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CONCERNS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Concerns and Opportunities for India in Central Asia

By

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Foreword

Central Asian countries, specially beyond the borders of Afghanistan, have historical links with India since ages. Today too, they are important for various reasons to India. Despite their distant physical boundaries, and particularly their geographical location, India in recent past years adopted policies to reach them consistently. The premise of Dr. Mansi Mehrotra - Khanna's monograph is based on the credence that in an increasingly interconnected world, the strategic significance of regions transcends their geographical boundaries. The rich culture, history, resources along with the location on the world map, puts Central Asia at the crossroads where interests of global players conflict and converge.

The discourse on 'Concerns and Opportunities for India in Central Asia' encapsulates a narrative of political, economic, cultural, and geopolitical complexities. The region comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that hold immense potential for nurturing partnerships and rivalries that can reshape international relations.

The region's abundance of natural resources, emerging markets-where many market grabbers are trying to encash, geopolitical importance, regional dynamics, and overabundance of opportunities for international actors to foster civilisational, economic, political and security connections keep the interests, engagement and competition dynamic. These opportunities are juxtaposed with concerns rooted in historical affiliations, economic challenges, institutional feebleness, regional rivalries, political and social complexities. These complexities create security concerns for not just India but also for the western interests. The author summarises the main causes, consequences and the ways to overcome the challenges to national, regional and trans-national security.

This well researched monograph gives fresh and implementable ideas and prospects where collaboration and cooperation between India and Central Asia is possible and feasible to exercise in the field of economics, education, healthcare, culture, history, information, youth, defence and security. These engagements without doubt will not only bring India closer to Central Asia but can also be replicated in India's engagement with other countries. In the present situation of cautious stepping in the said region where China, Russia and America for one reason and Turkey and other rich Muslim countries for religious and economic reasons are active players, this discourse may benefit India's position regionally and internationally.

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Chapter 1

अयं बन्धुरयं नेति गणना लघुचेतसां उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकं ॥

*Only small men discriminate saying: One is a relative; the other is a stranger.
For those who live magnanimously the entire world constitutes but a family.*

Macinder, in his book, writes, “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.”¹

Earlier, around 4th century BC, Kautilya’s basic thought behind Rajamandala, also known as Mandala Theory of foreign policy stated that, your neighbour is your natural enemy and the neighbour’s neighbour is your friend.²

Situated in the north and north-west of South Asia, Central Asian States include Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The region extends from the mountains of Western China to the shores of Caspian Sea. Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan create the southern border of the region and the vast expanse of Russia is to the north.

Being immediate and now India’s extended neighbours, civilisational linkages between India and Central Asia stretch over millennia. Formerly part of the historic region of Turkestan, engagement of India with Central Asia remained strong under the Soviet Union. The region was decolonised in the early 1990s, leading to a drift in the relations between India and Central Asia due to inability to connect by air or land.

In July 2015, Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to have visited all five Central Asian states in a single trip. The visit demonstrated Indian leadership’s intent; aimed at increasing strategic engagement and institution building to bring it closer to the Central Asian Republics (CARs). In 2022, the first India-Central Asia summit was held where two “Joint Working Groups” on Afghanistan and Chabahar port project were announced.

The region is of immense significance for India as “a tremor in the security environment in the CARs can directly threaten India’s security; particularly due to faster transportation, communication, technology and presence of rich mineral resources that play an important role in bringing Central Asia to international attention and within the ambit of India’s strategic interest.”³

¹ Halford George Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, National Defence University Press: Washington, 1942, p. 150

² Kautilya, *The Arth Shastra*, Volume 6, Chapter 2, Verse 15 to 18, in edited, rearranged and translated by L.N.Rangarajan, *Kautilya The Arthashastra*, Penguin Books: India, 1987, pp.555-556

³ Mansi Mehrotra, “India’s concerns in Central Asia”, *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, No.255, October 6, 2009, <https://archive.claws.in/255/indias-concerns-in-central-asia-dr-mansi-mehrotra.html>, cited on 4/6/2023

Concerns

The concept of security is at the very core of human and state existence. Security requires having a safe space devoid of any threat or fear. The four key premise to analyse security are-security of what, from what, for what, and by what means. In the present inter-connected world, these four broad premise to analyse security include human, environmental, national, trans-cultural, trans-economic, trans-national, food, infectious diseases, water, energy, man-made disasters and cyber security.

The Central Asian countries, India's "near abroad", became independent as recently as 1990. The undesired independence brought with it a number of challenges nationally, regionally and trans-nationally. Nationally, the challenges include: building democratic institutions; economic challenges; extremism and terrorism; presence of nuclear and biological material; poverty; underdeveloped education; corruption; weak infrastructure; demographic imbalance; rise of Islamic extremism; and environmental management. Regional challenges include drugs, arms and human trafficking; inter-ethnic conflict leading to inter-state tensions; energy and water disputes; mining; and porous borders. Trans-national security concerns include Russia's influence in security and politics; China's economic clout, Western (The United States and Europe) accession in democracy, Türkiye's ideas of Pan-Turkic World and Pakistan's desire to create a zone of 'strategic depth'.

Democracy in Crisis

The land-locked Central Asian States gained independence without political, economic, administrative or psychological preparedness. It became tedious for the leadership of these nations to establish the fundamentals of statehood in a modern sense where the 'state is organised on a national basis promoting nationalism through emphasis on shared symbols and national identity'. With no experience in the functioning of democracy, democratic institutions are facing difficulties in formulating a coherent policy and effective public administration. Region's disappointing economic performance, hindering successful pursuit of any development strategy (whether oriented towards capitalism or socialism) self-reliance and national, regional or global integration are some of the results of the inexperience in statecraft of the ruling elites.

Clan identity is a critical variable to understand and study the causes of conflict and peace in Central Asia. It played an important role in state formation in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and civil war in Tajikistan where inter-clan competition led to state breakdown. Despite the homogeneity in history and religion, clan-based identities are strong sub-national identities amongst the Central Asians resulting in a weak sense of national identity. Also, in the diverse ethno-political landscape, clan-based exclusivist approach of the ruling elites keeps the opposition inefficient and the elections fail on many basic democratic standards. Leadership-controlled elections, selections, appointments, promotions and patronage form part of the social, political, economic, administrative and defence networks undermining formal institution and other mechanisms of representations. It has been observed, particularly in Tajikistan, that opposition parties are created by the ruling elites to meet democratic standards of election and selection. Disappearance and torture of

political prisoners is not out of the ordinary. The political, administrative, and economic exclusion of the ethno-regional communities has led to inter-ethnic mistrust, fear, conflict amongst ethno-regional elites, competition over scarce resources, and underutilisation of resources both human and regional. Hence, political and economic exclusion has blurred the distinction between legislative, executive and judicial branches of the government and keeps social and political structures fragile.

With time, monopoly over or neopatrimonialism continues to dominate in all the five states in various degrees. Sarynagyshtan clan in Kyrgyzstan, until the Tulip Revolution of 2005, formed part of the political, administrative, defence, public services and financial elites. Nevertheless, at present, it would be an oversimplification to describe Kyrgyzstan as an exclusively clan-based democracy. Tajikistan's civil war and post war politics remained dominated by exclusivist clan-based democracy. At present, the Kulyab clan forms part of the ruling elite. Although, Kazakhstan is not characterised as an exclusivist clan-based democracy, clan affiliations and informal networks do play some role in political, administrative and economic dynamics. Turkmenistan is characterised by a tightly controlled autocracy. While in Uzbekistan, the Samarkand clan based in Samarkand, Bukhara and Dzhizak, dominated the power structures. However, after the death of Islam Karimov in 2016, a more inclusive political system was adopted by the ruling elites.

Establishing an inclusive democracy, a complex and a long-term process, requires multi-layered approach that addresses various aspects of governance, participation, and human rights. While each country in Central Asia has its unique features and concerns, some key steps to building inclusive democracy will require: first, strengthening rule of law that protects human rights; ensuring equality before law and providing mechanisms for accountability like technocratic reforms; empowering other segments of society; addressing both popular and professional culture within legal institutions; establishing independent judiciary; fostering transparent and impartial legal processes; funding small local groups; and protecting the freedom of speech and expression, assembly and association. Second, promoting political pluralism by encouraging the formation of diverse political parties, representing all the ethnic-communities that have equal access to political participation and a level playing field. Also, there is a need to check on monopolisation and concentration of power. Third, encouraging participation of civil society groups with opportunities for collaboration with the government in policy-making. Fourth, implementing electoral reforms to ensure free and fair elections. Fifth, investing in civic education programs that inform citizens about their rights, responsibilities and the principles of democracy apart from educating them about the importance of inclusivity, diversity and tolerance to foster a culture of democratic values. Sixth, educating and engaging the media to promote critical thinking, sense of responsibility and freedom. Seventh, fostering an environment of equal opportunities for development and working towards reduction of poverty, creation of jobs and implementation of social welfare programs. Eighth, implementing comprehensive anti-corruption measures and adopting international best practices to strengthen accountability and integrity within the public sector. Finally, strengthening regional cooperation and dialogue to share experiences of their success and promote democratic values.

Economic Challenges

The transition from communist centralised economy to market economy and changing paradigms of global environment has not been easy particularly because of no experience, exposure, and expertise. It is because during the Soviet period, the policies of the entire region were formulated and

administered from Moscow and most of the ruling elites were ethnic Russians. Further, being landlocked, the main obstacle to the region's development is access to a sea route. Also, the economy was built around the Soviet system, hence there is not just resource dependence but also lack of broad-based infrastructure development for processing and manufacturing. The small, relatively weak economy; resource dependence; insubstantial access to market; limited diversification; infrastructure deficit; youth unemployment; dearth of skilled workers; lack of coordination in management of the water and energy complex; low share of private sector; state monopolies dominating the economies hence anti-competitive market structure; extensive price controls; high inflation and under-developed financial sector keeps the economic growth low and inflation high. Additionally, absence of reliable economic data; tough business climate; and foreign exchange restrictions and control hamper Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Rampant corruption and administrative opaqueness also deter diversified foreign investment. The political elites and their families directly control the economies of their countries and have been seen to benefit from state expenditure. The carte blanche support for inefficient businesses as nepotism reduces the chances of efficient formulation and implementation of economic reforms. The household and small and medium sized enterprises remain vulnerable to economic headwinds due to preferential tax regimes. Stalled land reforms keep the nation dependent on remittances particularly in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.⁴ There is also socioeconomic disparity both within and between countries. Porous borders with Afghanistan and weak military resources keep the economic security fragile.

The worsening global environment (COVID-19 and Russia-Ukraine war), has also highlighted several key vulnerabilities in the region. Economies of CAR's are facing challenges at multiple fronts that include high prices of food and energy, slowdown of economy due to shut down or disruption of different production and supply channels, standstill tourism industry, financial and credit market volatility, high rents, eroding standards of living, reverse migration and subsequent increase in unemployment and trimming down of remittances.

Recently, acknowledging strained resources, market and connectivity, the governments of CARs have taken economic, social and security measures, to overcome the serious impact of COVID-19 and Russia-Ukraine war.⁵ The Central Asian economies have shown strong resilience but they have remained vulnerable to demonstrations that have forced the respective governments to take notice of

⁴ Personal remittances received - Tajikistan 33.42%, Kyrgyzstan 32.69%, Uzbekistan 13.28% of GDP (Source: "Remittance, percentage of GDP – Country rankings", [Global Economy.com](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/remittances_percent_gdp/), 2021, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/remittances_percent_gdp/ cited on 3/5/2023

⁵ Governments implemented economic stimulus packages to support businesses, industries and workers affected by the pandemic like financial aid, tax relief, loan guarantees and subsidies, efforts were made to diversify their economies and promote sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, technology and services. The governments also focused on strengthening healthcare infrastructure; social safety nets including cash transfers, food assistance and job retention schemes; education and digitisation through distance learning initiatives and promotion of digital platforms for remote education; Security measures included border control, public health campaigns and enhanced security cooperation. (Source: Luke Mackle, Amélie SchurichRey, and Talisa zur Hausen, Policy Analyst, and Ms Katrina Keegan, "Beyond COVID-19: Prospects for economic recovery in Central Asia", OECD, 2021, https://www.oecd.org/eurasia/Beyond_COVID%2019_Central%20Asia%20.pdf, cited on 11/2/2023 and George Bouma, Sheila Marnie, Vesna Bisheva, Mihail Peleah, Elena Danilova-Cross, David Das Neeves and Ieva Keskiné, "COVID-19 and Central Asia: Socio-economic impact and key policy considerations for recovery", UNDP Report, 2020, <https://www.undp.org/eurasia/publications/covid-19-and-central-asia-socio-economic-impacts-and-key-policy-considerations-recovery>, Cited on 1/5/2023.

the public discontent and introduced some tangible measures to address significant issues and grievances.⁶

The CARs require national reforms, regional cooperation, and international partnerships to address the economic challenges. Additionally, long-term sustainable development goals along with commitment and comprehensive strategies are required to overcome economic difficulty. This will include, diversifying economy particularly by encouraging and investing in the development of manufacturing, services, information technology, tourism, and other emerging sectors. Second, invest in human capital, research and development and infrastructural projects that promote sustainable and inclusive growth, including transportation, energy, telecommunication and logistics networks to enhance trade within the country and with the neighbouring countries. Third, create and enable the environment for entrepreneurship and innovation that will embrace access to finances and support to small and medium-size enterprises, technology transfer, adoption of digital technology to drive productivity and competitiveness. Fourth, combat corruption and strengthen governance structures and institutions to ensure transparency, accountability and rule of law. Fifth, create a safe and attractive environment for foreign direct investment. Sixth, address and tackle social and regional disparity by investing in infrastructural and welfare programs in underdeveloped areas. Seventh, strengthen resilient financial sector by building up robust banking regulations, develop financial literacy, encourage private sector participation in the financial system, financial transparency, and improve access to finance for individuals and businesses. Finally, promote sustainable development by integrating environmental consideration into economic planning.

