India-Central Asia Virtual Summit

Why in news?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi hosted the first India-Central Asia Summit in virtual format which was attended by Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

How has the India-Central Asia relation evolved?

History

- Ancient kingdoms like the Kushana Empire had territory in parts of both regions creating historical and civilizational linkages.
- The relationship strengthened in the medieval ages with the advent of Islam and establishment of Muslim rule in India, many of whose rulers had their origins in Central Asia.
- Modern Central Asia consists of five nations: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan which became independent after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.
- The Central Asian region is considered to be the part of India's "extended neighbourhood."

Geostrategic importance

- Central Asia is strategically positioned as an access point between Europe and Asia and offers extensive potential for trade, investment, and growth.

Geoeconomic Importance

- The region is richly endowed with commodities such as crude oil, natural gas, cotton, gold, copper, aluminium, and iron.
- India is working to invest in the region in the IT and education sectors as India has a very big IT sector and qualified working professionals.

Geo Security Cooperation

- Security cooperation includes conducting joint research on military-defence issues, coordinating on counterterrorism measures, and a special focus on the issue of Afghanistan.

Soft Power

- The people-to-people contact has been a defining feature of India's Connect Central Asia Policy.
- Indian cultural products have been extremely popular in the region since the time of the USSR.

What is the summit about?

- The first India-Central Asia coincided with the 30th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries.
- The leaders of the five central Asian countries were likely to be the chief guest, but the country saw a rise in COVID-19 cases which led to curtailed celebrations.
- **Objectives of the summit**
    1. to make it clear that cooperation between India and Central Asia is essential for regional security and prosperity
    2. to give an effective structure to India- Central Asia cooperation by establishing a framework of regular interactions at different levels
    3. to create an ambitious roadmap for the cooperation

What was the outcome of the summit?

- **Institutionalisation of the Summit**- The Leaders agreed to institutionalize the Summit mechanism by deciding to hold it every 2 years.
- They also agreed on regular meetings of Foreign Ministers, Trade Ministers, Culture Ministers and Secretaries of the Security Council to prepare the groundwork for the Summit meetings.
- **Secretariat-** An India-Central Asia Secretariat in New Delhi would be set up to support the new mechanism.
- **Areas of discussion-** The Leaders discussed to further cooperation in areas of trade and connectivity, development cooperation, defence and security and on cultural and people to people contacts.
- These included
    - Round-Table on Energy and Connectivity
    - Joint Working Groups at senior official level on Afghanistan
    - Use of Chabahar Port
    - Showcasing of Buddhist exhibitions in Central Asian countries
    - Commissioning of an India-Central Asia dictionary of common words
    - Joint counter-terrorism exercises
    - Visit of 100 member youth delegation annually from Central Asian countries to India
    - Special courses for Central Asian diplomats
- **Areas of concern-** The lack of access to land routes, and the situation in Afghanistan are among the biggest challenges.
- **Joint Declaration-** A comprehensive Joint Declaration was adopted by the leaders for an enduring and comprehensive India-Central Asia partnership.

What were the areas of concern noted in the joint statement?

- **Trade-** There is the problem of retreating trade with only 2 billion dollars, spent mostly on Kazakhstan's energy exports to India.
- In comparison, China's CAR trade figures have exceeded 41 billion dollars apart from the money invested in the Belt and Road Initiative.
- **Connectivity**- Pakistan is denying India transit trade.
- New Delhi's option is to smoothen the route through **Iran's Chabahar port**, but that will involve greater investment in rail and road routes, something India is hesitant to do in the face of U.S. sanctions.
- The option to use the Russia-Iran **International North-South Transport Corridor via**

Bandar Abbas port is also challenging as it is not fully operational and at least two CARs (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) are not members.

- India has also concerns over TAPI gas pipeline plans (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India), given the tensions with Pakistan.
- **Afghanistan-** Afghanistan is the delicate link between Central Asia and South Asia.
- With Taliban takeover, there is no official government, a humanitarian crisis is building, and there are worries of terrorism and radicalism spilling over its boundaries.

What interventions were made by India in Central Asia?

- New Delhi signed the **Strategic Partnership Agreements** with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to stimulate defence cooperation and deepen trade relations.
- India formulated its **Connect Central Asia Policy** which is a broad-based approach including political, security, economic, and cultural connections.
- India signed MoUs with Iran in 2015 to develop the **Chabahar port** in the Sistan-Baluchistan province to diversify the export markets and control China's ambitions.
- The government has also proposed to include the strategic Chabahar Port in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).
- The Central Asian countries have admitted New Delhi into the **Ashgabat Agreement** allowing India to facilitate trade and commercial interactions with Central Asia and Eurasia.
- India has extended a credit line of 200 million dollar for the support of development projects in Kyrgyzstan.
- It has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on High-Impact Community Development Projects (HICDP).
- India has supported efforts for a peaceful solution of the **Nagorno-Karabakh conflict** between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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