

THE TALIBAN AND CHINA: INDIA SEES NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

A CASPIAN POLICY CENTER POLICY BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India is the geopolitical behemoth of South Asia, boasting a population of over one billion with projections indicating that it will soon overtake China as the most populous nation in the world.¹ Its expanding economy, developing rule of law, and rising youth population point towards India adopting a more dominant role on the international stage in the second quarter of the twenty-first century. Until now, Indian foreign policy has been hyper focused on its immediate neighborhood. India has prioritized minimizing threats from Pakistan, curbing religious extremism, and balancing China along its northern border. However, India is assuming a more commanding position in regions outside of South Asia. India's proximity to the Central Asian states, its need to secure trade routes that circumvent Pakistan, and its desire to engage in spaces with a large Chinese presence suggest that it can play a more active role in Central Asia.

India's Previous Presence in Central Asia

India was quick to establish diplomatic channels to Central Asia after the Soviet Union collapse. India was one of the first non-communist countries to establish a diplomatic presence in the region in the 1990s and among the first countries officially to recognize the states' independence. India was a long-standing leader in the non-aligned movement, which provided it the leeway to establish a diplomatic presence in these countries. Then-Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1993 and Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995. He helped to broker Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPA) with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Prime Minister Rao also revived New Delhi's "Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation" (ITEC) Program to support Central Asia's information-technology sector.²

Indian engagements in Central Asia have primarily been focused on solidifying India's own national security interests, along with providing minor support for the region's technology sector and monitoring Pakistan's activity there. However, the geopolitical pressures of heightened Chinese involvement in Central Asia and the perceived Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects encirclement of India by have boosted support for increased Indian diplomacy to the region.³ Such pressures have also empowered India to engage with Central Asia on multiple fronts to showcase its willingness to become a resilient and reliable partner for the region.

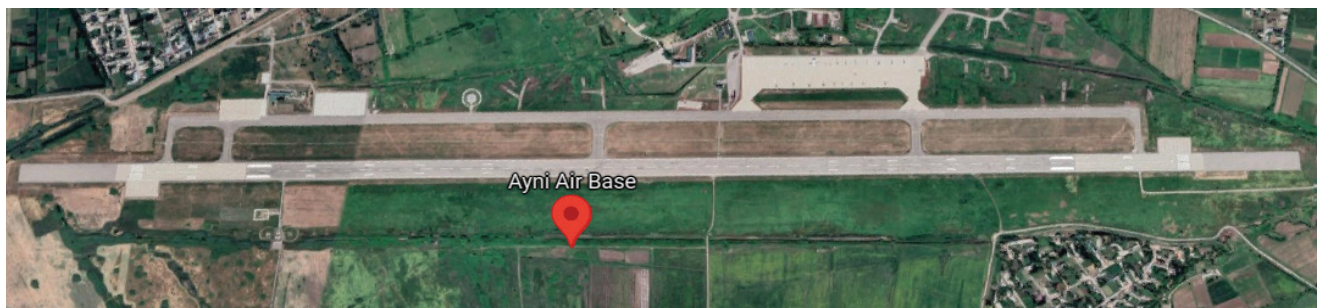
Countering Violent Extremism: A Focal Point of Indian-Central Asian Relations

Since India formally established diplomatic relations with the independent Central Asian

states, it has prioritized countering religious extremism in the region to prevent spillover into its immediate neighborhood. In 1995, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon (then Rahmonov) visited India and declared that India and Tajikistan needed to cooperate to safeguard their institutions from terrorism.⁴ Collaboration grew when India and Tajikistan assisted Afghanistan's Northern Alliance led by Ahmed Shah Massoud against the Taliban.⁵ During the Afghan civil war following the Soviet withdrawal, India built a military hospital at Farkhor near Tajikistan's southern border with Afghanistan. Furthermore, Modi disclosed that leasing the Ayni Airbase in Tajikistan was a serious consideration for his administration in 2015. The Indian government allocated about \$100 million to renovate the airstrip and construct hangars on the base, making it operational in 2005. Pakistan's cozy relations with the Taliban leadership in Kabul also cultivated fears in India that its main adversary could support a terrorist organization relatively close to the contentious Jammu and Kashmir region.⁶

The 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai carried out by the Pakistan-based terrorist organization, Lashkar-e-Taiba, left at least 178 dead and reinforced India's desire to counter extremism.⁷ In addition, worries over revitalized religious extremism in Central Asia became a growing concern when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan repatriated 231 and 156 citizens respectively from Syrian conflict zones as the Islamic State began to lose territory in the Middle East.⁸ Repatriating citizens from conflict zones could spark a growth of extremist thinking in the region if they are not properly reassimilated. While national security and countering religious extremism remain important issues, India hopes to transform its security exchanges with the Central Asian states into more robust relationships.

