

# India's Enhanced Military Security Cooperation with Central Asian Countries and Its Constraints

Dayong Li<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Baoji, Shaanxi, China

## ABSTRACT

India's growing comprehensive strength has enabled it to rationalize its military diplomacy on a global scale. In recent years, India has been strengthening its military security cooperation with Central Asian countries, which is mainly motivated by the Modi government's active promotion, limiting Pakistan's influence in Central Asia, and preventing the spillover effects of the security situation in Central Asia on South Asia. The current military security cooperation between India and Central Asian countries mainly includes frequent visits and exchanges between defense ministers, gradually strengthening military equipment and technology cooperation, and increasingly close joint military exercises. However, the geographical barrier, Russia's traditional influence in Central Asia, and India's lack of a military diplomacy master plan are constraining the in-depth promotion of military security cooperation between India and Central Asian countries.

**Keywords:** *India, Central Asia, Military security cooperation, Constraints.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The geopolitical importance of Central Asia and the security situation in the region have a profound impact on India's security, prompting India to pay high strategic attention to the region. First, in order to enhance its relations with the Central Asian countries, the Government of India has to pay strategic attention to the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan, given that the volatile country shares a long border with the Central Asian region. More importantly, religious extremism in Afghanistan has a profound impact on the security situation in South and Central Asia.[1] In India's view, the situation in Afghanistan has a direct impact on the security situation in Kashmir. Similarly, many terrorist organizations from Afghanistan share the same ethnic identity and religious beliefs as those in Central Asia. Therefore, the political stability of the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan has a profound impact on each other. Therefore, in order to prevent the deterioration of the regional security situation and to safeguard its long-term strategic interests, India, which considers itself a "stakeholder" in the Central Asian region, needs to enhance its military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries.

## 2. REASONS FOR INDIA'S INCREASED MILITARY SECURITY COOPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

India's "Connecting Central Asia" policy, proposed in 2012, aims to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian countries in the fields of politics, energy, and military security. In fact, India's increased military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries is aimed at safeguarding its geopolitical and economic interests.

### 2.1 *Modi Government Attaches Importance to Military Security Cooperation with Central Asian Countries*

Since coming to power in May 2014, India has been actively promoting military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries, and Modi's visit to the five Central Asian countries in July 2015 was a landmark in the history of India's relations with the region, and has been instrumental in developing closer military-security cooperation between the two sides. During his visit to Kazakhstan, India and Kazakhstan signed an

agreement to strengthen military cooperation; during his visit to Kyrgyzstan, the two countries signed four agreements covering defense cooperation; Modi's visit to Uzbekistan also pushed the two countries to strengthen cooperation in the area of military security; during his visit to Tajikistan, the two countries decided to strengthen cooperation in the areas of defense, connectivity, and counterterrorism; and in the same year, during his visit to Tajikistan, the two countries decided to strengthen cooperation in the areas of defense, connectivity and counterterrorism.[2] Since then, Modi has used the opportunity of attending various regional and international meetings, including the SCO summit, to hold consultations with the leaders of Central Asian countries on deepening military-security cooperation.

In January 2022, Modi held the first "Central Asia-India" summit with the presidents of the five Central Asian countries at the level of state leaders. During the summit, Modi held consultations with Central Asian leaders on deepening military-security cooperation and discussed the situation in Afghanistan.[3] The common interest of India and the Central Asian countries in containing the destructive forces emanating from Afghanistan has helped to encourage the establishment of a political coordination mechanism and the deepening of security cooperation between the two sides.[4] Indeed, the Modi government's emphasis on developing military-security cooperation with the Central Asian states has provided a strong impetus to India's military-security cooperation with them.

## ***2.2 Limiting Pakistan's influence in Central Asia***

Both India and Pakistan have territorial and border disputes, are highly interested in Central Asian affairs. Pakistan's enhanced relations with Central Asia are based on both political and economic strategic considerations and the strategic intention to counterbalance India's influence. In Pakistan's view, the emergence of Central Asian countries after the Cold War is an opportunity to form the world's largest Islamic regional bloc, which provides Pakistan with huge political and economic benefits.[5] At the same time, the Central Asian countries, which are located deep in the heart of the Eurasian continent, also hope to enhance their ties with the outside world through Pakistan, which is located at the crossroads of the Middle East and South Asia.

