

# **Keynote Address**

by

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at the  
**Inaugural Session of the**  
**Fourth 'India-Central Asia Dialogue'**

at  
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I am glad to have this opportunity to welcome such a distinguished gathering of scholars and experts on Central Asia to this Dialogue. I am also glad that in this fourth edition of the Dialogue we shall have the presence of diplomat colleagues as well, who should bring their perspectives and experiences into the discussion. I thank the Indian Council of World Affairs for their role in this Dialogue and organising this fourth edition.

At the outset, I would like to offer condolences to Uzbek colleagues at the passing away of the late President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan in September this year. He was widely respected and admired in India, and had contributed greatly to strengthening our relations.

India had elaborated the elements of "Connect Central Asia" in Bishkek in 2012 and in that context, the annual India-Central Asia Dialogue provides a platform for scholarly discussions, which is a valuable supplement to governmental level bilateral and multilateral engagements.



*Ms. Sujata Mehta, Secretary (West), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India delivering Keynote Address at the Inaugural Session.*

The first such Dialogue was held in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2012. The second and third Dialogues were organized in Kazakhstan in 2013 and in Tajikistan in 2014. These three editions of the Dialogue chalked out an ambitious and comprehensive plan of India-

Central Asia engagement. This fourth Dialogue in Delhi is an occasion to review progress and perhaps update the agenda and explore and add new ideas for the future.

The dialogue agenda encompasses discussion on themes ranging from a review of the Changing Global Dynamic; to Regional Integration & Multilateral Processes; Energy & Surface Transport Connectivity; the Regional Security Situation; and India-Central Asia synergies.

I would like to highlight at this point that this year the Dialogue is being arranged in the track 1.5 format so that alongwith experts and analysts we also have the participation of governmental representatives. It is our hope that this should enrich the discussions in this Dialogue and also find expression at the policy level whether in India or in the approaches of our Central Asian partners of some ideas expressed here.

Furthermore, the dialogue and discussion is being taken beyond the four walls of this venue and the conference room to reach out to those interested across boundaries via the resources-sympathetic and very effective webinar platform.

Given that there have been earlier three editions of this India-Central Asia Dialogue, many ideas already brought on the table are under various stages of examination and implementation. Some new ideas that could be considered for strengthening India-Central Asia relations in the months and years ahead will emerge during the course of this event. My colleague from the Ministry of External Affairs - G. V. Srinivas will outline some that are being proposed or contemplated by us.

In pursuing such initiatives we would like to draw on a most valuable asset. That relations between India and Central Asia are civilizational is something that we know intuitively - it is so intrinsic to our reality. India has been connected closely with Central Asia through the Silk Route as far back as the 3rd century BC till 15th century AD when the sea route from Europe to India was discovered. The Silk Route connected India with Central Asia not only for goods and wares like silk, textiles, spices, etc. but equally importantly was an effective channel of exchange of thoughts, ideas, religion and philosophy.

The significance of this region in the foreign policy matrix of India cannot be overemphasised; we believe that the security, stability and prosperity of Central Asia is imperative for peace and economic development in India. We are each other's extended neighbourhood and the region has been a priority area of interest for Indian policymakers, practitioners and thinkers.

Today, Central Asia faces some persisting, and some new challenges. Regional security is a continuing concern. The situation in neighbouring Afghanistan, which shares a border with three Central Asian countries, is yet to stabilize. Drug trafficking and

associated criminal activities have been a bane for the people of this region. The rise of Da'esh has added another dimension to extremism and militancy in the region. Reports suggest that those from Central Asia who have gone to fight for Da'esh are likely to return to their roots to pursue their sinister agenda back home; there are already signs of Da'esh fighters joining, coordinating and launching terrorist attacks having returned battle-hardened and indoctrinated. The challenge for our Central Asian partners is to act to ensure that moderate views of assimilation and accommodation prevail amidst an onslaught of extremism.

As highlighted by the Prime Minister of India at the World Sufi Forum in New Delhi in March 2016, Islamic civilisation stands on the bedrock of a great religion which espouses peace, diversity and the equality of faith. The highest ideals of Islam have always rejected the forces of terrorism and extremism, and together with Central Asia, India would like to work towards the revival of this glorious heritage.

The current scenario, regionally and internationally, presents immense challenges but also offers potential for India and Central Asia to qualitatively enhance their engagement. Both India and Central Asia are factors of peace, stability, growth and development in the region and the world. Stronger relations between us will contribute to increased security and prosperity of these countries and the world.

The Central Asian Republics are endowed with huge hydrocarbon resources, significant mineral deposits, extensive hydel power potential and vast stretches of arable lands. There is great potential to create regional economic corridors and networks of roads, railways, energy grids and of market integration all of which requires cooperative endeavour. Through such efforts and through outward linkages of these networks and corridors beyond the region, we could create enduring and mutually beneficial arrangements.

I should like to note that in the first such Dialogue we had noted that the political warmth and proximity between us was not equally manifest in the scale of economic exchanges between us and that we need to work for a convergence between these two aspects.

Our vision for the future cooperation between India and Central Asia is ambitious and at the same time realistic. There is much that we can achieve in partnership. This is a good moment to reflect on these issues as Central Asian countries mark 25 years of their independence. During these years you have made significant and admirable political, economic and social progress. At this juncture India would hope to participate in these national celebrations through a range of events also marking 25 years of our diplomatic relations.

I would like to close by expressing the hope that we may arrange exchanges of visits by young people who were born in the year we established diplomatic relations. These young people best represent the vision and aspiration of India and Central Asia to reclaim the historically close relations that we have enjoyed and which we seek to develop further for the greater good of our peoples, and as a true and meaningful contribution to peace, stability and development.

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