India and Tajikistan's strategic convergence on combatting religious extremism enhances an affinity between the two countries. In 2012, Tajikistan and India upgraded their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, allowing the two countries to explore cooperation in sectors such as education, health, technology, science, and political and economic affairs.⁹



The Ayni Air Base, located in Tajikistan, was constructed with Indian financing. Source: The Diplomat.



Tajik President Emomali Rahmon and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a 2017 state visit. Source: Vivekenanda International Foundation

India's experience in transforming security cooperation into a multi-dimensional relationship with Tajikistan has allowed it to seek similar relations with other Central Asian countries. Between 2014 and 2020, there were 18 ministerial, executive, and cabinet-level visits between Indian and Central Asian officials to discuss a myriad of issues, such as advancing technological cooperation, formulating joint business councils, and financing critical infrastructure projects.¹⁰

As the Central Asian countries seek financial support as well as security initiatives to bolster their economies, India could grow as a significant investor and financial source for the region become.

The Rise of the Taliban: Its Impacts on India-Central Asia Relations

The resurgence of the Taliban and their takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 reignited fears of extremism in Central and South Asia. Seeking to address these concerns, India sent a diplomatic delegation to Qatar to meet with Taliban representatives on August 31, 2021. Nevertheless, the Taliban provided no guarantees that it would counter groups opposing Indian control over Kashmir from operating within the country. In fact, Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen said that the Taliban would "raise our voices for Muslims in Kashmir, India or any other country."¹¹ Clearly, the return of the Taliban is a top security concern for New Delhi.

The complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and the immediate takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban also alarmed the Central Asians. Tajikistan is concerned that its 870-mile-long shared border with Afghanistan could become a hotbed for illegal drug smuggling, human trafficking, and religious extremism. Dushanbe granted China permission to construct and operate a military base within its borders in Gorno-Badakhshan autonomous region high in the Pamir Mountains near the border with Afghanistan.¹² Other Central Asian states have made diplomatic efforts to receive assurances from the Taliban that its rise to power would not affect the security of the region. The Taliban pledged that the militant group would not pose a security threat to Uzbekistan in an October 2021 meeting with Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov.¹³ Similarly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan both sent delegations to meet with Taliban representatives after Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov expressed concerns that the Taliban would threaten the security of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) states.¹⁴

India and the Central Asian states are concerned about the security implications of a Taliban leadership in Afghanistan. While the Taliban has issued security guarantees for the Central Asian governments, it has not done so for India. Despite assurances, not all countries seem satisfied and Tajikistan has strengthened its security relations with other countries to bolster its defenses amidst the Taliban resurgence. The Taliban takeover provides India with a concrete response to enhance its security relations with Central Asia. Creating a more comprehensive security framework would ease concerns about the impacts of the Taliban in Central Asia and India, while also establishing India's position as a security guarantor for the Central Asian region.

