Central Asia (CA), due to its geostrategic location at the junction of Europe and Asia, its proximity to the leading international actors such as Russia and China, its wealth of natural resources and its yet-to-be fully exploited trade and economic opportunities, has recently attracted increasing interest from international actors.

In order to create a stable position in the region and break the traditional long-standing ties of the Central Asian countries with Russia and China, the US and its NATO allies prefer to use a policy of provocation and increased activity of Western intelligence services. In particular, they apply soft power or initiate attacks there by specially trained radical militants (as happened, in particular, in the recent January events in Kazakhstan), and incite ethnic conflicts, such as the latest aggravation on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.

Russia, China and, more recently, India have been acting in a very different way in Central Asia: they have been seeking to strengthen cultural, trade, economic and political cooperation, based above all on their shared responsibility for the security and harmonious development of the region, to which these three states are most closely linked.

For Beijing, the Central Asian region is especially important, above all to prevent Islamic fundamentalism from penetrating into these countries, which could then spill over to the PRC. It is also important for Beijing to create a
reliable infrastructure in Central Asia for the delivery of Chinese goods abroad, and to ensure China’s energy security - it is in Central Asia that Beijing buys large quantities of gas, oil and uranium. China’s trade with the five Central Asian countries reached $40bn back in 2018. On January 25, Chinese President Xi Jinping chaired an online meeting with Central Asian leaders to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the CA countries and China, and vowed to import more of their agricultural products and other high-quality goods, raise bilateral trade with the region to $70bn by 2030, provide $500m in aid, 50m doses of vaccines and 1,200 scholarships for students. The Chinese leader also pointed to several joint projects of strategic importance: the China-Central Asia gas pipeline, the China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan highway and the China-Tajikistan road.

Following Xi Jinping, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi also held an online summit on January 27 to mark the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations with CA countries, also celebrated in India. Its results, as well as the importance of developing and deepening relations with the Central Asian countries for New Delhi, have been widely reported in the Indian media. In particular, it was noted that New Delhi has established special ties with some Central Asian countries over the past few years. For example, Kazakhstani troops are part of the Indian UN peacekeeping battalion in Lebanon. In Kyrgyzstan, India has built five telemedicine centers, provided $200m in loans, conducts the annual Khanjar military exercise and has a student community of 15,000. With Tajikistan, New Delhi cooperates closely in the defense sector. India has lent $1bn to Uzbekistan, approved four projects worth $450m and is investing $50m in setting up a pharmaceutical plant. In Turkmenistan, India has constructed an IT center. Before that, India had signed a defense and military technology agreement with Kazakhstan, set up a joint counter-terrorism team with Uzbekistan and concluded military cooperation agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. By developing defense cooperation with the region, India is clearly aiming to become an arms supplier to this part of the world, with the expectation that by using Russian arms, CA countries will buy spare parts and components for them, which India produces domestically.

The summit was focused on proposals on how to increase trade, business ties, cultural cooperation and, of course, counter the terrorism threat, which has intensified since the US had withdrawn its troops from Afghanistan. Narendra Modi stressed that these events showed the need for greater interaction. The Indian media recalled that the head of the Indian government had visited all the republics in the region back in 2015. And in December 2021, a foreign minister-level dialogue between the five countries and India was held, focusing on Afghanistan, the pandemic and mutual relations.

New Delhi is positioning itself as an important player in Afghanistan and Central Asia, counting on access to energy resources in accordance with its declaration made 30 years ago. New Delhi had hoped to activate a transport corridor through Chabahar Port in Iran and onward through Afghanistan. However, in 2019, India took the US side in the Iran-US controversy by acceding to US sanctions, with Iran taking a painful view, and some plans, including those for Chabahar Port, were frozen.

Like China, India quite reasonably does not want the Central Asian region to become a haven for Islamic radicals. It also feared the formation of a bloc of Muslim countries in Central Asia – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey – which New Delhi was convinced would have an anti-India bias. It therefore began to act decisively, tried to get a military airbase in Tajikistan and sent its military advisers to Afghanistan.

According to official reports from New Delhi, an important outcome of the online summit initiated by Modi on January 27 was an agreement by leaders of India and Central Asian countries to hold summits every two years, making Central Asia the culmination of New Delhi’s continuous diplomatic engagement with all countries of the region in recent years, according to the Indian Foreign Ministry. The summit welcomed India’s proposal to set up an India-Central Asia hub in New Delhi intended to function as a secretariat for summit meetings, according to the Delhi Declaration adopted at the end of the summit. In addition, the parties at the summit noted the relevance of the idea of creating an India-Central Asia parliamentary forum.

The online summit supported India’s proposal to include the Iranian Chabahar Port in the structure of the North-South international transport corridor, with Turkmenistan’s initiative to include Turkmenbashi Port as well. In addition, the Indian side welcomed the interest of Central Asian leaders to use the Shahid Beheshti terminal of Chabahar Port on the Gulf of Oman, which is being built with the active participation of Indian investors in order to facilitate trade with India and other external markets. In particular, with the Gulf states shipping goods to Western and Northern Europe via the territories of Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia, including by connecting the railways of the three countries, this would reduce, as a result of using this corridor, freight delivery times by a factor of two or three.
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