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PM Modi's Central Asia Visit Strengthens India's Security, Connectivity and Energy Partnerships Across the Eurasian Heartland

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Recent Developments:

- Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** is undertaking a four-day visit to **Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic from 29 August to 1 September 2026**, reflecting India's renewed strategic engagement with Central Asia.
- The Prime Minister visited **Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on 29–30 August** for bilateral discussions aimed at strengthening cooperation in **trade and investment, digital connectivity, defence, energy, education and people-to-people exchanges**.
- He subsequently travelled to **Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic**, to participate in the **26th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit**, held from **31 August to 1 September 2026**.
- India, a full member of the **SCO since 2017**, is expected to emphasise its regional vision centred on **Security, Connectivity and Opportunity**, while advocating collective action against terrorism, separatism and extremism.
- The visit assumes greater geopolitical significance because Central Asia has emerged as an important arena of interaction among **Russia, China, India, Western powers and other regional actors**.

Central Asia: Strategic and Geographic Significance:

The Five Central Asian Republics:

- Central Asia comprises five post-Soviet republics—**Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan**—located at the strategic intersection of **Russia, China, South Asia, West Asia and Europe**.
- The region's location gives it considerable geopolitical significance because it can influence **continental connectivity, energy transportation and regional security** across Eurasia.
- Historically, Central Asia remained closely connected with Russia through political, economic and linguistic networks, while China has substantially expanded its economic and infrastructure footprint during the post-Soviet period.
- The region has therefore increasingly become a theatre of **geopolitical competition and geo-economic engagement**, rather than remaining confined to the influence of a single major power.

India's Extended Neighbourhood:

- India officially considers the Central Asian countries part of its **Extended Neighbourhood**, reflecting the region's direct relevance to India's strategic and economic interests.
- India's engagement received greater institutional momentum through the **Connect Central Asia Policy**, announced in **2012**, which emphasised political cooperation, security engagement, economic relations and connectivity.

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- Prime Minister Modi further elevated this outreach by becoming the **first Indian Prime Minister to visit all five Central Asian countries in 2015**.
- The first **India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022** institutionalised leader-level engagement, with the participating countries agreeing to hold the summit every two years and establish supporting ministerial and official-level mechanisms.

Why Central Asia Matters to India:

Energy and Mineral Security:

- Central Asia possesses substantial reserves of **uranium, hydrocarbons and strategic minerals**, making it important for India's long-term energy and resource security.
- **Kazakhstan** possesses significant uranium and mineral resources and has emerged as an important partner for India's civilian nuclear energy requirements.
- **Turkmenistan** possesses major natural gas reserves and is central to the proposed **Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline**.
- **Uzbekistan** possesses substantial reserves of gold, uranium and natural gas, while the **Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan** possess considerable hydropower potential.
- Diversified access to these resources can reduce India's vulnerability to excessive dependence on limited geographical sources of energy and critical minerals.

Strategic Balancing:

- China's economic influence in Central Asia has expanded substantially through trade, infrastructure investments and the **Belt and Road Initiative**.
- India's deeper engagement provides Central Asian countries with additional strategic and economic partnerships, thereby supporting their objective of maintaining **strategic autonomy and diversified external relations**.
- India's approach should not be viewed solely through the prism of competition with China, as the region also offers opportunities for **cooperative regional development and multipolar engagement**.
- Nevertheless, sustained Indian engagement is important to prevent the strategic space of Central Asia from becoming excessively dominated by any single external power.

Regional Security:

- Central Asia's proximity to **Afghanistan** makes regional stability directly relevant to India's security interests.
- The Taliban's return to power has intensified concerns regarding **terrorism, radicalisation, extremism and the possible movement of transnational terrorist organisations**.
- Central Asian states and India therefore share an interest in preventing Afghanistan from becoming a source of cross-border instability.
- The **SCO** provides India with an important multilateral platform to discuss regional security challenges alongside Central Asian countries, Russia and China.

Connectivity: India's Major Strategic Challenge:

Lack of Direct Overland Access:

- India faces a structural connectivity challenge because it lacks **direct overland access to Central Asia through Pakistan**.
- This geographical constraint increases transportation costs and limits the volume of direct trade between India and the landlocked Central Asian republics.

- Improving connectivity is therefore one of the most important requirements for converting India's historical and diplomatic links into sustained economic engagement.

International North–South Transport Corridor:

- The **International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** provides an important alternative connectivity framework linking India with Eurasia through maritime, rail and road networks.
- Integration of the corridor with **Iran's Chabahar Port** can potentially provide India with greater access to Afghanistan and Central Asia without dependence on Pakistani territory.
- Chabahar therefore has significance beyond bilateral India-Iran relations and represents an important component of India's broader **Eurasian connectivity strategy**.
- Greater coordination between India, Iran and Central Asian countries can help develop economically viable multimodal routes.

Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation:

Importance of the SCO for India:

- The **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation** was established in **2001** and has evolved into an important Eurasian platform for cooperation on security, political issues and regional economic engagement.
- India became a **full member in 2017**, enabling it to participate more directly in discussions affecting Central Asian security and regional connectivity.
- The organisation allows India to maintain institutional engagement with Central Asian states while simultaneously interacting with major Eurasian powers.
- India's priorities at the SCO include combating **terrorism, separatism and extremism**, strengthening connectivity and expanding mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

Limitations of the SCO:

- The SCO includes states with significant **strategic rivalries and divergent geopolitical interests**, which can limit consensus and effective implementation.
- India must therefore use the organisation as one component of a broader Central Asia strategy rather than relying exclusively on multilateral engagement.
- Bilateral partnerships with individual Central Asian countries remain essential because their economic priorities and security concerns differ significantly.

Civilisational and Cultural Connections:

Historical Linkages:

- India and Central Asia share centuries-old connections through **trade routes, migration, Buddhism, cultural exchanges and historical empires**.
- The region historically served as an important connecting space between the Indian subcontinent and wider Eurasia.
- Such civilisational connections provide India with a form of **soft power**, which can complement contemporary strategic and economic engagement.

India–Uzbekistan Cultural Relations:

- Uzbekistan occupies a particularly important place in India's historical engagement with Central Asia.
- **Termez and the Kara Tepa archaeological complex** provide important evidence of the historical spread of Buddhism and cultural interaction between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.
- Shared linguistic and cultural influences are also visible in aspects of vocabulary, food and historical traditions.

- These connections can support greater cooperation in **education, tourism, cultural exchanges, academic research and people-to-people relations.**

Economic and Development Cooperation:

Expanding Trade and Investment:

- Central Asia offers opportunities for India in **pharmaceuticals, information technology, digital services, education, healthcare, mining and infrastructure development.**
- Uzbekistan has emerged as an important economic partner, and the current visit seeks to further expand cooperation in **trade, investment, defence, digital connectivity and energy.**
- Stronger institutional connectivity and improved transport corridors will be necessary for India to fully utilise the region's commercial potential.

Development Partnership:

- India can strengthen its regional profile through **capacity building, education, digital public infrastructure, healthcare cooperation and technical assistance.**
- These sectors allow India to differentiate its engagement by focusing on **human-centric and demand-driven development partnerships.**
- Such cooperation can create long-term goodwill without generating excessive debt dependence or political sensitivity.

Major Challenges for India:

Connectivity Constraints:

- The absence of direct land connectivity remains the most significant practical obstacle to expanding India-Central Asia trade.
- Alternative routes through Iran and the wider Eurasian connectivity network require sustained infrastructure development and political coordination.

Regional Security Uncertainty:

- Instability in Afghanistan continues to pose risks relating to **terrorism, extremism and cross-border organised crime.**
- A deteriorating regional security environment can undermine economic projects and transport corridors.

Great-Power Competition:

- Central Asia is witnessing increasing engagement from **China, Russia, the United States, Trkiye, the European Union and other regional powers.**
- India must expand its influence without forcing Central Asian countries to choose between competing geopolitical blocs.

Economic Competition:

- India's economic presence remains smaller than that of several major regional powers, particularly China.
- India therefore requires greater private-sector participation and commercially viable projects to complement government-led diplomacy.

Way Forward:

Build Reliable Connectivity:

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- India should accelerate coordination on **Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor** while exploring additional multimodal links with Central Asian partners.
- Connectivity projects must focus on commercial viability, predictable logistics and sustained institutional coordination.

Strengthen Security Cooperation:

- India should expand cooperation in **counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing, border management, cyber security and capacity building**.
- Regular dialogue on Afghanistan should remain an important component of India-Central Asia engagement.

Deepen Economic Integration:

- India should focus on sectors where it possesses comparative advantages, including **pharmaceuticals, digital technology, education, healthcare and renewable energy**.
- Greater business-to-business engagement is required to transform diplomatic goodwill into sustained economic partnerships.

Expand People-to-People Relations:

- Scholarships, academic exchanges, cultural programmes and tourism can strengthen India's long-term societal connections with Central Asia.
- Civilisational diplomacy should complement rather than substitute for modern **economic and strategic engagement**.

Conclusion:

- Prime Minister Modi's Central Asia visit reflects India's sustained effort to transform the region into a more important pillar of its **Extended Neighbourhood and Eurasian strategy**.
- Central Asia is significant for India's **energy security, mineral access, regional security, connectivity and geopolitical influence**.
- However, India's ambitions remain constrained by limited direct connectivity and intense geopolitical competition.
- A successful long-term strategy will require India to combine **connectivity diplomacy, economic engagement, security cooperation and civilisational soft power**.
- The ultimate objective should be to develop Central Asia as a region of **shared prosperity and strategic stability**, while ensuring that India's interests remain meaningfully represented in the evolving Eurasian geopolitical order