



# Power Dynamics of Central Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Prospects and Challenges for India

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## Abstract:

The research paper, "Power Dynamics of Central Asia in the 21st Century: Prospects and Challenges for India," critically examines the evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia and its implications for India's strategic interests. The paper delves into the historical context, emphasizing the enduring ties between Central Asia and India. It explores the intricate web of geopolitical factors shaping the region, including great power rivalries and their impact on India's standing. The economic dimension is scrutinized, evaluating trade, investment, and energy dynamics, shedding light on both prospects and challenges for India in Central Asia. The paper also addresses security concerns, particularly focusing on regional challenges and the threat of extremism, emphasizing the need for collaborative strategies. Diplomatically, the research assesses India's initiatives and strategies in Central Asia, with a spotlight on soft power elements such as cultural exchanges. The paper concludes by projecting future developments in the region and offering recommendations for India's policy framework. Overall, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the power dynamics in Central Asia, offering valuable insights into the multifaceted relationship between Central Asia and India, while guiding strategic thinking for India's engagement in the region in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Great power competition, economy, energy, regional security, India.*

## Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study involves a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and official statements to establish the historical context of Central Asia's power dynamics. Additionally, qualitative analysis will be conducted, leveraging case studies and expert interviews to gain insights into geopolitical, economic, and security aspects. The use of primary and secondary sources aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolving landscape in Central Asia and assess its implications for India. This mixed-methods approach ensures a thorough examination of the prospects and challenges India faces in navigating the power dynamics of Central Asia in the 21st century.

## Introduction

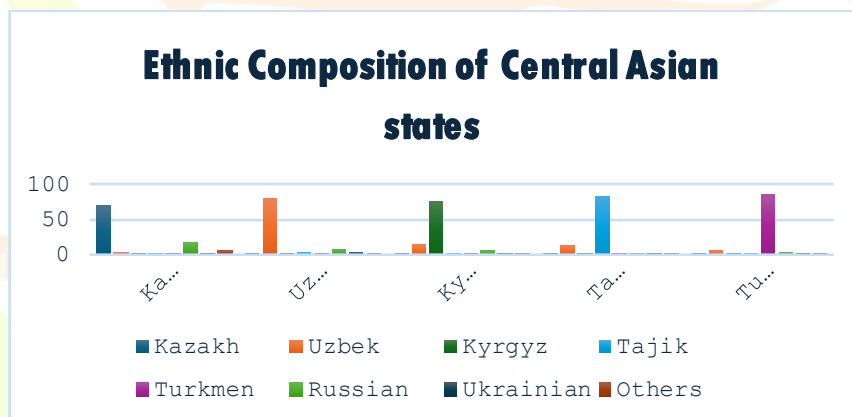
First coined in 1826 by J. Klaproth in his book 'Historical paintings of Asia', the term Central Asia refers to the landlocked subregion of Asia stretching from the Caspian Sea in the southwest and Eastern Europe in the northwest to Western China and Mongolia in the east, as well as from Afghanistan and Iran in the south to Russia in the north. It comprises of 5 republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. A longtime hub for

people, ideas, and trade, Central Asia was situated along the historic Silk Road, which connected Europe and the Far East.



[Source: Nations Online Project, 2000]

With a land area of 3,994,300 square kilometres, Central Asia contains some of the world's least populous areas. The 51 million individuals that make up the combined population are made up of people from over 100 different ethnic groups, including Tibetans, Koreans, Germans, and Austrians. But the five major ethnic groupings, listed in decreasing size are the Tajik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Kazakh peoples. With the majority of its followers being Sunni, Islam is the most popular religion. Large numbers of Russians and Ukrainians give the area a distinctive multiethnic character, which is a result of its historical integration into Russia and later the Soviet Union. Turkic languages, including Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh, comprised the majority linguistic group in Turkestan. With the exception of the Tajik people, who speak a language close to Persian, all of those groups speak Turkish. The societies, economy, and cultures of other governments and nations have been profoundly influenced by the cultures and civilizations of Central Asia over the course of its long and diverse history. In turn, Central Asia has been touched significantly by the cultures and civilizations of other states and countries such as China, India, Persia and Russia. Goods, ideas, and religious beliefs were transported from Central Asia to the other states via its major urban centres, which were situated along the Silk Road. Conversely, Central Asians were exposed to new ideas and religious beliefs, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Manicheanism, and Zoroastrianism.



[Data Source: Central Intelligence Agency, 2016]

Long a hub of cross-cultural interchange, mutual economic interaction, and political scheming, Central Asia is an area rich in history, diversity, and geopolitical relevance. This huge region, which is made up of former Soviet countries, has seen indigenous cultures impacted by outside pressures, as well as the emergence and collapse of nomadic empires and conflicts with other civilizations. A complex interaction between internal and external factors has moulded the geopolitical environment of Central Asia, starting with the nomadic Scythians and continuing with the vast Mongol Empire and subsequently the incursions of China and Russia up until its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

In this era of geostrategic and geoeconomics Central Asia is more important geopolitically than ever. Geopolitically, Central Asia is extremely important since it is at crossroads between powerful nations. Its wide length, straddling the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, is rich in natural resources, including energy reserves that are essential to the security of the world's energy supply. The stability of the region affects trade routes and the balance of power in the surrounding territories. Major powers like China, Russia, and the United States are interested in Central Asia because it may serve as a hub for economic corridors like the Belt and Road Initiative. These countries are all fighting for influence in this region. Its position as a strategic pivot influencing global politics adds to its geopolitical significance, in addition to its natural resources.