Drugs and Arms Trafficking

Drug trafficking is responsible for increased drug abuse, addiction and associated social and health problems. Central Asia remains one of the main transit routes for the trafficking of narcotic and illegal arms trade hence a challenge to global security threat. Central Asia is on the “northern route” of Afghanistan, world’s largest producer and supplier of narcotics accounting for 85% of global supply.⁷ Of the estimated 380 mt. of heroin produced in Afghanistan, 95 mt. is transported through Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to Russian Federation and Europe.⁸ “Although, Turkmenistan is relatively free from the problem of Islamic fundamentalism, its geographical location facilitates an easy transportation of arms and narcotics from Afghanistan to other CIS countries.”⁹

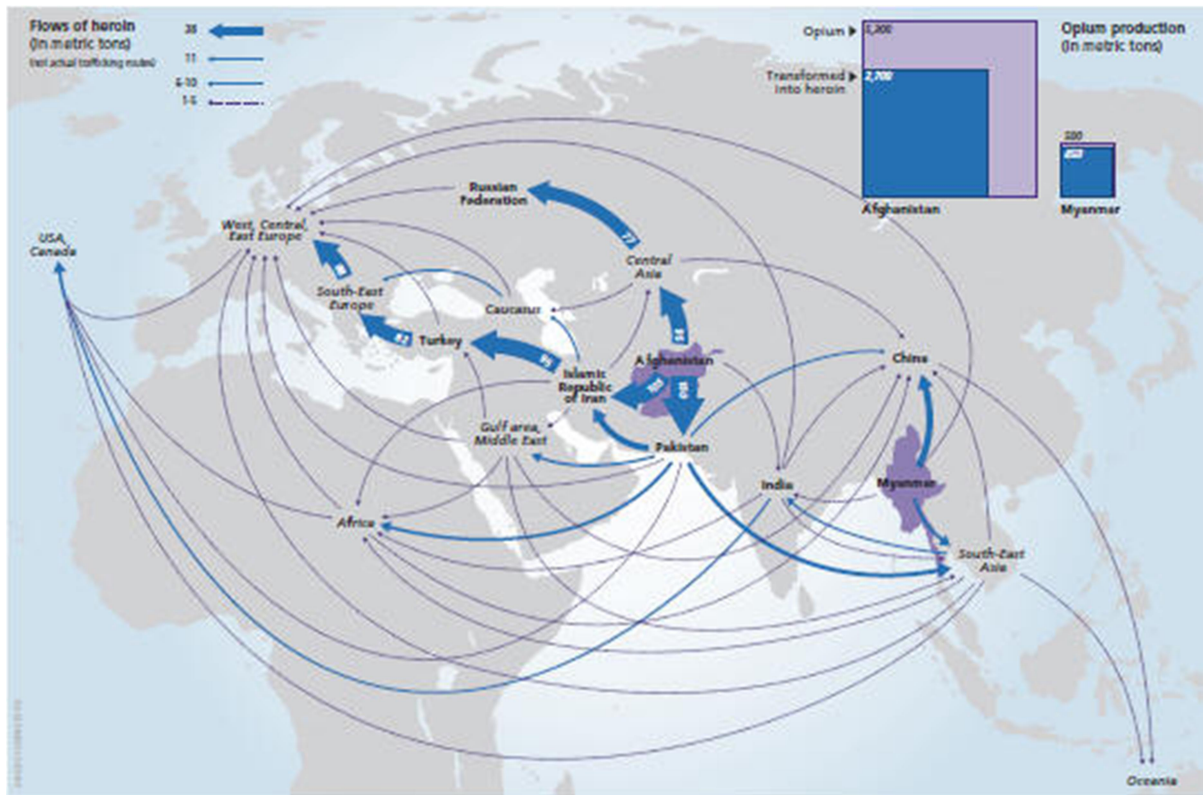
⁶ The reactions varied based on specific circumstances and priorities of each country. Protests in Zhanaozen, Kazakhstan over gas prices, and protest related to parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020 and April 2021. Post protest over the price rise in Kazakhstan, President Tokayev proposed political reforms that required amending one-third of the nation’s constitution. On the other hand, Uzbekistan took away the right of Karakalpaks to secede after the protests. Pravesh Kumar Gupta, “Central Asia: a look back at 2022 and projection for 2021”, Vivekanand International Foundation, January 4, 2023, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2023/january/04/central-asia-a-look-back-at-2022-and-projections-for-2023>, cited on 10/5/2023

⁷ “Drug Situation in Afghanistan 2021: Latest findings and emerging threats”, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Research Brief November 2021, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghanistan_brief_Nov_2021.pdf, cited on 3/4/2023.

⁸ (“The Global Heroin Market”, World Drug Report 2010, https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/1.2_The_global_heroin_market.pdf, p.46, Cited on 3/4/2023).

⁹ Jatin Kumar Mohanty, *Terrorism and Militancy in Central Asia*, Kalpana Publications: Delhi, 2006, p.82

It is observed that illegal narcotic production in Afghanistan has increased by 32% since the takeover by the Taliban in August 2021.¹⁰ Earlier, even the US led military presence in Afghanistan was unable to check the production of opium and heroin.



Source: UNDO World Drug Report 2010, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/index.html>, cited on 4/6/2023.

It is suspected “that the Central Asian governments, to some extent, control the narcotic trade and trafficking. It is admitted by a few officials that the Western taciturn is the result of a political trade-off as no one wants to risk alienating the governments on the issue of narcotic corruption because the cooperation of the authoritarian regimes is important for preventing Islamic militants from using the Tajik-Afghan or Tajik-Uzbek border as sanctuary.”¹¹ Also, it is speculated by a number of writers that United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was indirectly involved in drug trafficking as Ahmed Wali Karzai, brother of the then President Hamid Karzai, allegedly involved in opium trafficking in the Middle East, was on the payroll of the CIA.¹²

There are various reports that suggest a link between narcotics and terrorism, though this remains

¹⁰ “Opium Cultivation in Afghanistan”, UNODC Research Brief November 2022, p.3, https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/Opium_cultivation_Afghanistan_2022.pdf, Cited on 3/4/2023

¹¹ See footnote 3

¹² JoAnne Allen and Adam Entous, “Karzai’s brother said to be on CIA payroll”, Reuters, October 28, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-usa-cia-idUKTRE59R07T20091028>, Cited on 3/4/2023

unconfirmed so far¹³. Nevertheless, there have been many instances where arms and drugs have been recovered from the travellers in Central Asia. Also, it has been observed that sometimes drugs and weapons are used as money transfer by the extremist groups of the region and is part of organised criminal networks with the collaboration of government officials.

Numerous steps have been taken to contain and put an end to drug trafficking in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The governments are also collaborating through various regional organisations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to combat drugs and arms trafficking. Some of the steps taken include: strengthening border controls, improved surveillance systems, and conducting joint border patrols to intercept illegal drugs and arms shipments. Apart from this, the countries are provided with international assistance to enhance border security. Under United Nations Official Document System (UNODS), the regional efforts to check drugs include: first, Paris Pact Initiative (PPI)¹⁴ in which more than 55 countries and international organisations subscribed to the principle of shared responsibility in the fight against opiates trafficking from Afghanistan. Second, the Rainbow Strategy (RS)¹⁵ consisting of several operational plans with each plan addressing key targets, allowing for constructive engagement with prime regional actors, facilitating and supplementing interventions from national government and other Paris Pact partners. Third, the Central Asian Regional and Information Coordination Centre (CARICC)¹⁶ that aims to facilitate information and intelligence exchange and analysis, and to assist in the coordination of operational activities of the various law enforcement agencies in the region including police, drug control agencies, customs, border guards and special services and thereby improve effectiveness in countering drug trafficking.

The fight against narcotics and arms smuggling remains unsuccessful due to limited funds, lack of trained personnel, and unresponsive policies. Additionally, economic hardship, addiction, corruption, lucrative revenue from drug trade and proximity to Afghanistan is slowly turning Central Asia into narcotic trafficking conduit. Transnational complex networks are taking advantage of weak law enforcement coordination and differing legal systems hence pose challenges to law enforcement agencies and governance structures in the region. Also, the demand and market force; geographical challenges due to remote terrains and unguarded and porous borders; and evolving tactics of the traffickers to evade law enforcement measures keeps the fight against drugs and arms trafficking strenuous. The unavailability of prescribed drugs in medical clinics and treatment centres accepting substitution therapy involving narcotics keeps the drugs trade thriving.

Combating drugs and arms trafficking requires multi-dimensional approach that will include law enforcement agencies and regional and international collaboration and cooperation. There is a need

¹³ “Drug trafficking and the financing of terrorism”, UNODC, November 21, 2022, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/drug-trafficking-and-the-financing-of-terrorism.html>, Cited on 3/4/2023

¹⁴ For details see “Paris Pact Agreement”, United Nations, 2015, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf, cited on 5/3/2023

¹⁵ “Rainbow Strategy: A Regional Solution to a National Challenge”, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, November 2008, https://www.unodc.org/documents/regional/central-asia/Rainbow%20Strategy%20Folder_vers.2_WEB.pdf, cited on 4/6/2023

¹⁶ For details visit CARICC website, <https://caricc.org/index.php/en/caricc/about-caricc/about-centre>

for socio-economic development and preventative measures to reduce drug demand and associate criminal activities and arms trafficking like: raising awareness about drugs and arms trafficking through campaigns and education; involvement of citizens (especially mothers) in the fight against drugs; strengthening border security; improving legislative framework; national and regional intelligence development and sharing information; implementing robust anti-money laundering measures; diversification of economy that will create employment opportunities; and strengthening medical facilities, rehabilitation programs and treatment centres.

Chemical, Biological and Nuclear Material Availability

Under the Soviet, all the Central Asian countries played an important role in the development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The region possessed some elements of WMD production complex like plutonium production, uranium mining, fabrication and testing of biological and chemical weapons, and storage and testing of nuclear weapons.

Concerns remain regarding the security and potential illicit trafficking of nuclear materials, particularly in countries with less robust security and control mechanism. Access to the chemical, biological and nuclear materials including pathogens, toxins and chemical precursors, used for all kinds of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) makes the region a hotspot, as terrorists are determined to buy, steal and build a nuclear weapon. Having Afghanistan and Pakistan, regarded as the epicentre of terrorism, as neighbours adds to the concerns particularly when there is weak governance, economic hardships, porous borders, weak border controls, and limited resources for monitoring. Securing such materials heightens the risk of their unauthorised acquisition, trafficking or leakage of critical information on the manufacturing of WMD. However, there have been no confirmed reports regarding the illegal trafficking of fissile material from or through Central Asia.

The main challenge for the Central Asian states regarding the availability of nuclear, biological and chemical material is: lack of comprehensive inventory information makes it impossible to determine how many potentially dangerous radiation sources are in each country and how many are currently unaccounted for.¹⁷

At the international level, there has been effort by the United Nations and the International Energy Agency, to enhance nuclear security, non-proliferation measures, and the control of chemical and biological materials to ensure regional and international security. However, there is still a need for national and regional level strategies required to deal with the security threats arising from the chemical, biological and nuclear material availability in Central Asia.

Social Volatility

The issue of social instability in Central Asia can have a wide-ranging impact on the region. First, the problem of mass migration due to lack of economic opportunities has led to demographic imbalance. Many young men are migrating from rural areas to urban cities as well as to Russia and other

¹⁷ Laura S.H.Holgate and Anton Khlopkov, “Sustainable Security of Radioactive Sources in Central Asia”, Nuclear Threat Initiative and Centre for Energy and Security Studies, December 2018, https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Central_Asia_Report_Dec_2018_English.pdf, Cited on 2023

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries for economic opportunities. At the same time, there is migration of refugees within these states and from Afghanistan, which has become a serious challenge for the CARs. There is also deteriorating urban settlements caused by a decline in economic activities. Additionally, low wages; unemployment; unequal distribution of higher education across the region; dismal working conditions and absence of social securities is responsible for fragile social environment.

Other social challenges engulfing Central Asia are: First, education empowers and liberates people. There is deteriorating education, literacy, qualified and skilled people in Central Asia. Investment and updating of content and delivery of education, teaching, training and skill development requires urgent attention. There is also a need for investment in Research and Development. Inadequate investment in research and developmental projects has not only led to economic stagnation but also decline in competitiveness, brain drain and limited advancement in technologies. Second, health care is underdeveloped both in terms of infrastructure and skilled human capital. Third, though freedom of press is officially guaranteed by the governments, independent press remains restricted. Print and Internet content is censored by the government hence, the national narrative is influenced by the ruling elites. Authoritarian rule, political repression and human rights concerns are challenges that represent dismal democratic functioning in Central Asia. Fifth, institutionalised corruption, non-professionalism and withdrawal of the state from social obligation and nepotism have led to a lower quality of life, ethnic and religious tensions, and security threats from terrorism, extremism and organised crime. These issues keep the socio-political and economic security of the region fragile.

