



# India-Central Asia: Defence and Security Cooperation

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# India-Central Asia: Defence and Security Cooperation

## Introduction

Central Asia has emerged as an important geopolitical space after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Its geostrategic location at the crossroads of East and West, South, Central, and West Asia has often resulted in the spread of challenges beyond the region's immediate borders.<sup>1</sup> Three Central Asian Republics, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, share a 2,500 kilometre long and porous border with Afghanistan, making the region exposed to the unfolding crisis in Kabul.<sup>2</sup>

India has multifaceted interests in Central Asia. Following the independence of the Central Asian republics, New Delhi hoped to play a positive role in Eurasian political, economic, and security contexts. However, India's attempts in this direction were hampered due to a lack of political commitment and direct land

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1 Meena Singh Roy, Rajorshi Roy, "Placing India In The Emerging Regional Dynamics Of Central Asia", *Revista UNISCI* 2017, (45) at <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76754084005.pdf>

2 Ibid.

connectivity.<sup>3</sup> There have been consecutive efforts from the Indian side to make a better outreach to Central Asia in the post-Soviet period, but the progress has been slow. However, India's relationship with Central Asian countries has taken a positive turn in the recent past. With PM Modi's visit to five Central Asian countries in July 2015, India's Central Asia policy was revitalised. This was the first visit of any Indian Prime Minister to the region at one go. The visit was a symbolic achievement for Indian diplomacy and a wise strategic decision that cleared the way for overcoming the challenges that had previously hindered India's outreach to an important region in its strategic proximity.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, India was granted the permanent membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, which further accelerated India-Central Asia multilateral engagement. With the formation of the SCO Division in MEA and the appointment of a National Coordinator and Permanent Representative to SCO, India's participation was further activated.<sup>5</sup>

Central Asia is significant for India's energy security and a viable market for Indian companies. Other sectors of mutual interest include tourism, information technology, education, and so forth. Civil-nuclear cooperation has been an important aspect of energy cooperation. Kazakhstan supported India in getting an exemption for India-specific civil-nuclear cooperation with Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) members in 2008. The next year, India and Kazakhstan agreed to

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3 PK Gupta, "India's Policy Towards Central Asia: An Appraisal", *The Diplomatist*, August, 26, 2020, available at <https://diplomatist.com/2020/08/26/indias-policy-towards-central-asia-an-appraisal/>

4 P Stobdan, "India and Central Asia: The Strategic Dimension", IDSA, KW Publishers, 2020. Pdf available at <https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book-india-and-central-asia.pdf>

5 Brief On SCO, Ministry of External Affairs, Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Division, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SCO\\_MULTI\\_Brief\\_feb\\_2020.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/SCO_MULTI_Brief_feb_2020.pdf)

provide India with 2,100 tonnes of uranium till 2014.<sup>6</sup> In 2011, both countries signed an agreement for ‘Cooperation in the Field of Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy’ during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Kazakhstan. In 2019, India and Uzbekistan agreed on a long-term supply agreement for uranium to power Indian nuclear reactors. The Navoi Mining and Metallurgical Combine of Uzbekistan and India’s Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) struck an agreement on the supply of uranium ore concentrate for India’s energy needs. The agreement was inked during Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s second visit to India in January 2019. The uranium supply agreement with Uzbekistan was reached after years of protracted discussions, and it became the second Central Asian nation to export nuclear fuel to India after Kazakhstan.<sup>7</sup>

Currently, India’s commercial activities in Central Asia are limited to the pharmaceutical sector. There is a lot of potential for developing Indian manufacturing units in these countries. There exists strong goodwill for India amongst the Central Asian population. Indian culture, films, music, and television are very popular in these countries. Education cooperation between India and Central Asia is also in a developing stage. Indian students study medicine in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Indian universities (Amity, Sharda, and Sambhram IT University) have also opened their branches in Uzbekistan, and there are also possibilities for their expansion to other Central Asian countries.