In the 19th century, Russia and Britain engaged in a strategic rivalry known as "The Great Game" in Central Asia following Mackinder's 'Heartland Theory' to gain political dominance over the core of Eurasia with a focus on geopolitical and geographical impact. The boundaries and political dynamics of Central Asian republics were determined by this geopolitical chess match, which lasted for decades. Fast forward to the twenty-first century, the contemporary major powers of the world- Russia, China, and the United States are once again involved in a convoluted dance for dominance in the region, giving rise to a new geopolitical game. With its infrastructure projects, military alliances, and commercial relationships, Central Asia becomes a focal point in the global power struggle. The region's importance grows as these key actors negotiate their roles; this is indicative of the changing dynamics of a modern Great Game with implications for world geopolitics.

India's involvement in Central Asia stems from historical and cultural connections, in addition to strategic considerations regarding the geopolitical terrain of the region. India and Central Asia have civilizational cultural linkages owing to their shared history along the historic Silk Road. India now has multifaceted interests in Central Asia, with a particular emphasis on energy cooperation, trade diversification, and counterterrorism initiatives. India's primary strategic objective in Central Asia is to obtain access to the region's abundant energy reserves, namely oil and natural gas. By constructing the Chabahar Port in Iran in partnership with Afghanistan, India can now trade directly with Central Asia, avoiding Pakistan. India is also eager to improve educational and cultural exchanges in order to fortify people-to-people connections. India uses a multifaceted diplomatic strategy, participating in projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and interacting with regional organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Moreover, India has promoted strategic alliances that prioritize economic cooperation and cross-cultural exchanges in order to strengthen bilateral ties with Central Asian countries. Although India has made progress in its diplomatic endeavours in Central Asia, difficulties still exist. The region's geopolitical environment is becoming more complex due to China's growing influence. India's capacity to successfully negotiate geopolitical complexities, promote economic cooperation, and strengthen regional stability through diplomatic initiatives is a key indicator of its success in Central Asia. This study aims to assess the success of India's diplomatic efforts in Central Asia, which entails a detailed examination of the region's geopolitical alignments, economic alliances, and cultural exchanges.

## The Enduring Legacy of Central Asia

The history of Central Asia is extensive and rich. Its topography and climate have greatly influenced its history; the flat steppe has facilitated the establishment of powerful empires. Human occupancy of the region began in the late Pleistocene Epoch, about 25,000–35,000 years ago. The earliest known human populations in Central Asia were the Cimmerians and Scythians (1st millennium BCE) in the west and the Hsiung-nu people (from 200 BCE) in the east. The nomads ruled the semi-arid plains, while sedentary agrarian communities and small city-states developed in Central Asia's more humid regions. A crucial component of the Silk Road was the Scythians.

### The Silk Route

The term "Silk Road" was first used in the late 19th century by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen to emphasize the significance of silk as a major commodity traded along these routes. Goods such as silk, precious metals, gemstones, tea, porcelain, and ideas, were also exchanged along this ancient trade network, which began to emerge during the Han Dynasty in China around the 2nd century BCE.

Several routes, each with distinct qualities and importance, traversed Central Asia as part of the Silk Road. The Northern Route went through towns like Dunhuang, Turpan, and Samarkand as it traces the course of the Great Wall of China. Connections with China and Central Asia were made possible by this route. China was connected to India and the Middle East by the Southern Route, which passed over the Taklamakan Desert. Along this route, cities like Bactra (modern-day Balkh), Khotan, and Kashgar were important trading hubs. The Maritime Route was an essential part of the Silk Road network, although not being exactly in Central Asia. It connected China with Southeast Asia, India, and even extended as far as Rome through sea trade. Ports such as Quanzhou and Guangzhou served as hubs for marine trade. From Central Asia to the Caucasus and beyond lay the Trans-Caspian Route. Trade between Central Asia and areas like as Europe and Persia were aided by it. Along this route, cities like Bukhara and Merv thrived as significant commercial hubs.

The Silk Road had a significant impact on the economy of Central Asia. The region experienced economic expansion and wealth because of the trade routes, which enabled commerce on an unprecedented scale. As luxury items became more widely available, social stratification and cultural sophistication increased. A cross-cultural exchange of customs, beliefs, technology, and artistic creations, the Silk Road served as both a commercial route



and a melting pot of ideas and civilizations. Religions like Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity spread along these trade routes. The communities along the Silk Road were greatly impacted by this cultural exchange.

The first Turkic people founded an empire in the sixth century CE, which lasted for two centuries and had a significant impact on the ethnic makeup of the region in the following centuries. The Uighurs came to power in the eighth century, and their rule was followed by that of the Khitans and the Karakhanids.

China has faced pressure from encroaching nomads along its frontiers since its inception. The Hu nomadic group had a significant influence on early Chinese history, bringing with them foreign clothes and cavalry that was better suited for new forms of battle than its conventional Chinese counterpart. One may argue that the first empire in central Asia, the Xiongnu Empire (209 BC–93 AD–156 AD), served as a model for the Göktürk and Mongol empires that followed. China's expansion into eastern Central Asia occurred between the Sui and Tang dynasties. With Turkic nomads emerging as the most powerful ethnic group in Central Asia, Chinese foreign policy to the north and west suddenly had to contend with them. In order to manage and steer clear of any dangers presented by the Turks, the Sui administration restored fortifications and accepted their commerce and tribute missions.

### Islamization of the region

Islam started to spread throughout the region in the eighth century when the early Arab Empire gained dominance over parts of Central Asia. Chinese influence was likewise driven out of western Central Asia by the Arab conquest. Nonetheless, the 9th century saw the start of widespread Islamization.