“Central Asian states still struggle to provide basic services—from essentials like clean water and quality healthcare to more complex social welfare programs, disaster response, and emergency management systems that can improve or even save lives... Indifferent attitudes toward citizens and ham-fisted efforts to squelch dissent are widening the gap between governments and the governed. As a result, grassroots social activism is on the rise.”¹⁸

Overcoming delicate social fabric of a nation requires a comprehensive approach. While there is no one size that fits all, some general strategies that can help nation address challenges faced by social institution will requires encouraging inclusive governance; investing in education and skill development; implementing social safety nets to support the vulnerable like providing healthcare, social assistance, and unemployment benefits; promoting and providing safe space for interethnic and interreligious dialogues and discussion; upholding human rights, promoting rule of law, combating corruption, strengthening justice system; and reducing the socioeconomic gap. Engaging with regional and international organisations and institutions can provide valuable support by sharing best practices, and exchanging knowledge and training in areas such as governance, economic development and security will encourage strong, stable and just society.

Environmental Challenges

Central Asia has unique and diverse ecosystems. “CA countries rank among the most vulnerable to climate change in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.”¹⁹ Scarce water²⁰, reduced water quality,

¹⁸ Paul Stonski and Russell Zanca, “Societal Change Afoot in Central Asia”, Carnegie Endowment, 18/10/2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/18/societal-change-afoot-in-central-asia-pub-80086>, cited on 4/4/2023

¹⁹ *The World Bank in Central Asia*, The World Bank: IBRD-IDA, February 2, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/central-asia>, cited on 3/4/2023

rise in salinity, wind and water erosion, deforestation, decrease productivity of arable land, nuclear contamination, over grazing, habitat destruction, illegal wildlife trade, invasive species, decline in biodiversity pose one of the major environmental security threats and is responsible for severe ecological consequence. Additionally, industrial pollution, burning of coal, and leaks from oil and gas pipelines contributes to air and land pollution-related health issues, environmental degradation and global climate change.

Salinity in the Khwarizm region of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan due to inefficient agricultural irrigation and cattle grazing practices, and drying out of the Aral Sea and the Balakash lake has triggered the decline in industrial output and shortage of food in some states. The rise in temperature due to global warming is causing glacial retreat in the region risking availability of water resources as glaciers act as natural water storage. The scarcity of usable water has also led to tensions among regional countries. Natural disasters like floods, droughts, dust, and salt storms, and pollution levels are adversely affecting the environment. Other causes effecting the environment of the region and posing serious challenge to food security are inefficient irrigation systems, poor crop rotation and intercropping, low efficiency, desertification of land, and non-adaptability to changing climate conditions.

Additionally, inefficient water management, outdated infrastructure for wastewater treatment and solid waste management needs renovation and upgradation. Also, there is poor monitoring, compliance and enforcement for pollution: air, water and soil. Lack of environmental regulations and enforcement has led to pollution crisis. In 2007, during my stay in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, I witnessed that on the rainy days, the water from the taps was brown, i.e., full of mud. It could not be used for household purposes. The situation is not much different today.

Although, the governments of Central Asia recognise the significance of environmental challenges and have taken steps to overcome it that include: first, establishing institutions and frameworks for water management cooperations like International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS)²¹, Interstate Commission on Water Coordination (ICWC)²², Interstate Agreement on Water and Energy Use in the Syr Darya²³, Regional Environmental Action Plan (1990-2001)²⁴, International Water and Energy Consortium (2004), and Central Asian Countries Initiative on Land Management²⁵.

²⁰ The major Rivers of Central Asia are Syr Darya and Amu Darya are dependent of glacial meltwater, hence, effected by climate change.

²¹ “International fund for saving Aral Sea”, Interstate Commission for Water Coordination, January 4, 1993 cited on 22/5/2023

²² Most of the regional/ interstate arrangements suffer lack of financial commitment from the member states (“The institutional, financial and organisational arrangements for water management in Central Asia”, Draft Consultancy Report, International Water Management Institute, 2000, <https://www.iwmi.cgiar.org/publications/other-publication-types/conference-papers/>, cited on 1/6/2023

²³ For details on the Agreements between the CA countries “Agreements on Syrdarya river basin”, CAwater-info.net, http://www.cawater-info.net/syrdarya-knowledge-base/agreements_e.htm, cited on 22/5/2023

²⁴ “National Environmental Action Plan (1998-2001)”, Global Environment Facility, https://www.thegef.org/sites/default/files/ncsa-documents/National_Environment_%26_Health_Action_Plan_cover_merged.pdf, cited on 22/5/2023

²⁵ Other organizations involved in regional environmental issues include the Central Asian Mountain Information Network, the Central Asian Regional Environmental Center, and the Central Asian Hydro-

Second, the governments of Central Asia are also implementing programs to promote sustainable agriculture and land management like adopting crop diversification and irrigation techniques and reforestation and afforestation. Third, the governments are increasing their focus on renewable energy development to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels²⁶ particularly in fuel rich economies (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Fourth, to increase the awareness about environmental challenges and the importance of sustainable development, the governments of Central Asia are promoting environmental education in schools, engaging with the civil society organisations and communities in environmental conservation and management, and are conducting public campaigns. Finally, the governments of Central Asia are also enacting environmental legislation and regulations to protect natural resources²⁷.

The efforts of the governments at the national and regional level are commendable. However, much work needs to be done. For example: Sign a Central Asian Water Pact to regulate the division of transborder water resources;²⁸ support research and innovation to develop sustainable solution to environmental challenges; promote joint regional management of shared resources; engage local communities in conservation efforts; develop eco-tourism; sustainable land and water management practices; invest in renewable energy; and give tax incentives for renewable energy producers and consumers.

Terrorism and Extremism

“Although, Islam is the predominant religion practiced in the region, it has failed to become a unifying ethnic identity for the Central Asians. The long experience of moderate Islam during the Soviet period and the fear among Central Asians that Islamic identity may erode the prevalent territorial integrity, has made them conscious and sensitive towards their religious identity.”²⁹ Nevertheless, with the disappearance of the pressure to contain Islamic faith, the space for

meteorological Scientific Research Institute. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization also includes environmental matters. (Xuar, Urumqi, “Regional Cooperation on Environment”, Central Asian Republic Economic Cooperation, Senior Officials Meeting on Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation 28-29 August, 2006, p. 2, <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/Regional-Cooperation-on-Environment.pdf>, cited on 1/6/2023)

²⁶ “Hydropower is currently the largest source of renewable energy in the CAREC region with more than 380 gigawatts (GW) of installed generation capacity as of 2019, including PRC. Indeed, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Georgia mostly rely on hydropower for electricity.... Yet, wind and solar are also shaping up to be viable investments, with development costs dropping by over 80% and 35%, respectively, since 2010. Currently, wind and solar energy comprise only 6% of installed capacity in the region.... The CAREC region (excluding the PRC) needs around \$340 billion in energy investments.” “Five Things to Know About the Future of Energy in Central Asia”, Asian Development Bank, 12 January 2023, <https://www.adb.org/news/features/five-things-know-about-future-energy-central-asia#:~:text=Hydropower%20is%20currently%20the%20largest,rely%20on%20hydropower%20for%20electricity.>, cited on 1/6/23

²⁷ For details please refer to Irina Krasnova, Dinara Ziganshina and Bakhtiyor R. Mukhammadiev, “Environmental Law Russia and Central Asia”, Berkshire Encyclopaedia of Sustainability, September 12, 2010, http://www.cawater-info.net/library/eng/krasnova-ziganshina-mukhammadiev_e.pdf, cited on 1/6/2023

²⁸ Iskandar Abdullaev, “Water management policies of Central Asian Countries: Integration or disintegration?”, International Water Management Institute, P.13, <https://publications.iwmi.org/pdf/H035769.pdf>, cited on 1/6/2023

²⁹ See foot note 3

rediscovering Islamic identity found deep roots in Central Asia. This is reflected in the fact that soon after their independence, there is a rise in the number of mosques and madrasas and for the first-time political party based on religion (Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan [IRPT], based on moderate Islam) was formed. The number of Quran sold increased manyfold. In fact, Quran sellers can be seen on the pavements after every few kilometres in some parts of Central Asia. Apart from this, Mujaddidiya, Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HBT) movements and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) represent the most active and prominent radical Islamist groups. The consolidation and establishment of religion as a political and socio-cultural fabric of Central Asia happened due to political instability, weak governance and authoritarian regimes. The exclusivist and autocratic political system along with economic disparity, unemployment poverty, corruption, human rights abuse and a sense of marginalisation can be easily exploited by extremist groups and transnational extremist networks to recruit discontented individuals who may resort to violence as a means to expressing their frustration or provide these individuals with a sense of purpose, identity and empowerment. Nevertheless, the influence of Islam among the dominant political elites remains confined to the remote and mountainous parts of the region.

There is a strong undertone among the political elites of all the five countries that the Islamist forces are contrary to progress of a nation. In order to contain dominant Islamic identity, all the governments are working towards rediscovering their pre-Islamic identity and are rewriting history through myths and symbols to re-invent new identities. For example, Tajikistan's President is promoting Persian, Ismail Shamani Zoroastrian identity; Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are promoting Amir Timurs and Manas, respectively, as their national heroes. In Turkmenistan, President Saparmurat Niyazov's book *Ruhnama*, devoted to the history and culture of Turkmen people, has gone furthest by acquiring the official status of the principal 'spiritual' book of the nation, second only to the Quran. The book is compulsory in all Turkmenistan's schools and universities and is regularly cited in the press and in inscriptions on monuments (including mosques). Niyazov has created a personality cult of the Turkembashi. Kazakhstan's regime is promoting Kazakh language and cultural identity and "emphasising the local narratives and record of tribal affiliations and genealogies".³⁰ Simultaneously, there is a continuous struggle taking place between religion and identity amongst the political elites. This is reflective of the fact that some of the leaders are slowly moving back to their Islamic names distinct from their Sovietised or Russianised influence.³¹

However, ideological vacuum; government's policy of using threat from radical Islamists as a pretext to eliminate internal opposition; open borders with Afghanistan; and anti-American sentiment since the US-led operation in Afghanistan and Iraq, has raised radical Islamist sentiments. In addition, threat of now-veteran Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters returning "throughout Central Asia and the rise of extremist groups in the Fergana Valley connecting Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan present an immediate regional security threat that cannot be ignored."³² In fact, for two

³⁰ Anna Genina, *Claiming Ancestral Homelands: Mongolian Kazakh migration in Inner Asia*, PhD Dissertation, The University of Michigan, 2015, https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/111536/anngen_1.pdf;sequence=1, Cited on 5/4/2023

³¹ For example, Tajikistan President Emomali Rahmon, First Deputy Prime Minister Davlatalu Said, Deputy Prime Minister Azim Ibrohim and many other ministers in Cabinet of Ministers of Tajikistan have dropped the Russian suffix from their names.

³² See footnote 3

decades the IMU has carried out attacks aimed at overthrowing Uzbek government. Since the invasion of Afghanistan, IMU was weakened due to US military action that included cutting off the supply and resources and killing of its leader Juma Namangani. Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), having its base in Kyrgyzstan and its members are ethnic Uzbeks, seeks to establish Caliphate in Central Asia.³³

In 2015, Tajikistan's moderates under IRPT, one of the leading oppositions during the civil war of Tajikistan, was banned and declared a terrorist organisation after it lost the elections. It is likely that elimination of IRPT might give rise to extremist forces or the underground party may get radicalised. Tajik President is making efforts to eliminate visible display of Islam. The repression and interference in personal choices could push Tajiks on to a risky path as they had a recent history of civil war where the opposition under the banner of Islamists fought against the government. Although, there are no reports of spread of extremism amongst Turkmen, there is sufficient evidence that migrant Turkmen workers in Türkiye have joined insurgencies in Syria and Iraq. Also, the Turkmen-Afghan border remains a cause of perceived security concern arising due to infiltration of radical extremist ideology.

Additionally, the withdrawal of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops from Afghanistan has created a security vacuum. This has given a chance to the terrorist groups like, ISIS and Al-Qaeda to regain strength. Also, Pakistani *Zarb-e-Azb*, operation close to the Afghan border to disseminate the militants into the Central Asian region, works towards the cause of militancy in the name of religion. The withdrawal of ISAF has also led to an influx of Afghan refugees seeking asylum in Central Asia, threatening socio-economic challenges and affecting security and stability. Furthermore, the withdrawal of US forces may reshape regional power dynamics where China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan and Türkiye may seek to increase their influence in Central Asia and in Afghanistan. It is important for the Central Asian countries to not only monitor the evolving security situation in Afghanistan, stemming from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan but also maintain strong regional ties in order to effectively address the potential security challenges stemming from Afghanistan.

Many terrorist organisations are using online gaming, social networking sites and other online platforms to indoctrinate, recruit and disseminate radical ideology. It can be contained by promoting digital literacy and critical thinking, monitoring and regulating online platforms, and engage with religious leaders and promote religious tolerance and dialogue. It is also important to create job opportunities for the youth and invest in economic, social, education and skill development programs. This will require an inclusive rounded approach by government, NGOs and individuals to identify and counter extremist ideologies. Border security and management and intelligence sharing and

cooperation among security agencies nationally and regionally will prevent easy movement of terrorist and illicit activities.

