



China's Outreach in Central Asia

For Prelims: C+C5, [Buddhism](#), [Silk Route](#), [SCO](#), [Russia-Ukraine](#), [CSTO](#)

For Mains: China's Outreach in Central Asia and India's Stand.

Why in News?

Recently, China has conducted a meeting of trade ministers of the grouping known as **C+C5** — China and the five Central Asian republics, namely **Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan**.

- It was the latest in a series of diplomatic engagements by China with the region since the [Russian invasion of Ukraine](#).



What is the China-Central Asia Engagement?

- **C+C5:**
 - The **first C+C5 summit held in Jan 2022** marked the **30th anniversary of diplomatic relations** between China and Central Asian nations.
 - China's historical trade and cultural links with the region date back to the **ancient [Silk Route](#)**.
- **Significance for China:**
 - The region **provides China with a market for cheap exports** and overland access to markets in Europe and West Asia.
 - Central Asia is **resource-rich, with massive reserves of gas, oil, and strategic**

minerals such as uranium, copper, and gold.

- China has also prioritized its relationship with these countries to ensure **peace in [Xinjiang Autonomous Region](#)**, which forms its frontier with Central Asia.
- **BRI and Investments:**
 - China has been investing heavily in Central Asia through its **[Belt and Road Initiative](#)**, which includes projects in oil and gas, transportation, digital technology, and green energy.
 - While China's investments have provided opportunities for economic growth in the region, there has also been resentment towards China due to its **treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang and concerns about its increasing presence** and land acquisitions.
 - Despite this, Central Asian governments have not joined international campaigns against China's treatment of its Muslim minority.
 - China is now the region's **foremost trading partner, with talks underway for further transport and logistics projects** linking all countries in the region to China's seaports.

How are C5s Balancing their Relationships with Russia, China and West?

- **Heavily Dependent on Russia:**
 - The region is heavily reliant on Russia, which is also the **main provider of security through the [CSTO \(Collective Security Treaty Organisation\)](#)**.
 - However, the CSTO's unity is weakening, and the **conflict in Ukraine** has raised **concerns about the consequences of Russia's security** relationship with Central Asia.
 - In 2022 **Kyrgyzstan cancelled a CSTO military exercise** that was to be held on its territory last year, and **none of the five Central Asian countries have openly taken Russia's side** in the conflict.
 - Nevertheless, Russia has increased its trade with the **region as it seeks to reduce its dependence on European imports**.
- **China's Increasing Engagement:**
 - China has been increasing its engagement with Central Asia, leading some to speculate that Beijing is taking advantage of Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine to expand its influence in the region.
 - While Russia may be concerned about Chinese expansion, there was no visible indication of this.
- **Seeking towards West:**
 - Central Asian countries are seeking to develop trade relations with the West, including the European Union and the United States.
 - However, the region's **landlocked geography and limited transport infrastructure have hindered** this effort.

What is India's Stake in Central Asia?

- **Cultural and Ancient Ties:**
 - The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia from the 3rd century BC to the 15th century AD. From the export of Buddhism to the lasting influence of Bollywood, India has **shared old and deep cultural ties with the region**.
- **Security:**
 - In December 2022, officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan arrived in India for the **[first India-Central Asia meeting of national security advisors](#)**.
 - It highlighted the India-Central Asia relationship, emphasizing their common shared interests, such as stabilizing the **security situation in Afghanistan and reinforcing territorial integrity**.
 - India has also attempted to boost its security presence in the region by **renovating military bases in Tajikistan**.
 - If operational, the airbases would offer **India a strategic advantage against its two adversaries: China and Pakistan**.
 - Tajikistan is located close to the Wakhan Corridor, which connects Afghanistan and China, as well as **[Pakistan Occupied Kashmir](#)**.
- **Extended Neighborhood Policy:**
 - In 2022 India demonstrated its commitment to its **["Extended Neighborhood Policy \(ENP\)"](#)**, which calls to diversify its geopolitical partners and diplomatic goals, and its

willingness to engage its Central Asian partners on a multitude of fronts.

- The ENP was launched in 2014 and seeks to build a web of partnerships and economic cooperation with neighboring countries.
- The policy emphasizes **India's commitment to promoting regional stability, peace, and prosperity** through mutually beneficial cooperation with its neighbors.
- **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):**
 - India joined [SCO](#), as a full member in 2017.
 - SCO also includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
 - The grouping provides India with a forum to establish **security relationships with Astana, Bishkek, and Tashkent**, adding on to robust ties with Tajikistan.
- **Connectivity as a Challenge:**
 - While India has trading ties with the C5, it is **hobbled by the absence of a land route to Central Asia**, with **Pakistan denying it passage** and **Afghanistan being uncertain territory** after the Taliban takeover.
 - The [Chabahar port in Iran](#) offers an alternative route, but it is not fully developed yet.
 - There have been suggestions that **India should provide connectivity** for people and trade in **Central Asia through "air corridors"**, as it had done for Afghanistan.

Way Forward

- India must prioritize building long-lasting and reliable partnerships with Central Asian states, particularly in the face of **ongoing geopolitical challenges**. Security will remain a focal point for bilateral relations, but it is important for India to establish links through **transit, trade, investment, and people-to-people** connections.
- **India should take advantage of the vulnerabilities that the region has been exposed to** due to crises such as Russia's war in Ukraine and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.
- **Joint counterterrorism efforts** can help New Delhi establish itself as a consistent partner and monitor adversaries from a closer range.
 - However, India must also **work on other issues to supplement the security aspect** and ensure that the relationship with Central Asia is not susceptible to geopolitical, economic, or domestic pressure.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. What is the importance of developing Chabahar Port by India? (2017)

- (a) India's trade with African countries will enormously increase.
- (b) India's relations with oil-producing Arab countries will be strengthened.
- (c) India will not depend on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- (d) Pakistan will facilitate and protect the installation of a gas pipeline between Iraq and India.

Ans: (c)

Mains

Q. A number of outside powers have entrenched themselves in Central Asia, which is a zone of interest to India. Discuss the implications, in this context, of India's joining the Ashgabat Agreement. (2018)

Source: IE

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