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India's Strategic Outreach to Central Asian Republics under the Narendra Modi Government

*Imran Khurshid**

Abstract

India's ties to Central Asia have improved significantly in recent years. This gathered momentum after PM Modi's 2015 visits to each of the five nations, and subsequent initiatives by Prime Minister Narendra Modi have further strengthened the strategic ties with those republics. The underlying purpose of this study is to show that, since Modi came to power, there has been greater strategic outreach to CAR. These republics have received a greater strategic attention from New Delhi due to shifting geopolitical realities and great power contestations there. The paper also delves into how India has improved the institutional framework for its strategic engagement with Central Asian Republics, both at the bilateral and regional levels. Subsequently, the paper also lists India's challenges in connecting with the Central Asian Republics and delineates the strategic significance of these republics to India. This paper provides a systematic account of all major developments in India's relations with these republics since 2014. Finally, this research paper substantiates the fact that there has been greater strategic engagement with CAR post-2014, after Narendra Modi came to power.

Keywords: *Strategic Outreach, Multilateral Cooperation, Great Power Game, Strategic partnership, Central Asian Republics*

Introduction

India's ties to the "Central Asian Republics" have improved significantly in recent years. Subsequently, it gathered momentum after PM Modi's 2015 visits to each of the five nations. The first "India-Central Asia Dialogue" was held at the level of foreign ministers in 2019 after India joined the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)" in 2017 (Koparkar, 2022). Exchanges of visits and the formation of collaborative working groups complemented these efforts. The partnership has developed in a number of fields, including defense, counterterrorism, trade, energy, investment, IT, education, skill development, health, and tourism. India provided a \$1 billion line of credit for regional development initiatives to these countries. Fighting the COVID pandemic in Central Asia required a steady supply of medical supplies and made-in-India

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vaccinations, and India's role remained substantial in those efforts as well (Koparkar, 2022, p. 02).

Central Asia has historically been at the epicenter of major geopolitical and geo-economic upheavals. Although the Silk Road's collapse restricted trade, the new leadership of India is making a new push to rebuild ties with the region (India's Central Asia outreach, 2022). Due to historical connections between civilizations and cultures, Central Asia has been a part of India's thinking, and India has aspirations to increase its presence and linkages with the region (Sachdeva, 2022). New geopolitical realities and economic prospects following the dissolution of the Soviet Union had an impact on Indian strategic thinking. The emergence of new sovereign states boosted opportunities for trade, transit, and energy imports. Concerns over the growth of religious fanaticism were also present. India's concern was further heightened by the unrest in Afghanistan and China's increasing presence in Central Asia (Sachdeva, 2022).

Following strategic partnerships with Kazakhstan in 2009, Tajikistan in 2012, and Uzbekistan in 2011, India unveiled its 12-point "Connect Central Asia" agenda in 2012. This strategy is a comprehensive framework with linkages to politics, the economy, security, and culture. Through this policy, India hopes to strengthen its relations with the region on the political, security, economic, and cultural fronts by taking a more proactive approach to the region as a whole (Sachdeva, 2022). When Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a strategic outreach to these Central Asian Republics in 2015, this policy was further cemented. Since then, there has been a substantial increase in collaboration, especially in the areas of connectivity, energy, and defense (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

This research paper explores Narendra Modi's strategic outreach to these republics using a neo-classical, realistic paradigm with a focus on both structural and unit-level variables. At the structural level, systemic pressures in the form of China's greater strategic inroads into this region and subsequent great power dynamics have compelled India to increase its strategic engagement with the region. And consequently, at the leadership level, Narendra Modi's personal commitment to the strengthening and deepening of engagement with these central Asian republics has enhanced India's strategic outreach to this region. So, both of these factors-systemic pressures and unit-level variables-have pushed India's grand strategic outreach to this region. This paper entails a historical, descriptive, and analytical method based on the available literature on this research subject. This paper gives a systematic account of all major developments in the relationship with these countries from 2014 onward. This paper is divided into multiple sections. The first section delineates Modi's strategic outreach to the Central Asian Republics; the second section, India's engagement through bilateral and regional forums; the

third section, India's challenges in connecting with the Central Asian Republics; and the last section, the geo-strategic significance of these republics for India. And finally, this research paper substantiates the fact that there has been greater strategic engagement with this region since Modi came to power in 2014.