³³ Country Report on Terrorism 2018, United States Department of State Publication, Section 2656f (the "Act"), October 2019, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2018-FINAL.pdf>, cited on 25/8/2023, Viktoria Akchurina, Anita Lavorgna, "Islamist Movements in the Ferghana Valley: a new threat assessment approach", *Global Crime*, Vol.15 Issue: 3-4, NCJ No. 248322, August-November 2014, Shawn Snow, "ISIS looks for foothold in Central Asia", *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/01/isis-looks-for-foothold-in-central-asia/>, cited on 24/5/2023, Thomas M.Sanderson, "From the Ferghana Valley to Syria and beyond: a brief history of Central Asian foreign fighters", January 5, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ferghana-valley-syria-and-beyond-brief-history-central-asian-foreign-fighters>, cited on 24/5/2023,

Although, not in the near future, regional factors can convert the economically, politically and socially fragile and autocratic nations into Afghan style anarchies principally due to clan-based politics and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's active peddling of a Wahabi brand of pan-Islamic identity.

To conclude, it is important to note that the goals, priorities, challenges and aspiration of each country in Central Asia may differ. Nevertheless, there are several common areas that the Central Asian countries could consider focusing on. Some potential aspects for the region are: CARs will have to walk a tight rope with regard to its economic and developmental policies and environmentally destructive investment patterns and activities post- COVID and Russian-Ukraine crises. Also, the region will have to balance between international pressures of establishing democratic institutions and their traditional clan-based structures. Apart from this, in the short run, the recovery policies should focus on being inclusive and resilient to environment and biodiversity; establish robust energy and water security in the context of changing global environment; diversify economies by promoting sectors like agriculture, manufacturing, technology, and tourism; enhance transportation networks to facilitate trade and investment; strengthen quality education system; prioritise social developmental goals such as poverty reduction, healthcare, gender equality and social inclusion; for good governance and rule of law, the governments should work towards building inclusive transparent institutions that will build trust between government and its citizens; develop strategies for migration; institutionalise strong national and regional economic and security institutions; and balance involvement of international actors.

Section-2

International Actors

In international security paradigm, the state aspires towards peace, order and lawfulness within the society of states³⁴ and maintains balance of power, diplomatic advantage, and expands economic, cultural and military influence.

Central Asia, as a strategically important region, attracts the attention and involvement of various international actors. The influence and engagement of these international actors can vary over time and depends on changing geopolitical dynamics, economic opportunities, and regional security concerns. Central Asian countries often pursue a multi-vector foreign policy approach, engaging with multiple international actors to balance their interests and maximise benefits for their own development.

Russia's Hold on Central Asia

For decades, Central Asia was controlled from Moscow, hence, post-independence, command, presence and influence of Kremlin continued on the political, economic and cultural aspects of Central Asia. Russia has done so by using international organisations like Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Although, with time, Moscow's efforts to maintain its leading position among competing powers have weakened, Russia will remain important for Central Asia as the most lucrative destination of migrants, transit route for goods, political relationship and security cooperation. The Central Asian countries still seek Russia's support to maintain security under CSTO. For example, in January 2022, the CSTO troops were sent to Kazakhstan to control the protests that had erupted all across the country against the government over price rise.³⁵ Earlier, CSTO held a military drill across porous Afghanistan borders after Taliban takeover. While Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were part of the exercise, Kyrgyzstan refused to join the exercise, called "Indestructible Brotherhood-2022".³⁶ Russia plays a crucial role to reduce internal turmoil in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through its military bases in these countries.

There is a dominant belief in the West that with time, Central Asian countries are slowly coming out of the clutches of the historical dominance of Kremlin. Some of the examples to support it are: CARs

³⁴ J.Kackson- Preece, "Security in international relations", United Kingdom: University of London, 2011, <https://www.london.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/ir3140-security-international-relations-study-guide.pdf>, cited on 30/4/2023

³⁵ Seema Guha, "Russian troops restored order in Kazakhstan; will there be peace now?" *The Outlook*, January 16, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/international/explainer-russian-troops-restored-order-in-kazakhstan-will-there-be-peace-now--news-31657>, cited on 22/4/2023

³⁶ Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan cancels CSTO 'indestructible brotherhood' military exercise", *The Diplomat*, October 10, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/kyrgyzstan-cancels-csto-indestructible-brotherhood-military-exercises/>, cited on 22/4/2023

are rediscovering their past identities; restricting Russian lessons in classes; pulling down the statues of Lenin and renaming streets. Additionally, there were reports that the CAR's are likely to seek new security arrangement due to Russian involvement in Ukraine creating uncertainty among the Central Asians about Moscow's commitment towards security of the region because of the fears of the revival of terrorist sleeper cells and the rise of Taliban.

The governments of Central Asia have remained neutral and have not supported Russia in its war with Ukraine. In fact, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan recognised Ukraine's territorial integrity and promised humanitarian aid to Ukraine. The leaders of Central Asia are controlling media reports and hence strong public opinion in order to maintain a neutral position and not spoil economic and political relations with either the West or Moscow. Moscow has not demanded unswerving allegiance by the leaders of the region and has shown no commitment to compensate the region in case of breaking away with the West. Moscow can neither afford to lose already shrinking friends by pressuring the region to openly support Russia (this is in continuation of their stand on Georgia or Crimea in 2014 and 2008) nor afford to divert its resources to Central Asia. The war and subsequent international response have weakened Moscow's standing regionally and internationally. It is visible in international forums and dealing with other nations. In a video circulated on YouTube, President Emomali Rahmon was seen complaining to Russian President Vladimir Putin about his lack of respect and attention to the countries of Central Asia. The video also shows the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan looking on silently.³⁷

Nevertheless, not supporting Moscow's war or trying to adhere to the sanctions on Russia does not reflect CARs deepening their relations or succumbing to the Western pressure but reflects their commitment towards multi-vector foreign policy and national interest. On the resolution to remove Russia from the UN Human Rights Council, the CA countries voted in favour of Russia.³⁸ While on the UN Resolution ES 11/4 declaring Russia's so-called referendum in Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia Oblast and the subsequent attempt to annex as invalid and illegal under international law, the Central Asian countries abstained.³⁹ In fact, the trade between Russia and Central Asia has increased manifold since the start of the war. Russian President Vladimir Putin, his officials, and Russian businessmen have visited the region many times since the beginning of the war. According to Garret Mitchell, Russia will continue to enjoy a privileged position, taking into account the importance of foreign remittances, language, fuel transfers, pipeline networks and security contacts.⁴⁰

The Russia-Ukraine war, and Western sanctions have affected the Rubel hence the remittances, transfer of technology and equipment, and disrupting the trade routes connecting Europe and Central

³⁷ "Tajik President's demand for 'respect' from Putin viewed millions of times on YouTube", Radio Free Europe RadioLiberty, October 15, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-russia-rahmon-youtube-2respect/32084773.html>, Cited on 7/5/2023

³⁸ "US suspends Russia from human rights body: how your country voted", Aljazeera, April 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted>, cited on 7/5/2023

³⁹ "ES-11/4. Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations", United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/ES-11/4, October 13, 2022

⁴⁰ Garret Mitchell, "China in Central Asia: the Beginning of the end for Russia?", SLOVO, 2014, Volume 26, No.1

Asia has led to increase in the time and distance taken for trade. Russia is looking for migrant workers from Central Asia due to the exodus of Russians and recruitment in the Russian forces and hence labour shortages resulting from war. “The war has caused significant changes in the regional trade patterns. Direct exports from Western democracies to Russia have dropped dramatically. We saw the emergence of intermediated trade – an increase in Western exports to Central Asian and the Caucasus countries accompanied by an increase in exports from these countries to Russia. This intermediated trade, however, is only a fraction of what was previously exported to Russia directly. This situation created an opening for other suppliers, such as Türkiye and China, both of which have substantially increased their sales to Russia,” explained Beata Javorcik, the EBRD’s Chief Economist, and one of the new paper’s authors.⁴¹

China’s Economic Clout

The stage for Xi Jinping’s era of “China’s Dream”⁴² was set by Hu Jintao’s policy of the “New Historic Mission” that followed aggressive international diplomacy and accelerated military modernisation program to defend China’s expanding overseas interests.⁴³ In his 2017 speech to the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, President Xi offered, “a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence.”⁴⁴

According to historical and visual artist Dr. Tong Lam, “The ‘aggressive expansionism’ of China in the markets across the world is because of their strong aspiration to have power, wealth, and to catch up with the West in the race to dominate the world”.⁴⁵ China maintains a multilateral approach in the region. President Deng Xiaoping instituted “Beijing Consensus”⁴⁶ also known as the Chinese Economic Model, which comprises the political and economic policies of the People’s Republic of

⁴¹ Anton Usov, “EBRD analyses trade flows between Russia, Caucasus and Central Asia”, *EBRD*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.ebrd.com/news/2023/ebrd-analyses-trade-flows-between-russia-caucasus-and-central-asia.html>, cited on 21/5/2023

⁴² Graham Allison, “What Xi Jinping wants”, *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/>, cited on 2/5/2023

⁴³ Daniel M.Hartnett, “The ‘new historic mission’: reflections on Hu Jintao’s military legacy”, in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai and Travis Tanner, *Assessing the People’s Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era*, Strategic Studies Institute: US Army College, April 1, 2014, pp.31-80, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA599540.pdf>, cited on 5/5/2023

⁴⁴ Xi Jinping, “Full text of Xi Jinping’s report at 19th CPC National Congress”, *China Daily*, October 18, 2017, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm, Cited on 13/4/2023

⁴⁵ “China aggressively expanding to catch up with the West”, *The Economic Times*, August 9, 2014, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-aggressively-expanding-to-catch-up-with-west/articleshow/39941462.cms?from=mdr>, cited on 3/6/2023

⁴⁶ The Beijing Consensus uses China as an alternative model for development in the Third World, and serves as a bellwether to the future of Western dominated development priorities. (Dustin R.Turin, “The Beijing Consensus: China’s Alternative Development Model”, *Inquiries*, Vol.2 No.1, 2010, <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/134/the-beijing-consensus-chinas-alternative-development-model>, cited on 8/5/2023)

China (PRC). Beijing's interests and engagement in Central Asia are primarily driven by a massive infrastructure development project aimed at enhancing trade and energy cooperation, securing access to natural resources, connectivity across Asia, Europe and Africa and maintain stability to protect its interests. A point that is often mentioned in this context is "the aspiration to pacify the restive northwest region of Xinjiang (officially the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region) constitutes key factor that defines Chinese engagement with and presence in Central Asia."⁴⁷ Hence, China is investing heavily in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that includes construction of roads, railways and pipelines. BRI passing through Central Asia, connects China with Europe. For Central Asia, being landlocked, road transportation is the backbone for economy as it establishes easy contact between farms, fields, factories and market. It also provides door to door services and carries passengers and goods for short and medium distance. Beijing, with its BRI has filled in the economic and connectivity gap.

China has access to Central Asia's energy and strategic minerals such as uranium, copper and gold and has flooded the markets with "Made in China" products. The complementary economies of China and CARs and regional cooperation institutions, like SCO and China + C5, has helped China promote international economic trade and exchange and transnational investment. China plays a leading role in these organisations, established with a purpose of fostering political, economic and security cooperation.

Despite the initial years of tense relations between China and Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan on border demarcation⁴⁸, China's relations with the CARs have witnessed an impressive growth over the last three decades. According to official Chinese government data, in 2022, China's trade with Central Asia totalled \$70.2 billion, an increase of approximately 40 per cent as compared to 2021 and 100 times the level of trade directly following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, when the newly-independent Central Asian nations officially established diplomatic relations with China.⁴⁹

The overcapacity of production, aging population, slowdown in economic growth, and rising labour cost within China, gave opportunity for the development of China's foreign direct investment.⁵⁰ Beijing also wants to develop its western Xinjiang region and bring stability, prevent spread of terrorism and West sponsored Colour Revolution⁵¹ in the region including Central Asia. In 2022, China's actual use of foreign capital reached RMB 1.2 trillion, up 6.3 percent from the previous year.

⁴⁷ Malika Tukmadiyev, "Xinjiang in China's foreign policy towards Central Asia", *Connection: The Quarterly Journal*, Volume 12, No.3, July 1, 2013, The Partnership for Peace Consortium: United States, p.87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26326333>, cited on 22/7/2023

⁴⁸ The border issues between CARs and China were resolved under "Shanghai Five" framework and the SCO keeping these agreements guarantee.

⁴⁹ "China-Central Asia: a new paradigm of cooperation", *Orient.tm*, February 16,2023, cited on 7/5/2023

⁵⁰ "China records steady FDI Growth in 2022", *China Brief*, January 20, 2023, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-records-steady-fdi-growth-in-2022/#:~:text=FDI%20inflows%20in%202022,growth%20rate%20of%208%20percent.>, cited on 8/5/2023

⁵¹ A. Y. Battamo, O. Varis, P. Sun, Y. Yang, B. T. Oba, and L. Zhao, "Mapping socio-ecological resilience along the seven economic corridors of the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 309, article 127341, 2021.

In US dollar terms, it reached US\$189.13 billion, a year-on-year growth rate of 8 per cent.⁵² Thus, China has emerged as the region’s dominant trading partner and investor. But Russia will continue to play a substantial role in the region due to its deep energy, cultural, political and military bonds.

