

India's Strategic Interest with Central Asia in the Post-Soviet Era: Prospects for the Future

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Abstract

In June 2012, during the inaugural meeting of India and Central Asia, Dialogue in Bishkek, India's Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahmed delivered a keynote by addressing the Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP). This initiative was designed to serve as a key mechanism for strengthening India's relations with Central Asia. The Indian government and businesses have already started strengthening ties with their Central Asian counterparts to enhance cooperation within this framework. This paper analyzes the significance of Central Asia in today's global context. It begins by reviewing India's relations with the region prior to the 2000s. Followed by an examination of India's primary interests in Central Asia energy and security since the year 2000 particularly in relation with other regional powers. The final section focuses on India's "Connect Central Asia Policy of 2012," exploring the key issues that necessitated its formulation and assessing the policy's potential outcomes.

Keywords: geopolitics, energy, security, central Asia, post-cold-war, infrastructure

Received: 12/05/2026 | Accepted: 30/06/2026 | Published: 20/07/2026

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Introduction

One of the key factors determining the dynamics of the present world politics is the entry of rising giant countries, in particular India, into its foreground. Rapid and sustainable economic growth allows India to systematically strengthen its influences in the international arena through an active foreign policy both at the regional and global levels. India pays special attention to cooperation with various international organizations and associations like: OSCE, SCO, and UNO and the objectives of the article are to study the priorities of India in the development of interaction with these organizations and connections, to identify external and internal factors influencing its interests as well (Aryal, 2024). On the other hand, this article also highlights that after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Indo Pakistani rivalry for influence in Afghanistan emerged with renewed vigor, stimulating the strengthening of traditionally close ties between India and Afghan Tajiks and interest in developing cooperation with Tajikistan. Security issues have long been prioritized over other issues in Central Asia towards Afghanistan. The main agenda in Central Asia is to address potential threats from the spread of Afghanistan, increased migration flows from Afghanistan, and the root causes of youth radicalization and terrorism through several funding instruments. For India's side, a significant obstacle faced by India in the development of relations with the countries of Central Asia remains the difficult access to them, for their raw materials and markets of the region. Pakistan has been blocking the land transport links between India and Afghanistan, and China is limiting trade between India and Central Asian countries through Xinjiang. As a result, trade between India and the countries of Central Asia is carried out mainly in a 'roundabout way through the ports and transport network of Iran. Over a decade old trans-Afghan gas pipeline project has not moved off the ground, financing of which is becoming impossible due to in stabilization in Afghanistan. This concerns India as well as Central Asian countries, thus forcing them into mutual engagement in multiple domains, for containment of instability in the region (Bossuyt, 2021).

Despite its geographical proximity, economic potential, and expanding strategic interests, India has lagged behind other regional powers in Central Asia and has only recently prioritized connecting Central and South Asia in its foreign policy. Several factors have contributed to India's delayed engagement in the region, with a gap of nearly two decades in active involvement. In the early 1990s, India was just beginning its economic reforms and lacked the capacity to fully capitalize on trade and investment opportunities with the newly independent Central Asian republics (Golden, 2011). For much of this period, India focused its diplomatic and economic efforts on its "Look East" policy, which aimed at strengthening ties with Southeast and East Asia, rather than engaging with Central Asia.

Moreover, direct transportation routes between India and Central Asia, which could facilitate trade and exchanges, have been hindered by significant political and geographical challenges. Political obstacles, including the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan's unwillingness to support India-Central Asia trade relations, have been major roadblocks. Additionally, the formidable Himalayan Mountain Range presents a substantial geographical barrier, further complicating the development of efficient transport links between the two regions (Springer, 2019).

However, in the past two to three years, India has made determined efforts to address this gap, spurred by its robust economic growth. India now has significant economic, security, and geopolitical interests that drive its increased engagement with Central Asian countries. To foster stronger ties, India has introduced the "Connect Central Asia" policy, aiming to enhance cooperation across various sectors. Additionally, India has initiated several infrastructure projects aimed at securing strategic access to the region and enhancing connectivity with Central Asia (Springer, 201

Importance of Central Asia

For India, maintaining a long-standing, time-honored partnership with Russia has become essential to its external security and security in general, as it is heavily dependent on arms supplies from Russia for defense purposes. However, these ties have evolved rapidly alongside shifting global dynamics. The traditional Indo-Russian relationship has inevitably lost some of its former strength. As both nations have faced challenging periods of economic restructuring their foreign policy priorities have also undergone significant shifts. Yet, the geostrategic importance of India's proximity to the Eurasian region remains as relevant as ever (Routledge, 2020).

One of the most significant aspects of this region is its status as an energy-rich hub and the "heart of Asia." Central Asian countries boast abundant hydrocarbon and mineral resources and are geographically close to India. Turkmenistan holds the world's fourth largest natural gas reserves, while Kazakhstan is the leading producer of uranium and has vast oil and gas deposits. Their strategic location positions them as a crucial bridge between different regions of Asia and between Europe and Asia. Recognizing India's economic and energy security needs, Central Asian nations see mutual benefits in strengthening ties with India (Dwivedi, 2024). However, the absence of direct surface and road connectivity continues to hinder economic engagement. India and Central Asia countries have opportunities and challenges that exist in the present bilateral relationship.