Modi's strategic outreach to the Central Asian Republics

In a single trip in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid visits to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, making him the first Indian PM to do so. PM Modi's visit to this region gave the country's Central Asia policy new life. The Indian Prime Minister had never before visited the region all at once. This journey was a tactically sound one that enabled India to get through the barriers that had previously blocked its outreach to a crucial region in its strategic vicinity, and it was also a symbolic success for Indian diplomacy. In the post-Soviet era, India has made numerous attempts to improve its outreach to Central Asia, but the development has been uneven. However, only in recent years have we seen a significant improvement in India's relations with Central Asian nations (Gupta, 2022).

According to the former ambassador to Kazakhstan, Ashok Sajjanhar, "Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has brought back the focus on Central Asia after 30 years of neglecting this landlocked and resource-rich region that shares cultural and deep historical ties with India." He further reiterated, "Saying that in terms of its relations with the Central Asian countries, India could have done more. It goes without saying that only four visits by Indian prime ministers occurred between 1995 and 2015. The region received only infrequent attention from Indian authorities over the course of decades in 2002, 2003, 2006, and 2011 (Joshi, 2022)." The significance of this visit is reflected in the fact that, with this visit, India began to view this region diplomatically as a single geographical and geostrategic entity. Following 2015, the presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan made reciprocal high-level state visits, which paved the way for improved bilateral and trilateral agreements between India and Central Asia. Both parties sought to work together on money laundering, military and defense technology, and formed a combined working group on counterterrorism.

Modi inked 22 agreements during this visit; he also inked a bilateral uranium purchase agreement with Kazakhstan, which presently makes up around 80% of India's imports of uranium, as well as agreements on trade, tourism, culture, and military and technical cooperation. Also, since 2002, India has kept a base in Tajikistan called Ayni open, which was utilized to evacuate its citizens from Afghanistan when the Taliban took control of the country (Sachdeva, 2022).

Despite the previous UPA government's announcement of the Connect Central Asia Policy, the outreach effort failed in part due to a lack of a serious effort to see it through (Staff, 2017). The Indian Foreign Office did not begin to actively express interest in the region or fully comprehend the strategic and commercial opportunities in Central Asia until Modi came to power in New Delhi in 2014. "We have strong historical, cultural, and civilizational ties, Tajikistan is the Central Asian country closest to India, a narrow corridor separates us, our linguistic connections are the strongest in Central Asia... We discussed measures to tap the rich potential in trade and commerce, as well as to encourage joint ventures and investments, the Indian Prime Minister said following his meeting with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon (Staff, 2017)."

The strengthening of strategic ties has resulted from subsequent high-level exchange visits at all levels, amplifying the transformational effect of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit in July 2015 (Manhas, 2022). "The fact that the foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries flew to New Delhi in December 2021 to participate in the third India-Central Asia Dialogue, despite the threat posed by the Omicron variant and while forgoing the concurrent meeting of the OIC foreign ministers, shows the significance these countries attach to their ties with India (Manhas, 2022)." Furthermore, the CARs have welcomed New Delhi to the Ashgabat Agreement in order to offset the influence of a steadily assertive and expansionist China. This gives India access to connectivity networks that will encourage expanded trade and commercial contacts. The presence of India in this region is also seen by Russia as a deterrent against the expansion of Chinese influence and a way to keep Beijing from dominating the southern CIS. In terms of geopolitical changes, Central Asia has remained crucial.

In July 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi underlined India's rising interest and intention to actively participate in this region, saying, "My current visit to all five Central Asian countries is a testimony to the importance that India attaches to the region. Looking ahead, we would like to contribute to the region's transportation and communication networks, we can build a massive network of physical and digital connectivity that stretches from Eurasia's northernmost tip to Asia's southernmost reaches, the International North South Transportation Corridor is an important step in that direction (Roy & Roy, 2017)."