After the foreign powers were driven out, Central Asia saw the formation of multiple native empires. In the sixth and seventh centuries, the Hephthalites dominated most of the area and were the most powerful of these nomadic clans. The Samanid dynasty, the Seljuk Turks, and the Khwarezm Empire were among the strongholds that ruled the area in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The coming together of the Mongolian tribes under Genghis Khan produced the most amazing power to emerge from Central Asia. Using superior military techniques, the Mongol Empire spread to comprise all of Central Asia and China as well as huge areas of Russia, and the Middle East. Until the conquests of Timur (Tamerlane) around 1400, the Mongols ruled through a succession of independent khanates; by the end of the 15th century, all of these Timurid possessions had been taken over by the Uzbek people. After Timur's (Tamerlane's) dynasty broke up, southern Central Asia was divided into several rival khanates led by his descendants.

Russia started to conquer the area in the 17th century and kept going until the 1870s, when the remaining autonomous Uzbek khanates were either annexed or turned into protectorates. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the region was progressively incorporated into the Soviet system through enhanced communications and a planned economy, eventually displacing the power of the Russian tsars. The Soviet government established five Soviet socialist republics in the area throughout the 1920s and 1930s: the Turkmen SSR, the Tajik SSR, the Kirgiz SSR, the Kazakh SSR, and the Uzbek SSR. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, all five Central Asian Soviet socialist republics gained independence and became the sovereign and independent nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.



# Rising importance of the CAR

## Strategic significance in geopolitical dimensions

Strategically, Central Asia is located in the middle of both Asia and Eurasia. It connects Asia and Europe by acting as a bridge between Eastern and Western nations. Because of its geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic location, Central Asia is seen as being significant. The Central Asian kingdoms have historically been a hub for trade, rivalry, and conflict due to their geographic location. It is now a bridge that connects North and South and East and West. Aside from its advantageous location, the Central Asian region has emerged as the new front in the global geopolitical and geoeconomic wars for outsiders.

In the geostrategic framework of the 19th century, Central Asian states are crucial to the Heartland Theory, which was first put forth by Halford Mackenzie in his 1904 book "Geographic Pivot of History." Mackinder's interpretation of global historical processes rested on the notion that the world was naturally split into several regions, each with a unique role to play. As a result, the centre of all the geopolitical shifts of historical dimensions inside the World Island was the Heartland, which is home to the continental masses of Eurasia. The Heartland was in the most ideal geopolitical location, he noted. Recognizing the relative nature of the term "central location," Mackinder drew attention to the fact that the Eurasian continent, with the Heartland occupying its centre, is in the centre of the world within the framework of global geopolitical processes. According to his theory, the geopolitical subject (actor) who controlled the Heartland would have the required economic and geopolitical capacity to eventually rule the World Island and the entire globe. Central Asia, with its vast expanse of land, valuable resources, and geopolitical position, becomes a focal point in this theory. The region's geopolitical importance is underscored by its proximity to major powers, including Russia, China, and the Middle East. Access to Central Asia provides nations with the potential to control key trade routes, energy resources, and exert influence over neighbouring regions, making it a critical geopolitical pivot in the global balance of power.



[Source: Network for Strategic Analysis, 2020]

Later, Yale Professor Nicholas J. Spykman in his book *America's Strategy in World Politics* wrote "Geography is the most fundamental factor in the foreign policy of states because it is the most permanent. Ministers come and go, even dictators die, but mountain ranges stand unperturbed." He modified the 'Heartland Theory' and transformed into the 'Rimland Theory'.

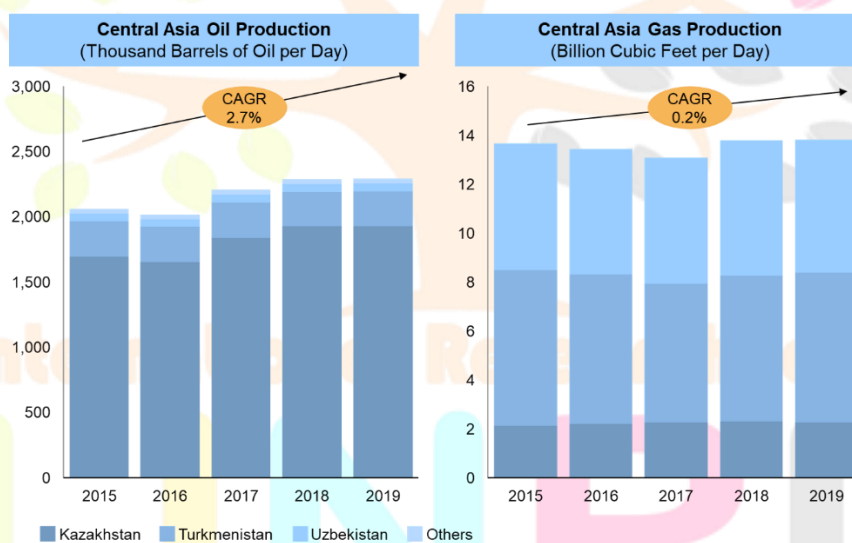
The Rimland Theory offers a lens through which to understand the strategic significance of coastal regions surrounding a dominant landmass. According to his rimland theory, the coastal areas or littorals of Eurasia are key to controlling the World Island, not the Heartland. The Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean littoral, and the shoreline of the Caspian Sea are examples of Central Asia's rimland. Because these coastal regions have access to vital resources, commerce routes, and possible military bases, they are extremely important geopolitically. The idea highlights the strategic battle for influence among countries vying for control or alignment with these rimland territories in the context of Central Asia. For example, in order to protect their interests in energy resources, transportation routes, and regional stability, countries like the United States, China, Russia, and Iran compete for dominance or collaboration in the region. As a result, the Rimland Theory offers a framework for comprehending the geopolitical forces influencing the strategic environment of Central Asia.

## Geoeconomic dimension

From a geopolitical as well as a geoeconomic standpoint, Central Asia is a special region. Its abundance of natural resources, primarily electricity, gas, and oil, offset its landlocked location. The republics are at the centre of worldwide strategy for the exploitation of oil, gas, and hydroelectricity and its diversification to the international market in the post-Cold War world. Following these states' independence in the 1990s, the region became more accessible to the global energy and open market, increasing its geoeconomic significance.

