India and Central Asia

India’s relation with Central Asia has a long history. The two regions have shared deep cultural linkages with each other over two millennia in terms of people to people contact, trade, and commerce.

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History

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- Ancient kingdoms like the Kushana Empire had territory in parts of both regions. These historical and civilizational linkages have spilled over into many areas including religion and culture.
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- These contacts were further strengthened in the medieval ages with the advent of Islam and later with the establishment of Muslim rule in India, many of whose rulers had their origins in Central Asia.
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- Modern Central Asia consists of five nations: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.
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- All five Central Asian nations became independent after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.
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- The Central Asian region is considered to be the part of India’s “extended neighborhood.”
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- The Central Asian states were earlier a part of the Soviet Union, which had very friendly relations with India, the contacts between the two regions were not lost.
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- India had good diplomatic engagements with the region as it had a consulate

at Tashkent in the erstwhile Central Asian region of the Soviet Union.
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- After the breakup of the Soviet Union, there seemed to be drift in India's relations with this region.
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- First, the most prominent being that India was thoroughly engaged with its immediate neighborhood, especially Pakistan, over the issue of Kashmir.
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- Second, India was now on its own in the international system as it no longer had the backing of the erstwhile superpower USSR, which had been disintegrated.
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- The Soviet Union's successor state, Russia, was facing a deep economic crisis in the early 1990s.
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- As a result, India's priorities in terms of bilateral engagements shifted gradually.
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- Initially Central Asian states featured very low in India's priority list, at least in the first decade of their independence.
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- India woke up late to the quickly changing geopolitical and geoeconomic realities of Central Asia.
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Great Power Games

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- Over the past decade, the region has become the site of great power tussles over energy resources.
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- At the same time, the world witnessed India's rise as an economic power and a regional power.
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- Now India cannot afford to overlook Central Asia if it has any ambition of remaining a "rising power" in the international system.
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- A new look at Central Asia was that India was losing its "immediate neighborhood" to China, which developed very good political and economic relations with nearly all of India's neighbors, thereby strategically encircling India.
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- China has made deep inroads in the Central Asian republics in terms of investments with the region.
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India and Connect Central Asia policy

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- Due to increasing presence of China, India formulated its Connect Central Asia Policy which is a broad-based approach including political, security, economic, and cultural connections.
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- The primary goal behind the Connect Central Asia policy was re-connecting with the region which has a long shared history with India.
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- India’s Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahmed unveiled the “Connect Central Asia Policy” (CCAP) at the first meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track II initiative, held from June 12-13, 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to fast-track India’s relations with the Central Asian states.
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- The key elements of this policy cover many important issue areas, including political cooperation, economic cooperation, strategic cooperation, regional connectivity, information technology (IT), cooperation in education, people-to-people contact, medical cooperation, and cooperation in regional groupings.
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Geostrategic importance of Centrla Asia

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- Central Asia is strategically positioned as an access point between Europe and Asia and offers extensive potential for trade, investment, and growth.
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- Central Asia is not a part of India’s immediate neighborhood and therefore it doesn’t share borders with India, the issue of connectivity between the two regions becomes of paramount importance.
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Geoeconomic Importance of Central Asia:

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- The region is richly endowed with commodities such as crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, and iron, the increasing importance of the region’s oil and gas resources has generated new rivalries among external powers.
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- India is working to invest in the region in the IT and education sectors. Since, India has a big IT sector and very qualified and talented working professionals, India is looking to use its power in this sector to set up a Central Asian e-network linking all five Central Asian states with its hub in India to provide tele-education and telemedicine connectivity. The IT sector has a huge potential and can work as a bridge to bring the region closer.
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- Geoeconomics is intimately linked with geopolitics and therefore economic cooperation between India and the CARs plays an important role in developing strong defense ties, by strengthening strategic and security cooperation with a strong focus on military training.
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Geo Secuirty Cooperation

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- Security cooperation includes conducting joint research on military-defense issues, coordinating on counterterrorism measures, and a special focus on consulting closely on the issue of Afghanistan, whose security is extremely crucial for both India and Central Asia.
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- This security cooperation has a limitation of its own and that factor is geography.
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- For India to reach Central Asia, the shortest route goes via Pakistan and Afghanistan.
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- Pakistan’s hostility with India and its cooperation with China against India are evident, overland connectivity with Central Asia remains problematic.
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- The other problem is that both Pakistan and Afghanistan are not secure and stable countries, so even if India shared good relations with Pakistan, this route to Central Asia from India is not a safe and reliable path for trade and commerce.

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- The safety of goods and transport of energy resources is extremely crucial as the stakes of both the governmental and private players in terms of investments are very high.
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- Many scholars argue that because of this reason, important projects like the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline are still in limbo. To date not a single drop of oil from Central Asia has reached India.
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- The reasons for delay in TAPI to function is lack of good regional connectivity.
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- Another reason is due to the landlocked nature of Central Asian states, there is no direct sea route between India and the region and that too has a huge impact on regional connectivity.
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- To address this problem, talks have been going on the issue of working jointly to reactivate the international north-south transport corridor.
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India and Soft Power in Central asia

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- India needs to use its soft power while dealing with the region.
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- The “people-to-people” contact has been a defining feature of India’s Connect Central Asia Policy.
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- Many students from Central Asia come to India for higher studies because India provides higher education at marginal cost when compared to European and American universities.
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- Many Indian students also visit Central Asia for research purposes. India needs to make itself a more attractive destination for educational purposes to Central Asian students.
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- Indian cultural products have been extremely popular in the region since the time of the USSR.
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- People in Centrla Asia listen to Hindi music and watch Indian Movies from Bollywood.
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- India can increase its attractiveness to the region’s countries more effectively then by any other means.
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- Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to the five Central Asian states presented an excellent opportunity for India to nurture peace in a region being swept by radical extremist winds.
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Conclusion

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- Connect Central Asia policy shouldn’t just remain on paper but it should be realized in practice.
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- Connect Central Asia policy is a holistic policy which is not just about energy, oil, and natural resources but about cooperating in every sphere, including politics, culture, and defense.
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- This policy will be a game changer in times to come. Central Asian regional dynamics will become very interesting with India’s involvement in the region in the coming years.
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Category: Mains| GS – II| bilateral relation

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Source: The Diplomat

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