

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

PM Modi Travels to Central Asia: A Welcome Move

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Summary

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to participate in the 25th Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization Heads of State. He is also likely to visit Tashkent, Uzbekistan prior to Bishkek. These visits will, inter alia, provide a significant impetus to India's engagement with Central Asia, which India characterises as its extended neighbourhood.

Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to participate in the 25th Summit of SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) Heads of State on 31 August–1 September 2026. In addition to meeting Sadyr Japarov, the President of Kyrgyzstan, he is also likely to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, as well as leaders of the other Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—who are expected to be present.

Before his visit to Bishkek, PM Modi is also likely to visit Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on a bilateral visit to hold discussions with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev on further diversifying and expanding bilateral ties. Although no formal announcement has been made about this visit so far (as of 24 August), indications of the visit were provided by the Uzbek foreign minister, Bakhtiyor Saidov, during his recent visit (2–5 August) to India. He had then stated that the primary objective of his visit was to lay the groundwork for an upcoming visit by PM Modi to Uzbekistan.

These visits will, inter alia, provide a significant impetus to India’s engagement with Central Asia, which India characterises as its extended neighbourhood. The region has been given sharper focus since PM Modi assumed power in 2014. In addition to other initiatives, India organised the first India–Central Asia Summit in a virtual format at the level of Heads of State/ Government on 27 January 2022. Several far-reaching decisions were adopted at this Summit.

Although efforts have been made over the last four and a half years to provide additional momentum to bilateral ties, it is felt that the forward movement has failed to realise the potential and energy expected in early 2022. It is hoped that the current visit by PM Modi and his interactions in Bishkek and Tashkent will invigorate bilateral and regional ties and help chalk out a roadmap for the future intensification of relations.

Evolution of Ties in Modi Era

Just over a year after becoming PM, Modi travelled to all five Central Asian countries in July 2015, becoming the first Indian PM to do so. The last 10 years have witnessed an appreciable upswing in bilateral partnership and engagement with these countries. The rapidly changing dynamics of Central Asia’s regional and global political, strategic, and economic architecture present a significant opportunity for India to diversify and deepen its partnerships with these countries.

The most significant development during this period was the Central Asia + India Summit, hosted by PM Modi in a virtual format on 27 January 2022. In a historic

decision to transition from bilateral outreach to a structured, strategic partnership, it was decided to institutionalise the Summit mechanism and hold Summits every two years. Far-reaching proposals to further cooperation in areas of trade and connectivity, development cooperation, defence and security, and, in particular, cultural and people-to-people contacts were also discussed. A comprehensive Joint Declaration was adopted, outlining their shared vision for an enduring and comprehensive India–Central Asia partnership.

India’s Participation in SCO Summits

In the context of SCO Summits, PM Modi visited Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 2016; Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2017; Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 2019; and Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in 2022. The PM interacted, inter alia, with SCO Central Asian leaders on the sidelines of other SCO Summits in Ufa, Russia, in 2015; in Qingdao, China, in 2018, etc.

India hosted the 23rd SCO Summit virtually in July 2023. All members, including the four from Central Asia, participated. It is understood that the Central Asian leaders were somewhat disappointed that the meeting was not being organised in person. Some saw this as an opportunity lost by India in further expanding its ties and understanding with Central Asian countries. India did not participate in the SCO Summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, in July 2024 because PM Modi was busy with some urgent Parliamentary commitments soon after the General elections, in which he won a third mandate as Prime Minister.

Some observers felt he could have participated, at least virtually, in the deliberations of the Astana Summit to reaffirm India’s commitment to strengthening ties, especially with Central Asia. PM Modi’s participation in the 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, China, did not allow him to connect meaningfully with his Central Asian counterparts. Thus, his visits to Bishkek and Tashkent later this month will be the first opportunity after the India–Central Asia Summit in January 2022 to meet and advance the highly consequential India–Central Asia relationship.

The Way Forward

The last five years have witnessed appreciable interaction and exchange of visits between leaders of India and Central Asia, particularly of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan visited India in February 2026 to participate in the India AI Summit. Kazakh Deputy PM/FM paid a bilateral visit to India in November 2023 to promote exchanges in bilateral trade, critical minerals and connectivity. He was in India in June 2025 and December 2021 for the fourth

and third India–Central Asia Dialogues. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar travelled to Astana in July 2024 and October 2021 for SCO and CICA meetings, respectively.

PM Modi and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev met on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan in October 2024 and the COP-28 meeting in Dubai in December 2023. PM Modi travelled to Samarkand, Uzbekistan for the SCO Summit in September 2022. The two leaders also held a bilateral virtual Summit in December 2020 and signed nine MoUs spanning defence, digital technology, energy and development aid.

As mentioned above, the Uzbek FM visited India in early August 2026 and in addition to meeting his counterpart called on President Droupadi Murmu, Speaker of Lok Sabha Om Birla to establish an India–Uzbek Parliamentary Friendship Group, and participated in the India–Uzbekistan Business Forum to promote further cooperation in critical minerals and mining, Digital Public Infrastructure, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, health care, transport logistics, renewable energy, etc. He had visited India for the Raisina Dialogue in January 2020, as well as for the Third and Fourth India–Central Asia Dialogues in December 2021 and June 2025.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman visited Tashkent for the AIIB meeting in September 2024, during which a Bilateral Investment Treaty was signed. Connectivity through the INSTC and Chabahar, the export of uranium to India, and bilateral defence exercises are significant aspects that bind India to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Significant interactions at the ministerial level have taken place between India and Tajikistan, and between Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, in recent years.