There was fierce competition among the main players over control of the freshly uncovered oil and gas resources, with the aim of strategically influencing the Central Asian republics. Russia, China, the United States, and India are engaged in a fast-moving competition to diversify their oil and gas pipeline industries. Russia's South Stream to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan BTC and Nabucco of the West and Eastern China-Turkmenistan-Xinjiang gas pipeline, the Kazakh-China cross-border oil pipeline, and the Southeastern TAPI to Pakistan and India are the competitors in the diversification race. In order to achieve the goal of energy security supplies, everyone is fighting for traction in the Central Asian region. Since oil and gas represents the primary engine of economic activity, prosperity and increasingly an important driver of the world economy, hence, Central Asian states are being considered a better energy alternative. The Central Asian region is under threat from both regional and transregional forces as a result of these energy resources. Due to the growing demand for gas and oil, as well as the decline in supply in other parts of the world, this area is becoming more and more important in global politics.

According to the British Petroleum Statistical Energy Review 2021, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have proven oil reserves of 30 billion, 0.6 billion, and 0.6 billion barrels, respectively. Their daily crude oil productions were 1.81 million barrels, 0.216, and 0.047 million barrels in 2020. This region is also abundant in gas. Total proven natural gas reserves in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were approximately 2.3, 13.6, and 0.8 trillion cubic meters (TCM), respectively. Oil and gas production in the region have grown at 2.7% and 0.2% per year, respectively, in the past five years as shown in figure below.



[Source: International Energy Agency]

Turkmenistan is the biggest producer and exporter of natural gas in the region while Kazakhstan is the largest producer and exporter of hydrocarbons. The substantial amount of natural resources have allowed both these countries to play a determining role in the global energy market.

## Security dimension

Sandwiched between Russia, China, and instability in Afghanistan, the former Soviet states of Central Asia must contend with religious extremism, economic coercion, and transnational organized crime amidst great power competition. Internally fragile due to authoritarianism, poor governance, and ethnic tensions, the region's adolescent countries are vulnerable to both outside interference and domestic discontent as they seek to balance the influence of larger powers. Central Asia thus faces an intersection of internal and external risks that threaten their stability despite plentiful energy resources.

The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan poses multiple security threats to neighbouring Central Asian countries. These include the risk of Afghanistan turning into a hub for Islamic extremist groups to spread radicalization across borders and recruit terrorist fighters. There is also the threat of economic and political instability driving an influx of Afghan refugees which would strain resources. Afghanistan's position as the world's largest opium producer could mean



increased drug trafficking through Central Asia's porous borders, especially impacting Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which are trafficking transit routes. The repression of ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Turkmen Afghans under Taliban rule may draw interventions from Central Asian states concerned about human rights violations against those sharing cultural ties. Finally, the collapse of Afghanistan's government leaves behind a regional security vacuum that could see greater competition for power and influence between outside states like Russia, China, and Pakistan - with the potential for growth in terrorist groups like ISIS-K as proxies, further destabilizing security across the region.

Over 4,000 Central Asian nationals joined terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Nusra Front as foreign fighters since 2012, largely due to economic hardship, injustice, corruption, oppression, and restricted freedom of worship inflicted by regional governments. With ISIS now weakened, many surviving fighters are returning home determined to spread extremism through violence, insurgency, and asymmetric warfare. Though unlikely to topple governments, they could generate instability. Along with punitive measures, authorities should implement de-radicalization programs and expand economic opportunities in vulnerable communities. Repressive-only approaches could further radicalization.

Illicit drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan and transiting Central Asia enroute to Russia and Europe is a major transnational organized crime threatening security and stability. Similar to Afghanistan, lack of economic opportunities pushes Central Asians into the drug trade worth of billions of dollars. In 2017, opium production in Afghanistan dramatically increased which creates security challenges for the region and beyond. Other cross-border crimes like human trafficking, illegal migration, and smuggling exacerbate corruption and fund terrorists and thus, threatening governance. Transnational criminal structures undermine state institutions and impede long-term development across Central Asia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has significantly heightened security concerns across its Central Asian neighbours and former Soviet partners. Most prominently, the region has become more perilously wedged between an expansively militarist Russia trying to limit Western influence in what it sees as its backyard, and China - whose Belt and Road ambitions present both economic opportunity and apprehension about following a similar debt-dependency path that has trapped poorer Asian and African nations. The war has also instantly weakened Central Asian economies deeply integrated with Russia, with sanctions leading to declines in trade, remittances, investments, and migrant job access as Russia suffers inflation and capital flight. Resulting hardship risks public protests and instability. Furthermore, pressure to align with Western condemnation of Moscow conflicts with the region's continuing political, economic and military reliance on Russia - meaning Central Asian nations must perform a delicate balancing act to avoid angering either side. Altogether, Russia's aggression in Eastern Europe has tied Central Asia's security environment into knots - vulnerable externally, underdeveloped internally, and now squeezed between the competing great power whims all around them. Their Soviet-born connectivity with Russia now risks economic contagion, political coercion and violent overflow from the Ukraine war zone.

## **Shadows of the Great Game: Power Struggles in Modern Central Asia**

### **The 'Old' Great Game**

As the industrial revolution got underway, the imperial powers required more and more resources and money to support its expansion and find new markets for the finished goods. The phrase "great game" was coined by British intelligence officer Arthur Conolly and made famous by Rudyard Kipling in his 1904 novel "Kim," in which he exaggerates the idea that power contests between powerful nations are similar to a game. According to Evgeny Sergeev, the Great Game was a complicated struggle that involved "a multilevel decision-making and decision-implementing activity directed by [the] ruling elites" in Russia and Britain.