China’s Role as Central Asia’s Most Important Trading Partner						
Central Asia countries	Importing from China			Exporting to China		
	China’s ranking as a trading partner	Trade volume (US\$ million)	Share in the country’s total imports	China’s ranking as a trading partner	Trade volume (US\$ million)	Share in the country’s total exports
 Kazakhstan	2	6,537	17.0%	2	7,823	13.6%
 Kyrgyzstan	1	1,733	35.4%	6	81	4.1%
 Tajikistan	3	605	18.2%	5	55.4	5.0%
 Turkmenistan	3	431	14.3%	1	8,686	80.2%
 Uzbekistan	1	5,052	23.1%	3	1,768	12.3%

Source: “China and Central Asia: Bilateral Trade Relationships and Future Outlook”, *China Briefing*, May 20, 2021, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-central-asia-bilateral-trade-relationships-and-future-outlook/>, cited on 24/5/2023

The commanding Chinese investment, production and transportation of goods and services, otherwise regarded as “soft power” influences, has triggered nationalist anger among the Central Asians at Beijing because of latter’s attitude and approach as Neo-imperialist and a hegemon. There appears to be widespread anxiety among the citizens with respect to China’s rapidly expanding footprint in the economic, social, political, strategic, cultural and military fields of these countries.⁵³ It has also raised

⁵² Colour Revolutions are a series of protest, largely “inspired by” democratic sentiments, in Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, Abkhazia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Moldova. They were called Colour Revolutions as they were inspired and financed by foreign countries and organisations like George Soros’ Open Society Foundations. Michael McFaul identified seven stages of successful political revolutions common in Colour Revolutions. They are: A semi-autocratic rather than fully autocratic regime; secondly, an unpopular incumbent; thirdly, a united and organised opposition; fourthly, an ability to quickly drive home the point that voting results were falsified; fifthly, enough independent media to inform citizens about the falsified vote; sixthly, a political opposition capable of mobilising tens of thousands or more demonstrators to protest electoral fraud; seventhly, divisions among the regime’s coercive forces. (Sally Cummings (ed.), *Domestic and International Perspectives on Kyrgyzstan’s ‘Tulip Revolution*, Routledge: United Kingdom, 2013, ISBN 978131798677 and Lincoln A. Mitchell, *The Color Revolution*, University of Pennsylvania Press: USA, 2012, ISBN 978-0812207095

⁵³ Anti-Chinese protests broke out in Kazakhstan over reports of lease of land for agricultural purpose to China as Kazakh workers became aggressive over discriminatory pays. Chinese businesses were threatened in Kyrgyzstan after the Parliamentary elections in 2020. Earlier, in 2018, China came in for sustained criticism when a thermal powerplant renovated by it at the cost of US\$ 386 million suddenly stopped working during the extremely low winter temperatures. Several questions were raised including corrupt and pollutive behaviour of

concerns about potential debt dependency and loss of political autonomy.

Furthermore, China has increased its military presence in Central Asia by conducting exercises, training military professionals, exporting arms and building military infrastructure.⁵⁴ However, until recently, China has not shown its interest in playing an important role in Central Asian security matters as Beijing does not want to step on Moscow's interests but wishes to maintain economic and technological influence. A good example of that is Beijing's "silence despite the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict and the worsening of the security situation in the Gorno-Badakhshan region on the Afghanistan border – precisely where China has opened up military installations."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Beijing will be more than willing to fill in any power vacuum in the region.

Afghanistan's Interest

The five "stans", along with Afghanistan, have much in common. Afghanistan shares its natural border borders with three of the five Central Asian countries, namely, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Historically, the region has been part of various empires, that ruled both in Central Asia and Afghanistan, including Persian and Mongol empires. Afghanistan, located in the south of Central Asia, had a turbulent history of political instability, conflicts and terrorism. In 1980s, the Soviet Afghan war followed by Taliban regime in 1990s, the US-led invasion of 2001 resulted in the removal of Taliban. Taliban re-established itself after the withdrawal of the US forces.

Afghanistan has historical, cultural and economic interests in Central Asia. Kabul seeks to enhance economic cooperation and leverage their resources, transit routes and trade corridors to promote regional integration and development through projects like Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (TAPI) gas pipeline and Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission line. Afghanistan also needs access to markets and transportation networks in the Eurasian region.

The Central Asian countries and Afghanistan have converging security concerns along their borders and issues related to drugs and arms trafficking, terrorism and extremism. CAR have been involved in various initiatives to support Afghanistan's stability and development, including: Regional economic cooperation, particularly Uzbekistan have prioritised enhancing economic cooperation with Afghanistan. Central Asian countries have signed bilateral and multilateral agreements with Afghanistan to facilitate trade and transit like CAREC for improving regional connectivity, trade facilitation and infrastructure projects, including the construction of railways, highways, and energy transmission lines that connect Afghanistan with Central Asia. These initiatives aim to promote regional trade, boost economic growth, create opportunities for the Afghan businesses, and develop economic interdependence. Second, Central Asian countries are providing humanitarian assistance to

Chinese working in the region. Ashok Sjjanhar, "China-Central Asia relations: An uneasy co-existence", *ORF*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/china-central-asia-relations-an-uneasy-co-existence/>, cited on 9/5/2023

⁵⁴ China has built a military base in Tajikistan and there are several reports that have emerged about the presence of Chinese military personnel in Tajikistan. (Ltc Andrea Zanini, "China's new military posture in Central Asia", *Near East South Asia*, April 26, 2022, https://nesa-center.org/chinas_new_military_posture_in_central_asia/, cited on 9/5/2023

⁵⁵ Yunis Sharifli, "China's dominance in Central Asia: myth of reality?", *Russia*, 19 January 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/chinas-dominance-central-asia-myth-or-reality>, cited on 30/4/2023

Afghanistan in the form of food supplies, medical aid and infrastructural rehabilitation. Third, educational and cultural exchange programs are undertaken to foster people-to-people contact and promote understanding. Third, the five “stans” are collaborating with Afghanistan on security issues including border management, counterterrorism efforts and combating drugs and arms trafficking. Regular joint military exercises, exchange of intelligence and coordinated border patrols are conducted to address shared security concerns. Finally, regional organisations like SCO and Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process, along with other regional actors are engaged in dialogue and cooperation to promote peace, stability and development in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan’s interest in Central Asia revolves around economic cooperation, regional security, cultural ties, connectivity and energy alliances. Central Asia is committed to cooperating and supporting Afghanistan with regional security, stability and progress and promoting sustainable development.

Pakistan’s Strategic Depth

Central Asia’s vicinity to Pakistan and Islamabad’s involvement in the region “is in continuation with General Zia-ul Haq’s policy of creating a 'zone of strategic depth' in Central Asia, Afghanistan and Kashmir. These policies were aimed at bringing the region under Islamabad's command and to find a gateway to Central Asia for economic, strategic and religious purposes. Islamabad has been arguing that the area stretching from Pakistan to Türkiye and from Kazakhstan to Iran and the Gulf is logically integrated and unified strategic and security region.”⁵⁶

Apart from ethno-regional and security interests in Central Asia, Islamabad is driven by the region’s energy resources, particularly natural gas and oil. Pakistan seeks to establish energy corridors to access Central Asian energy reserves. Projects like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline aim to connect Central Asian gas fields to South Asia, with Pakistan being a crucial transit country. Also, being a member of SCO and Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), Central Asia provides an opportunity to Pakistan to increase economic cooperation, trade, cultural exchange and people-to-people contact.

Most of the leaders of CARs are supportive of Pakistan on Indo-Pakistan issues in a bilateral framework due to shared religious identity. Nevertheless, the Central Asians still have close feelings towards India due to uninterrupted relationship between them during the Soviet times. In fact, the economic and cultural linkages between Central Asia and South Asia date back to the Vedic civilisation. Buddhism went to China via Central Asia and Islam was introduced to the Indian subcontinent by the Mughals, who ruled for around two centuries, came from the Fergana Valley. But Pakistan is strategically engaging in the region with the help of their long-time ally China and recently cultivated ally in Russia.

Both China and Pakistan regard each other as strategic allies. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan has deepened ties between Chinese and Pakistani militaries. Beijing is the leading conventional supplier of weapons and high-end offensive strike capabilities. China’s interest in having military and naval power in Indian Ocean establish sea route for trade from Pakistan’s Western coast aligns with the interest of Pakistan to check India, There interest in strengthen in naval wartime contingency, keeps Islamabad and Beijing politically and militarily impregnable.

There had been substantive increase in the engagement between Russia and Pakistan. At a high-level meeting in Moscow between Russia, China and Pakistan in December 2016, Islamabad became the focal point with regard to the future of Afghanistan. Some of the reasons being: Russia’s interest in

⁵⁶ See footnote No.3

using Taliban to counter Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); bringing stability in Afghanistan; containing jihadist of former Soviet republics joining ISIS; and ensuring safety and security of Russian citizens. The two countries are conducting regular joint military exercises since 2016. However, Moscow's relations with Islamabad does not have any sizeable future vis-a-vis New Delhi.

Iran's Ambition of Major Linkages

Iran and Central Asia share cultural connections, particularly through their common linguistic heritage and historical interaction.⁵⁷ The Central Asian countries, specially, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are making efforts to revive Persian language. Iran's policy towards CARs aims to build political, economic and cultural relations with opportunities to influence and cooperate. Given Iran's growing isolation, shrinking friends, and Western sanctions, Central Asia is one of the most important regions for Tehran.⁵⁸ Despite Iran's cultural, religious and civilisational linkages with the CARs, it was not able to have any significant presence in the region as the CARs feared that Tehran will pursue adventurist policy to export and establish Islamic regime. Also, the Shi'a Iran and Sunni Central Asia religious difference will keep the engagement frail.

Iran engages with the Central Asian countries individually as well as through multilateral forums, such as the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Iran serves as a transit route for Central Asian countries to access international markets, particularly through its ports on the Persian Gulf. Iran has been involved in transportation and connectivity projects, such as railway links and transport corridors, aimed at facilitating trade and transit between Central Asia, Iran and beyond. The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway link, also known as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), links Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with Iran and Persian Gulf. The INSTC provides not just an alternative to the deep-sea Suez Canal route but also gives access to India to reach Central Asia. Turkmenistan has shown interest in including the Turkembashi Port in the INSTC framework, expanding the region's transportation infrastructure.⁵⁹

India is involved in engaging with Iran on Chabahar-Zahedan railway project apart from establishing and developing Chabahar port. This route will help New Delhi bypass Pakistan to reach Central Asia, Afghanistan, Russia, and Europe via multi-modal INSTC. It has the potential to expand up to the

⁵⁷ Iran had significant cultural and political influence in Central Asia. During the medieval Islamic period Persian culture, language and literature were highly influential in the region, and many Central Asian rulers adopted Persian as their court language. Persian poets, scholars and artisans had a profound impact on the development of Central Asian societies. Transoxiana (present day Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), were early centres of Islamic civilisation. Many Persian-speaking scholars, theologians, and Sufi mystics from Iran contributed to the spread and development of Islam in Central Asia. Even under the Timurid Empire, Persian culture, literature and arts had a profound influence both in Iran and Central Asia.

⁵⁸ Post-9/11, Iran was encircled by the Western presence as anti-Shi'a and anti-Iran government from Afghanistan was removed and Operation Desert Fox removed Saddam Hussain from Iraq. Nevertheless, Tehran has a significant potential for utilisation of public diplomacy and soft power in the region particularly after the withdrawal of the US led NATO forces and Russia- Ukraine war.

⁵⁹ "The Silk road resurrected India's Central Asia odyssey via Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", [Zoombangala.com](https://inews.zoombangla.com/the-silk-road-resurrected-indias-central-asia-odyssey-via-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/), July 2, 2023, <https://inews.zoombangla.com/the-silk-road-resurrected-indias-central-asia-odyssey-via-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/>, cited on 5/7/2023

Baltic and Arctic regions. Additionally, India is in talks with the Eurasian Economic Union, which includes Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus and Russia to work out a Free Trade Agreement. If successful, the “free trade zone between India and EAEU would boost trade turnover to US\$ 15 billion – an immediate 25% increase.”⁶⁰



Source: Mausam Jhan, “Enhancing trade connectivity: Why India views INSTC as key”, April 28, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/enhancing-trade-connectivity-why-india-views-instc-as-key-11682658152548.html>, cited on 12/09/2023

The Five Nation Railway Corridor is proposed to link landlocked Central Asia (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan via Afghanistan) to the Caspian Sea via Iran. The route is planned to extend to China in the East and connect to the Turkish railway network in the West.

Both Iran and Central Asian countries recognise the potential for increased economic cooperation to explore avenues for enhancing trade, investment, and regional economic integration. Overall, the relationship between Iran and Central Asian countries encompasses a range of areas, including historical and cultural ties, economic cooperation, transportation connectivity, security collaboration, and geopolitical considerations. These relations are driven by regional dynamics and border cooperation between Iran and the countries of Central Asia.

⁶⁰ INSTC to Improve India-Russia Connectivity with Cheaper Multi-Modal Transit Routes, Russia Briefing, June 30, 2021, <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/instc-to-improve-india-russia-connectivity-with-cheaper-multi-modal-transit-routes.html/>, Cited on 4/5/2023

Türkiye's Idea of Pan-Turkic World

Despite strained relations between Türkiye and Central Asia during the Soviet times, the linguistic, historical⁶¹, racial and cultural legacy gave Ankara an opportunity to fill in the power vacuum and the desire of these nations to rediscover their historical cultural identity. Türkiye actively promoted cultural exchange programs, scholarships, and educational opportunities for Central Asian students to study in Turkish universities. This cultural connect has been reinforced through the promotion of Turkish language, Turkish TV series, music and cinema, which have gained popularity in Central Asia. The initial Avrasyacılık (Eurasianism) and Pan-Turkism promoting Turkic culture⁶² underwent a course-correction in 2010 under Erdogan emphasising cultural, educational, economic, political and military relations.⁶³ It is worth noting that the Central Asian governments often prioritise their own national identity and maintain geopolitical balance between Russia, China and Türkiye.