India's diplomatic relationship with Central Asia countries highlights the close ties Kazakhstan has enjoyed with India in the last two decades including the recent high-level visits of 2015-2016. On the

other hand, diplomatic relations with Kyrgyzstan has been highlighted by historical and cultural links which makes it a special bond, especially with the introduction of parliamentary democracy in the country. India has been giving humanitarian aid, credit lines and assistance to central Asia countries for nation-building since the 1990s (Roy, 2001).

Central Asia is experiencing rapid transformation as the world increasingly focuses on this energy-rich region. The influx of capital and expanding trade are driving large-scale infrastructure developments, reshaping the movement of goods and people. This shift has been aptly compared to the waves of transformation that previously swept through Europe and Southeast Asia. As a result, great power competition over security and energy resources in the region has intensified. The major powers are framing their responses in different ways to capitalize on a short withdrawal from the region (Hindustan Times News, 2022).

India's expanding strategic engagement in Central Asia

Like China, India, as a rising global, economic powerhouse, will require substantial and natural gas supplies to sustain its economic growth the near future. Currently, India is the world's third-largest oil consumer and seventh-largest gas consumer, with oil demand projected to reach 252.9 million tons in 2025. While the Middle East remains India's primary source of hydrocarbons, New Delhi is actively working to reduce its reliance this volatile region. Given its abundant energy resources and geographical proximity, Central Asia is well-positioned to become a crucial energy supplier for India. Although the region lacks adequate energy transportation infrastructure to directly supply hydrocarbons to India, New Delhi has already begun establishing a presence in Central Asia's energy sector. A significant milestone in this effort was Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's 2011 visit to Astana, which secured India's access to oil and gas-rich North Caspian Sea region, along with Kazakhstan's vast uranium reserves. In 2012, India's ONGC Videsh Limited, the international arm of the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, acquired a 25% stake in the offshore Satpayevoil block, operated by Kazakhstan's state-owned Kazmunaigaz (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2016).

India's economic interests in Central Asia extend beyond energy imports to encompass essential raw materials vital for its industrial growth, including iron ore, coal, and other minerals. For instance, steel giant ArcelorMittal operates metallurgical plants and mines in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, with a rapidly growing population, India is increasingly exploring Central Asia's vast tracts of land for large-scale commercial farming, which could play a crucial role in addressing its food security needs. In general, India's engagement in the region spans not only the energy and mining sectors but also includes agriculture, information technology, hydropower, and pharmaceuticals, as the country looks

to diversify its economic ties and bolster long-term growth (Springer, 2024a).

India's interests in Central Asia also encompass security concerns. Many experts argue that the art of instability threatening India stretches from the Ferghana Valley-the densely populated heart of Central Asia-through Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal regions, extending to Kashmir in northwestern India. With the impending 2014 withdrawal of allied forces from Afghanistan, regional cooperation is becoming increasingly crucial for India to mitigate potential destabilization along its northwestern borders. The memories of the 2001 attack on India's Parliament and the 2008 Mumbai attacks serve as stark reminders of the persistent threat posed by terrorist safe havens that remain unaddressed. In response, India is keen to enhance security cooperation with Central Asian nations to mitigate the risks of further destabilization in Afghanistan and the potential spillover of instability throughout the region. As part of this strategy, India seeks to strengthen cooperation in counter-terrorism, military training, and research and development (Mazumdar, 2014).

India's military presences in Central Asia remains relatively limited compared to that the United States and Russia. A key aspect of India's strategic engagement in the region is its relationship with Tajikistan, which has been central to its efforts to establish a military foothold. However, India's plans to station military personnel at the Ayni airbase near Dushanbe were hindered by Russian influence; Moscow's apposition led to prolonged delays and ultimately resulted in the cancellation of what could have been India's first overseas military base (Roy, 2000).

China's active engagement in Central Asia, as India's key geopolitical rival, is another significant factor driving India to intensify its relations with the region. China has been developing infrastructure to streamline the import of Central Asian natural resources and the export of Chinese goods, further solidifying presence in the region. This growing Chinese presence compels India to act, as it seeks to secure access to the region's natural resources and local markets, and prevent being sidelined in this strategically important region (Singh, 1995).

Developing India - Central Asia Connectivity

However, India is trying to gain a foothold in the region. India has begun to see Central Asian countries as an essential partner in its efforts to identify potential alternative sources for energy needs. It is not that there was no bilateral trade in the energy sector, the problem is largely due to the limited presence of Indian companies and partners in the region and the inherent contradiction in India's policies towards Central Asia which emphasizes diversification of energy sources on the one hand and on the other hand tries to keep relations with Russia stable. For India, away from Russian sources, the idea of energy diversification has become a major issue. Furthermore, as there is a substantial Russian

presence in the Central Asian region, India is trying to maneuver carefully without adversely affecting its relations with Russia (Patnaik, 2016).