India has long recognized that Pakistan's effective control of Kashmir poses a very real geopolitical obstacle to India's engagement in Central Asia, and this geopolitical obstacle suggests that India's engagement in Central Asia should continue to focus on its geopolitical rivalry with Pakistan. Indeed, despite India's dominant role in South Asia, the Indo-Pakistani rivalry continues to constrain India's foreign policy, and has become an obstacle to the implementation of India's foreign strategy, which in turn constrains India's pursuit of its larger strategic ambitions.[6] India believes that Pakistan to enhance relations with Central Asia is to seek strategic depth against India, and India to strengthen cooperation with Central Asian countries to a large extent is also to weaken Pakistan's influence in Central Asia.

## ***2.3 Countering the Spillover Effects of the Security Situation in Central Asia on South Asia***

Any geopolitical changes in Central Asia inevitably have a significant impact on neighboring countries. Central Asia itself faces complex ethnic and religious problems and shares a border with Afghanistan, the main source of the spread of religious extremism in the region. India considers the security and stability of Central Asia to be of vital importance to its own security interests. Given the Kashmir issue, India is acutely aware that it cannot afford to ignore the political and security situation in Central Asia. For India, Kashmir is not only a matter of concern for millions of Muslims in the region, but also affects the peace and security of Muslims in other parts of India. At the same time, if the destabilizing local conflicts in Afghanistan and some Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, continue, it will make the already unstable security environment in South Asia even worse. Central Asia, therefore, holds a crucial geostrategic position for India, which requires that it not be neglected under any circumstances.[7]

An important aspect of India's Central Asia policy is the launch of the "India-Central Asia" Foreign Ministers' Dialogue in 2019. This dialog mechanism has given a strong impetus to the development of strategic partnership between India and Central Asian countries.[8] In recent years, India's engagement with Central Asian countries on the political security front has intensified in line with the changing security situation in Afghanistan. Drug trafficking is another major problem for India and Central Asia. In the area of drug trafficking,

drug traffickers smuggle drugs originating from Afghanistan through various routes to the outside world, which not only affects to some extent the establishment of strong relations between India and the Central Asian countries, but also poses a serious challenge to the security and social stability of India and the Central Asian region.

### **3. STATUS OF INDIA'S MILITARY SECURITY COOPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES**

The policy of "Connecting Central Asia" has given new impetus to the development of India's military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries.[9] Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations, India has been providing military training and conducting joint military exercises for the armed forces of Central Asian countries. Since the Modi government came to power, India has enhanced military security cooperation with Central Asian countries by signing a number of military security cooperation agreements with them and dispatching military attachés to Central Asian countries. India's military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries is mainly in the areas of joint counter-terrorism, military education and training, weapons and equipment development, and high-level political and military visits.[10]

#### ***3.1 Frequent Visits and Exchanges Between Ministers of Defense***

In recent years, military-security cooperation between India and Uzbekistan has become increasingly important with the exchange of visits between the two countries' defense ministers. In September 2018, Uzbekistan's Defense Minister Abdusalam Azizov visited India and the two sides reached an agreement on cooperation in regular military security exchanges, and in November 2019, a memorandum of understanding on military-medical cooperation as well as joint training and capacity building at military academies were signed during talks between India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Uzbekistan's Defense Minister Bakhodir Kurbanov. In November 2019, during talks between Indian Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Uzbekistan Defense Minister Bakhodir Kurbanov, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on military-medical cooperation, as well as a memorandum of understanding on joint training at military academies and cooperation in capacity-building between the two sides, etc.[11]

In recent years, the defense ministers of India and Kazakhstan have exchanged visits more frequently. In October 2018, India's defense minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Kazakhstan's defense minister met in Astana. In April 2021, India's defense minister Rajnath Singh and Kazakhstan's defense minister Nurlan Yermekbayev met in New Delhi to exchange views on further strengthening cooperation, including military personnel training and joint exercises and defense capacity building, and discussed the possibility of military-industrial cooperation. In April 2021, Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Kazakhstani Defence Minister Nurlan Yermekbayev met in New Delhi and exchanged views on further strengthening cooperation, including in the areas of military training, joint exercises, and defence capacity-building, and discussed the possibility of military-industrial cooperation. In April 2023, the defence ministers took advantage of a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to discuss ways of expanding bilateral military cooperation.