Türkiye has pursued free trade agreements and increased trade volume with Central Asia. The region has received investment from Türkiye in various sectors including construction, infrastructure, energy and trade. Turkish businesses have been involved in significant projects in the region, such as construction of highways, airports and energy pipelines. Politically, Türkiye has been involved in regional organisations focused on Turkish cooperation, such as Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (CCTS) and Turkic Council. In defence sector, Türkiye is primarily involved in military training, arms sales and counter-terrorism. Ankara, is also involved in joint military exercises and cooperation frameworks, such as Partnership for Peace program with NATO. In fact, European countries can manoeuvre through Ankara, if they perceive Türkiye's influence is beneficial in achieving the goal of preventing any single power from dominating Central Asia.

Despite the organic, racial and religious connection between Türkiye and Central Asia, Türkiye domestic developments like coup in 2016, currency and debt crisis, slowed productivity, high inflation, deteriorating external environment and “heterodox monetary policy”⁶⁴, their terminal strategic and economic decline is irreversible that will have a direct effect on Ankara's desire to have a leadership position in the region. At the moment, Türkiye is kept together by NATO due to its strategic position which it would like to extend up to Central Asia to counter Russia and China.

The Russians and Chinese view Türkiye as collaborative, competitive and a balancer in the region. However, the specific perceptions and responses of Russia and China toward Türkiye can be influenced by the evolving geopolitical dynamics and their bilateral relations with Ankara. But

⁶¹ The Turkic people originated from Central Asia, and their migration and dispersion across different regions led to the development of various Turkic-speaking communities, including those in Türkiye and Central Asia.

⁶² Pan-Turkism is an ideology that promotes the unity and solidarity of Turkic-speaking peoples, aiming to strengthen cultural, linguistic, and political ties among them. The ideology advocates a sense of shared Turkic identity and cooperation across the Turkic speaking regions, which includes Central Asia.

⁶³ Mohammed Alrmizan, “Turkish foreign policy in Central Asia in the era of Erdogan: convergence of Pan-Turkism, pragmatism and Islamism”, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, ISBN: 978-603-8360-03-3, 2022, p.6, <https://hal.science/hal-03696308/document>, cited on 8/5/2023

⁶⁴ “The World Bank in Türkiye”, The World Bank, April 10, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview>, cited on 10/5/2023

Türkiye might be supported by the West to maintain a dominant position and as a broker to counter the Russian EAEU and CSTO and the Chinese BRI.

The European Union Accession in Democracy

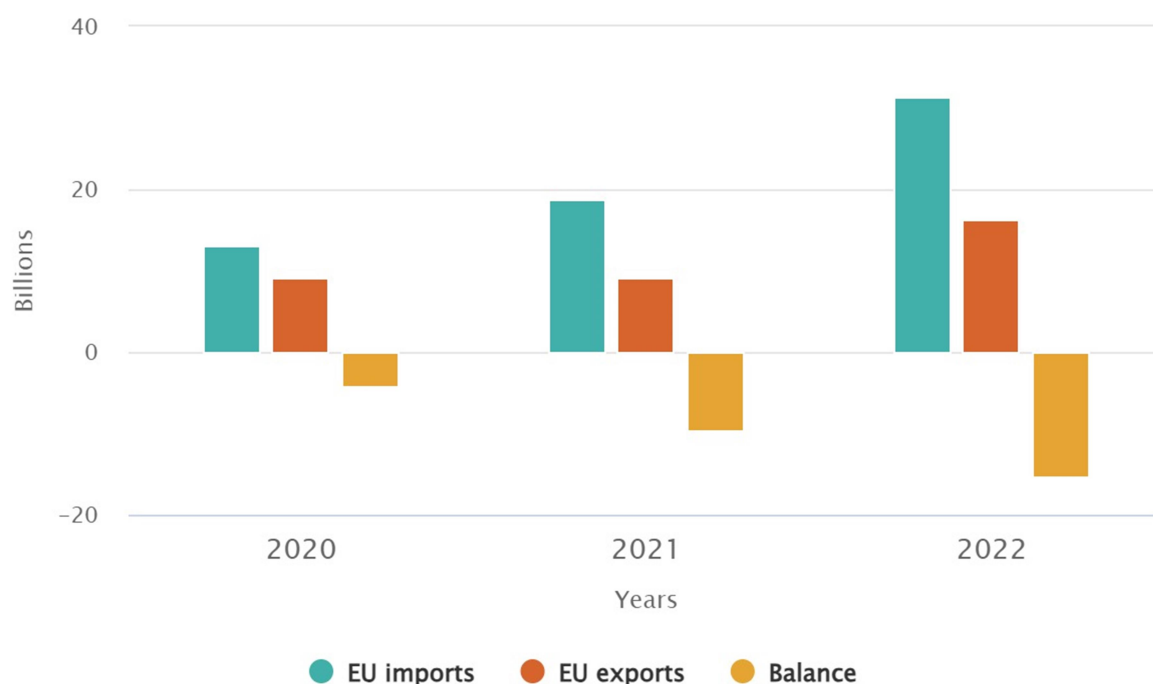
The European Union comprises 27 countries, each with its own distinct national interest. However, both the regions engage through regional frameworks such as Central Asia + European Union (CA-EU). Some common interests and areas where EU has been engaged with the region on diplomatic, economic, human rights and security fronts: first, due to the region's proximity to Afghanistan. Second, EU's interest in access to regions hydrocarbon reserves to diversify their imports and find an alternative to Russian oil and natural gas. EU is also looking at nuclear power to compensate Russian energy supplies. Third, counterbalancing Russia in the region. Fourth, increasing EU-China connectivity to ensure economic benefit. To safeguard its interests in Central Asia, EU is actively involved in shaping the economic and security affairs of the region in line with its own international agenda.

Some of the initiatives undertaken by EU and Central Asia to strength their engagements are: EU Strategy for Central Asia 2007 aimed to promote economic development, strengthen transport and energy links, promote environmental protection, safeguard human rights, and combat security threats. The 2019 iteration of the Strategy highlighted new objectives to increase the connectivity and flow of people, services, goods, and ideas between EU and Central Asia, promote an integration of regional market and prioritise Central Asia-Afghan cooperation to advance peace.⁶⁵ The EU is one of the largest trading partners and investors in Central Asia, accounting for about a third of its overall external trade in 2021. "According to preliminary data for 2022, EU goods imports from Central Asia continue to increase (by 67% in 2022) and exports from the EU to Central Asia also grew (by 77%)."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Russell, M. (2019, January). The EU's new Central Asia strategy. European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)633162_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf), cited on 3/5/2023

⁶⁶ "EU trade relations with Central Asia", [European Commission](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20(by%2077%25)), April 9,2023, [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20\(by%2077%25\)](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20(by%2077%25)). Cited on 25/8/2023

Trade in goods, € billions

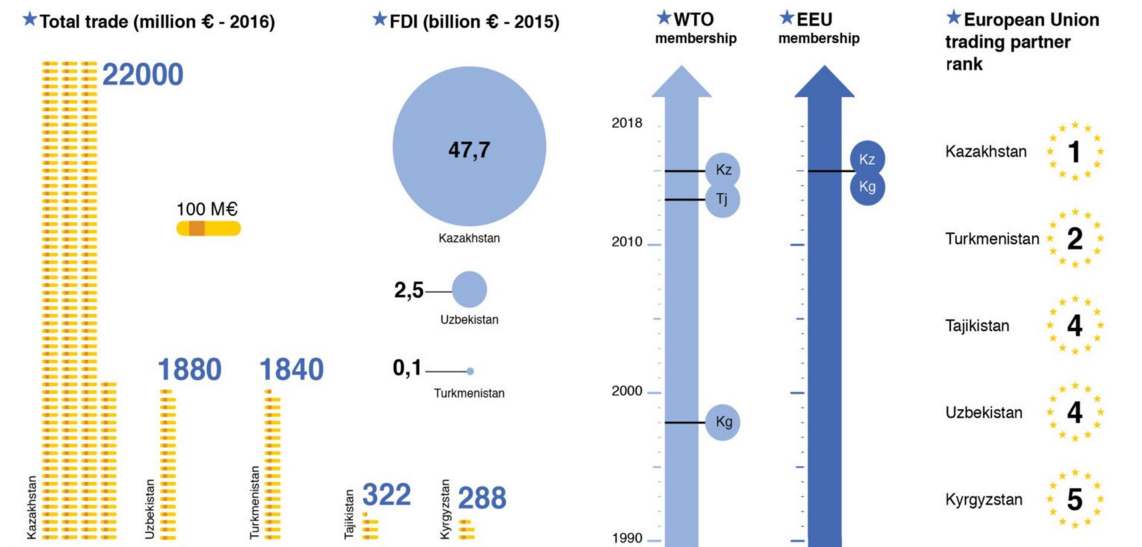


Source: “EU trade relations with Central Asia”, [European Commission](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20(by%2077%25).), April 9, 2023, [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20\(by%2077%25\)](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20is%20the%20region's,also%20grew%20(by%2077%25).). Cited on 25/8/2023

“Nevertheless, the total turnover of the EU’s trade with Central Asia remains low. Central Asian exports to the EU largely focus on a few commodities, particularly crude oil, gas, metals and cotton fibres. EU exports are dominated by machinery and other manufactured goods. Such products account for more than half of EU exports to the region.”⁶⁷ EU is also involved in regional connectivity supporting the development of transport networks, energy infrastructure, digital connectivity, and people to people contact both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and Europe.

⁶⁷ “EU trade relations with Central Asia. Facts, figures and latest developments.”, [European Commission](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en), 2023, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/central-asia_en, cited on 21/5/2023

European Union - Central Asia economic info



Source: Jos Boonstra and Riccardo Panella, “Three reasons why the EU matters to Central Asia”, *Voices OnCentralAsia.org*, March 13, 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/three-reasons-why-the-eu-matters-to-central-asia/>, cited on 21/5/2023

The EU has been planning to broad base its influence and engagement across the spectrum of security and development in Central Asia and make a significant presence felt. EU provides support to projects related to socioeconomic development, poverty reduction, and institution building. The assistance focuses on areas such as education, health, sustainable development, energy, water management, environmental security, preserving and promoting cultural heritage, capacity building programs to strengthen legal systems, promote judicial reforms, combat corruption and improve law and order, education and research through exchanges, scholarships, and partnerships between universities and research institutions in Central Asia and Europe. Also, EU is involved in regional cooperation initiatives and programs aimed at addressing common challenges in the region related to security, counter-terrorism, border management, and fight against organised crime and drug trafficking.⁶⁸

The economic recession within Europe, Central Asia’s historical connect with Russia and Iran, economic clout of China and the lack of unanimity among the EU member nations is likely to keep EU’s desire of being among the leading players in the region ambitious. Also, the differences in political systems, social and cultural norms and economic growth and position hinders the organic development of the relationship.

The United States of America’s Restoration of Western Interests

September 11, 2001 and the subsequent Operation Enduring Freedom restored Western interest and checked terrorism and dominating Russian and Chinese influence in the region. The US got actively involved in the investment, security political presence, and military engagement. But with the US withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan and closure of its base in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Washington’s influence in the region has been on a decline. However, proximity to Taliban controlled

⁶⁸ For details, please visit European Union website, https://www.ecas.europa.eu/ecas/central-asia_en

Afghanistan may require the support of US to deal with the security challenges arising from the borders. CARs would like to play a balancing game and would like the West to be involved in the geopolitics and economics of the region without becoming the area of contention for Russia, China, and the US.