The challenging geographical topography, as well as the problematic India-Pakistan border dynamic, significantly hampers connectivity, limiting broader

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6 Rhea Menon, Sharanya Rajiv, “Realizing India’s Strategic Interests in Central Asia”, Carnegie India, December 1, 2019 at <https://carnegieindia.org/2019/12/01/realizing-india-s-strategic-interests-in-central-asia-pub-80576>

7 “Uzbekistan a key partner in India’s efforts to build strategic uranium reserve”, October 21, 2020. Available at <https://www.nuclearasia.com/news/uzbekistan-a-key-partner-in-indias-efforts-to-build-strategic-uranium-reserve/3917/>

economic collaboration between India and the Central Asian region.<sup>8</sup> The lack of connectivity is to blame for the low level of trade and investment. In order to address connectivity issues, India invested in Iran's Chabahar Port. Furthermore, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Ashgabat Agreement are expected to remove connectivity constraints.

Terrorism, radicalism, and the smuggling of narcotics and weapons from Afghanistan are major security concerns for India and Central Asia. As a result, a greater emphasis on regional security was an inescapable requirement. Afghanistan is also vital for India's access to Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, enhanced multilateral cooperation on Afghanistan has been recorded between India and Central Asia following the Taliban takeover of Kabul in August 2021.

The pace of India's multilateral and bilateral interactions with Central Asian countries is steadily improving. This has occurred mostly due to strong political will on both sides. However, there is still a need for advances in less developed sectors. Cooperation in the defence and security arena continues to be one of the most pressing issues. This brief will examine the current state of India-Central Asia defence and security cooperation and make some recommendations.

## **Security: A Factor in India-Central Asia Multilateral Engagement**

Long-standing historical, cultural, political, and economic ties between India and Central Asia have evolved into a stable and transformative association. The proximity and growing convergence on issues of mutual concern between

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8 Rhea Menon, Sharanya Rajiv, "Realizing India's Strategic Interests in Central Asia", Carnegie India, December 1, 2019 at <https://carnegieindia.org/2019/12/01/realizing-india-s-strategic-interests-in-central-asia-pub-80576>

9 Meena Singh Roy, Rajorshi Roy, "Placing India In The Emerging Regional Dynamics Of Central Asia", *Revista UNISCI* 2017, (45) at <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/767/76754084005.pdf>

India and the five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—has resulted in increased cooperation in addressing emerging geostrategic challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapidly changing world order.<sup>10</sup> Concurrently, the two sides have increased their discussions and cooperation on trade, development partnership, connectivity, economic development, energy security, and other regional issues of mutual interest. India and Central Asian countries also held multiple discussions on mutual geopolitical concerns about emerging challenges in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> Terrorism remains a mutual concern; therefore, India has promoted a comprehensive approach to strengthen international cooperation to restrain this menace on bilateral and multilateral fora.

### **Afghanistan: A common Challenge**

Developments in Afghanistan have direct impacts on both regions. Now that the Taliban has returned to the country, there are uncertainties about pursuing relations with the Taliban. While India has taken a pause as the situation unfolds, Central Asian countries have adopted different approaches to deal with it. Post-Taliban takeover, terrorism, and the cyber and narcotics dimensions are critical to the collective security of India and Central Asia. How India pursues its relationship with Afghanistan and how it will impact its relation with Central Asia need to be closely observed.

### **Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan**

On November 10, 2021, India hosted the Delhi Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi. This dialogue brought together the National Security

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10 Debasis Bhattacharya, “India-Central Asia relations: Growing convergence brings relations to strategic heights”, Raisina Debates, Observer Research Foundation, January 11 2022, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-central-asia-relations/>

11 Ibid.

Advisers (NSAs)/Secretaries of Security Councils of Central Asian republics, Russia, and Iran. This was considered a significant achievement of India's active diplomacy in Afghanistan. The 'Delhi Declaration' was adopted at the conclusion of this security dialogue. The participating representatives from Central Asia, Iran, and Russia have agreed to maintain peace and stability in Afghanistan and combat terrorism and illicit drug trafficking. In addition, the NSAs of the participating nations agreed to form an inclusive government in Kabul and reaffirmed that Afghan territory should not be used against any other country.