In 2018, Tajikistan's Defense Minister Sherali Mirzo visited India. In 2021, the two defense ministers held consultations on bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest during talks in Dushanbe. The two defense ministers have also taken advantage of meetings on various occasions, including SCO meetings. Meanwhile, the exchange of defense ministerial visits between India and Kyrgyzstan has continued. In November 2003, during the visit of India's defense minister to Kyrgyzstan, talks were held on training of military personnel. In September 2011, during the visit of Kyrgyzstan's defense minister to India, discussions were held on the training of the armed forces of the two countries, military-technical cooperation, and other issues of mutual interest. In 2014 and 2016, a delegation from the Indian National Defense Academy (INDA) met in Dushanbe to discuss bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest. In 2014 and 2016, a delegation from the Indian National Defense Academy visited Kyrgyzstan, and the visits of the two defense ministers were useful in strengthening military-security cooperation between the two countries. Meanwhile, India and Turkmenistan are also actively facilitating exchanges and interactions at the senior level of the Ministries of Defense of both countries under the military security cooperation agreement signed between the two countries in 2015.

### ***3.2 Progressively Enhanced Cooperation on Military Equipment and Technology***

For a long time, Uzbekistan has met the needs of its armed forces by importing advanced weaponry. In recent years, Uzbekistan has been emerging as a production center for dual-use products, particularly aircraft maintenance and spare parts, ammunition, armoured vehicle parts and defence textiles.[12] Military-security cooperation is now an important component of the bilateral strategic partnership between India and Uzbekistan. India not only provides military loans to Uzbekistan, but also holds defense industry seminars with Uzbekistan in 2019 and 2020. In fact, India's strength in the defense sector has enabled it to closely cooperate with Uzbekistan in the transfer of military equipment and technology.

India wishes to enhance cooperation with Kazakhstan in the manufacture of military equipment and technological development. The military industries of India and Kazakhstan are in talks to jointly develop and co-produce military products. Sanjay Jaju, Joint Secretary for Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, said that India and Kazakhstan are seeking opportunities to enhance cooperation in the military industry, and that Indian defense companies are holding talks with Kazakhstan's defense industry on co-development and co-production of military products. Yerbol Bulakpaev, director of the Defense Production Department of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Industry and Infrastructure Development, said the two countries want to cooperate on a range of topics, including repair, maintenance, upgrading, and research and development of military equipment. In fact, the established Joint Working Group on Military-Technical Cooperation is an effective platform for the two countries' military-industrial enterprises to strengthen cooperation.

Since 1997, India has been providing military technical support to the Kyrgyz Armed Forces through the Memorandum of Understanding on Military Technical Cooperation (MoU). In February 2015, the two countries initiated discussions on military technical cooperation, in particular the training of Kyrgyz military personnel at the Indian Military Academy. India is also willing to assist in the establishment of an information center at the military academy of the Kyrgyz Armed Forces, agreed to provide medical equipment to the latter's field hospital, and helped the latter rebuild the Balykchy training center.[13] In September 2019,

Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to India held a meeting with India's defense minister to strengthen military-technical cooperation between the two sides. Similarly, in 2015, India and Turkmenistan signed an agreement to enhance military-technical cooperation between the two sides, including India's support to Turkmenistan in military technology and related fields. The two countries also signed an agreement to promote military-industrial cooperation, including cooperation between the public defense sectors of the two countries in the areas of joint production of products and technical training, and to promote bilateral military-technical cooperation through exchange of information, personnel exchanges, visits, training, and implementation of joint projects.[14] In December 2001, during the visit of Tajik Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloev to India, the two countries signed an agreement to strengthen military-technical cooperation, and at the beginning of the 21st century, the Indian Air Force (IAF) established the Farkhor airbase in Tajikistan to provide training to Tajik pilots and other military personnel. Since 2007, India has invested heavily in modernizing and upgrading the Ayni airbase. Currently, India has provided substantial support to Tajikistan's military and security infrastructure.

