



India's 'return' to Central Asia

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(Mains GS 2 : Bilateral, Regional and Global Groupings and Agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.)

Context:

In recent months dialogues and summits held with Central Asia like the inaugural India-Central Asia Summit, the India-Central Asia Dialogue, and the Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in New Delhi collectively indicate a renewed enthusiasm in New Delhi to engage the Central Asian region.

Geopolitical reason:

- India has limited economic and other stakes in the region, primarily due to lack of physical access; yet the region appears to have gained a great deal of significance in India's strategic thinking over the years, particularly in the recent past.
- India's mission Central Asia today reflects, and is responsive to, the new geopolitical, if not the geo-economic, realities in the region.
- India's renewed engagement of Central Asia is in the right direction for the simple reason that while the gains from an engagement of Central Asia may be minimal, the disadvantages of non-engagement could be costly in the longer run.

Struggle of power:

- One of the factors driving India's engagement to the Central Asian region is the great power dynamics there.

- The decline of American presence and power in the broader region (due primarily to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan) has led to a reassertion by China and Russia seeking to fill the power vacuum.
- While China dominates the geo-economic landscape, Russia is the dominant politico-military power in the region but in the end, geo-economics might gain more traction.

Engagement with India:

- A somewhat anxious Moscow considers India to be a useful partner in the region: it helps it to not only win back New Delhi, which is moving towards the U.S., but also to subtly checkmate the rising Chinese influence in its backyard.
- For the U.S., while growing India-Russia relations is not a welcome development, it recognises the utility of Moscow-New Delhi relations in Central Asia to offset Beijing's ever-growing influence there.
- As for China, India's engagement of the region and the growing warmth in India-Russia relations are not a cause for concern yet, but they could be eventually.

Continental nutcracker situation:

- In the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, New Delhi faces a major dilemma in the wider region, not just in the pre-existing theatres like the Line of Control and the Line of Actual Control.
- There are growing and legitimate concerns within the Indian strategic community that India in the region might get further hemmed in due to the combined efforts by China, Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan.
- If so, it must ensure that there is no China-led strategic gang up with Pakistan and the Taliban against India in the region, which, if it becomes a reality, would severely damage Indian interests.

Focus on Afghanistan:

- India's engagement in Central Asia would help it to consolidate its post-American Afghan policy.
- U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan has landed India in a major dilemma as it has very limited space to engage Taliban 2.0 despite the current relationship whose future depends on a number of variables.
- During the Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani governments, given their proximity to India and the presence of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan, India was able to engage Kabul without too much hardship, despite Pakistani resistance.

New ways of engaging:

- Now the Taliban have returned to Kabul which leads to force New Delhi to devise new ways of engaging Afghanistan thus in this engagement the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and Russia could be helpful.
- For instance, given its location bordering Afghanistan as well as its close geographical proximity to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Tajikistan holds immense geopolitical significance for India (incidentally, India helps maintain an airbase in the country).
- India's innovation to engage with CARs in pursuit of its interests in Afghanistan is reflected from the announcement of a Joint Working Group on Afghanistan during the summit between India and the CARs.

Current vision:

- In India's current vision for a regional security architecture, Russia appears prominent.
- President Vladimir Putin's meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the earlier meeting between Russian National Security Adviser General Nikolai Patrushev and Mr. Modi are indications of the growing relationship.
- A cursory glance at the various issues being discussed between the two sides also indicates a new joint thinking on regional security.
- Thus, New Delhi expects the U.S. to understand that in the wake of the latter's withdrawal from the region leaving India in the lurch, New Delhi has no choice but to work with the Russians.

Prioritise relationship:

- Russia and India recently exchanged a 'non-paper' on how to increase their joint engagement in Central Asia.
- Both India and the CARs use Russian defence equipment, and the non-paper has reportedly explored the possibility of joint Indo-Russian defence production in some of the existing Soviet-era defence facilities in the CARs to meet local and Indian demands.
- The non-paper also reportedly discusses potential trilateral defence exercises among India, Russia and the CARs.
- In any case, joint defence production by India and Russia has been on the rise and the CARs could play a key role in it.
- This growing India-Russia partnership also explains India's non-critical stance on the developments in Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

Challenges ahead:

- India's 'return' to Central Asia is not going to be easy as China, which shares a land border with the region, is already a major investor there.

- China is the region's most important economic partner, a reality that worries Russia and sharpens India's relative irrelevance in the region.
- An even bigger challenge for India may be Iran as India's best shot at reaching the CARs is by using a hybrid model – via sea to Chabahar and then by road/rail through Iran (and Afghanistan) to the CARs.
- So, for New Delhi, the ongoing re-negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (or the Iran nuclear deal) are of crucial importance.
- If there is a deal, it would bring Tehran back into the Western fold and away from China (and Russia), which will be favorable to India.

Conclusion:

India needs to show its political will, material capability and diplomatic wherewithal to stay the course on its commitments to Central Asia.