### **India-Central Asia Dialogue**

The first-ever India-Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Ministers level was held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in January 2019. Afghanistan also participated in this dialogue. Several initiatives were taken during the Samarkand Dialogue to enhance G2G cooperation. The setting up of an 'India-Central Asia Developmental Group' was announced. This group is expected to come up with concrete proposals. It was also decided to develop an India-Central Asia Business Council to enhance trade and commerce between the two regions.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, In February 2020, India-Central Asia Business Council was launched.

The Second Meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue was conducted in a virtual format on October 28, 2020, under the chairmanship of India's External Affairs Minister (EAM), Dr. S. Jaishankar.<sup>13</sup> The second dialogue focussed on enhancing cooperation in fighting pandemics like COVID-19, India's developmental assistance to CARs, eradicating connectivity barriers, developing trade and

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12 "Press Statement by EAM after First India-Central Asia Dialogue" Media Centre, MEA, January 13, 2019. Available at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30907/Press\\_Statement\\_by\\_EAM\\_After\\_1st\\_IndiaCentral\\_Asia\\_Dialogue](https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/30907/Press_Statement_by_EAM_After_1st_IndiaCentral_Asia_Dialogue)

13 "Joint Statement of the 2nd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue" Media Centre, MEA, October 28, 2020 available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/33148/Joint+Statement+of+the+2nd+meeting+of+the+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue>

business, and promoting cultural heritage, tourism, and people-to-people contact. Joint efforts for the development and reconstruction of Afghanistan were also a focus area in this dialogue.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, the Third India-Central Asia Dialogue was held in Delhi on December 19, 2021. The Indian EAM S. Jaishankar met with the Foreign Ministers of Central Asian nations both collectively and bilaterally. The visiting Central Asian foreign ministers also met with PM Modi. In his remarks, Dr. Jaishankar emphasised the need of focusing on the four Cs: commerce, capacity building, connectivity, and contact, which are critical in furthering India's presence in Central Asia. India and Central Asian countries exalted their consensus on Afghanistan and have expressed their willingness to provide humanitarian aid to the country. They also highlighted that Afghan land should not be used for harbouring radicalism and extremist elements.<sup>15</sup>

### **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**

India's permanent SCO membership is regarded as a step forward in her interaction with Central Asia. This has strengthened India's strategic presence in its extended neighbourhood. While a member of the SCO, India has made several specific recommendations for regional cooperation in different areas. However, India must be proactive in realising its goals within the SCO.

By exchanging information, India has increased its collaboration with SCO member states in combating extremism and terrorism through the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) organisation in Tashkent. India also participates

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14 PK Gupta, "Second India-Central Asia Dialogue: Major Takeaways", VIF article, November 20, 2020. Available at <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2020/november/05/second-india-central-asia-dialogue-major-takeaways>

15 Anil Trigunayat and PK Gupta, "Third India-Central Asia dialogue: Shifting gears of India's Central Asia policy", Financial Express, December 21, 2021. Available at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/third-india-central-asia-dialogue-shifting-gears-of-indias-central-asia-policy/2385693/>

in military exercises and peace missions to strengthen security cooperation. India assumed chairmanship of the Council of Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of SCO in October 2021. As chairman of this council, India also hosted a two-day symposium for member governments on cyberspace security in December 2021. This Indian initiative aimed to improve coordination among RATS SCO member nations to combat terrorists, separatists, and extremists' use of the internet.<sup>16</sup>

### **First India-Central Asia Summit**

On January 27, 2022, the First India-Central Asia Summit was held virtually. Indian Prime Minister Modi hosted this summit, and it was attended by the Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>17</sup> PM Modi has emphasised the importance of Central Asian countries to the region's security and stability. The success of the 'Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan,' conducted in New Delhi in November 2021, led India and Central Asian leaders to continue frequent meetings of Security Council secretaries/NSAs to review regional developments. Under the auspices of the SCO, Uzbekistan will host a 'High-Level International Conference on Afghanistan' in Tashkent in July 2022. A Joint Working Group (JWG) on Afghanistan was also announced.<sup>18</sup>

The formation of a JWG on Afghanistan will provide an institutional framework for India-Central Asia's collective efforts to stabilise Afghanistan. Terrorism and extremism are the primary threats to regional stability in India and Central Asia.