INSTC: The International North-South Transport Corridor is a multimodal transportation network established to enhance trade and connectivity. The agreement was signed in 2000 in St. Petersburg to facilitate transportation. It was initiated by Iran, Russia and India. Later 12 other countries joined it. It is expected that INSTC will transport CIS and Europe from Indian ports via sea route to Bandar Abbas in Iran. Followed by road from Iran and finally by sea route to Russia's Astrakhan port (Sahadeo and Zanca, 2007).

China is a very important country in South Asia, during a speech in Kazakhstan in 2015: Xi Jinping outlined his vision for the Silk Road Economic Belt. Initially, the idea was to finance transport infrastructure in Central Asia. Within months, China added ports and other things. It has been decided that the global GDP will be 44 billion for the population of 65 countries. Thus China is investing heavily in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, especially in building ports. China is also trying to make deep inroads in Nepal and Bangladesh recently Nepal has proposed to make the Kerung Kathmandu Pokhara Lumbini Rail Project part of China's "One Belt and Road" (Springer, 2024b)."

China and Pakistan are engaged in projecting the project only for an economic purpose but it does not seem to be because it is only economic. China wants to establish its rule from Africa to Southeast Asia via One Belt one Road, China is preparing to improve trade routes through land-sea routes. This route will pass through many ports in Asia and Africa and many free trade zones will come in its way. Nearly 65 countries will bring to a close the other and will two-third of the world's population directly add to the economy. The name of the Silk Road was used by German geography in the 19th century, and then it included only the road from Xinjiang in China to Central Asia, but as a result of its expansion gradually. This route reached West Asia, Africa and Europe. It may be noted that the present New Silk Road included not only the road but also the sea route. China is laying a network of ground and sea transport through these economic corridors: 1) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 2) New Eurasian Land Bridge, 3) China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, 4) China-Mongol-Russia Economic Corridor, 5) Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and 6) China-Indo-China-Peninsula Economic Corridor (Khan, 2024).

There are plans to construct Six Corridors under this project. This includes the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, which runs through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and is strongly opposed by India. India says that any construction in PoK without its permission is a violation of sovereignty. The chain also agreed to change the name China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to include India, but lately, it was

overturned, the major corridors being built under the One belt One Road projected now known as New Silk Road. If China succeeds in implementing the One Belt Road Project, the balance of power in South Asia will be uncertain. This will be a very serious situation for India; India will strengthen the INSTC initiative. All these factors together, whatever OBOR's conclusion, but China will face lots of problems in implementing these projects. Chinese strategists feel that they will be able to "encirclement" India through One Belt One Road. But the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or other economic corridors may become a source of tension for China in Future (Khan, 2024).

Transportation infrastructure: A Crucial Necessity

Currently, bilateral trade between India and Central Asia stands at approximately half a billion USD per year, far below its true potential. For trade to experience significant growth, transportation bottlenecks must first be addressed. To overcome these challenges and bypass the political and geographical barriers hindering trade between India and Central Asia, New Delhi is actively promoting the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC) project. The NSTC envisions the Iranian port of Chabahar as a key gateway, allowing India to access Afghanistan via the Zaranj-Delaram Road (ZDR) in Nimroz Province, which was built with Indian support. The ZDR connects to the Garland Highway, providing further links to Central Asia. Enhancing Chabahar Port and its connectivity with Afghanistan will not only strengthen India's ties with energy-rich Iran but also provide direct access to Central Asian markets without relying on Pakistan. Furthermore, it will create a trade route to Russia via Iran's Bandar Anzali port on the Caspian coast. Most importantly, the Zaranj-Delaram Road (ZDR) will enable India to engage directly with Afghanistan and Central Asia while completely bypassing Pakistan. India has already invested \$136 million to link Chabahar to Afghanistan's ring road and, over the past decade, has committed \$2 billion to infrastructure projects in Afghanistan, including initiatives to develop the Hajigak iron ore deposits, estimated to be worth between \$1 trillion and \$3 trillion ((Marketos, 2019).

Another strategically significant transportation project is Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, designed to strengthen energy cooperation between India and Central Asia while reducing India's reliance on Middle Eastern energy imports. Originating from Turkmenistan's Doveletabad gas field and extending to Fazilka on India's Punjab border, this pipeline is set to become a crucial energy infrastructure initiative for the region. With an estimated cost of \$7.6 billion, the TAPI pipeline will have the capacity to transport 90 million metric standard cubic meters per day (mmscmd) of natural gas over a 30-year period. Once operational, expected by 2018, India will receive 38 mmscmd of this gas, with Pakistan receiving 52 mmscmd (38 mmscmd for domestic use and

14 mmscmd for Afghanistan). The project is seen as a pivotal component in enhancing India's energy security and diversifying its sources of natural gas (Pradhan, 2020).

Another potential route for establishing a transport corridor between India and Central Asia is the US -led New Silk Road Project. This initiative seeks to redirect Central Asia's primary transportation routes southward through Afghanistan, facilitating access to Pakistani and Indian markets. The primary objective of the project is to foster Afghanistan's development and regional integration by establishing it as a key transit hub. The United States has strongly supported India's expanding role in the region. As US Ambassador to India Nancy Powell stated, "Washington can work with Central Asian states and New Delhi to make Central Asia an attractive place for Indian investment (Springer, 2024c)."

