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Why PM Modi's Upcoming Visit to Central Asia is Significant?

Dr Pravesh Kumar Gupta, Associate Fellow, VIF

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26th SCO Summit
Prime Minister

Context

PM to attend SCO, and focus is on what New Delhi wants from a region it has courted for a decade.

Facts

26th summit theme: 25 years of SCO - together towards Sustainable Peace, Development and Prosperity.

Chabahar and INSTC: by which India reaches Central Asia but are stalled by the West Asian conflict.

India's priorities inside SCO: naming Pakistan-sponsored terrorism; sustainable economic development; Central Asia at core of the grouping; people-to-people links; and territorial sovereignty and integrity for connectivity.

Analytical Crux

India's Central Asia policy has a structural problem that no summit fixes. The region matters for energy, critical minerals and northern approach to Afghanistan, but India cannot physically reach it. Pakistan closes the land route, Uzbekistan is doubly landlocked, & Chabahar and the INSTC run through Iran, which is at war. What is left is diplomacy at multi-lateral venues, and that is why the SCO matters to Delhi. It is the only forum where the Indian PM sits at the same table as all five Central Asian presidents. Central Asia has learned to negotiate as a bloc with 8 external powers, so India is now one supplicant among many rather than a privileged partner, and the CS+1 format it joined is one it did not design.

Verbatim Quotes

“A stable Afghanistan is a precondition for development across both South and Central Asia. New Delhi and Tashkent can coordinate their Afghan policy on reconstruction and the economy.”

— Pravesh Kumar Gupta

Pakistan's rehabilitation in US- A test for India-US ties



Context Over 18 months U.S. hosted Pakistan's army chief three times, claimed credit for ending an India - Pakistan war, and put punitive tariffs on Indian goods.

Facts

■ Munir at the White House three times in three months : first US presidential hosting of a serving Pakistani army chief.

■ Trade imposition by white house on India : 25 % reciprocal tariffs on Indian exports, additional 25% penalty for continued Russian oil purchases.

■ India - US : signed 10 year defence framework in 2025 covering intelligence sharing, counter-terrorist operations and technology cooperation.

Analytical Crux

The same US that fused satellite intelligence for India at Galwan went quiet after Pahalgam and it is structural rather than personal. Pakistan's usefulness to US regional diplomacy now outweighs US sensitivity to the terrorism Pakistan has long sponsored. Where it is weak is on India's own agency i.e. treats Delhi as the object of US choices and never asks what India traded away, or gained, in the Feb 2026 settlement that ended the tariff war. The partnerships survive on institutional mechanisms that deliver predictably under stress, not on professions of friendship or chemistry between leaders. Therefore, focus should be on less theatre and more institutional plumbing.

Verbatim Quotes

"US reliability, is "transactional, personality-driven, and geographically selective."

- Deepak Kumar

Unimpeded trade needs IPMDA as the answer

Unimpeded trade needs IPMDA as the answer

Despite the diplomatic difficulties in United States-India relations due to mounting sanctions, it is increasingly clear that Washington needs regional powers such as New Delhi to support common global interests and values. Amid the U.S. visa issues for Indians and the energy crisis stemming from the war in West Asia, Indian and U.S. Foreign and Commerce Ministers have underscored the need for reciprocal trade and energy agreements. While the prime objectives in the present relations are clear, the strategy needs renewed focus on maritime domain awareness (MDA), which is crucial for the 'unimpeded trade' and has been unequivocally agreed to by both sides.

The Indo-Pacific is a trade artery

The West Asia crisis has demonstrated that the Indo-Pacific is not only a crucial geostrategic location for India and the U.S. but also for the rest of the world. Geoeconomically, it is the circulatory system of the global economy, a vast maritime corridor through which nearly \$7 trillion in trade flows annually, connecting energy producers in the Persian Gulf to manufacturing hubs in East Asia and consumer markets across the Americas. Some of the world's busiest maritime chokepoints, the Straits of Malacca, the Lombok, and the Sunda, Hormuz, Bab-al-Mandeb, and Mozambique channels sit squarely within its waters, crucial for both energy and container supplies. Yet, this indispensable artery of global commerce is increasingly being threatened by a convergence of state-sponsored coercion, illegal maritime activity, and a dangerous surveillance gap – geographically, jurisdictionally and institutionally – that even the U.S. is finding challenging to address alone.

The Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) launched under the Quad framework in 2022, represents the most credible multilateral architecture yet devised to address this problem. It is a practical, technology-based mechanism for sharing near-real-time maritime data across partner nations to detect, deter, and respond to threats to the free flow of trade. And its full



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Maritime cooperation through the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) can strengthen the Indo-Pacific's trading system

operationalisation is anchored in robust U.S.-India cooperation under Quad (India, Australia, Japan, the U.S.), which is now a strategic imperative. At the technological level, in 2025, India has already purchased SeaVision technology from the U.S., which includes software enhancements, training, and logistical support necessary for mutual MDA cooperation.

A surveillance deficit

The Indo-Pacific suffers from a persistent and widening maritime surveillance deficit. As a multilayered technological assimilation, MDA provides an effective understanding of the maritime domain and its impacts on security, safety, the economy, and the environment.

Across the broader waters of the Indian Ocean, which connect to the South China Sea and the Western Pacific, hundreds of vessels routinely disable their Automatic Identification System (AIS) transponders – a phenomenon analysts call "going dark" – likely to evade sanctions, conceal cargo, and cause safety and environmental threats.

Such vessels may also be engaged in smuggling or ship-to-ship transfers of contraband. Many smaller fishing vessels fall outside mandatory AIS transponder carriage requirements, and depending on the applicable national and international regulatory framework, they are also found engaged in illegal fishing practices in other nations' waters or even at high seas. This depletes regional stocks and undermines the food security of littoral states.

Furthermore, as witnessed in recent times, non-state as well as state-affiliated actors are conducting grey-zone operations designed to intimidate and coerce, while escaping any legal or conventional military response. The Quad's Indo-Pacific Maritime Surveillance Collaboration 2026 (IPMSC), under the IPMDA architecture, is as elegant in its pragmatism as in its cooperation, based on a shared understanding that no country can monitor the vast oceans alone. By integrating data from commercial satellite-based radio-frequency monitoring, radar fusion, and existing partner-nation sensor networks, and

sharing it with like-minded partners, it creates a layered, near-continuous picture of maritime activities.

The beneficiaries

For the U.S., regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean is essential if it aims to focus on its immediate neighbourhood in the Pacific and the Atlantic. For India, its Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in Gurugram in 2018, is a natural institutional complement to IPMDA's regional hub architecture. IPMDA is precisely the kind of arrangement that respects India's sovereignty while amplifying its reach. With the basics already in place, U.S.-India cooperation is necessary but not sufficient.

The full potential of IPMDA/IPMSC will be realised only through the active participation of existing Quad partners as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) partner states, the Pacific Island nations that constitute critical maritime corridors. The European Union, which has upheld the importance of free and open trade since the Hormuz crisis, signals an appetite for engagement that Washington and New Delhi must cultivate.

The contributions and benefits of IPMDA/IPMSC for smaller, capacity-constrained partners, such as Bangladesh, the Maldives, the Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Fiji, are significant. These countries have independent surveillance infrastructure, but their waters are frequently exploited because these systems remain ineffective at addressing maritime crimes beyond their jurisdictions. This provides an opportunity for collaboration.

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific has systematically dismantled the assumption that open trade is unilaterally sustainable. The freedom of navigation upon which global supply chains depend is increasingly contested, and such contestation, unrebuted, has become precedent in recent years. In a region where coercion has increasingly become the currency of power, transparency must present itself as a form of deterrence.

Context

Maritime domain awareness is part of the India-US relationship worth protecting from the tariff quarrel because Indo-Pacific carries the world's trade & nobody can watch it alone.

Facts

● \$ 7 trillion in trade moves through Indo-Pacific each year : connecting Persian Gulf energy producers to East Asian manufacturing & consumer markets in the Americas.

● Quad's Indo Pacific Maritime Surveillance collaboration, 2026 : integrates commercial satellite based radio frequency monitoring, radar fusion & partner-nation sensor networks.

Analytical Crux

Maritime domain awareness is cheap, unclassified at the point of delivery, and one area where India supplies the platform rather than receiving. The Gurugram fusion centre is not an Indian complement to an American scheme but Indian ocean node of the scheme itself, which makes the sovereignty objection weaker than it looks. The strategic environment has dismantled the assumption that open trade sustains itself, and the freedom of navigation on which supply chains depend is now contested. No country can monitor the oceans alone, and therefore the pragmatism of the Quad scheme rests on admitting it. Transparency is a cheap deterrent that costs a measure of autonomy, & that India has decided the trade is worth making.

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