



## A strategic bulwark

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**(Mains GS 2 : Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting the Indian interests).**

### Context:

The 3rd meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue was held in **New Delhi** on 19 December 2021 under the chairmanship of the External Affairs Minister of India in which Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Republic of Uzbekistan took part.

### Appreciating the role:

- The Ministers underlined the civilizational, cultural, trade and people-to-people linkages between India and Central Asian countries and reaffirmed their commitment to building a comprehensive and enduring India-Central Asia partnership.
- They highly appreciated the role of the India-Central Asia Dialogue, as an effective platform for strengthening the multifaceted cooperation and exchanging views on various regional and international issues of mutual interest.
- They emphasized that establishment of long-term relations between Central Asia and India is aimed at enhancing regional peace, security, stability, sustainable economic growth and prosperity in the region.
- They discussed further strengthening of the India-Central Asia Dialogue and agreed to hold regular annual meetings of the Dialogue.

### Series of events:

- The third India-Central Asia Dialogue convened by the External Affairs Minister is one in a series of timely connections to the region by New Delhi this year, spurred in some measure by events in Afghanistan.
- The dialogue has been held a month before leaders of all five Central Asian Republics (CARs) come to New Delhi as chief guests for the Republic Day celebrations.
- During the recent visit of President Putin to India a new bilateral high level mechanism was created to coordinate approaches towards the evolving situation in Afghanistan.
- Recently, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval's "Regional Security Dialogue" with his CAR counterparts also took place in New Delhi to discuss Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan crisis:**

- Among the issues discussed were extending "immediate" humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, increasing trade, and improving connectivity.
- The Central Asian neighbours of Afghanistan worry about the threat of terrorism, radicalisation, narcotics, and refugees.
- Three Central Asian nations Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, share a direct border with Afghanistan and have been vulnerable to the consequences of the developments in Afghanistan.
- However, All Central Asian countries except Tajikistan have resorted to engaging with the Taliban government, especially providing humanitarian assistance.

### **Trade and connectivity:**

- The CARs welcomed the signing of MoUs for implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) for socio-economic development in Central Asian countries, based on grant assistance by India.
- The Ministers noted the current level of trade and investment (below 2 billion) between India and Central Asian countries and stressed on the importance of making concerted efforts to achieve the full potential for trade, especially in sectors like pharmaceuticals, information technology, agriculture, energy, textiles, gems & jewellery etc.
- They encouraged development of direct contacts between the States of India and the Regions of Central Asian countries, including through signing of Agreements/MoUs on the establishment of twinning/partnership relations between the states of the Republic of.
- India's \$1 billion Line of Credit for projects in Central Asia, and connectivity initiatives such as Chabahar port, the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline were all part of the dialogue.

### **Recognise the geopolitics:**

- While the strengthening of India-Central Asia ties and a revival of their traditional, historical and cultural links are much needed, it is also important to recognise the geopolitical cross-currents that complicate such efforts.

- While Russia continues to wield influence in the CAR governments, China's Belt and Road Initiative and \$100 billion trade (by some estimates) have made it a central figure in the region.
- The U.S. has also been seeking a foothold in the region, especially after Afghanistan.
- Meanwhile, India's land connectivity to Central Asia is hampered by Pakistan and development of alternative routes, via Iran's Chabahar, has received a setback after the Taliban takeover of Kabul.
- Further the development of the Indian-managed Shahid Beheshti terminal there continues to suffer due to the threat of American sanctions.

### **Conclusion:**

- While India has strengthened ties with other parts of Asia, it must now redouble its efforts towards Central Asia if it is to counter the 'Great Game' rivalries playing out in the region.
- India also needs to reclaim its shared history with central asian countries that are an important market, a source for energy, and also a bulwark against the threats of extremism and radicalisation.