https://newsonair.com/2022/01/24/india-kazakhstan-emerging-ties-a-look-back-at-30-years-of-strategic-cooperation/>
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- <sup>9</sup> Huma Siddiqui, “India-Kazakhstan explore joint production of military platforms for the three services”, The Financial Express, April 13, 2021, available at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-kazakhstan-explore-joint-production-of-military-platforms-for-the-three-services/2232121/>
- <sup>10</sup> “Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh holds bilateral talks with Kazakh Defence Minister Lt Gen Nurlan Yermekbayev”, DD News, April, 10, 2021, available at <https://ddnews.gov.in/national/raksha-mantri-rajnath-singh-holds-bilateral-talks-kazakh-defence-minister-lt-gen-nurlan#:~:text=Lieutenant%20General%20Nurlan%20Yermekbayev%20is,the%20invitation%20of%20Raksha%20Mantri>.

- <sup>11</sup> “India-Kazakhstan Defence Cooperation: Webinar and Expo held”, PIB Release, October, 16, 2020, available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1664989>
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> “Brief on India-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations”, Embassy of India Tashkent, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_brief\\_Oct\\_2021.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_brief_Oct_2021.pdf)
- <sup>14</sup> Grevatt, J., “India, Uzbekistan agree defence industry ties”, 2 October, 2018, available at <https://www.janes.com/article/83487/india-uzbekistan-agree-defence-industry-ties>
- <sup>15</sup> “Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh calls for isolating nations adopting terrorism as state policy Extends full assistance to Armed Forces of Uzbekistan for modernisation and capacity building”, PIB Release, November 3, 2019, available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1590190>
- <sup>16</sup> “Indo-Uzbekistan Field Training Exercise ‘DUSTLIK ‘commences in Ranikhet (Uttarakhand)”, PIB Release, Ministry of Defence, GOI. March 10, 2021, available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1703755>
- <sup>17</sup> “Brief on India-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations”, Embassy of India, Tashkent, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Uzbekistan\\_22-7-2021.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Uzbekistan_22-7-2021.pdf)
- <sup>18</sup> “Brief of India-Tajikistan Bilateral Relations”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, available at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_Brief\\_July\\_2021-1.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_July_2021-1.pdf)
- <sup>19</sup> P. K. Gupta, “India-Tajikistan Relations: The Security Factor” VIF Brief, March 2019, available at [https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/India-Tajikistan-Relations\\_5.pdf](https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/India-Tajikistan-Relations_5.pdf)
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> “India, Kyrgyzstan special forces start two-week counter-terror drills”, Wion News, April 17, 2021, available at <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/india-kyrgyzstan-special-forces-start-two-week-counter-terror-drills-378092>
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