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- 16 "RATS SCO Practical Seminar on Securing Cyberspace in the Contemporary Threat Environment for RATS SCO Member States, 7-8 December 2021", PIB release, December 9, 2021. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1779848>
  - 17 "India-Central Asia Virtual Summit" January 27, 2022, PIB Delhi. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1793068>
  - 18 PK Gupta, "First India-Central Asia Summit: Some Major Takeaways", VIF Article, January 31, 2022. Available at <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2022/january/31/first-india-central-asia-summit-some-major-takeaways>

As a result, more cooperation in combating both traditional and emerging forms of terrorism and extremism, such as cyber warfare, is required. Terror financing is another issue that both India and Central Asia face. Tajikistan's intention to organise an International Conference in Dushanbe in 2022 as part of the 'Dushanbe Process on Countering Terrorist Financing' will be a significant step forward in this respect.<sup>19</sup>

## **India-Central Asia Defence Cooperation**

In the defence sector, initial interactions emphasised common threats like religious extremism, terrorism, narcotic-funded violence, and transnational crime. India's military cooperation with Central Asian countries has been notable, but it's far from exhaustive. The region's overall military cooperation is largely constrained to military education, military exercises, infrastructure, and training. India has increased defence cooperation in the region, with a defence attaché deployed in each of India's Central Asian embassies. In 2011, India and Kyrgyzstan held their first joint military drill. During Prime Minister Modi's 2015 visit to the five Central Asian nations, India strengthened the institutional foundation for bilateral defence cooperation. The visit led to the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements for defence and military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan.

### **Kazakhstan**

In 1991, India was one of the first countries to recognise Kazakhstan's independence. One year later, in 1992, diplomatic ties were established. Kazakhstan is India's most important trade partner in the region. According to the statistics, bilateral trade in 2019 totalled 1.9 billion USD, representing a 46 per cent increase from

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19 Ibid.

the previous year.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that, as of 2020, around 700 legal firms and branches with Indian capital participation are registered in Kazakhstan. FICCI and the Chamber of International Commerce of Kazakhstan created a Joint Business Council (JBC) to enhance trade, economic, and investment relations between the two nations.<sup>21</sup>

Defence cooperation between India and Kazakhstan includes annual joint military exercises, bilateral visits, and cadet youth exchange programs. India has provided training to hundreds of Kazakh soldiers. Both countries have successfully conducted a company-level joint military exercise named as 'PRABAL DOSTYK' in 2016 in Kazakhstan. 'PRABAL DOSTYK' 2017 Bakloh in Himachal Pradesh in November 2017. The joint military exercise was renamed as 'KAZIND 2018', which took place in southern Kazakhstan.<sup>22</sup> 'KAZIND 2019' between India and Kazakhstan army was held in Uttarakhand's Pithoragarh. This was the fourth edition of the annual military exercise. The 5th edition of "KAZIND-21" was held from August 30 to September 11, 2021, at Training Node, Aisha Bibi Kazakhstan.<sup>23</sup> This exercise focussed on countering insurgency and terrorism in an urban and rural environment. Although these military exercises have expounded the mutual trust and confidence between the two countries, there is still much to explore in this field.