India continues to play a significant role in the region through development cooperation and capacity building. The "India-Central Asia Development Group" and "India-Central Asia Business Council," were founded recently as a result. Additionally, it established an India-Central Asia Center in Delhi and announced in 2020, the opening a US\$1 billion line of credit for initiatives in the infrastructure, IT, energy, and agricultural sectors (Sachdeva, 2022).

India has seen an increase in cooperation, communication, and understanding with Central Asian states. India has additionally looked into ways of interacting with the region collectively rather than only bilaterally or as a merely player in systems that include other external powers. Subsequently, in order to revive the Chabahar port, which had been shut down since 2003, India and Iran signed Memorandums of Understanding in 2015. Most Central Asian nations view India's Chabahar port as an opportunity to increase their export markets and curtail China's ambitious designs (Pant & Wani, 2021).

Additionally, in his dialogue with Turkmenistan leaders in 2017, the PM also pushed for an early restart of the stalled TAPI gas pipeline, "The TAPI gas pipeline is the most important initiative in our relationship. This has the potential to transform regional economic cooperation and bring prosperity along the way... We emphasized the importance of completing the project as soon as possible, PM Modi said." "This project is now in the works and is scheduled to be completed in 2020, Kazakhstan is our region's largest economic partner, we will work together to take economic ties to a new level," he furthered.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi further added following talks with Kazakhstan's President, "We are pleased to have a much larger second contract with Kazakhstan for the purchase of uranium and to expand our civil nuclear cooperation. The gas pipeline remains India and Central Asia's most visible and expensive project. I strongly believe in this project, and it is not just a commercial project, but one that will lay the groundwork for regional peace and security (Staff, 2017)."

However, while New Delhi remains a stakeholder in the massive gas pipeline project envisioned in 1990, its concerns about the project's safety and security have escalated exponentially since the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Another issue is that even if the project is completed, many industries in India will become dependent on it, and Pakistan can exploit this by cutting off supply during times of tension, resulting in massive losses (Basu, 2022).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) also granted permanent membership to India in 2017, which boosted bilateral ties between India and Central Asia. The first "India-Central Asia Dialogue" was initiated by India in 2019 at the level of the foreign ministers (Sachdeva, 2022, p. 02). India's participation was further bolstered with the establishment of the "SCO Division within MEA" in 2017 and subsequently with the appointment of a "National Coordinator and Permanent Representative" to SCO (Gupta, 2022).

During its presidency of SCO in 2023, the "Delhi Declaration" was adopted, and India took a strong position to support new areas of growth, including startups and innovation, traditional medicine, digital inclusiveness, youth

empowerment, and most SCO member states' shared Buddhist heritage. As part of this pledge, India formed two new structures: the Special Working Group on Startups and Innovation and the Expert Working Group on Traditional Medicine, underscoring New Delhi's commitment to assisting in regional economic and social reforms (Wani, 2023). In his address to the SCO forum, the Indian prime minister emphasized the importance of connectivity for enhancing regional trade. He further emphasized the need to uphold the fundamental principles of the SCO charter, particularly respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states (Kumar R. , 2023). In his speech, he made indirect references to Chinese debt diplomacy and its aggression across the Himalayas against India; additionally, he also criticized Pakistan's policy of employing terrorism as a tool of statecraft to advance its interests. To a certain extent, the SCO as a forum has enabled New Delhi to engage with this region and advance its strategic interests.

Furthermore, looking at the current geopolitical landscape of this region, Russia and China appear to have a significant impact. However, given their inherent fear of Russia and skepticism of China, the CARs have also made an effort to strike a balance between maintaining their strategic autonomy and maximizing the political and financial gains from each actor (Roy & Roy, 2017, p. 12). Enhancing their strategic ties with India provides them with a platform to allay their innate concerns. And subsequently, this helps the CAR pursue a multi-vector foreign policy by balancing their relationships with other countries. The CARs consider India, which enjoys a positive reputation in the region, to be a crucial element in their strategic assessment. (Roy & Roy, 2017). Although India's engagement with this region has been historically low, India is still in a better position to benefit from the competitive rivalries among the Eurasian major powers. Russia is unlikely to complain about India having a greater presence in Central Asia due to their "time-tested" positive relationship. A more extended Indian involvement with the CARs can help reduce the current volatility at a time when Moscow has been constrained to give China more strategic space in this region. Russia also wants India to have a greater presence in this region to counterbalance China's growing influence there. However, after coming to power in 2014, India under Narendra Modi has now shown greater urgency to rebuild its links with Eurasia and form more solid long-term partnerships, which will subsequently have the potential to lay the groundwork for building greater strategic and geopolitical alignment with this region (Roy & Roy, 2017).