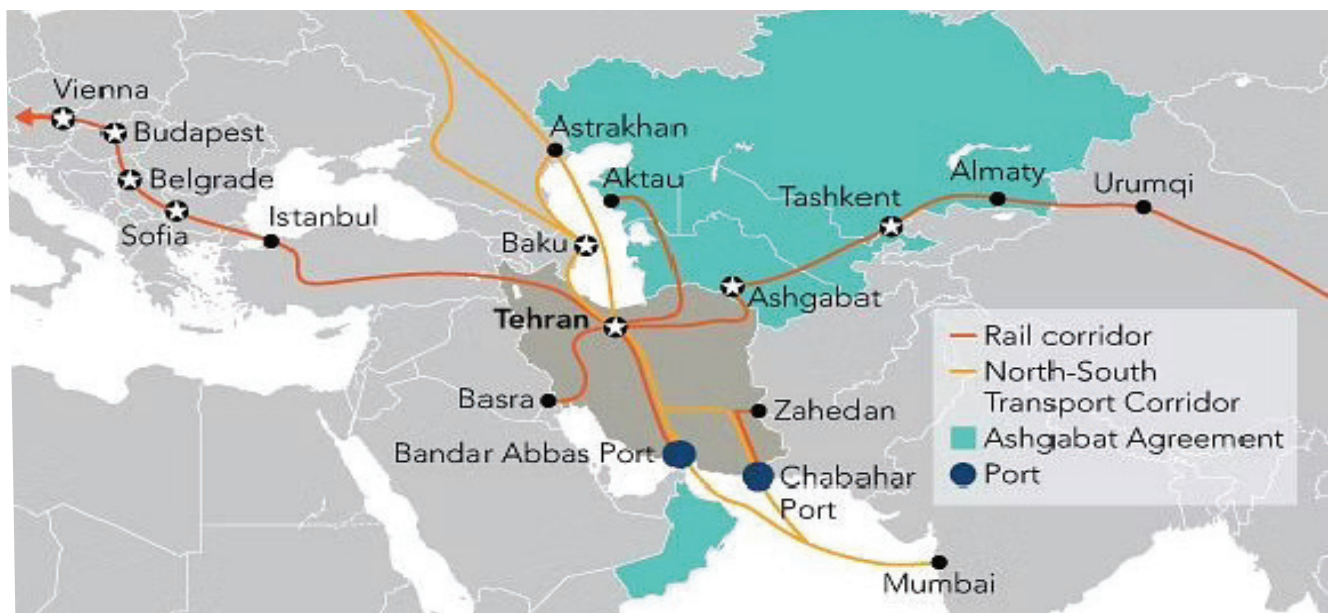
Bridging India and Central Asia

India's lack of a shared border with any of the Central Asian states has impeded development of close bilateral relations. Between the five former Central Asian countries and India sits Pakistan and Afghanistan. Additionally, outdated cross-border infrastructure within Central Asia deters multilateral interactions and trade.¹⁵ Moreover, proposals to link India with the region often prove fruitless. The 1,127-mile-long Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline was designed to transport Turkmen gas to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁶ However, the Taliban's recapture of Afghanistan coupled with other significant financial and bureaucratic hurdles have stalled the project indefinitely.¹⁷

India has ramped up investing in resilient infrastructure projects in the region that cement its position in Central Asia. In 2015, India agreed to work on Iran's Chabahar Port, located on the Gulf of Oman. The agreement stipulated that India would manage the terminal for 10 years, granting it the ability to access goods from Afghanistan and Central Asia without having to cross Pakistan.¹⁸ Chabahar Port has garnered enough international interest to attract over \$500 million worth of investments and is a direct competitor for Pakistan's

seaport at Gwadar that China is financing.

India hopes to connect its newly expanded Chabahar Port in Iran with the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC is a 4,473-mile-long transportation network linking Mumbai, India to Moscow, Russia via Central Asia and Iran.¹⁹ The route offers an alternative to the Suez Canal, which has proven to be vulnerable to unexpected weather conditions and human error. The INSTC is one of the most salient components of India's foreign agenda in Central Asia.²⁰ The route would not only link India with Central Asia, but it would also serve to counterbalance China's growing economic presence in the region. Nevertheless, global crises, like Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent Western-imposed sanctions on Moscow leave the project's future uncertain.



Routes of the proposed International North-South Transit Corridor linking India to Europe. Source: CSIS: Reconnecting Asia.

India's efforts to forge closer and more robust relations with Central Asian states face geopolitical barriers, including the difficult relationship between Iran and the United States and the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. Therefore, in addition to implementing costly infrastructure plans to create transit corridors linking the two regions, India should also explore other channels to bolster multilateral engagement, like inaugurating joint business councils, brokering trade deals, and enhancing its security relationship with the Central Asian states by promoting professional military education and training.

Historical Antagonism Between India and China Fuels India's Recent Interests in Central Asia

Tensions between India and China reached a tipping point after border clashes in 2020.²¹

While diplomacy succeeded in halting the fighting, reality is that hostilities between the two countries had been brewing for decades. Pakistan's close relations with China are another challenge. In 2013, China and Pakistan formalized the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of China's BRI that includes a \$60 billion infrastructure plan.²² China has continued to increase its economic ties with Pakistan, and now accounts for half of Pakistan's trade deficit.²³ Pakistan ranks among the countries most vulnerable to debt distress as a result of China's BRI projects.²⁴

China has also been actively involved in India's other neighbors. China gained control of Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port when the Indian Ocean country defaulted on loan payments.²⁵ In addition, Bangladesh has embraced large amounts of funding from China to launch new infrastructure projects. For example, Dhaka and Beijing inked 27 bilateral agreements amounting to \$24 billion in 2016.²⁶ Chinese investment in India's direct neighbors has been classified as a "string of pearls," an attempt by Beijing to surround India with bases, ports, and governments friendly to Chinese interests.