Recognizing the challenges of sustaining a large-scale commitment to Central Asia to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China, the US may view supporting India as a strategic counterweight to both powers, similar its previous support for Turkey. While the New Silk Road strategy could certainly facilitate India's engagement with Central Asia, it faces several obstacles. Central Asian countries appear hesitant to make this proposed route the main direction for their foreign trade. Additionally, even if the route is successfully implemented, it would still pass through Pakistani territory, which remains a point of concern for India, given the perceived unreliability of trade routes through Pakistan (Moore, 2007).

"India is increasingly prioritizing the region through 'Connect Central Asia' policy, which focuses on active political, economic, and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian nations at both bilateral and multilateral levels." However, this approach may face challenges over time, particularly in light of evolving regional dynamics, including issues related to the Uighurs.

After the events of 9/11, Central Asia's strategic importance grew significantly in the global war on terrorism. Concerns were widespread that the region's states were particularly susceptible to the spread of religious extremism, particularly due to their proximity to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, all sharing borders with Afghanistan, were especially worried. Under Taliban rule, this threat seemed particularly real, as it could have provided a powerful boost to extremist forces in the region in response; Central Asian states welcomed the military presence of US-led coalition forces, viewing the West at the most effective counter to the rising threat of extremism. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan provided base facilities at Karshi-khanabad and Ganci near Manas Airport, respectively, while Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan expressed their willingness to cooperate. Although the defeat of the Taliban by the West diminished the immediate threat of terrorism, the

ongoing military presence of foreign forces has significantly altered the region's geopolitical landscape (Krishna, 2020).

The geopolitics of Central Asia could experience a significant shift if religious extremism were to gain a foothold in the region. However, for now, the likelihood of such extremism gaining dominance seems low. This is largely due to the region's lack of a deep-rooted tradition of fundamentalism. While the majority of Central Asians practice Islam, the people have historically not exhibited fanatic tendencies. Several factors have shaped this outlook. The ancient Silk Road, which traversed the region, introduced its people to a rich exchange of ideas and cultures. Prominent centers of learning and civilization, such as Bukhara and Samarkand, drew scholars from around the world. Furthermore, the enduring and inclusive influence of Sufism, a mystical branch of Islam, has fostered values of tolerance and understanding throughout Central Asia. The Sufi brotherhood, in particular, has played a crucial role in fostering this inclusive spirit (Harshe and Tripathi, 2015).

Moreover, the enduring nomadic traditions of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, combined with access to modern education and scientific advancements, have been enriched by a strong cultural and intellectual heritage. The technological and healthcare developments of the Soviet era further contributed to a broad outlook characterized by tolerance and benevolence. Despite these factors, the current economic hardships, particularly in areas like the Fergana Valley, and the widespread poverty, coupled with limited political freedoms and lack of participatory governance, are pushing some disenfranchised individuals toward extremism.

Notably, the Fergana Valley has long been a center of Islamic tradition, where its settled way of life allowed people the time to deeply engage with the faith. Even during the Soviet era, despite harsh suppression of religion, Islam persisted and continued to flourish, with many people in the region maintaining their devotion. In fact, the influence of unofficial religious leaders in the Fergana Valley was far stronger than that of the official clergy based in Tashkent. The deep-rooted religiosity of the region's people has never been in doubt.

The rise of radical Islam in the region can be traced back to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. The mujahedeen, driven by the belief that "Islam was in danger", mobilized against the Soviet forces, viewing them as godless communists and fighting to defend their faith. Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, these forces gained considerable momentum. The Taliban's rise in Afghanistan in the late 1990s further entrenched religious extremism, adding a new and dangerous dimension: international terrorism.

The spread religious extremism and terrorism is closely tied to drug trafficking, which flows from Afghanistan through Central Asia to European markets. This illicit trade not only sustains extremist movements but also exacerbates the problems of corruption, addiction, and violence across the region. The toxic combination of extremism and drug trafficking has destabilized the region, further entrenching the challenges faced by Central Asian states (Debata and Hanova, 2024).

Events in Afghanistan have profoundly influenced the Fergana Valley, where religious fervor, coupled with economic deprivation, has driven many toward extremist activities. External funding, safe havens, and training from across the border have further fueled this trend. The Fergana Valley remains a focal point for the threat of religious extremism, with remnants of these groups still operating in the region. Despite these challenges, the people of the valley continue to seek a balance between modernity and tradition. As one insightful observer noted, “One hand should hold the Koran, and the other a computer, symbolizing the aspiration for a harmonious fusion of faith and progress.”

The Central Asian region has attracted significant interest from external powers due to its vast natural resources, particularly energy reserves. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan, as Caspian Sea littoral states, possess abundant reserves of oil, natural gas, and hydrocarbons, while Uzbekistan holds moderate gas reserves. In the 21st century, energy security has emerged as a top priority for many nations, as the global economy relies on a stable and timely supply of energy. In the United States, defense policy has been redefined to include securing access to affordable energy. While estimates of Central Asia’s energy reserves vary, it is increasingly acknowledged that the region holds significant energy potential, with the likelihood of untapped reserves remaining high (Springer, 2024d).

