

India Competing with Chinese and Pakistani Security Cooperation in Central Asia

By Matt Stein
OE Watch Commentary

The accompanying excerpted articles look at India's recent security cooperation efforts in Central Asia vis-à-vis China and Pakistan and provide some context for how India might continue to work with the region. The article from *Force India*, an independent website with a focus on defense news in India and South Asia, mentions one of the early Indian efforts in the region. Specifically, "after the India-Pakistan Kargil war of 1999, India expressed an interest in acquiring the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan" and how "the Indian thinking was that through Ayni, Indian Air Force would be able to carry out aerial surveillance of northern Afghanistan, Pakistan and China." The article also notes how despite the investment of "USD 70 million in refurbishing the base," the Tajik government "has repeatedly refused [to allow] India to operate from the base, primarily out of Russian pressure."

The article goes on to highlight some of the recent security cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, including exercises, which have focused on "counterinsurgency and counterterrorism." It ultimately notes how India's trade with the region in 2021 "amounted to USD 2 billion," but that "according to the 2018 data" China's trade with the region totaled "USD 41.7 billion." It also points out how "China today accounts for about 18 percent of the total military purchases by Central Asia as compared to about 1 percent at the beginning of the last decade." This is in addition to China carrying out "several joint military exercises with Tajik, Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces" in 2019. In spite of China's achievements in the region, the article ends by stating that "if India can hold its ground, it can build on its historic goodwill to create a cooperative niche for itself in the region."

The article from *Dawn*, an independent English-language newspaper from Pakistan, reports on the recent visit by Pakistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, to Tajikistan. The article quoted Qureshi as saying that "both he and his Tajik counterpart were satisfied by the trajectory of defense cooperation and relations between the two countries and



Rajput regiment parade on Rajpath, New Delhi.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_Army-Rajput_regiment.jpeg, CC BY YA 3.0

there are great opportunities in the future." The article also mentions how the foreign minister "also met with Tajikistan's Defense Minister Colonel General Sherhali Mirzo" and that the two "agreed to work together to defeat extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking and cross-border crime." This article only reports on security cooperation between Pakistan and one of the Central Asian states, but it represents the level of security cooperation Pakistan carries out with the region, largely limited to exchanges and various training programs. Joint military exercises take place, but only periodically, not annually like India does with forces from the region.

For a number of years the Indian government's security cooperation with the Central Asian states appeared to be largely aimed at countering Pakistan vis-à-vis Afghanistan. While ongoing security

“Given the proximity of the area to Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, the Indian thinking was that through Ayni, Indian Air Force would be able to carry out aerial surveillance of northern Afghanistan, Pakistan and China”

cooperation shows that remains a factor, it appears that India is looking more closely at Chinese activity in the region, which could impact Indian efforts going forward.

Source: Smruti D, "India and the BRI | The Great Game Redux," *Force India* (an independent website with a focus on defense news in India and South Asia), 6 May 2021. <http://forceindia.net/feature-report/great-game-redux/>

...After the India-Pakistan Kargil war of 1999, India expressed an interest in acquiring the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan. Given the proximity of the area to Pakistan, Afghanistan and China, the Indian thinking was that through Ayni, Indian Air Force would be able to carry out aerial surveillance of northern Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. In 2002, it got some rights to place Indian Air Force personnel at the base...So far India has also spent USD 70 million in refurbishing the base...However, despite the investment and presence of its personnel, Tajikistan has repeatedly refused India to operate from the base, primarily out of Russian pressure...

India undertakes several military exercises with Central Asian countries. The most recent one took place in April this year, where Special Forces from India and Kyrgyzstan participated in the eighth edition of Khanjar exercise in Bishkek...

The same month, India also hosted the defence minister of Kazakhstan Lt Gen. Nurlan Yermekbayev...Kazakhstan is India's largest trade and investment partner. The total bilateral trade between the two countries amount to USD 1.2 billion. Indian and Kazakh forces also participated in a joint military exercise for counterinsurgency and counterterrorism called Ex KAZ-IND. Kazakh troops are deployed along with the Indian battalion in the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). The two nations have also been cooperating in the field of space communication system satellite, KazSat-2R.

Continued: India Competing with Chinese and Pakistani Security Cooperation in Central Asia

Continued Source: Smruti D, “India and the BRI | The Great Game Redux,” *Force India* (an independent website with a focus on defense news in India and South Asia), 6 May 2021. <http://forceindia.net/feature-report/great-game-redux/>

Just a month before these two events, India hosted troops from Uzbekistan for the second edition of India-Uzbek joint military exercise, Dustlik-II, that were performed in Uttarakhand...

As of 2021, India’s total trade with CAR amounted to USD 2 billion. Chinese trade turnover with CAR, on the other hand, according to the 2018 data by China’s customs service, was USD 41.7 billion...According to a report by ORF (the Observer Research Foundation), China has been swiftly increasing its presence in Central Asia’s security sector. The report stated, ‘China today accounts for about 18 per cent of the total military purchases by Central Asia as compared to about 1 per cent at the beginning of the last decade.’

China also undertakes several bilateral military exercises with the CAR countries. In 2019, China undertook several joint military exercises with Tajik, Kyrgyz and Uzbek forces...The important thing here is sustaining power. If India can hold its ground, it can build on its historic goodwill to create a cooperative niche for itself in the region...

Source: “Pakistan, Tajikistan to tap unexplored areas in bilateral ties: FM Qureshi,” *Dawn* (an independent English-language newspaper from Pakistan), 31 March 2021. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1615652>

Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said on Wednesday that there were a lot of opportunities present in furthering relations between Pakistan and Tajikistan in different avenues and stressed the need for greater cooperation between the two countries.

The foreign minister was addressing a press conference with his Tajik counterpart, Sirajuddin Mehruddin, at Tajikistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Dushanbe as part of his visit to attend the 9th Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference.

...The foreign minister said both he and his Tajik counterpart were satisfied by the trajectory of defence cooperation and relations between the two countries and there are great opportunities in the future...Qureshi noted that Pakistan had trained many military officers and senior diplomats of Tajikistan “and we will welcome more officers coming to Pakistan”.

He also met with Tajikistan’s Defence Minister Colonel General Sher Ali Mirzo. “We agreed on need to work together to defeat extremism, terrorism, drug trafficking and cross-border crime.”...

THE MAD SCIENTIST LABORATORY BLOG

<https://madsciblog.tradoc.army.mil/>

Mad Scientist Laboratory engages global innovators to report on the Operational Environment (OE), emergent disruptive technologies and their convergent impacts, and the changing character of warfare.