The Western allies hope to bolster peace and stability in the region by supporting trade links and helping in opening of new markets connecting Afghanistan to Central Asia, Pakistan, India and beyond. In February 2020, the US strategy for Central Asia for 2019-2025 provided for over \$9 billion in direct assistance to support peace and security, democratic reform⁶⁹, and economic growth and meet humanitarian needs. The US has also led the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and the Asian Development Bank in extending over \$50 billion in credit, loans, and technical assistance designed to support the development of the region. The US private sector, meanwhile, has invested over \$31 billion in commercial ventures in the region, generating thousands of local jobs and building human capacity. The US has been providing funds to expand programming under ERICEN that includes expanding trade routes; bolstering the private sector, and investing in people through training and education.⁷⁰ Since 1993, the US has dominated investment in Kazakhstan's oil and gas sector.⁷¹ Chevron and Exxon-Mobile are among the key players in Kazakhstan's oil sector.⁷² Also there are a large number of American NGOs working in Central Asia, particularly in Central Asia, such as Azattyk (branches of Radio Liberty, United States), Present Time (subsidiary of Liberty), Eurasia, SOROS Foundation and many others are active in Central Asia. Notable is the activity of the National Endowment for Democracy. These organizations are also characterized by an anti-Chinese orientation.⁷³

The US is also putting pressure on the leaders of the CARs to support and implement sanctions on Russia post Russia-Ukraine war. For example, on 25 April 2023, Elisabeth Rosenberg, the assistant secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes at the US Treasury Department, warned that companies and banks in Kazakhstan could face sanctions if found to be aiding Russia to circumvent sanctions. Owing to the Russia-Ukraine war, Russian imports from Central Asia has increased due to

⁶⁹ According to V.A. Ponomarev, in recent years Washington and American NGOs have shown respect for the "special path of development" of the Central Asian countries, and the impact on these countries in the political, ideological, and humanitarian spheres has become more flexible. However, it remains constant and purposeful and is expressed in pressure on the countries of the region with reminders of the need to liberalize national legislation regulating the electoral process, create "free media," "a multiparty political system," etc. Ponomarev, V.A. (2020) Ob osnovnykh napravleniyakh politiki SshA v Central'noi Azii [Main US Policies in Central Asia], *Problemy postsovetskogo prostranstva*, No. 4, 445–459. <https://www.postsovietarea.com./jour/article/view/266>, Cited on 3/5/2023

⁷⁰ "Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative, Fact Sheet, The Department of State, February 28, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/economic-resilience-in-central-asia-initiative/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20provided%20%2425,for%20a%20modern%20job%20market>, Cited on 5/5/2023

⁷¹ Time to share: Who is fighting for the energy resources of Kazakhstan RIA Novosti, January 15, 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220115/kazakhstan-1767874161.html>. Cited on 3/5/2023

⁷² What does the US mean for Kazakhstan? Figures and facts, Forbes Kazakhstan, September 25, 2019, https://forbes.kz/life/opinion/chto_znachit_ssha_dlya_kazahstana_tsifry_i_faktyi, Cited on 3/5/2023

⁷³ Mendkovich, N., The US and anti-Chinese NGOs in Central Asia, IAC, November 5, 2019. <https://ia-centr.ru/experts/nikita-mendkovich/ssha-i-antikitayskie-npo-v-tsentralnoy-azii/>. Cited on 6/5/2023

loss of access to the European market. “According to the latest EBRD report, exports from the EU, UK, and US to Kazakhstan increased by more than 80 percent in 2022. At the same time, Kazakhstan increased its exports to Russia by more than 22 per cent. In June 2022, the US imposed secondary sanctions on an Uzbek company involved in exporting electrical components to Russia.”⁷⁴

The total inflow of foreign direct investments from the US to Kazakhstan exceeded 62 billion US dollars, and in the first three quarters of 2022 the volume of American investments increased by 58.8 per cent compared to the corresponding period of 2021. About 590 enterprises with the participation of the American capital function are present in Kazakhstan, and more US companies are showing they are interested in the Kazakh market.⁷⁵

The US has maintained a strong diplomatic relation with the Central Asian countries. In 2015, the Washington created C5+1 to maintain US political influence in the region. It provided regular meetings of the foreign ministers of the CARs and the US Secretary of State. Recently in Astana, Blinken met with the Central Asian Foreign ministers for the first time since its founding. “In each of his meeting and statements, Blinken reiterated U.S. commitment to the region’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence and contrasted that with Russian efforts in Ukraine.”⁷⁶ He even announced additional fund allocation for ERICEN to support these countries implement secondary sanctions on Russia. “These are not massive sums when contrasted with the volume of trade between Russia, China, and the region, and government press releases are light on details about the ERICEN’s programs.”⁷⁷

Militarily the US conducts regular joint military exercises with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In fact, Kazakhstan has been the main recipient of US military assistance.⁷⁸ Like Ukraine, the US Department of Defence is functioning a laboratory near Almaty which “develops military biological formulations”.⁷⁹

Under “the Biden administration, major foreign policy efforts have been to restore America’s partnership with allies, deal with China as America’s major competitor, and address global climate change. The Biden administration may be less welcoming of China’s activities, like the Belt and Road

⁷⁴ Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi, ‘Just passing through: Kazakhstan’s parallel trade predicament’, [The Diplomat](https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/just-passing-through-kazakhstans-parallel-trade-predicament/), February 27, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/just-passing-through-kazakhstans-parallel-trade-predicament/>, cited on 30/4/2023)

⁷⁵ Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi At a Joint Press Availability, Policy Issues, US Department of State, February 28, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-kazakhstan-foreign-minister-mukhtar-tileuberdi-at-a-joint-press-availability/>, cited on 30/4/2023

⁷⁶ Catherine Putz, “Ukraine’s shadow over Blinken’s travels through Central Asia”, [The Diplomat](https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/ukraines-shadow-over-blinkens-travels-through-central-asia/), March 3, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/ukraines-shadow-over-blinkens-travels-through-central-asia/>, Cited on 6/5/2023

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Umarov, T. Everyone’s friend: Will Russia and China be able to force the US out of Kazakhstan, Carnegie Moscow Center Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 27, 2021. <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/84968>. Cited on 6/5/2023

⁷⁹ G. Onishchenko: US biolaboratories in the CIS countries are dangerous—COVID has shown what viruses are capable of, Internet portal of the CIS, May 19, 2021. <https://e-cis.info/news/566/92233/>. Cited on 6/5/2023

Initiative, than the Obama administration had been, and perhaps less supportive of developing hydrocarbon resources in Central Asia. Also, responsibility for Central Asian affairs is no longer combined with South Asian affairs, but is again combined with Russian affairs as it was in the Obama administration.”⁸⁰ Washington realises that it cannot replace political, economic and military clout of Russia and economic dominance of China but aims to be a “reliable partner” and a balancer in CAR’s.

India’s Strategic Interests

India’s engagement with Central Asia is driven by its desire to enhance its influence for economic, political, civilisational and strategic reach through connectivity, economic ties, educational and cultural exchanges. In the recent past, due to India’s inadequate geo-political priorities and resource constraints, New Delhi has not converted its historical and cultural relations into a substantive bond with CAR’s. To make things difficult, New Delhi’s relationship with Moscow went through uneasy times. India failed to gain Russia’s support to name Pakistan as a terrorist state during BRICS Goa Summit. On the contrary, in September 2016, Russian troops arrived in Pakistan to conduct its first ever military exercise with Pakistan on the same day as Russia flagged off the eighth military drill with India in Vladivostok. Additionally, Moscow strongly supports China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and intends to link its own Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project with CPEC that passes through Gilgit-Baltistan region in Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK). Russia views the emergence of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project with CPEC important for regional connectivity. These developments infused uncertainty in Russia-India relations and showed lack of understanding among policymakers leading to declining trade and investment; inadequate information sharing and infrequent people to people contact and media exchange. Also, India-China border dispute has turned the relationship between New Delhi-Beijing into a tinderbox. It has also plunged the countries into periodical skirmishes. Additionally, New Delhi has shown regular concerns over Chinese growing spheres of influence, both militarily and commercially, in South Asia with an intention to encircle India.

Despite the uncertainty on evolving political dynamics, “India has signed a DTAA (Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement) with Armenia, Belarus, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Negotiations are ongoing for signing the same with Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. India has signed Bilateral Investment Protection Agreement (BIPA) with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Russia, Armenia and Belarus.”⁸¹

However, post-Ukraine War, Russia’s desire to be closer to the West has dilapidated. Also, the European economies are on the decline and the power is moving from West to the East with China and India. The war has made Russia over dependent on China that can be a cause of concern for New Delhi. However, on its side, apart from emerging as the major economic and global player, India has again proven to be Russia’s most trusted partner for the longest time. Despite immense pressure on

⁸⁰ “How will US Policy towards Central Asia look under the Biden Administration?”, Interview, [Harvard University](https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/how-will-us-policy-toward-central-asia-look-under-biden-administration), March 16, 2021, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/insights/how-will-us-policy-toward-central-asia-look-under-biden-administration>, Cited on 5/6/2023

⁸¹ “Trade Facilitation Steps”, [Ministry of Commerce and Industry](https://commerce.gov.in/international-trade/trade-promotion-programmes-and-schemes/trade-promotion-programme-focus-cis/trade-facilitation-steps/), <https://commerce.gov.in/international-trade/trade-promotion-programmes-and-schemes/trade-promotion-programme-focus-cis/trade-facilitation-steps/>, cited on 21/5/2023

New Delhi from the West on energy import from Russia, Indian FM Jaishankar maintained a strong stand and said that, “If you are looking at energy purchases from Russia, I would suggest that your attention should be focused on Europe. We do buy some energy which is necessary for our energy security, but I suspect looking at the figures, probably, our total purchases for the month would be less than what Europe does in an afternoon,”⁸² In fact, after the Western sanctions on Russia, India is now playing an important role in global oil market by buying cheap Russian oil and refining it into fuel for Europe and the US,⁸³ hence maintaining a demand-supply balance, while preventing extreme price shock.⁸⁴

While responding to the criticism on India’s continuing relationship with Russia and not criticising Russian invasion on Ukraine, EAM S. Jaishankar mentioned that, Western countries preferred a military dictatorship next to India as a preferred partner⁸⁵ and that the US is not “fooling anyone” by saying that the support for Pakistan Air Force’s F-16s was meant for counterterrorism.⁸⁶

The competition between India, China, Russia, Pakistan, Europe, Türkiye or Iran in Central Asia is not necessarily a zero-sum game as the Central Asian countries follow a “multi-vector foreign policy”, *i.e.*, engaging with various regional and global powers to maximise their own benefits. Hence, despite two major players in the CARs, Russia and China, there is enough space for India to have a toehold in the region. In fact, India is amongst the prominent nations in Central Asia’s multi-vector strategy. Additionally, the present Indian government has realised CARs importance and is making serious efforts to have a meaningful presence in the region. During the first India-Central Asia Summit, held via video link from New Delhi on January 27, 2022, the leaders acknowledged the challenges of connectivity of India with the Central Asian Countries as one of the “main issues of discussion”. Some of the ways proposed to overcome the issue include annual summits, and annual meetings of the Foreign, Trade and Cultural Ministers and Secretaries of Security (National Security Advisor) to

⁸² “I prefer to do, articulate it my way”, EAM S.Jaishankar on India’s stance over Ukraine war and Russian Energy imports”, Swaraj, April 12, 2022, <https://swarajyamag.com/world/i-prefer-to-do-articulate-it-my-way-eam-s-jaishankar-on-indias-stance-over-ukraine-war-and-russian-energy-imports>, cited on 8/5/2023

⁸³ Suhasini Haidar, “India leads ‘Laundromat’ countries buying Russian crude and selling oil products to Europe”, The Hindu, May 1, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-leads-laundromat-countries-buying-russian-crude-and-selling-oil-products-to-europe-report/article66800618.ece>, cited on 8/5/2023 Earlier in June 2022, FM S.Jaishankar said at a conference in Bratislava that , “there’s an enormous shortage of oil...Getting access to oil is difficult. A country like India would be crazy to get oil from somebody and sell it to somebody else,”

⁸⁴ Sukalp Sharma, “The significance of rise in India’s petroleum product exports to EU”, The Indian Express, May 7, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-economics/the-significance-of-rise-in-indias-petroleum-product-exports-to-eu-8493369/>, cited on 8/5/2023

⁸⁵ ‘West preferred a military dictatorship next to India as a preferred partner rather than India’, Economic Times, October 10, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/west-preferred-military-dictatorship-as-partner-rather-than-india-jaishankar-takes-jibe-at-pakistan/videoshow/94763845.cms?from=mdr>, cited on 8/5/2023

⁸⁶ Prashant Jha, “Not fooling anyone: Jaishankar on US Support for Pakistan F-16s”, Hindustan Times, September 27, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/not-fooling-anyone-jaishankar-on-us-support-for-pakistan-f16s-101664216876123.html>, cited on 8/5/2023

“strengthen cooperation in the areas of political and development, partnership, trade and connectivity, culture and tourism and security”.⁸⁷

New Delhi is taking many positive steps to be engaged meaningfully in the region. In 2017, India became a full-fledged member of SCO. In 2020, India for the first time hosted the meeting of SCO Council of Heads of Government, the second-highest decision-making body of the organisation. The next important milestone came in September 2022, when India took over the Chairmanship of the Summit for one year and Prime Minister Modi chaired the SCO Summit. The regional organisation and the leadership will provide an opportunity to New Delhi to diversify relations with the region.

SCO remains important for India’s strategic reach in Central Asia. It provides opportunity to involve and be visible in Eurasian affairs, access to energy resources, combat illicit drug and terrorism, build security apparatus, deepen ties with Russia, counter Pakistan’s agenda and stay involved in the regional discussion on Taliban.

Like most multi-lateral organisations, SCO has its own challenges like: diverse interests of the SCO members; geopolitical tensions; complex regional conflicts; concerns of security human rights and democratic values; economic disparity; issues of connectivity; and institutional capacity of developing and mandating effective institutions, mechanisms and processes. The principle of unanimity does hinder decision making. India has been the lone voice in SCO boycotting the BRI, as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir. Since 2019, India and China are embroiled in an intense standoff involving thousands of soldiers stationed along their disputed border in eastern Ladakh. In June 2020, the clash between the Indian and Chinese army in Galwan Valley resulted in casualties on both sides and escalated tensions. Despite these tensions, India and China have sought to maintain their diplomatic engagement within the SCO framework. Both the countries discussed issues of common interest and emphasised the need for cooperation in areas such as regional security, trade and connectivity. SCO provides a platform and opportunity for dialogue and engagement between New Delhi and Beijing, even during periods of bilateral challenges. During the recent SCO summit India-Chinese FM held a detailed discussion on bilateral ties on the sidelines. India’s Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar Tweeted, “Focus remains on resolving outstanding issues and ensuring peace and tranquillity in the border areas.”⁸⁸

During the recent SCO virtual annual summit, chaired by India for the first time, President Xi Jinping “lambasted” protectionism, unilateral sanctions and the overstretching of national security” and urged members to “reject the moves of setting up barriers, decoupling and severing supply chains.” These are invariably references aimed at the United States, which has sought to pursue what it terms

⁸⁷ Suhasini Haidar, “Central Asia meet forms Afghan group”, *The Hindu*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/prime-minister-narendra-modi-addresses-india-central-asia-summit-through-video-conference-on-january-27-2022/article38334622.ece>, cited on 29/3/2023).