### ***3.3 Increasingly Close Joint Military Exercises***

India and Uzbekistan are holding their first-ever Dustlik (Dustlik) joint military exercise in November 2019. The exercise is aimed at enabling the armed forces of the two countries to share experiences in counter-terrorism and thereby improve the efficiency of joint operations.[15] In March 2021, the "Dustlik" joint military exercise was held, which included intelligence sharing, special forces tracking techniques, and enemy surveillance. Since then, the two countries have held three more Dastriks in March 2022, February 2023 and April 2024, respectively. This joint military exercise not only helps to improve interoperability and friendship between the participating forces of the two countries, but also helps to increase the level of military cooperation between the two countries.

India and Kazakhstan held the Prabal Dostyk joint military exercises in 2016, and later upgraded the series to the Kazind joint military exercises. By the end of 2023, India and Kazakhstan have conducted seven Kazind exercises. The purpose of the series of joint military exercises is to promote

close military cooperation between the armies of the two countries, to draw on each other's operational experience, to improve their joint counter-terrorism capabilities, and to eliminate potential threats in joint peacekeeping operations.[16] This series of joint exercises will help to raise the level of defense cooperation between the armies of the two countries and further promote the development of relations between the two countries.

India and Kyrgyzstan have been conducting joint military exercises called "Khanjar" since 2011, and by the end of 2023, the series had been conducted 10 times. By the end of 2023, 10 joint military exercises had been held in the series, and in 2024, the two countries held their 11th Khanjar exercise in Bakloh, India. The exercise provides an opportunity for both sides to enhance military cooperation, address international terrorism and extremism of mutual concern, and showcase their advanced defense equipment. Joint military exercises between the two countries promote greater synergy and interoperability between the armed forces of the two countries, primarily through intelligence sharing and familiarization with each other's weapons and equipment. India and Tajikistan launched a joint counter-terrorism exercise in 2003, which focused on counter-terrorism operations in high-altitude mountainous areas. Under a military security cooperation agreement between the two countries, the Indian Military Academy trains Tajik military cadets as required. At the request of Turkmenistan's Special Forces, the Indian Special Forces Training School (SFTS) has begun to train Turkmenistan's Special Forces, with the aim of improving their operational capabilities. In 2021, the two countries' special forces will conduct joint combat exercises in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

#### **4. CONSTRAINTS ON INDIA'S ENHANCED MILITARY SECURITY COOPERATION WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES**

Under the active promotion of the Modi government, India's military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries has been increasing in recent years, but it still faces serious challenges. In fact, India's ability to take effective measures to address these challenges has a profound impact on the prospects for military security cooperation between India and Central Asian countries.

#### **4.1 Geographical Barriers**

Since India does not share a border with the Central Asian States, its limited comprehensive national capacity has limited India's ability to engage in more in-depth military-security cooperation with the Central Asian States. After the independence of the five Central Asian states, India hoped to continuously improve its relations with them in the political, economic and security fields. However, India's Central Asia policy has been constrained by the lack of direct geographic links. In terms of geopolitical realities, India's desire to enhance military-security cooperation with the Central Asian states is largely influenced by Afghanistan and Pakistan. In other words, India's geographic connectivity to Central Asia is largely dependent on Pakistan and Afghanistan, and India's relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan have a profound impact on India's military-security cooperation with Central Asian states.

Thus, the lack of direct geographic linkages remains one of the main obstacles to India's military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries, which makes it necessary for India to take into account factors such as Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran in enhancing military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Thus, the complex geopolitical situation and geopolitical security challenges in both South Asia, where India is located, and Central Asia, where it seeks to enhance its military-security relations, and geographic isolation not only limit India's connectivity with Central Asian countries, but also constrain India's ability to play a greater role in Central Asian regional security affairs.