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20 "India-Kazakhstan Emerging Ties: A look back at 30 years of Strategic Cooperation", News on Air, January 22, 2022, available at <https://newsonair.com/2022/01/24/india-kazakhstan-emerging-ties-a-look-back-at-30-years-of-strategic-cooperation/>

21 Ibid.

22 'India, Kazakhstan agree to ramp up military ties', The Economic Times, 4 October 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-kazakhstan-agree-to-ramp-up-military-ties/articleshow/66076245.cms>

23 "India, Kazakhstan carries out 5th edition of joint military drills KAZIND-21", The Economic Times, September, 7, 2021 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-kazakhstan-carries-out-5th-edition-of-joint-military-drills-kazind-21/articleshow/86004620.cms>

Defence manufacturing and production are where India wants to cooperate with Kazakhstan. There has been discussion between the Defence Ministers of both countries on these issues. It is expected that with the increasing economic and commercial engagements between the two countries defence production and manufacturing will also boost.<sup>24</sup> In April 2021, Defence Minister of Republic of Kazakhstan Lieutenant General Nurlan Yermekbayev visited India and met with Defence Minister Rajnath Singh. Subsequently, in bilateral talks, the focus was on bilateral defence cooperation, capacity building, training, and military exercises. Both leaders agreed to look into the prospects of defence industry partnership.<sup>25</sup>

On October 15, 2020, India and Kazakhstan held a webinar. The webinar's topic was "Make in India for the World, India-Kazakhstan Defence Cooperation: Webinar and Expo." FICCI organised it under the auspices of the Ministry of Defence's Department of Defence Production. This webinar was part of a series arranged with friendly foreign countries to enhance military exports and reach a 5 billion USD defence export objective over the next five years. The webinar was attended by ambassadors from both nations as well as top military personnel from both countries. They discussed the need to capitalise on chances for co-development and co-production and meet<sup>26</sup>

In this webinar, Ashok Leyland Limited, L&T Defence, Bharat Forge, Zen Technologies, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Elcom Innovations, Alpha Design

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24 Huma Siddiqui, "India-Kazakhstan explore joint production of military platforms for the three services", *The financial Express*, April 13, 2021 at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/india-kazakhstan-explore-joint-production-of-military-platforms-for-the-three-services/2232121/>

25 "Raksha Mantri Rajnath Singh holds bilateral talks with Kazakh Defence Minister Lt Gen Nurlan Yermekbayev", *DD News*, April, 10, 2021 at <https://ddnews.gov.in/national/raksha-mantri-rajnath-singh-holds-bilateral-talks-kazakh-defence-minister-lt-gen-nurlan#:~:text=Lieutenant%20General%20Nurlan%20Yermekbayev%20is,the%20invitation%20of%20Raksha%20Mantri.>

26 India – Kazakhstan Defence Cooperation: Webinar and Expo held , PIB releases, October, 16, 2020 available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1664989>

Technologies, and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) made company and product presentations on major platforms/equipment such as artillery systems, radars, protected vehicles, missiles, and air defence equipment, training solutions, and so on. BEL has also announced intentions to establish a representative office in Kazakhstan.<sup>27</sup>

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

## **Uzbekistan**

With the transition in leadership in Uzbekistan, New President Shawkat Mirziyoyev attempted to revitalise India-Uzbekistan relations. It was well supplemented by Prime Minister Modi's attempts to strategise India's Central Asian policy. On September 4-7, 2018, following Uzbekistan's former Uzbek Defence Minister, Maj. Gen. Abdusalam Azizov visit to India, bilateral defence cooperation moved in a forward direction. India and Uzbekistan agreed to increase counterterrorism cooperation through joint military exercises, military education, and military medicine. The plan for 2019-20 included collaborative Special Forces training, military engineering training capsules for Uzbeks, and air force exchanges to aid in the growth of Uzbekistan's Qarshi Aviation School. India has also aided in establishing an India Room at Uzbekistan's Armed Forces Academy in Tashkent.<sup>28</sup>

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27 Ibid.