The Great Game, also called Bolshaya Igra, was a fierce rivalry between the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia that lasted from the 1800s until 1907, with Britain trying to control or influence a large portion of the region in order to protect British India, the "crown jewel" of its empire. In the meantime, Tsarist Russia aimed to grow its realm of influence and territory in order to become one of the biggest land-based empires in history. And the Russians would have been only too glad to grab India from Britain. Russia subjugated Central Asian khanates and tribes on its southern frontiers as Britain cemented its control over India, which included what is now Myanmar, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.

With an edict establishing a new trade route from India to Bukhara and utilizing Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan as a buffer against Russia to prevent it from possessing any ports on the Persian Gulf, the British Lord Ellenborough launched "The Great Game" on January 12, 1830. Russia, however, sought to create a neutral area in Afghanistan so they could continue to exploit vital trade lines. This led to the British fighting a string of fruitless battles to take control of Turkey, Bukhara, and Afghanistan. Russia took control of many Khanates, including Bukhara, as a result of the British losing all four of their wars: the First Anglo-Saxon War (1838), the First Anglo-Sikh War (1843), the Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848), and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878). Despite the humiliating outcome of Britain's conquest efforts, Afghanistan remained an independent republic that served as a buffer between Russia and India.

The Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907, which split Persia into three zones—a northern, nominally independent zone under Russian authority, a centre, supposedly independent zone under British control—marked the official end of the Great Game. The Convention also designated Afghanistan as an official protectorate of Britain and drew a border between the two empires that extended from the eastern tip of Persia to Afghanistan. Up to their alliance against the Central Powers in World War I, relations between the two European nations remained tense.

## The new great game

Post the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of the five countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan various regional and external powers including the US, China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, India, and GCC nations, attempted to influence the affairs of the region starting a "modern great game." But this time, there are a lot more competitors

taking part, which makes a difference

Central Asia's abundance of natural resources, including gold, gas, oil, and water, is the reason for the region's growing and renewed interest. Furthermore, its geographic location marks a significant strategic intersection that links Europe and Asia. These elements stimulated the development of economic, transportation, and integration projects in neighbouring nations, giving such nations a Eurasian flair. These include the US's NSR project, the EU's TRACECA, the Chinese SREB, the Russian-led EAEU, the India-Russia-Iran-led INSTC, etc. This paper's goal is to look into the strategies and policies of the aforementioned powers, as well as potential areas of conflict between and among them in Central Asia.

### Russia

Despite the Soviet Union's dissolution, Russia maintains Central Asia as its sphere of influence with historical, economic, political, and security ties. With around \$20 billion invested, the Commonwealth of Independent States serves as a symbolic platform. Russia utilizes two main channels: CSTO for military-political collaboration with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and EAEU for economic and political ties. Post-Soviet vulnerability led to CSTO's formation in 1992, addressing security threats. Military alliances persist with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, securing Russia's dominant military presence in the region, influencing political, economic, and military affairs. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) serves as a key tool for Russia to strengthen economic and political ties with Central Asia, granting Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan access to various markets. EAEU agreements with China, Vietnam, Iran, Serbia, and Singapore provide additional benefits. Russia's financial and technical assistance, totalling \$200 million, aids Kyrgyzstan's integration. EAEU expansion strengthens Russia's position in the region, influencing crucial Asia-Europe routes. Additionally, Russian soft power, facilitated by language, media, and education ties, further solidifies its influence, with millions of Central Asian migrants contributing to their home countries.

### China

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, China strategically cultivated economic and political ties with Central Asia. The demarcation of borders, supported by Russia, and military agreements restrained military activities near shared borders. Successful energy cooperation agreements were forged, such as China's exploration of Kazakhstan's Uzen oilfield and the construction of the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) expanded into the region, focusing on the China-Central Asia-Western Asia Economic Corridor (CAAWAEC) as a vital alternative route to Europe, circumventing Russia. China's financial influence through loans and investments, including those from the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), stimulated infrastructure development but also led to debt-related challenges for some Central Asian countries. China's military presence in Tajikistan and soft power initiatives, including Confucius Institutes, strengthened its diplomatic ties, contributing to the economic, political, and military influence of both China and Russia in the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became a platform for joint Russian and



Chinese efforts in ensuring stability and security in Central Asia, countering potential threats from Afghanistan and the Middle East.



CCAWAEC [Source: *One Belt n.d.*]

## United States of America

After the 9/11 attacks, the US sought to establish a military presence in Central Asia, with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan hosting bases for operations in Afghanistan. However, Russia and China, viewing this as a security threat, used the SCO to push for the withdrawal of US troops. The closure of bases diminished US deterrence against Russia and China, but Washington still utilizes parts of Central Asia for troop equipment transport, incurring a hefty annual cost. Despite military setbacks, the US has fostered economic ties with Central Asian nations and initiated various diplomatic dialogues and agreements. The 'C5+1 format' and the New Silk Road (NSR) initiative aim to enhance cooperation, economic development, and regional stability, countering China's Belt and Road Initiative. The NSR could potentially create an economic platform to challenge China and Russia's influence, particularly if the US strengthens military bases in the region. The US has also promoted soft power, establishing the American University of Central Asia. Despite NSR's initial slow progress, there are signs of revival in 2020, potentially with the support of US ally Turkey, which could influence developments in China's Xinjiang province and further challenge China's influence in Central Asia.

## European Union

Brussels views Central Asia as a key alternative connection to China and Asia, bypassing Russia, and initiated the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor Post-Soviet Union collapse. The EU adopted a Central Asian strategy in 2007, focusing on mediating regional disputes and enhancing cooperation. The 2019 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and Council aims to intensify EU-Central Asia collaboration, including border management, regional cooperation with Afghanistan, and addressing organized crime and trafficking. Key reasons for EU's interest in Central Asia include access to Asia without Russian territory, energy imports, and economic development. The EU, Central Asia's main economic partner, provides loans and financial support, with Kazakhstan benefiting significantly. The EU's engagement extends to NATO's stabilization efforts in Afghanistan, countering drug flow, and promoting education-based soft power diplomacy through scholarships and university projects, aiming to foster democracy and human rights in the region.