However, the landlocked nature of Central Asia poses a challenge, making the transportation of energy resources from the region more costly compared to other areas. Despite this geographical obstacle, Western multinational companies are actively involved in various stages of exploration, pipeline construction, and infrastructure development to tap into these valuable energy reserves.

The increasing importance of Central Asia’s energy reserves is largely fueled by the West’s, particularly the United States’, efforts to diversify energy sources. Ongoing instability in the Middle East, OPEC’s influence on supply and pricing, and US involvement in Iraq have further intensified the need to secure alternative energy supplies. In this context, the West has turned its attention to controlling Central Asia’s energy resources. Prominent American figures, such as Henry Kissinger, have openly advocated for securing control over these critical resources, viewing oil as a strategic commodity that must be managed by any means necessary. This competition for energy dominance in Central Asia, combined with efforts to reduce Russia’s historical influence in the region, is often described as a

modern iteration of the 19th-century “Great Game” -a geopolitical struggle for control over key resources and strategic territory (Debata and Hanova, 2024).

Indian Perspectives

A key trend in the post-Cold War era has been the rise of religious extremism and terrorism, particularly in regions like Central Asia, posing serious threats to national stability. These forces have the potential to fracture nations, as seen in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Multi ethnic and pluralistic societies are especially vulnerable to such destabilizing influences. Both India and the central Asian states, with their diverse and multi-ethnic populations, have faced similar challenges.

For over a decade, India has been grappling with militancy and terrorism, especially in Jammu and Kashmir, where groups advocating for jihad against India, often supported by groups across the border, have made the situation extremely volatile. The 1999 Kargil War serves as a stark reminder of the threats posed by such groups.

In Central Asia, countries like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are also facing rising extremist activity, particularly in sensitive regions such as the Fergana Valley. Notable militant groups in the region include Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which aims to establish an Islamic Caliphate stretching from Mongolia to the Caspian Sea, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (now known as the Islamic Movement of Turkistan), which has received support from Al-Qaeda. Additionally, Tajikistan has witnessed the emergence of a new extremist group called “Bayat” which is suspected of having Wahhabi affiliations.

Although the International Security Assistance Force (SAF) has played a role in maintaining stability, the threat of religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia remains persistent. Periodic reports indicate that the terrorist infrastructure has not been fully dismantled, and some assessments suggest that terrorist groups have adapted more quickly to the post-9/11 environment than the states in the region have been able to address the evolving threats (Dhaliwal, 2023).

In the early years following Central Asia's independence, India was particularly concerned about preserving the region's secular and modern outlook, fearing it could be undermined or replaced by a religiously driven agenda. From India's perspective, the primary issue was Pakistan's pursuit of strategic depth. Pakistan's ambitions extended beyond merely integrating Central Asia into the Islamic fold or gaining military leverage; its broader objective was to position itself as a vital bridge connecting Central Asia to the rest of the world thereby strengthening its geopolitical influence.

Central Asia's strategic location in Eurasia is a key factor shaping India's interests in the region is geopolitical importance has attracted the attention of both regional and global powers. By the mid-1990s, the initial optimism in Russian-American relations had begun to wane. This shift became evident after the 1994 Budapest summit, which signaled the end of a short-lived period of cooperation-what President Boris Yeltsin described as the onset of a "Cold Peace (Dhaliwal, 2023)."

American strategic thinking has long been influenced by British geographer Halford Mackinder's concept of Eurasia as the "geographic pivot of history," a perspective that continues to shape geopolitical discourse today. The significance of geopolitics remains relevant in the post-Cold War context, with emerging ideas of "geopolitical pluralism and multiculturalism" gaining prominence. This perspective suggests that Russia cannot claim exclusive rights over the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as its sphere of influence, and that the West also has vital interests in the region. Therefore, Russian policy within the CIS should prioritize inclusivity rather than exclusivity.

A prominent proponent of these ideas, American political thinker Zbigniew Brzezinski, outlined his views in the *Grand Chessboard*, which significantly shaped the policies of both the Clinton and Bush administrations toward the newly independent states of Central Eurasia. In contrast, Russian scholars V. Kolosov and N. Mironenko, in their work *Geopolitics and Political Geography*, advocated for a strategy focused on fostering voluntary economic, cultural, and communication integration with neighboring states.

This debate gave rise to two competing visions of the global order: a unipolar world led by the United States versus a multipolar world championed by Russia and China. These divergent approaches revealed that, while the Cold War had ended, old mentalities remained entrenched. Many Russians doubted the feasibility of the West accepting Russia as an equal partner, even after the ideological divide had been overcome. They believed the West had always sought a weak Russia, relegated to being a raw material supplier and a subordinate partner (Bajpai and Chatterjee, 2020).

Sergei Rogov of the Institute of the United States and Canada at the Russian Academy of Sciences aptly argued that even if a Russian-American partnership were realized, it could never serve as the central axis of the new international system. The civilizational and strategic differences between Russia and the West were simply too great for such an arrangement to be sustainable.