India perceives China as encroaching in its historical sphere of influence. For decades, India has been a powerhouse of South Asia, but lucrative Chinese investment opportunities in India's neighborhood threaten its status within its own region. China has also employed similar tactics in Central Asia, with countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are falling into debt traps due to expensive infrastructure projects while at the same time pulling in insufficient revenues.²⁷ Even before China announced the BRI in 2013, India introduced its "Connect Central Asia Policy" (CCAP) in June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The initiative's goal is to expand India's economic cooperation with Central Asia while imparting a geopolitical focus and strong emphasis on military training.²⁸ Although the project initially stalled, Prime Minister Narendra Modi reinforced its importance to Indian foreign policy by visiting all five Central Asian countries in 2015.²⁹

In 2017, India joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which is a multilateral organization designed to resolve border disputes in Central Asia. Since its founding, the organization has expanded beyond the original China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to also include India, Russia, and Pakistan. The SCO has provided India a feasible platform to promote its cultural exchange programs and security initiatives with the Central Asian countries. At the 2018 SCO summit, Modi encouraged greater cooperative tourism initiatives and the establishment of food and other cultural festivities among member state nations.³⁰ While minor, the SCO gives India a more even playing field to advance its relations with Central Asia.



Leaders of countries in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization pose at the 18th SCO Summit in 2018. Source: CCTV Video News Agency.

In addition, India hosted the first ever India–Central Asia Summit virtually in January 2022. The format resembled Chinese forums that are held with the five Central Asian states. In the summit, the leaders of India and the Central Asian countries discussed the establishment of an India–Central Asia Center, which would manage relations between India and the region. There was also a focus on improving trade, investment, and connectivity between South and Central Asia. Lastly, security and defense cooperation were at the forefront of the meeting. Participants spoke of the importance of hosting joint counter-terrorism exercises and supporting a Joint Working Group on Afghanistan.³¹ The India–Central Asia Summit was held two days after the China Plus Central Asia meeting, which focused on expanding trade, investment, and security assurances between Beijing and the Central Asian republics.³² The back-to-back summits indicate that China and India are vying for economic and security influence in Central Asia. While China seeks to maintain and grow its prominence in the region, India is aiming to gain a foothold with the promises of less-controversial investment and security guarantees.

“The back-to-back summits indicate that China and India are vying for economic and security influence in Central Asia.”



Modi speaks with the Central Asian leaders at the India-Central Asia Summit. Source: Observer Research Foundation.

India can also take advantage of festering adverse relations between the Central Asian countries and China. Residents of Kyrgyzstan have staged numerous protests opposing Chinese-led infrastructure projects in the country³⁵, and Kazakhstani university students enrolled in Chinese schools have reported feelings of uncertainty when transiting at the Xinjiang airport.³⁴ Kazakhstani citizens who previously held Chinese citizenship have been arrested while on business trips in China, adding to the sense of unease for Central Asians residing in China.³⁵ India can offer its own investment and credit lines to Central Asia that come with less geopolitical baggage than China's BRI projects. In 2020, India announced it would provide Central Asia with an additional \$1 billion line of credit intended for broadening the connectivity partnership between India and Central Asia.³⁶ Projects like these display India's eagerness to play a deeper role in developing Central Asia's infrastructure to counter China in the region.

Direct Chinese advances in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka demonstrate Beijing's ambitions to expand beyond the East Asia-Pacific region. Beijing's establishment of a "string of pearls" surrounding India raise concerns in New Delhi over possible susceptibility to Chinese military pressure. India is utilizing its diplomatic corps and soft power competence to counterbalance Chinese BRI infrastructure projects in South and Central Asia. China's economic influence in South Asia has pushed India to adopt a more forward approach in Central Asia.

Policy Recommendations for India

India and the Central Asian countries would mutually benefit from more developed relations in a variety of different sectors. India's traditional engagement with Central Asia in countering religious extremism has allowed it to develop a harmonious relationship with multiple countries in the region. Extending this engagement to economic issues, pulling in the private sector, and cementing its security commitments in the region would elevate India as a serious player in Central Asian affairs and provide Central Asia with an alternative security and economic partner to China and Russia. To accomplish this, India should:

Forge its own security relationships with Central Asian states. India should push ahead with separate bilateral security relationships with Central Asian states. India should continue to work with Tajikistan to combat violent extremism and expand cooperation with other states, such as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, to curb radicalism in their countries. By using its relationship with Tajikistan as a basis for other countries, it can greatly transform its relatively minimal security presence in Central Asia into a network of reliable security partners.