## Iran

Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Iran aimed to establish influence in Central Asia, primarily through energy projects and soft power initiatives. However, facing economic and political challenges due to UN Security Council, US, and EU sanctions, Iran struggled to compete with other powerful players like Russia and China in the region. While Iran has maintained connections with Tajikistan through soft power efforts, including financial and infrastructure support, its political and economic reach is constrained by regional states' secular stance, wary of Iran's theocratic nature, and ongoing US sanctions. Iran's participation in multilateral platforms like the Economic Cooperation Organization and agreements like the interim deal with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) provides avenues for collaboration, yet Iran's strategy may involve closer cooperation with Russia and China to prevent regional marginalization, potentially seeking full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) when sanctions are lifted.

## Türkiye

Despite lacking a direct border, Turkey wields substantial influence in Central Asia, particularly among Turkic-speaking nations like Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Focused on rallying Sunni Muslims, Turkey employs soft power tools, such as educational initiatives and cultural organizations, strengthening ties through scholarships and universities. The Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency aids Central Asia's development, and

Turkey fosters economic cooperation through the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States. Despite lacking the financial might of major powers, Turkey's historical and cultural connections, coupled with soft power strategies, provide it with significant influence. Notably, Turkey's involvement in the 2020 Karabakh war and the presence of Turkish troops in Azerbaijan could extend its influence in Central Asia and infrastructure projects linking the region with the South Caucasus. However, aspirations of a Pan-Turkish state face scepticism from Central Asian political elites, emphasizing economic and political sovereignty.

## India

India has strategically engaged with Central Asia as an alternative energy source, vital transport corridor, and a significant market for its goods. After the Soviet Union's collapse, India strengthened ties with the region, implementing the "Connect Central Asia" strategy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visits in 2015 included agreements on military cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. The India-Central Asia Dialogue, part of the Connect Central Asia Policy, emphasizes regional collaboration. India collaborates with Russia on connectivity projects but partners with the United States for energy infrastructure, aligning with the New Silk Road's TAPI gas pipeline. As a member of the SCO since 2017, India defends its interests, fostering cooperation against COVID-19 and offering developmental projects and a \$1 billion line of credit. India's influence in Central Asia is set to rise due to its economic growth, strengthening its roles in the region's economic, logistical, and security domains.

## Gulf Cooperation Council countries

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened doors for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries in Central Asia, marked by a return to Islamic identity. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait extended cultural and religious ties, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) became a vital collaboration platform. Economic complementarity, with GCC's capital attracting Central Asian infrastructure development, further strengthened ties. Security cooperation, especially interest in joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), showcased shared concerns. Transportation routes, including China's Silk Road and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, present opportunities. GCC investments in Central Asia, totalling billions, signify deepening economic bonds. The regions, with vast energy resources and strategic locations, explore cooperation in political, economic, transportation, security, and religious spheres through international organizations and initiatives.

# Reconnecting Across the Ages: India and Central Asia

India and the Central Asian Republics have enjoyed positive relations throughout history. The significance that New Delhi places on the heartland region is demonstrated by the origins of Central Asian dynamics in India's strategic thinking, which are eloquently outlined in Kautilya's Arthashastra. An examination of India's political past also makes clear the close ties New Delhi had with the five Central Asian republics before to the Soviet Union's takeover of the area. Moreover, Central Asia served as a link for the renowned Silk Road, which spread Indian trade and culture throughout Asia.

But India's relations with Central Asia were never stable. It began to decline in the middle of the 1800s when the British Indian Empire began to come together. Relationships did not develop any depth or intensity, despite being rekindled in the years after independence. India began to acknowledge the CAR as a region of strategic importance in light of the shifting geostrategic and geoeconomic dynamics in the Central Asian environment post the disintegration of erstwhile USSR. India's "Look North Policy" from the 1990s is a prime illustration of this.

India's interactions with the region were previously seen through historical and cultural lenses. However, abrupt shifts in the global political landscape, the emergence of Central Asia's geopolitics in reshaping Asia's geopolitical map, geopolitical scenarios in Eurasia, the prioritization of regional security in the global political agenda, and the prioritization of geoeconomic interests over military considerations in the early 2000s have made Central Asia more attractive and influential to its neighbours. India, the closest participant, and obvious ally was unable to avoid the area at this time and attempted to expand into the area of immediate geopolitical and geostrategic relevance.

## Opportunities for India

Over the past 20 years, India has attempted to re-engage in Central Asia in order to advance its interests in the following broad areas: to achieve a significant footprint on the region's hydrocarbon map, which will enable India to diversify and

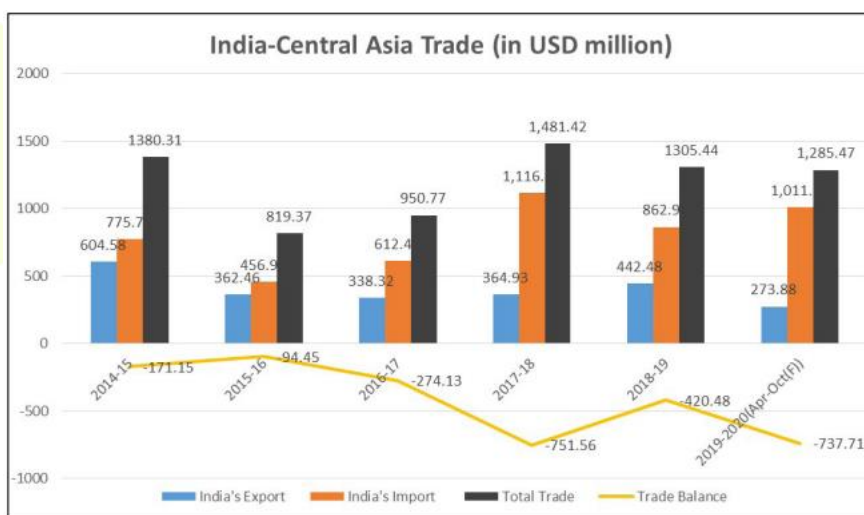
secure energy sources essential to her growth momentum; to check Pakistan's Islamist agenda against India; to safeguard and preserve India's security interests in the region against the rise of radical Islam as a political force in Central Asia; to monitor drug trafficking and potential weapons proliferation in this strategically significant region; and to advance commercial interests.