India and Central Asia have, however, not yet realised the full potential of their partnership, which is dictated by the rapid transformation of the global and regional order, India’s significant economic growth and expanding international influence, and the trust, confidence and mutual respect between these countries.

Starting with PM Modi’s visit to the region at the end of August 2026, India will need to *inter alia* look at the following aspects to bring relations between India and Central Asia to an appropriate level of dynamism and intensity:

- In the midst of growing geopolitical turbulence, Central Asia has been looking for partners other than Russia and China to engage with. India eminently fits the bill as there is no threat perception that Central Asia harbours from enhanced partnership with it. To realise this, India and Central Asia will need to significantly augment their collaboration across multifaceted areas, viz. political, official, security, business, scientific, technological, health, education, cultural, think tanks, and others, both at the bilateral and regional levels.

- **Kazakhstan:** India entered into a Strategic Partnership with Kazakhstan in 2009 when the then Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev visited India as the Chief Guest on India’s Republic Day. No subsequent visit by the Kazakh Head of State to India has taken place in more than 17 years. It is imperative that a visit, preferably bilateral and not for a multilateral event, be organised without any further delay.
- **India–Central Asia Summit 2.0:** At the time of the first India–Central Asia Summit in January 2022, it was agreed that the Summit relationship be institutionalised and that the next Summit be held in two years. During his meeting with the visiting foreign ministers of Central Asia during the fourth India–Central Asia Dialogue in New Delhi in June 2025, PM Modi said that he looked forward to meeting them at the next Summit. In the Joint Declaration issued on this occasion, it was mentioned that the next Summit would take place at a mutually convenient date in 2025. Today we are more than halfway through 2026, and there is no indication of when the second India–Central Asia Summit might take place. This needs to be taken up and implemented urgently, with an in-person Summit held in India at the earliest. Adequate preparations would need to be made for this to provide a strong impetus to bilateral and regional ties.
- It was decided at the virtual Summit in 2022 to institutionalise relations between India and Central Asia. The subsequent Summits could be held alternately in India and in one of the Central Asian countries. After the 2026/27 Summit in India, the next Summit could be scheduled either in Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan in 2026.
- It was decided at the Virtual Summit in 2022 that regular meetings of Foreign Ministers, Trade Ministers, Culture Ministers and Secretaries of the Security Council should be held to prepare the groundwork for the Summit meetings. An India–Central Asia Secretariat in New Delhi was also to be set up to support the new mechanism. It is not known what progress has been made in implementing these decisions except for the meetings of the Secretaries of the Security Councils and the Fourth meeting of the India–Central Asia Dialogue. Other meetings should also be held expeditiously before the in-person Summit later this year/next year.
- Several other decisions were taken at the Summit in 2022, i.e., creation of an ‘India–Central Asia Parliamentary Forum’; implementation of High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in Central Asian countries; utilisation of US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit announced by India in 2020 for infrastructure development in Central Asian countries, and more. Action on all these decisions should be expedited.
- Although all countries of Central Asia need to be given due importance, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan merit special focus—Uzbekistan because it has a

large economy, has the largest population in the region and has emerged as the most proactive among the Central Asian states to expand partnership with India; and, Kazakhstan because it has the largest territorial area in the region, is bestowed with significant mineral resources, and is the largest economy of the region.

- It would be mutually beneficial for India to collaborate with other like-minded countries like the US, Japan, Europe, etc., to strengthen and deepen engagement with Central Asia. This would benefit Central Asian countries and other partner nations.
- To take full advantage of the emerging opportunities for partnership in Central Asia, India should appoint a Special Envoy for the Region who can reach out to the concerned authorities in the region at the appropriate level, and also expedite decision-making in India.

Taking action on the above has the potential to provide an early, much-needed, significant fillip to the strategic and vital partnership between India and Central Asia.

Conclusion

There is immense alignment of views and positions on most regional and global issues between India and Central Asia. Some of these include peace and stability in Afghanistan; rapid promotion of Connectivity (INSTC and Chabahar); counter-terrorism; climate change; technology and innovation; renewable energy; trade and investment; security and defence, etc. India can share its expertise in IT, digital public infrastructure, health, education, start-ups, the space industry, textiles, the leather and footwear industry, gems and jewellery, tourism, pharmaceuticals, counter-terrorism, anti-radicalisation, and much more with the Central Asian countries. Once suitable connectivity is established, the region could meet India's energy security needs for oil, gas, hydropower, and other resources, in addition to uranium, which India is importing from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

There is empathy, warmth and trust between the people of India and Central Asia. There is no fear, distrust, or threat perceived from India, unlike with some other neighbours in the region. The future holds huge potential for a much brighter and more robust relationship between India and Central Asia, at both the government and people-to-people levels, and at both the bilateral and regional levels.

Disclaimer: This write-up builds on the author's previous article titled [“India and Central Asia: Despite Historical Links and Modi Government's Outreach, Ties Need Renewed Focus”](#), published by *Firstpost* on 8 May 2024.

About the Author



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