

India-Central Asia Summit 2022: From Symbol to Substance

Ramakrushna Pradhan*

Abstract

The first India-Central Asia Summit held in New Delhi on 27th January 2022 has established a new milestone in India-Central Asia relations. Although the Summit was organised in a virtual format, the initiative proved to be symbolic of the importance India attaches to its strategic neighbours in Central Asia for establishing a comprehensive and enduring partnership with them. As India considers the Central Asian Republics as 'central' to its vision of an integrated, stable and extended neighbourhood, the inaugural India-Central Asia Summit, which also coincided with 30 years of their diplomatic relationship, would help New Delhi to develop strategies for a better, stronger and substantive relationship between the two sides. In this milieu, this article attempts to delineate how this Summit enables the transformation of India's symbolic and historical ties into a substantive, visionary and strategic partnership through increasing trade, economic and connectivity potentials.

Central Asia is a buffer between two nuclear powers – the Russian Federation and China. Major geopolitical massifs – the Eurasian, Islamic, Chinese, and Indian – intersect here. Central Asia is also the geographical centre of Asia, where four ancient civilizations – Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism – meet. The region also critically links to the security of almost all the countries of the world and offers immense opportunities to regional and extra-regional players. A vivid reflection of history tells us about the centuries-old close civilizational, cultural, trade and people-to-people linkages shared between India and Central Asia. Events in Central Asia have shaped a good portion of India's political history. The region used to be a staging ground for invasions into India. Central Asian dynamics vis-à-vis Indian strategic thought has been mentioned in Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. Central Asia was also a bridge for promoting Indian commerce and culture across Asia

***The Author**, Prof. R. K. Pradhan is Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, School of Social Science, Guru Ghasidas University, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh.

(This article was received from the author on December 11, 2022)

through the famous Silk Route. The Indus Valley civilization and Central Asian Khanates were historically closely connected.

Until the Sovietisation of Central Asia, India's relations with the countries of the region were positive and relatively uncomplicated. There were no major issues of dispute between India and the Central Asian khanates. Historically, India's relations with the CAR (Central Asian Region) have always been close. However, between 1917 and 1991, India's contacts with Central Asia were largely mediated through Russia. Although India during this period had maintained certain privileged links with Central Asia yet that were filtered through Moscow and the 1971 Indo-Russian Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union towards the end of 1991, however led to the emergence of five Central Asian Republics (CARs), namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, as independent countries. The strategic location of this region at the crossroads between Europe and China and also between Russia and Iran, coupled with their huge and largely untapped oil and gas reserves enabled the region to impart immense geo-strategic importance in world affairs. Even during this period, the rising presence in Central Asia has been those of the US, Europe, and China, as well as Japan and Korea, but not India. India, to date is a low-profile country in the region with the tag of a latecomer. Historically, deep-rooted civilisational linkages, thorough friendship, cultural affinity and economic bondings largely remained disconnected throughout the years between these two Asian neighbours until recently. In this milieu, the first India-Central Asia Summit may break the ice and herald a new phase in their relationships.

India-Central Asia Summit

The first India-Central Asia Summit, which was held in a virtual format hosted by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, was well acknowledged and appreciated by the Central Asian leaders. This virtual event was organised on 27th January, 2022 and was attended by the heads of the states of all five Central Asian states. In this initiative, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan H.E. Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the President of the Kyrgyz Republic H.E. Mr. Sadyr Japarov, the President of the Republic of Tajikistan H.E. Mr. Emomali Rahmon, the President of Turkmenistan H.E. Mr. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan H.E. Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev have participated and expressed their desire for an enduring partnership with India. This Summit is very important on many counts as this

came only after two days of a similar China-Central Asia Conference, where Beijing promised US\$ 500 million in assistance and assured to increase the trade up to US\$ 70 billion from the present level of about US\$ 40 billion.¹ Secondly, the inaugural India-Central Asia Summit also marked the 30th anniversary of the India-Central Asian states' diplomatic relationship and the 75th year of India's independence. Further, this was for the first time both sides met after India's inclusion into Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a full member state.