Energy security and continuity are essential for powering India's economy. According to PPAC data, India's oil import dependency was 87.4% in 2022-23. The country currently imports about 85% of its crude oil requirements from abroad. Out of which 44% of the country's oil requirements comes from the volatile region of West Asia. Reducing reliance on the West Asia and developing alternative energy sources has become crucial, since India is expected to remain more dependent on equity oil and energy. India's energy security plan will heavily rely on the energy resources of Central Asia, particularly the Caspian Sea region. As the region is home to 7% of world's total gas reserves and 2.7% of world's total oil reserves. Crucially, the enormous hydroelectricity potential of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the rich uranium in the area, and the vast offshore and onshore hydrocarbon reserves in the Caspian Sea littoral states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan present India with significant opportunities to capitalize on both fronts.

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Project, a \$10 billion pipeline, aims to transport 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Turkmenistan to India. Turkmenistan is home to the fourth-largest natural gas deposit in the world, which makes it a reliable supply of gas for South Asia. The pipeline covers a 1040-mile route, passing through conflict-ridden areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite stalled construction due to prior commitments to Russia, difficulties in engaging with the Ashgabat regime, security risks, and lack of financing, a joint statement from Indian Prime Minister to Turkmenistan in 2015 welcomed the establishment of the "TAPI Ltd" special purpose vehicle and emphasized the mutual benefits of the project. The project also aims to promote cooperation in oil exploration between India and Turkmenistan.

With an 8.5-million-ton capacity and full operating status, the Chabahar Port is essential to India's and Eurasia's connectivity and strategy plans. The closest maritime port to Central Asia is Chabahar. The INSTC is a multimodal transportation route that connects the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean to the Caspian Sea via Iran and then travels via St. Petersburg, Russia, to northern Europe. More direct connectivity to Europe, Russia, and Central Asia will be possible because to the INSTC. It will also enable Iran and Azerbaijan to develop become major regional hubs for transportation. The INSTC is expected to be 30% less expensive and 40% shorter than the conventional path that passes through the Suez Canal.

The potential of India's relations with Central Asia has a promising future. There is very little trade between India and Central Asia. The combined value of commerce between Kazakhstan and India in 2018–19 was 851.91 US million, or 0.10 percent of India's overall trade. Trade between India and Turkmenistan was 66.27 US million dollars over the same year, accounting for 0.01 percent of India's total trade. Trade with Tajikistan was 26.52 US million dollars. Finally, trade with Uzbekistan was US\$328.14 million, or 0.04 percent of India's overall commerce.



India's national security is heavily influenced by Central Asia, including Afghanistan, which is a hotbed of religious extremism and radical Islam. The disintegration of the Soviet Union has provided a fertile ground for militant groups, including the Taliban and Hizb-ul-Tahrir. The proliferation of drug-trafficking in Central Asia further complicates security concerns. India's security is closely tied to the instability between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the unholy alliance between the Taliban and Pakistan contributing to terrorist attacks. Also, India's only overseas airbase lies in Farkhor, Tajikistan.



Transnational organized crime, including drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and money laundering, poses a significant threat to the Central Asian region and beyond. Afghanistan, the world's top opium producer, has become a transit route for drugs, leading to the spread of drug addiction among the region's people. The drug trade generates revenue for anti-government forces, organized crime, and public corruption, contaminating power. The spread of small arms from Afghanistan has contributed to militant activities in the region, with Kyrgyzstan being particularly concerned.

To counter these threats, India has initiated cooperative security initiatives with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. However, India's direct collaboration with Central Asian states in defence affairs is limited by the growing role and presence of Russia-led CIS-regulated CSTO and China-led SCO. As a full member of the SCO, India can have a larger role and access to the region on matters of security and counter terrorism using the SCO platform.

## Diplomatic engagements

Currently, the Central Asian Republics comprises India's extended neighbourhood. The security, stability, and prosperity of the region is closely related to India's. After signing strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan in 2009 and Uzbekistan in 2011, at the 2012 India-Central Asia Dialogue in Kyrgyzstan, India unveiled its Connect Central Asia Policy. India's back then External Affairs Minister E. Ahmed said that "the policy calls for setting up universities, hospitals, information technology (IT) centres, an e-network in telemedicine connecting India to the CARs, joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, joint scientific research, and strategic partnerships in defence and security affairs."

In addition to the nations' political and economic cooperation, the policy aims to promote regional connectivity as well as the advancement of the region's infrastructure and educational system. 2015 saw Prime Minister Narendra Modi travel to each of the five Central Asian nations, underscoring the significance of the strategy. The Connect Central Asia Policy is based on - 4Cs: Commerce, Connectivity, Consular and Community.

In addition to the India-Central Asia Summit in 2022, there were three India-Central Asia Dialogues in 2019, 2020, and 2021. At the virtual summit, all five of the Central Asian presidents were in attendance. Discussions on the relationships between the nations were held, and strategies for addressing security challenges and promoting long-term peace in conjunction with political and economic cooperation were explored. The aim of this summit was to secure greater connectivity to the region and to strengthen India's connection with the Central Asian countries.