Increase Security Engagement with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has expressed his intent to stamp out extremism and a desire to stabilize Afghanistan.³⁷ India should strengthen security engagement with Uzbekistan to halt religious extremism and further mold its security role in the region.



Modi meets with Mirziyoyev during the 2018 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit. Source: The Print.

Promote Interregional Infrastructure Projects Crossing Eurasia. Central Asia is among

the least internally connected regions in the world and would considerably benefit from initiatives to link the five countries with each other and to external countries.³⁸ India's involvement in the Chabahar Port construction and the INSTC underscore its commitment to infrastructure development in Central Asia. Continuing to promote such initiatives would allow India to carve out its own role in Central Asian infrastructure development that circumvents China's debt traps.

Encourage its Growing Private Sector to Link with Central Asia. India is the third-largest tech start-up source worldwide, boasting more than 38,000 officially recognized start-ups.³⁹ Promoting start-ups in its information-technology sector to work with Central Asian companies will allow India to build rapport in the region and expand its reach through unique methods that set India apart from Russia and China.

Prioritize Direct Flights Between Indian Cities and Central Asian Countries. Prior to the 2019 Pakistani airspace closure and COVID-19 related travel restrictions, direct flights between major Indian cities and Central Asian countries were frequent. Indians traveling to Europe would take advantage of cheaper flight tickets offered by Central Asian airlines. Kazakhstan's Air Astana, Uzbekistan Airways, and Turkmenistan Airways serviced several Indian metropolitan areas.⁴⁰ Coordinating with Central Asian countries to establish new flight paths linking India to the region would bring the two closer together and encourage mutual tourism and business opportunities.

Policy Recommendations for Central Asian States

Kazakhstan adheres to its multi-vector foreign policy to foster connections with multiple countries within Central Asia and afar to ensure that it does not become too dependent on a single great power.⁴¹ Other Central Asian countries have since developed their own formats of a multi-vector approach, such as Turkmenistan's positive neutrality and Uzbekistan's refusal to accede to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). By adhering to this policy in terms of India, Central Asian countries should:

Embrace Indian Financial Support. A key component of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy is diversifying financing sources to ensure that it avoids falling into a debt trap with a larger power. Other Central Asian countries should follow Kazakhstan's policy to embrace Indian financial support on critical infrastructure projects.

Prioritize Internal Infrastructure Projects. By prioritizing internal infrastructure projects, Central Asian countries will be able to expand their regional trade and improve cross-border efficiency. In addition, the Central Asian states will be able to link their modernized infrastructure projects with larger transit corridors, such as the INSTC, to reach India.

Countries should apply a Kazakhstan-style foreign policy by attaining Indian funding for essential infrastructure projects.

Support Cultural Exchange Programs with India. India has implemented cultural exchange programs with countries from around the world. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations finances Indian poetry to be translated into Central Asian languages. In addition, under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program, thousands of Central Asians attend trainings and receive scholarships to enroll in Indian universities, including Turkmen students, who are often isolated from the international community. Nevertheless, Indian students at Central Asian universities have reported incidents of discrimination, tension with residents, and extortion at their schools. Central Asian countries can support cultural exchange programs with India to promote person-to-person interactions while also addressing these concerns to ensure that cultural programs remain mutually beneficial to both India and Central Asia.

Conclusion

Central Asia is increasingly emerging as a geopolitically significant region with several lucrative trade networks, high potential for infrastructure development and business expansion. India has played a small role in the region since independence, focused its efforts on combatted religious extremism and supporting joint military training. However, Central Asia's interest in balancing China's and Russia's influence in the region presents an opportunity for India to cement its status in Central Asia as a sustainable partner. India's interest in financing critical infrastructure projects in Central Asia and sponsoring private-sector growth in the region are attractive to the Central Asian countries. Meanwhile, bolstering relations with the Central Asian states will allow them to offset China's influence in the region and monitor Pakistan's growth. China is a considerable factor driving India's desire to play a more active role in Central Asia. Both Central Asian states and India should embrace this fact and forge closer relations to support their foreign policy agendas.

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