Prime Minister Modi highlighted the importance of Central Asia to India and outlined the principle of "Support of All, Development for All, Trust of All, Efforts of All" for regional development, peace and prosperity.² In his address, the honourable Prime Minister of India emphasised three main objectives: (i) to make it evident that cooperation between India and Central Asia is essential for regional security and prosperity; (ii) to give an effective structure to India-Central Asia cooperation; and (iii) to create a road map towards adopting an integrated approach for regional connectivity and cooperation for the next 30 years.³

For a comprehensive and enduring partnership between India and Central Asia, New Delhi has proposed a number of innovative measures for further enhancing the cooperation and received concurrence from the Central Asian counterparts. These are:

1. Both sides have agreed to organise activities, including the issuance of joint postal stamps to mark the 30th anniversary of establishment of their diplomatic relations.
2. To build a long-term, comprehensive and enduring India-Central Asia partnership based on mutual trust, understanding and friendship along the lines of centuries-old close civilisational, cultural, trade, and people-to-people linkages between the two regions.
3. Leaders have agreed to hold the India-Central Asia Summit once every two years.⁴
4. In addition to the regular Foreign Minister Level mechanism of India-Central Asia dialogue, it was agreed to hold regular meetings of Trade and Culture Ministers to take the framework of cooperation forward.
5. Leaders have agreed to establish India-Central Asia Centre in New Delhi, which would act as Secretariat for the India-Central Asia Summit.
6. India has offered logistic support and professional training for the diplomats of Central Asian countries in the Sushma Swaraj Institute for Foreign Service.⁵

7. It was proposed to create an “India-Central Asia Parliamentary Forum” for valued cooperation between the Parliaments of India and Central Asian countries and interaction among the members.
8. Leaders have called for collective efforts to fight against the pandemic through a timely, transparent, effective and non-discriminatory international response to global health challenges and stressed extensive vaccination, vaccine supply, transfer and vaccine production technology, development of local production capacities, promotion of supply chains for medical products and ensuring price transparency. The “One Earth, One Health” approach of the Indian Prime Minister was well-appreciated by the leaders.
9. Given the land-locked nature and lack of overland connectivity with India, the leaders have emphasised the mutual connectivity project to be given priority for enhanced trade and economic relations between both sides.
10. The inclusion of Chabahar Port into INSTC and the proposal of Turkmenistan to include Turkmenbashi port in INSTC were welcomed.
11. Promotion of cultural cooperation between both sides was discussed with hopes of enhanced cultural tourism, hosting regular film festivals, close cooperation between museums, translations of literary works, digitalisation of manuscripts along with commissioning “A Dictionary” of common words used in India and Central Asian countries and showcasing Buddhist exhibition in Central Asia were well appreciated by all.
12. Deepening cooperation in the education sector was agreed upon by all sides, with an emphasis on developing direct contacts between higher educational institutions in India and Central Asia. India’s proposal to host 100 members youth delegation from the Central Asian countries to promote greater mutual understanding was welcomed by the Central Asian leaders.
13. Leaders have pledged to keep the world free of terrorism and have denounced it in all of its manifestations. However, they have also reaffirmed that giving support, using terrorist proxies for cross-border terrorism, financing terrorism, trafficking in weapons and illegal drugs, spreading radical ideologies, and abusing the internet to spread misinformation and inciting violence are all against the fundamental values of humanity and international relations.
14. The leaders emphasised the significance of making concerted efforts to boost trade and investment in sectors like medicine, healthcare, pharmaceuticals, education, information technology, business process

outsourcing (BPO), infrastructure, agriculture and processing of agricultural products, energy, space industry, textiles, and leather as the current level of trade and investments between India and Central Asian countries is far from realising its true potential.⁶

15. The parties agreed that India's defence cooperation with concerned Central Asian nations is a crucial foundation. The presidents of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the Kyrgyz Republic expressed delight with India's frequent bilateral military counterterrorism drills. A joint counterterrorism drill between India and interesting Central Asian nations was also agreed upon.⁷
16. Leaders have stressed the value of continuous communication between the national security councils in light of the shared problems of terrorism, extremism, and radicalization in the area. In particular, during 2021, they expressed delight at regular gatherings and Security discussions held amongst their Security Councils. They praised the conclusions reached during the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, which took place on November 10, 2021.
17. The leaders spoke about the state of Afghanistan and its implications for regional security and stability. They reaffirmed their unwavering support for a peaceful, safe, and stable Afghanistan and emphasised the importance of respecting its territorial integrity, sovereignty, and unity while refraining from meddling in its internal affairs. They also discussed the present humanitarian situation and were determined to keep giving Afghanistan's citizens emergency humanitarian aid. The leaders called for coordinated action against all terrorist groups, including those that have been sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council. They reiterated the significance of UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021), which unequivocally demands that Afghan territory not be used for sheltering, training, planning, or financing terrorist acts (UNSC). They also decided to keep in-depth discussions about the situation in Afghanistan. Furthermore, they decided to form a Senior Officials Joint Working Group on Afghanistan in this situation. The formation of an Afghan government that is truly representative and inclusive, the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking, the crucial role of the UN, the provision of immediate humanitarian aid to the Afghan people, and the protection of the rights of women, children, and other national, ethnic groups and minorities are all issues on which there is a broad "regional consensus," according to them. In this context, the leaders took notice of Uzbekistan's intention to host a High-Level International

Conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent in July 2022 under the auspices of the SCO.⁸

Significance of the Summit for India

Geopolitical Dynamics

The Summit serves as a visual representation of the significance that the leaders of India and the Central Asian nations place on a comprehensive and long-lasting alliance. It took place at a crucial time when tensions were building between the US led West and Russia and the United States (US) and China. Geopolitical failures have also affected India, including border disputes with China and the Taliban's occupation of Afghanistan. This comes after President Vladimir Putin's trip to India, which might have allowed India to pressure Russia to moderately balance China in Eurasia and to contain the risks from Afghanistan. The recent turmoil in Kazakhstan also demonstrated that "new actors," albeit their objectives are still unclear, are fighting for influence in the area.

Regional Security

India and Central Asian nations share concerns about terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking, as well as a desire for regional stability. The events in Afghanistan worry India and Central Asian nations. The Summit reaffirmed its fervent support for a tranquil, safe, and stable Afghanistan. India has been providing humanitarian aid to the Afghan people despite connectivity issues and volunteered to supply food grains to prevent a crisis in Afghanistan. The Summit was a significant diplomatic victory for India. The summit will enhance India's diversified approach to the area because the region is a crucial lynchpin in its security strategy.

Connectivity and Economic Relations

The absence of a direct land route between India and the Central Asian nations has long been viewed as a significant barrier to enhancing commercial and economic ties with the region. However, the situation is anticipated to improve soon, thanks to the numerous measures already underway. In 2018, India became a party to the Ashgabat Accord. In addition, the Central and West Asian nodes of the INSTC are starting to operate and grow by adding new ports. India and Central Asian nations support the inclusion of the Chabahar Port in the INSTC network, while Turkmenistan has suggested including the Turkmenbashi Port in the trade route.

Trade Relations

Successive Prime Ministers of India visited Central Asia and considered the region important for India's regional security. Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015, visited all five Central Asian states and emphasised the significance of relations between India and Central Asia. Yet, India's trade with them was mere US\$ 1.4 billion in 2019.

India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to interact with the countries of the region in a single multilateral forum in 2017. However, the SCO serves merely as a sluice gate to control the covert competition between China and Russia and stop either country from taking over the region. Recent India-China conflicts are in fact managed by Russia through the SCO.

Cultural Ties and People-to-People Contact

There are some advantages India has over other regional players in this field. In this area, Indian literature, film, and culture are particularly popular. Due to their shared cultural tastes and understanding, people from Central Asia and India might further strengthen their friendship. The common cultural perspectives of India and Central Asian nations are woven together by strands of Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Sufism, and a rich literary past. Telemedicine, healthcare, and India's technological cooperation programmes have all directly benefited locals and are, therefore very well-liked by them.

At the end of the Summit, the two sides signed a joint declaration intending to enumerate their common vision for establishing an endured and comprehensive India-Central Asia partnership. On many fronts, this Summit has been pivotal for India in its Central Asia policy. It paved the way forward in envisioning its strategies towards the region in actualising its broadly conceived goals into a concrete course of action.

A Way Forward

India's civilizational values undoubtedly has a strong influence in Central Asia. The Great Silk Road crossed through India via the Ferghana Valley. From here, Buddhism was transmitted to the rest of Asia. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are the three nations with which India is still connected via the Valley under the illegal occupation of Pakistan. Yet, despite being the cultural anchor of the region and having superb historical bonding and civilisational linkages, India to date is tagged as a disinterested power and a latecomer in the Central Asian region. A country whose history has largely been shaped by

the invasions waged from Central Asia has now been dubbed as an extra-regional power. When introspection is made to find the logic behind such a misnomer, it was found that India has neither any established perspective nor any strategic narratives towards the region unlike the US, China and Russia. In fact, India lacks a coordinated policy approach to deal with the Central Asian countries vis-à-vis other powers. It is, therefore, necessary for India to evolve its own perspective and understanding to broaden its operational scope of Central Asia. For that, India must first correct its expansive conception of the region.