#### **4.2 Russia's Traditional Strengths in Central Asia**

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has not only been the main security provider in Central Asia, but has also strategically scrutinized the security cooperation of Central Asian countries with extraterritorial powers. Russia has always regarded Central Asia as its "backyard" and controlled the region through various mechanisms such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). At present, a major challenge for India is to safeguard its strategic interests in Central Asia without conflicting with Russia's strategic concerns.

Russia, which is seen as an important player in Central Asia, is not willing to allow India to

establish a military base in Tajikistan. For India, the Ayni airbase is a strategic foothold in Central Asia that will help strengthen its operations against Afghanistan and keep a close eye on Pakistan. The construction of the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan could have effectively contributed to India's projection of influence in Central Asia, but India's intention to operate the airbase was opposed by Russia. Russia used its influence with the Tajik government to ensure that India did not deploy fighter jets at the base, and Russia did not want foreign powers, including India, to deploy fighter jets in Central Asia.[17] In fact, India has invested heavily in the Ayni airbase, but has not allowed it to play the role it should for the realization of India's geostrategic objectives. At present, if India is to capitalize on the value of the base and enhance its strategic influence in Central Asia, it must receive effective support from Russia, whose geopolitical concerns and strategic interests constrain the establishment of military bases and the expansion of India's strategic influence in Central Asia.

#### ***4.3 India Lacks a Master Plan for Military Diplomacy***

In recent years, India has been increasing its military-security cooperation with the Central Asian States, laying the groundwork for the expansion of India's influence in the region. India's military-security cooperation initiatives with other countries are based on mutual trust and understanding, and are not influenced by other factors, not to mention the lack of a clear overall military-diplomatic plan.[18] All military services are required to seek approval from the Ministry of Defense for their foreign military cooperation plans, and the Ministry of External Affairs is required to seek permission from military personnel to visit foreign countries. At the same time, there is a lack of transparency in India's current military security cooperation with specific countries.

Therefore, it is difficult for India to form a unified strategy at the level of top-level design in enhancing military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries, and then it is difficult to build a sustainable and effective mechanism for military-security cooperation. India's existing military security cooperation policy towards Central Asian countries cannot reflect the strategic expectation of its "connecting Central Asia" policy, and at the same time, India lacks the determination and perseverance to play with the big powers in promoting military security cooperation with

Central Asian countries, which restricts India's comprehensive cooperation with Central Asian countries in the field of military security. More importantly, India's military-security cooperation with Central Asian countries also lacks a sustainable promotion plan and appropriate feedback mechanism. In recent years, although India recognizes the importance of military-diplomatic integration, it is still far from constructing a military-diplomatic integration mechanism, and it still lacks a strategic overview of military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries, resulting in the fact that both sides have not yet constructed a sustainable and effective mechanism of military-security cooperation, which makes it a long way for India's military-security cooperation with the Central Asian countries to make substantial progress.

#### **5. CONCLUSION**

In recent years, under the active promotion of the Modi government, India and the Central Asian countries have deepened their military security cooperation through enhanced high-level military visits, strengthened defense technology cooperation and close joint military exercises. Currently, the common security concerns arising from the changing regional and international situation have prompted India and the Central Asian countries to strengthen military security cooperation. In fact, although India and Central Asian countries continue to enhance cooperation in the field of military security, the breadth and depth of cooperation is still limited, and the current military security cooperation between the two sides is mainly limited to military education, joint exercises, infrastructure construction and personnel training, and the cooperation is still constrained by various factors. For India, further deepening military security cooperation with Central Asian countries is an important part of its "Connecting Central Asia" policy, which not only helps India strengthen its strategic presence in Central Asia, but also provides security guarantee for the cooperation between India and Central Asian countries in economic and trade as well as energy, and also helps India play a bigger role in the security affairs of the Central Asian region. This will not only help India to strengthen its strategic presence in Central Asia, but also provide security guarantees for its cooperation with Central Asian countries in the areas of trade, economy and energy, and help promote India's role in regional security in Central Asia.

## AUTHORS' INTRODUCTION

Dayong Li, identity card No. 622103198908194019, Home Address: Deputy No. 2, West Section 2, Jiang Tan Road, Weibin District, Baoji City, Shaanxi Province, China.

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