By this time, Central Asia's vast energy reserves were gaining increasing recognition, despite the region's landlocked nature. The development of more than an economic one, serving export pipeline infrastructure became more of a geopolitical issue. Strategic tool for the West to counter Russia's dominance. This competition was particularly evident in the debate over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC)

pipeline, which was promoted as an alternative to the Caspian pipeline Consortium (CPC) that transports oil through Russia to Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. The pipeline issue symbolized the subtle geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia (Routledge, 2020).

The American objectives were clear: to secure control over Central Asia's energy resources; to limit Russia's extensive influence in the region; and to further the global fight against terrorism. This marked the beginning of what is often referred to as a modern-day "Great Game," a competition for influence and control over the region's vast resources. It should be noted that Russia has held a long-standing presence in Central Asia, and the region is historically considered a natural extension of the Russian steppes,

The global war on terror provided a framework for cooperation, with Russia playing a crucial role. Moscow's approval of coalition forces establishing military bases in Central Asia not only enabled this collaboration but also significantly reshaped the region's geopolitics. Over time, a growing sentiment developed in Russia that the Western military presence might not be temporary, with some speculating that it could be driven by hidden agenda (Aryal, 2024).

The reaction of the Central Asian states was quite telling. Both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan permitted the US to establish military bases on their territory, and recent reports indicate that Kazakhstan might also be open to following suit. These nations sought strategic autonomy and were eager to reduce their dependence on Russia. The issue of energy pipelines became a key avenue for them to assert their independence, as they sought to diversify their export routes. By opening up to external powers, the Central Asian states could gain more leverage in managing their geopolitical and economic interests.

The collaborative dynamic between Russia and the US, was disrupted by events in Iraq, reigniting a sense of competition, particularly in the military domain. Russia has become increasingly assertive in Central Asia, aiming to counterbalance NATO's presence in the region. In response, Russia, together with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Belarus, established the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As part of this alliance, the CSTO set up a base in Kyrgyzstan specifically, the Kant airbase situated near the US base at Ganci (Bossuyut and Dessein, 2021).

This dynamic can be summed up by the observation that, "Russia, the US, and China are all striving to establish a new kind of relationship, with counterterrorism playing an increasingly prominent role." However, beyond their stated intentions, it is evident that each power seeks to secure a foothold in Central Asia. In simpler terms, "Russia is responding to the US presence by positioning itself in areas where the Americans have established a presence when the US stationed forces in Uzbekistan,

Russia felt compelled to do the same in Tajikistan (Taneeja and el, 2017).”

A new dimension in the Tally between Russia and the US in Central Asia is the growing influence of China Beijing has cultivated substantial interests in the region, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In particular, Kyrgyzstan holds strategic importance for China, as it seeks to strengthen its economic and military ties with the country. One of China’s primary objectives is to enhance transport. Connectivity through Kyrgyzstan on May 2003, plan was announced for a new railway line Inking Kashgar in China to Andijon in Uzbekistan via Jalatabad in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, China has expressed interest in acquiring products from Kyrgyzstan’s former Soviet-era defense industry enterprises, including the Bishkek Machine Building Plant, Janar, and Dastan, which remain integral to the region’s defense industrial base (Golden, 2011).

India’s extended neighborhood is far from a peaceful as it should be, and the growing strategic significance of Eurasia in the coming decades further highlights this reality. The geostrategic importance of Central Asia will only continue to rise as global power dynamics shift. The competition between Russia and the US sometimes overt, sometimes subtle is unlikely to escalate into direct conformation, at least not over Central Asia. However, this balance could shift significantly if China, as a rising global power, challenges the US for dominance. While such a scenario is unlikely in the immediate future, it remains a possibility on the horizon. Russia, with its vast potential, could play a more prominent role in global affairs, but this is also unlikely to occur in the short term. In the near future, the region will likely see interesting new geopolitical alignments taking shape (Taichakov and el, 2023).

For India, these developments are of immense significance. They directly impact the country’s geopolitical interests and security concerns. To navigate this complex and evolving landscape, India must take a proactive approach in strengthening its engagement with Central Asia, fostering a deep and enduring partnership with the region’s nations.

The post-Cold War era, Central Asian Countries have focused on nation-building and strengthening their statehood. Fortunately, the pessimistic predictions of the early 1990s, which foresaw the region’s disintegration, have not come to pass. None of the states has descended into failure. On the contrary, nations like Kazakhstan have made significant progress in their development. However, Central Asian countries continue to grapple with significant socio-economic and security challenges. Relations among them remain tense, with issues such as water security, border disputes, environmental degradation, and migration becoming increasingly critical. Furthermore, the rise of religious extremism and fundamentalism continues to pose a serious threat to regional stability (Frank, 1992).