28 "Brief on India-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations", Embassy of India Tashkent, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_brief\\_Oct\\_2021.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_brief_Oct_2021.pdf)

During Uzbek President Mirziyoyev's visit to India in October 2018, both nations committed to expanding defence and defence industrial cooperation. It has been decided to undertake joint military training exercises to reinforce the counterterrorism framework. Military medicine and military education cooperation have also been permitted. In addition, both nations have resolved to form a Joint Working Group (JWG) to strengthen mutually beneficial defence-related operations. Both countries agreed to establish a Defence Wing at the Uzbek Embassy in New Delhi.<sup>29</sup>

RM Rajnath Singh visited Tashkent and Samarkand on 1-3 November 2019 and held bilateral discussions with his Uzbek counterpart Maj. Gen. Bakhodir Kurbanov. A MoU on Military Medicine was signed. As a follow-up to the MoU on Military Education signed in October 2018, two institutional level MoUs for collaboration in training and capacity building were also concluded. Dustlik I, the first-ever bilateral military exercise between India and Uzbekistan, was launched by RM Rajnath Singh from 4 to November 14 2019, in the Chirchiq training area near Tashkent.<sup>30</sup>

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

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29 Grevatt, J. (2018), "India, Uzbekistan agree defence industry ties", 2 October, 2018, available at <https://www.janes.com/article/83487/india-uzbekistan-agree-defence-industry-ties>

30 "Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh calls for isolating nations adopting terrorism as state policy Extends full assistance to Armed Forces of Uzbekistan for modernisation and capacity building", PIB releases, Novemebr, 3 2019. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1590190>

such circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

On the 27th and 28th of February 2019, India and Uzbekistan convened their first annual Joint Working Group on Defence in New Delhi, followed by a visit by the Indian Defence Secretary to Tashkent in March 2019. India has provided a USD 40 million Line of Credit to the Republic of Uzbekistan as part of defence industrial cooperation. New Delhi also hosted two defence industrial workshops in September 2019 and November 2020, with the participation of members from both the public and commercial sectors.<sup>32</sup>

## Tajikistan

India-Tajikistan relations have always been cordial. Regular high-level visits between the two nations have strengthened bilateral ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations on August 28, 1992. Deeply ingrained historical and cultural ties have contributed towards expanding and broadening the relationship to a higher platform. The partnership between the two countries spans all spheres of bilateral activities, emphasising enhancing cooperation military and defence sectors. Gradually the Defence cooperation between India and Tajikistan has become one of the main pillars of their bilateral relations.<sup>33</sup> India provides military training to a substantial number of military officers, and cadets from Tajikistan at its National Defence College and Indian Military Academy. India also set up India-Tajikistan Friendship Hospital near Qurganteppe, Tajikistan, where Indian doctors and medical staff provide medical care to the civil and

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31 “Indo-Uzbekistan Field Training Exercise ‘DUSTLIK ‘ commences in Ranikhet(Uttarakhand)”; PIB releases, Ministry of Defence, GOI. March 10, 2021. Available at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1703755>

32 “Brief on India-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations”, Embassy of India, Tashkent, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Uzbekistan\\_22-7-2021.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India-Uzbekistan_22-7-2021.pdf)

33 “Brief of India-Tajikistan Bilateral Relations”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, available at [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral\\_Brief\\_July\\_2021-1.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Bilateral_Brief_July_2021-1.pdf)

armed forces patients.<sup>34</sup>

## **Kyrgyzstan**

During PM Modi's visit to Kyrgyzstan in July 2015, India and Kyrgyzstan signed four significant agreements, including enhancing defence cooperation and holding annual military exercises. PM Modi appreciated Indo-Kyrgyz Joint Military Training Exercise Khanjar and commented that the same be held annually. However, Joint military exercise is the only significant achievement of India's defence cooperation with this country.

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

In 2017, Kyrgyzstan hosted Khanjar-IV. The fifth exercise, Khanjar-V was held in India in 2018 in Counter Insurgency Jungle Warfare School in Vairengte, Mizoram. In 2019, Khanjar-VI was held in Kyrgyzstan. Khanjar-VII took place in India in early February 2020, according to Indian government sources. The eighth edition debuted in mid-April 2021 in Bishkek, with a ceremony attended by the commander of the Kyrgyz National Guards, Colonel Ergeshov Talantbek, and Indian Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan Alok A. Dimri. According to the news

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34 PK Gupta, "India-Tajikistan Relations: The Security Factor" VIF Brief, March 2019, available at [https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/India-Tajikistan-Relations\\_5.pdf](https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/India-Tajikistan-Relations_5.pdf)

statement, how many troops from either side are taking part is unknown. Nonetheless, a photo posted on the official Indian Army Facebook page showed around 20 troops from each side, sporting berets and masks and standing behind seated officials and dignitaries who were uncovered due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Both sides have benefitted immensely from their respective experiences in Special Forces Counter-Terrorism operations in mountainous terrain through the joint exercises.