⁸⁸ Anirban Bhaumik, “Jaishankar-Quin meet: India stresses resolving outstanding issues on LAC, China calls for raising mutual trust”, *Deccan Herald*, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/jaishankar-qin-meet-india-stresses-resolving-outstanding-issues-on-lac-china-calls-for-raising-mutual-trust-1215703.html>, May 5, 2023, cited on 20/7/2023

“friendshoring” by shifting supply chains for critical goods to partners and allies, and away from China.”⁸⁹

The future of SCO will be shaped by how the organisation balances and interacts in the complex regional and global dynamics. Nevertheless, the SCO platform provides an opportunity to interact and discuss the irritants between nations and subsequently work to find the solution.

Conclusion

Socio-economic and political security in the Central Asian countries will remain delicate as long as there is instability in Afghanistan, unchecked narcotic trade, feeble economy and authoritarian governments. Declining Russian influence in security and politics, increasing Pakistani cultural penetration (as it has also been involved in translating, publishing and distributing the Quran written in Russian language) and Chinese economic clout has put the Central Asian countries in a spot where they have to make difficult choices. Despite the young generation having no feeling of historical connect with Russia, neither Moscow nor the deflating Western financial industry can hope to have a strong control over the region. Additionally, CARs are young democracies with no potential of being NATO members. Even China and Russia would not like to see NATO forces on its Eastern and Western frontiers respectively. Furthermore, the prospect of alternate currency trade will diminish the demand for the dollar hence dominance of the US in times to come. Despite growing Chinese influence in Central Asia, the region will continue to play a multi-vector approach, engaging with various external powers to maximise its own benefits and strategic positioning. Until now, India’s engagement in the region is security centric; rather than cultural, economic, educational and developmental. New Delhi can facilitate in overcoming security threats in CARs, by not only sharing its experience and expertise in nation-building but also in combating terrorism through different methods and techniques. New Delhi must perceive CARs as an integral part of its strategic neighbourhood. Also, defence and economic relations must be maintained along with educational, cultural, scientific and technological cooperation.

⁸⁹ Catherine Putz, “Why was India’s SCO Summit virtual?”, *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/07/why-was-indias-sco-summit-virtual/>, cited on 24/7/2023

Section 3

Opportunities

India is emerging as a global soft power or co-optive power. The nation's branding of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* and Delhi's foreign policy aspiration of becoming *Vishwa Guru* will create a positive image worldwide. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, engraved at the entrance hall of the Parliament of India, means "the world is one family". In essence, it includes being connected to the world and the fragile ecosystem we are dependent on and accountable for. Being the positive world power (*Vishwa Guru*) is what we must aim at. Apropos we need to identify and involve the cultural evangelists, entrepreneurs and institution builders to connect and have meaningful presence in the region. We need to have a holistic approach to our Connect Central Asia Policy.

Institution Building

India must reach out to the people along with the governments by building bridge institutions, which is our strength. We can share our long experience and expertise in structuring democratic institutions, intended to improve individual and institutional governance and administration for Central Asian nations that will help overcome the capacity-building challenges that are the structural cause of conflict. It can be done by trying to improve the quality and effectiveness of government without play-off. Institutional professionalism and increasing the stakes in local representation is important in divided societies to build grassroots support as it reduces, prevents and manages conflict and domestic opposition. Institutional professionalism can be built by training officials with leadership, administrative, technical and financial skills.

India can also share her experience and expertise of e-governance and digitisation of government services as it empowers citizens through technology and links various departments and monitors government programs.

Additionally, India can work with the Central Asian countries to institutionalise, advance and collaborate in research and developmental projects through Eurasian corpus. One such initiative was started by Professor Chandra Shekhar in Uzbekistan with the help of Ministry of External Affairs where he established fifteen India Study rooms in Uzbekistan between 2019 and 2022.⁹⁰

Socio-Economic and Financial Connectivity

The economic relations should be for mutual benefit of both India and Central Asian countries. The region is rich in energy and natural resources like gold and copper. Being landlocked and having limited R&D, the utilisation of its resources is not optimum. This gives India an opportunity to act as a strong soft power in the region. For example, Tajikistan is rich in water resources. India can help develop projects and plans to increase agriculture production, improve food security and reduce poverty.

⁹⁰ Communique with Professor Chandra Shekhar on July 5, 2023.

India can get into bilateral and multi-lateral agreements with the border nations to reach Central Asia. Also, India can join with Iran, United States, and Japan to balance China and Pakistan in the region. New Delhi's recent stand on Russia will help India boost its relations with CARs.

Each year many people from Central Asia come to India for medical treatments. "India's technical cooperation programme under India Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC), telemedicine and healthcare have been directly beneficial for the ordinary people of the region."⁹¹ Additionally, COVID-19 highlighted the existing medical vulnerability. We can work with the governments of CARs to create a suitable environment for opening Indian private hospitals and alternative therapies like AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) Centres that provides curative, palliative and rehabilitative healthcare.

Further, India can build a bridge over the river Panj connecting Tajikistan to Afghanistan like the US has done in lower Panj. New Delhi needs to increase its regional leverage by connecting the Chabahar Port in Iran with Ashgabat to get unhindered rail and road access to Central Asia.

To have easy trade and commerce we need to have financial connectivity. Our government can work towards establishing Rupee trade plans with the CARs and establish Rupay enabled cashpoints and Unified Payment Interface (UPI). India is in the process of internationalising the Indian Rupee. During Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to France, agreement was reached for the use of India's UPI. It will start from the Eiffel Tower allowing Indian tourists to make payments in Rupees through UPI.

India's digital stack is revolutionising access to financial services in an economy where retail transactions are primarily cash based. It is not only innovative and competitive but also expands markets, closes gaps in financial inclusions, makes transactions transparent, reduces corruption and black market, reduces money printing (hence transaction) cost, boosts government revenue collection and improves public expenditure. India can share the technology, experience and expertise with Central Asian countries that will not just increase government collection but will also help reduce corruption and check illegal activities.

Defence Connectivity

Traditionally, border management focused on the security of borders by ensuring legitimate movement of people and goods across the borders and restrain illegal activities. In the 21st century, the traditional approach combined with adoption of technologies for border surveillance and integrated systems for entering, storage and exchange of data that will ensure security. India can provide assistance and expertise in border security and border management by training the border security forces.

India should also actively take part in Central Asian regional cooperation and security arrangements

⁹¹ "The Silk road resurrected India's Central Asia odyssey via Shanghai Cooperation Organisation", [Zoombangala.com](https://inews.zoombangla.com/the-silk-road-resurrected-indias-central-asia-odyssey-via-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/), July 2, 2023, <https://inews.zoombangla.com/the-silk-road-resurrected-indias-central-asia-odyssey-via-the-shanghai-cooperation-organisation/>, cited on 5/7/2023

like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (India and Pakistan are to become its full members in 2017) and should participate in military exercises. Joint military exercises are important as they create stability and understanding between nations, build personal and institutional links between the countries military forces, and reinforce political, economic and commercial, and cultural linkages between the countries.

Historical and Cultural Connectivity

History has shown that India has never been expansionist in her approach. India had neither conquered nor inflicted horrors of armed forces. The expeditions were purely based on trade. Hindu and Buddhist monks accompanied the traders to spread Indian thought and culture in far-off lands. Ashrams and hermitages were set up in the foreign lands for cultural interactions. Some of the prominent names of the saints who established such centres were Kaundinya and Agastya. Under Ashoka the missionaries were sent to spread Buddha's *ashtangic* (eightfold) *marg*. Soon many cities became cultural centres and India came to be looked upon as a sacred land where people travelled for holy pilgrimage and spiritual awakening. In the present century too the image of India has not altered. We can reposition ourselves in our immediate neighbourhood.

Media plays an important role in public diplomacy, which is aimed at promoting deep bilateral diplomatic and economic relations. Media can also play an important role in educating about countries and their bilateral relationship, recognise priority concerns within alliance and learn about the views of policymakers, have meaningful influence in building public opinion towards foreign policy. Media presence is important to prevent information asymmetry, build confidence and shape positive narrative. India should have an office of Doordarshan, All India Radio (AIR) and Press Trust of India (PTI) in Central Asian countries.

To understand the complexities and challenges of Central Asia we need to have more people-to-people contact or diplomacy such as trade and cultural exchange apart from research-based field trips and interactions with a wide range of people. There is an old saying in diplomacy "... diplomacy must move from the hands of lawmakers into the palms of citizens." People to people contact should be one of the important pillars in India's foreign policy as, it has a "way of projecting power. All countries want to attract, and engage with, top scientists, university research laboratories, and multinational technology companies. Facilitating connections between the brightest minds is the best place to start.... The key, however, is to connect the talent inside their borders to like-minded minds abroad."

The education system in all the five CARs is outdated. India can work towards developing the same. Presently, there are branches of three Indian Universities- Amity, Sharda and Sambram- in Uzbekistan. Branches of three more Indian universities are being worked out: Glocal, LNCT and Integral. According to a Tajik reporter, "India can establish a number of 'Indian schools'. You can bring teachers from India, who can teach and can also earn money. But its impact in the long run is essential, because children will grow up in the spirit of loving India."⁹²

Empowering private citizens and sectors to go global includes bootcamps for entrepreneur start-ups, regional youth leadership summits, and classroom-to-classroom Skype or Zoom call exchanges.

⁹² Interview with Esfandiar Adinah, 17 February 2017.

New Delhi must also work towards cultivating its historical, cultural and spiritual linkages in order to maintain goodwill and friendship with CARs. Here I would like to end with three personal stories that advocate my strong belief in *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*: During my field trip to Tajikistan, I visited Dushanbe Museum where I saw the statues of Shiva, Parvati and Nandi; Shivlingm; and a 50-foot-long stone statue of reclining Buddha. I am sure that the Central Asia was at one point influenced by Vedic culture and traditions. Second, during my visit to Khujand, the northern part of Tajikistan, I stayed with a family. They became good friends and the woman of the house showed me her wedding video. In one of the clips the bride and the groom were taking five rounds around the fire. This is neither Islamic nor Christian. Third, there is a long tradition of social-cultural, religious, economic and political contact between Central Asia and Ancient India. Migration and expansion of people and tribes from Central Asia into India is as old as Bronze Age where clans of Shakas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Phlavas, Paradas etc. were absorbed into the community of Kshatriyas of Indian society. There are extensive references about the people from Central Asia in Indian literature. The Mughal empire of India came from Ferghana Valley that connects Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Mughal rule in India gives Central Asians a sense of pride and a strong sense of connection.

I am a UP Khatri. When I got married, I was taken to our family temple in Old Delhi. I was told that our ancestors, the clan of four Khanna, Mehrotra, Kapoor and Tandon, started travelling from Afghanistan from 11th century onwards and settled down in Gangatic plains. We had our temple in Afghanistan. I am sure if we together rediscover the past, we will find many stories that will connect us as one family.

Building cultural and historical ties should be of prime importance as sometimes they could do much more than any army, investments, and high-profile visits. Build cultural ties to promote fashion food and film industry. Central Asia traditional dress of women is similar to the Indian kurta-salwar. We can encourage Indian designers who open Indian boutiques that can cater to their wedding, party or daily wear. Our spices can be introduced to their staple diet Biryani.

India has enough skills, experience, and knowledge and can develop the educational and research institutes, heritage sites or build cheap hostels, hotels or guest rooms similar to Indian dharmashalas and international youth hostels. India can also develop tourist attractions around Tajik power stations which does not need much investment.

Engaging Youth

India should use the data of the Central Asian students who have come to India for language studies. These students can be employed to translate Indian movies and TV shows in their language for viewing. It can be part of Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) funding project too.

- ✓ Hold annual meeting in the embassies of students who had come to study in India.
- ✓ Bilateral Cultural Exchange Programs between Indian and Central Asian youth can be facilitated to establish interconnection that will help engineer the implementation of the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*.
- ✓ Some of the delegates who have done distinguished work in building the bilateral ties can be awarded and facilitated.

- ✓ Engage the youth of these countries in the Cultural and Art programs organised by ICCR.
 - Here the youth data can be created and particularly those who have come to study can be informed whenever such programs are organised to build understanding, interests and strong connection.
 - Indian cultural festivals can also be organised in the embassies to propagate, expose and make the people understand Vedic culture and traditions.
 - The cultural engagements will not only boost India's traditional art form but these art forms will get international exposure and will be revived.

- ✓ An online platform of the visiting CARs youth can be created to build network
 - This can be done by creating an Open Forum on the MEA website for the CAR delegates.
 - The CAR delegates can choose a unique email ID that is password enabled.
 - Regular workshops should be conducted with students, researchers, teachers, administrators, political and business elites in order to find ways and opportunities of working together and understanding each other.

To conclude, branding and promoting *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* as our Foreign Policy will help India engage with the world constructively and influentially. India is in the process of developing humanitarian approach in international relations, building strong strategic alliances along with presenting itself as a determined and responsible leader nationally, regionally and globally. To be the 'Vishwa Guru' requires us to be proactive and:

- Identify academic, social, cultural, technical, media, holistic health and economic 'evangelists', sherpas, entrepreneurs and institution builders.
- Involve these experts in framing Foreign, Cultural and Economic Policy
- Build favourable environment to enable these experts to build a strong network of bridge institutions.
- Find ways to overcome irritants and hindrances that are hampering bilateral, trilateral or multilateral relations.
- Plan to become eminent member of principal regional and international organisations and associations.

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