India has traditionally valued its relations with Central Asia, recognizing the region's deep historical and cultural connections to the Indian subcontinent. However, despite these deep-rooted connections, the relationship has not progressed as hoped. India faces a significant challenge in accessing Central Asia directly, primarily due to the unstable situation in Afghanistan and its complex relationship with Pakistan. These factors have limited India's ability to fully engage with the region. The Turkmenistan Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which could greatly enhance regional connectivity and energy cooperation, holds substantial potential. However, despite promising developments, including an intergovernmental agreement, the completion of the TAPI project remains uncertain and is still a work in progress (Chaban, Niemann and Speyer, 2020).

Iran plays a critical, though often understated, role in India's relations with Central Asia, providing an alternative access route to the region. However, the India-Iran relationship over the past decade has been hindered by mutual suspicion and geopolitical complexities, limiting the potential for deeper cooperation. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which runs through Iran remains underdeveloped and needs significant investment to unlock its full potential. Likewise, India's use of the strategically important Chabahar Port in Iran has progressed more slowly than expected. To strengthen its access to Central Asia, India must make substantial investments in both the INSTC and Chabahar Port, ensuring that these infrastructure projects become viable and efficient gateways. Prioritizing this in India's foreign policy is crucial for enhancing regional connectivity and securing long-term strategic interests (Khanbabazada, 2024).

12 On July 10, 2012, the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses (IDSA) hosted a roundtable discussion titled "India's Engagement with Central Asia: Exploring Future Directions." Several key recommendations emerged from the seminar, aimed at deepening India-Central Asia ties. These included:

1. Relaxing visa regimes to facilitate easier movement.
2. Establishing a Central Asia-focused university to promote educational exchange.
3. Enhancing multilateral engagements across the region.
4. Setting up an India Cultural Centre in Bishkek to strengthen cultural diplomacy.
5. Investing in the development of the International North-South Transport Corridor
6. Expanding cooperation in the Information Technology (IT) sector.

7. Promoting tourism as a way to foster people-to-people connections.
8. Focusing on investments in the agriculture sector to support mutual growth.
9. Exploring the potential of a trade route through the Karakoram Highway.
10. Tapping into secondary markets in the energy sector for diversification.
11. India's proactive role in ensuring the success of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA).
12. Collaborating on joint science and technology initiatives.
13. Pursuing full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).
14. Encouraging Door Darshan to be more proactive in broadcasting cultural programs.
15. Supporting joint archaeological expeditions to foster cultural understanding (Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis).

These suggestions highlight a comprehensive strategy for strengthening India's engagement with Central Asia across multiple sectors, with an emphasis on connectivity, cultural exchange, and economic cooperation.

In recent years, India has made notable progress in its engagement with the core Central Asian countries-Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan-marking the most significant shift in its policy since these nations gained independence from the Soviet Union. Since 1991, this strategically important region, home to 62 million people, has increasingly captured global attention due to its vast natural resources, including being the sixth-largest producer of hydrocarbons and the fourth largest producer of natural gas. Beyond energy, the region also possesses abundant critical resources, including uranium and hydropower (Sun, 2004).

From geopolitical perspective, the Central Asian states (CAS), with a combined economy of \$217 billion, occupy a pivotal location. They share borders with Afghanistan, which presents both opportunities and risks: they could either become a stabilizing force in the region or, conversely, a hotbed for destabilization driven by the spread of international terrorism and the illicit drug trade originating from Afghanistan and flowing toward Europe. Afghanistan plays a crucial role in India's broader Central Asia strategy. As such, India's long-term strategic and economic interests in the region cannot be fully understood without considering Afghanistan's impact on the future of Central

Asia (Ragi, Sondhi and Pathak, 2017).

The significance of the Central Asian states (CAS) to the broader region, particularly to India's strategic interests, cannot be overstated. After years of relatively lukewarm engagement, India has recently begun to recognize the region's crucial role, reflecting a growing awareness of Central Asia's geopolitical and economic importance. India's historical ties to this region which stretch back centuries through the ancient Silk Road, have long been dormant. These trade routes, which once connected East, South, and Western Asia, had been largely inactive since the fifteenth century, and the partition of 1948 further severed India's direct territorial links with Central Asia (Stobdan, 2004).

Today, however, Central Asia is a region defined by a new kind of currency-its vast natural resources, especially oil and gas. Recognizing its wealth and strategic importance, many countries have sought to establish a foothold in the region. In April 2011 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made India's first official visit to Kazakhstan, underscoring India's renewed focus. The trip resulted in several agreements, including a nuclear energy pact for joint uranium exploration and a deal allowing India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC) to acquire a 25% stake in an oil field in the Caspian Sea. Just a month later, Uzbek President Islam Karimov visited India, marking his fifth trip since 1994, where he also signed agreements on security and energy cooperation (Talmiz, 2019).

In recent years, India's Ministry of External Affairs has actively strengthened bilateral relations with all five Central Asian countries, deepening political ties through summits and conferences. However, India faces significant competition from several powerful players that have long been vying for influence in the region. These include Russia, the former hegemon, China, the rising superpower, and neighboring countries such as Iran, as well as distant players like the United States, the European Union, and even Turkey and South Korea (Sottilotta and el, 2025).