It would be appropriate for India to provide a cultural and historical perspective to the region through a Summit-level annual meeting when others engage with the region from their perspectives, such as China from an economic standpoint (Belt and Road Initiative), Russia from a strategic standpoint (Collective Security Treaty Organization), Turkey from an ethnic standpoint (Turkic Council), and the Islamic world from a religious standpoint (Organisation of Islamic Cooperation). It would be appropriate for India to provide the area with an Indic cultural and historical perspective through annual summit meetings. Except for Russia, Central Asia has no particular opinion toward any nation.

Central Asians are generally frightened of China despite frequently having hazy strategic visions. They depend less on India economically than they do on China, with whom they have extensive economic relations. The region's hostility toward Pakistan is fading, maybe as a result of the population's progressive conversion to Islam or because of Russia's altered perception of Pakistan. People's longstanding passion for Bollywood and their conception of "Hindustan" in popular culture may play important roles in enhancing the relationship. However, India's soft power is dwindling as the generations change. This requires arrest. Apart from trade, the current vague objectives of re-establishing ties between India and Central Asia can only be replaced by a value-driven cultural policy and a pragmatic narrative to transform the orientation of the region towards India.

New Delhi should boldly and decisively promote closer ties with the Central Asian region. But, importantly, it must seek to capitalise on the following options.

1. To continue to build on our strong political relations through continuous and consistent exchange of high-level visits at bilateral and multilateral forums.
2. To show the political willingness and economic strengths to take on the

financial risks involved in overseas investments.

3. To establish physical connectivity with each of the Central Asian states.⁹
4. To step up multilateral engagement with CAS using the existing multilateral forums like SCO and Eurasian Economic Community (EEC).
5. India has to take a leaf out of Chinese economic diplomacy and encourage economic interests to lead other political and security objectives at stake in the region.
6. The focus needs to be shifted from import orientation to export promotion of Indian goods in CAS.
7. More concentration should be given to trade in service than to trade in goods.
8. Public enterprises like ONGC, SAIL, BHEL, BSNL, CIL, etc., must come forward and play on the front foot as far as investments in strategic collaborations and Joint Ventures are concerned in the energy and power sector, minerals and oil explorations, etc.
9. Importantly, India needs to come out of its 'one size fits all approach' (Chandra 2017)¹⁰. Instead of formulating a general trade policy for a region, New Delhi needs to formulate and have country-specific trade strategies.
10. Market mapping, analysis, and creating data banks for raw products, consumers and capital goods is critical for Indian exporters. Hence updated and critical information network must be created for better business ties with CAS.
11. India needs to work on an alternative logistic route like the Chinese One Belt, One Road (OBOR) and hence must reactivate land connectivity at the earliest through INSTC.

Notes:

¹ EIO (2022), "Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit," *Embassy of India*, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, January 27, available at: <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?pdf13991?000>.

² Ministry of External Affairs (2022), Government of India, "Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit," 27 January, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773/Delhi+Declaration+of+the+1st+IndiaCentral+Asia+Summit>, accessed 28 January 2022

³ Ministry of External Affairs (2022), Government of India, "English translation of Prime Minister's Opening Remarks at the first meeting of India Central Asia Summit," 27

January, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/34772/English+translation+of+Prime+Ministers+Opening+Remarks+at+the+first+meeting+of+India+Central+Asia+Summit>, accessed 28 January 2022

- ⁴ PIB (2022), “India-Central Asia Virtual Summit,” Press Information Bureau, Government of India, January 27, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1793068>.
- ⁵ Zafar, Athar (2022), “India-Central Asia Summit: A Milestone in Engagement with the Region,” Indian Council of World Affairs, February 17, available at: https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7074&lid=4798#_edn4.
- ⁶ EIO (2022), “Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit,” *Embassy of India*, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, January 27, available at: <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?pdf13991?000>.
- ⁷ EIO (2022), “Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit,” *Embassy of India*, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, January 27, available at: <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?pdf13991?000>.
- ⁸ EIO (2022), “Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit,” *Embassy of India*, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, January 27, available at: <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?pdf13991?000>.
- ⁹ Chandra, Amiya (2017), *The Trade Game: Engaging with Central Asia*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press.
- ¹⁰ Chandra, Amiya (2017), *The Trade Game: Engaging with Central Asia*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press.