## **Turkmenistan**

Turkmenistan and India have cordial and strong historical connections. Contacts with the Indus Valley Civilization have been demonstrated through archaeological findings in south Turkmenistan. Regular high-level visits have helped to develop bilateral relations in contemporary times. Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov visited India in May 2010. In July 2015, Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi visited Turkmenistan. Several important Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements spanning fields like science and technology, defence, tourism were inked during these trips.<sup>36</sup> Despite signing an agreement to strengthen cooperation in the defence sector, little progress has been made. Among the Central Asian republics, India-Turkmenistan defence and security cooperation is the most limited.

## **Challenges and the Way Forward**

- i. India's military relations with the Central Asian countries have been significant but far more limited. The overall military cooperation with

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35 "India, Kyrgyzstan special forces start two-week counter-terror drills", Wion News, April 17, 2021, available at <https://www.wionews.com/india-news/india-kyrgyzstan-special-forces-start-two-week-counter-terror-drills-378092>

36 India-Turkmenistan Relations, Brief on Foreign relations, MEA, [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Turkmenistan\\_2022.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Turkmenistan_2022.pdf)

the region is mostly limited to military education, infrastructure, and training.

- ii. There is still a lot of opportunities for India to advance its defence cooperation with Central Asian countries
- iii. India must strive to execute the defence manufacturing agreements it has inked with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.
- iv. Russia led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has established itself as the most trusted security alliance in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of this group. India must initiate some dialogue with this regional security grouping or present its candidature as an observer.
- v. Russia is the security manager in Central Asia. India shares strong and cordial relations with Moscow. So, New Delhi-Moscow cooperation in central Asia concerning defence and security may be another agenda for multilateral cooperation. Together with Central Asian countries, Russia and India may engage in joint defence production and carry out Military exercises.
- vi. India-Central Asia joint manufacturing in defence sector can also be promoted.
- vii. The India-Uzbekistan military medicine agreement can be expanded to other Central Asian republics.
- viii. India can also work with its Central Asian partners in exchanging defence expertise and knowledge sharing.
- ix. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan share a direct border with Afghanistan and are vulnerable to cross-border security threats. Cooperation in border security as a part of India-Central Asia defence cooperation can also be encouraged.
- x. The establishment of India-Central Asia Defence ministers' forum may accelerate the cooperation in this sector.
- xi. India-Central Asia NSAs and Head of Security Council may also form a forum on defence and security cooperation.

- xii. India-Central Asia joint military training can be promoted
- xiii. India-Central Asia Defence Expo can be organised to promote business opportunities in this sector.
- xiv. India's 40 million USD line of credit for procurement of goods and services by Uzbekistan may be extended to other CARs.

## **About the VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION**

The Vivekananda International Foundation is an independent non-partisan institution that conducts research and analysis on domestic and international issues, and offers a platform for dialogue and conflict resolution. Some of India's leading practitioners from the fields of security, military, diplomacy, government, academia and media have come together to generate ideas and stimulate action on national security issues.

The defining feature of VIF lies in its provision of core institutional support which enables the organisation to be flexible in its approach and proactive in changing circumstances, with a long-term focus on India's strategic, developmental and civilisational interests. The VIF aims to channelise fresh insights and decades of experience harnessed from its faculty into fostering actionable ideas for the nation's stakeholders.

Since its inception, VIF has pursued quality research and scholarship and made efforts to highlight issues in governance, and strengthen national security. This is being actualised through numerous activities like seminars, round tables, interactive dialogues, Vimarsh (public discourse), conferences and briefings. The publications of VIF form lasting deliverables of VIF's aspiration to impact on the prevailing discourse on issues concerning India's national interest.



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