Given this competition and India's late arrival on the Central Asian scene, the country finds itself at a geographic and financial disadvantage. To secure its position and influence in the region, India must carefully strategize its engagement with Central Asia. This requires building on its historical and cultural connections, leveraging its strengths in technology and humanresources, and fostering economic partnerships in areas where it can offer unique advantages, such as in energy, infrastructure development, and regional connectivity. India's approach will also need to be multifaceted, involving both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, while navigating the complex dynamics of a region already heavily contested by other powers (Zhuangzhi, 2004).

Twenty year ago indent to the Central Asian republics, which are some of the largest markets for its glands, was facilitated through the Soviet Union's base Mestow. While the old system has since been

dismantled, this study argues that the historical goodwill and the contacts established between India and Russia, as well as with Central Asia, still serve as a valuable foundation for trilateral cooperation in the present day. Despite two decades of relative neglect, these long-standing ties offer significant potential for fostering productive collaboration.

India and Russia already share a legacy of close cooperation and mutual trust. Geopolitically, the two countries are strategic allies with common objectives. Both support a multipolar order in Eurasia and seek regional stability, particularly in Afghanistan, Russia has been a steadfast advocate for India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), while India has expressed no reservations about Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's recent proposal for the creation of a Eurasian Union. Furthermore, both countries have aligned closely on various global issues, including the Middle East crises, particularly in Syria, and have jointly issued statements addressing both the situation in Syria and the future of Afghanistan during the 12th India-Russia summit in December 2011 (Xu and el, 2020).

These shared priorities and complementary foreign policy goals underscore the potential for deeper cooperation between India, Russia, and Central Asia, building on the historical bonds and mutual interests that continue to define their relationships.

Although the India-Russia bilateral relationship has generally been positive, it has, at times, been marked by benign neglect, leaving both countries as somewhat passive allies in Central Asia. However, they share a common position in the region. Like India, Russia is also a relative latecomer to the Central Asian scene, having spent much of the 1990s focused on rebuilding its own economy and infrastructure. As a result, Russia failed to develop a coherent strategy for engaging with the "Stans" for many years. Given Russia's diminished influence in the region and its current budgetary constraints, it is unlikely that it will regain its former dominance in Central Asia without a partner (Yadav and Wahlang, 2021).

India, as an emerging player seeking access to the region's vast natural resources, and Russia, as a former hegemon trying to regain its economic and cultural influence, have much to gain from deeper collaboration. While Central Asia holds significant strategic value for both, neither country possesses the sufficient financial resources or capacity to exert significant influence independently. By sharing the responsibilities of investment, expertise, and influence-building, India and Russia could more effectively advance their mutual interests in Central Asia and strengthen their presence in a region that holds great potential for both.

Conclusion

Recent developments in Central Asia highlight the shifting strategic dynamics in the region. US Influence has already peaked, while Russia and China are strengthening their political, military, and economic ties with the Central Asian nations. In this context, India has been actively seeking to enhance its presence in the region, aiming to tap into its vast energy reserves and forge mutually beneficial security and economic partnerships. India's growing economy relies on Central Asia's energy, minerals, and other resources to fuel its development, stability, and security. Additionally, China's increasing influence in the region has prompted India to intensify its engagement with the Central Asian republics. After nearly two decades of slow progress in building strong ties, India is now determined to make up for lost time, India aims to secure a stake in Central Asia's energy and mineral resources, invest in regional economies, and establish alternative trade routes that bypass Pakistan.

However, for much of this period Indian's physical access to the landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs) remained restricted. Ongoing tensions in Afghanistan, India's growing ties with the United States, and Washington's concerns coupled with the potential threat of sanctions on India's Investment in Iran's Chabahar port have impeded India's engagement with the Central Asian republics (CARs). India also has a military base in the region, and agreements have been signed for large-scale infrastructure projects. However, these successes are difficult to compare with the successes of China, which has overtaken both India and Russia.

However, Turkmenistan has been a strong supporter of India's bid for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). India should consider new ways to increase its presence in Central Asia. After the ban on Iran, it may be easier for India to find out the possibility of a land-sea pipeline route through Iran, which will make the option of Turkmenistan-Iran-India (III) pipeline stronger, India interested in joining the Ashgabat agreement, which connects central Asia with western Asia and the Indian Ocean. India and central Asia should look for new options to strengthen the bilateral relations of both sides, such as the emphasis on non-conventional energy, solar energy, bio-gas etc. To facilitate the relation of people to people, the services should be promoted through which the culture, economic, business relations between central Asia and India will be easy to increase and medical tourism. According to India's Medical Tourism Business, India's medical tourism had increased to 52 billion in 2015, in which more than 15 billion patients come to India every year to treat a large number of Central Asia and the Middle East. From Tajikistan and Central Asia in general medical tourism in India is increasing due to cost-effective treatment and quality treatment. According to the Medical Value Travel Report of KPMG and FICCI, India is ranked among the top three medical tourists in Asia. Historically, Central Asia has been connected to India's extended neighborhood pol-

icy through shared history, culture, and spiritual ties. Both can create a new Silk Route Initiative by providing a multi-dimensional character from their strong relationship, which will create new Silk route friendship and collaboration between the two countries.

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