The Ashgabat Agreement, which was established in April 2011 to create an international multimodal transportation and transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, was joined by India in 2018. On April 25, 2011, Iran, Oman, Qatar, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan signed the agreement for the first time. In 2013, Kazakhstan and Pakistan became members of the group, however Qatar later withdrew from it. April 2016 saw the implementation of the Ashgabat Agreement. The main objective is to improve connectivity within the Eurasian region and synchronize with other regional transport corridors, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

In order to provide bilateral assistance and capacity building through training programs, study tours, technology transfers, and, in certain situations, aid for disaster relief, the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program was launched in 1964. Since the 1990s, the CARs have participated in the ITEC program to get training. The fact that more than 3000 people in the area have benefited from the ITEC program since its launch suggests that it has been successful.

Founded in June 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an economic, political, and regional security organization with a focus on Eurasia. The SCO has actively pushed regional cooperation in areas such as trade and economy, environment protection, education, transport-connectivity, energy, culture, and people-to-people interactions in recent years, moving beyond a restricted focus on security and military matters. In 2017, India was admitted as a full member of the SCO. Despite the SCO's growing membership, experts observe that attention is still focused on the Central Asian region. In particular, the SCO offers India a strong platform to strengthen relations with Central Asia.

Indian involvement in the region continues to be heavily reliant on development cooperation and capacity building. India-Central Asia Development Group and India-Central Asia Business Council were founded by it in the last few years. Moreover, it established an India-Central Asia Centre in Delhi and introduced a US\$1 billion credit line for development projects in 2020 related to IT, energy, infrastructure, and agriculture.

## Challenges to India's rise in influence

India's lack of a shared border with Central Asia, placing it outside the country's immediate neighbourhood, presents a significant challenge for connectivity. This is further compounded by the landlocked nature of the Central Asian states, which eliminates the possibility of direct sea routes between the regions. These factors combine to make robust land-based connections of paramount importance for fostering ties between India and Central Asia.

China's presence in Central Asia throws a major hurdle on India's "Connect Central Asia" policy. China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) dwarfs India's investment capabilities. This economic clout gives China significant leverage over the Central Asian Republics (CARs), many of whom have become heavily reliant on Chinese infrastructure projects and loans. Furthermore, China's close ties with Russia, another major player in the region, can limit India's room for manoeuvre on security and political issues. This economic and political dominance makes it challenging for India to establish itself as a credible alternative partner for the CARs.

Strained relations with both Pakistan and Afghanistan create a significant roadblock for India's "Connect Central Asia" policy. Ideally, a land route through these countries would provide a direct connection for trade and commerce. However, both Pakistan and Afghanistan struggle with instability and insecurity. Further complicating matters is the return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. This destabilizes the crucial land route for connecting India to Central Asia. Sanctions imposed on Iran and Russia, potential partners for regional connectivity projects, further restrict India's options. The ongoing war in Ukraine adds another layer of uncertainty to the region's stability.

Central Asia's path towards regional unity remains obstructed. Unlike established blocs like SAARC or ASEAN, Central Asian countries struggle with unresolved border disputes, ethnic tensions, and competition for resources. These internal issues hinder the development of a strong collective identity and a unified approach to regional affairs. This lack of regional cohesion poses a challenge for India in formulating a coherent policy towards Central Asia. Without a clear understanding of the region's common interests and priorities, it's difficult for India to develop a strategic approach that effectively engages all the Central Asian states. This fractured landscape forces India to navigate complex bilateral relationships, making it more challenging to establish a comprehensive and impactful regional presence.

## Conclusion

Central Asia has long captured the imagination of Indians due to historical, civilisational and cultural connection and the country has long-standing goals of strengthening its ties and establishing a greater presence in the region. Amidst the current great power competition being played out in the region, it is impertinent for India to leave its mark. Although there are quite a significant challenges obstructing India's Connect Central Asia Policy but there are areas of cooperation which would suit the Indian interest.

First and foremost is increasing connectivity projects with the region. As discussed earlier, India has already invested in the INSTC and the Chabahar Port in Iran yet more engagement in connectivity projects is required from India. If India wants to match the deep pockets of China, then it needs to partner with like-minded nations and achieve its interests in the region. India being a part of the New Silk Road announced by US is already a right step in the direction.

Secondly, India should focus on increasing trade relations with the Central Asian countries. India can be a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) which would make the Eurasian market more accessible for India by limiting trade barriers and simplifying processes for Indian businesses. There is a need to realize a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and EAEU which has a potential of spurring the trade.

Soft power and "people-to-people" connectedness may play a key role in the Connect Central Asia policy's effectiveness. To further their education, many students from Central Asian nations have travelled to India and vice versa. India must enhance and make chances for students from these nations easier. Since the Soviet Union, Indian products, music, movies, and other entertainment have been popular in these areas. Sometimes using soft power can achieve goals that hard power, force, or diplomacy may not be able to. Therefore, a comprehensive soft power strategy can be a game-changer. This can be achieved by easing visa requirements, building schools and institutions, boosting tourism, and investing in the agricultural sector.

The current century is being called as the Asian century for its accelerated economic growth and military developments and India is one of the major players in the continent. With its rising ambition of being a 'Vishwa guru', it is impertinent for India to have its foothold in the strategic regions of the world. India and Central Asia have enjoyed century old ties which needs to be reinvigorated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to achieve India's geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the current world politics. India has succeeded to a certain extent in its vision of Connect Central Asia in the middle of the great power competition which is undermining the prospects of India in every aspect. By pursuing a multi-pronged approach, India can overcome the existing challenges and carve out a niche for itself as a reliable and valuable partner for the nations of Central Asia.

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