India's engagement through bilateral and regional forums

"India's current geostrategic engagement with Central Asia is shaped by four major structural factors. These include: (a) the impact of the security situation

in Afghanistan on Central Asia;(b) a relatively weaker Russia, especially in pursuing its policy towards Central Asia, which Moscow once considered to be its ‘soft underbelly’; (c) the rise of China in Central Asia, which is significantly endangering regional security and the stability of this region; and (d) a lack of interest from Western nations, especially after the withdrawal of NATO troops from war-torn Afghanistan (Mohapatra, 2022).”

India and the CARs share similar perspectives on the majority of geopolitical concerns, notably Afghanistan, with which three CARs share a border (Pandita, 2022). They have a common interest in preventing terrorists from being sheltered, trained, or funded on Afghan soil. In crucial sectors including defense, security, counterterrorism, and intelligence sharing, their relations have improved over the past six years (Pandita, 2022). India and Kyrgyzstan decided to undertake their annual bilateral military exercise Khanjar as a reflection of their developing relationship. The next year, they made the decision to establish a Mountain Training Centre to host combined mountain training exercises, provide training, and instruct members of the Kyrgyz Armed Forces (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

Under the Narendra Modi government, New Delhi has used both bilateral and regional mechanisms to pursue its greater strategic engagement with the Central Asian Republics. India has strengthened its regional institutional structure for bilateral defense cooperation. Notably, during Prime Minister Modi’s visits to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan in 2015, agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) on cooperation in defense and military technology were signed (Menon & Rajiv, 2019). India and Kyrgyzstan decided to undertake their annual bilateral military exercise Khanjar as a reflection of their developing relationship. The next year, they made the decision to establish a Mountain Training Centre to host combined mountain training exercises, provide training, and instruct members of the Kyrgyz Armed Forces (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

The first “Prabal Dostyk” joint military exercise between Kazakhstan and India took place in 2016. Consequently, the second edition of this bilateral military exercise took place in 2017. The joint exercise aims to improve military ties between the two nations and achieve interoperability between their militaries. The 3rd Battalion of the “11th Gorkha Rifles” of the Indian Army and the Kazakhstan Army each contributed a platoon to the training contingents. The main goal was to strengthen the already-existing military ties between the Kazakhstani and Indian armies and to create a synergy that will allow for combined operations as and when they are required. Additionally, India has increased its civil nuclear cooperation with the region to protect its energy interests (PTI, 2017).

In addition to bilateral cooperation, India has prioritized regional engagement with the region. India, Iran, and Afghanistan inked a tripartite agreement in May 2016 to establish the “Shahid Beheshti Terminal” at Chabahar. India had agreed to contribute \$85 million toward the terminal’s construction, as well as several million dollars’ worth of cranes and other machinery. The port may also act as a hub for transit trade between Afghanistan, Iran, and India, offering an alternate path to the historic Silk Road that travels through China (Chaudhury, 2016). The port has a lot of potential given its geostrategic location close to the Strait of Hormuz and the Indian Ocean. India then delivered six portable harbor cranes to the port’s “Indian Ports Global Chabahar Free Trade Zone (IPGCFTZ).” The Sistan-Baluchestan province’s Chabahar port, which is situated there, is seen as a key entry point for India into Central Asia and Afghanistan. The port was also supposed to give India access to Afghanistan and the “Central Asian Republics” by allowing it to elude Pakistan. India is exhibiting its commitment to enhancing its ties with its Central Asian Republics and consequently promoting their development by investing in this project (Chaudhury, 2016).

Located on the Indian Ocean coast, it is Iran’s only deep-sea port. Its strategic location on the growing International North-South Transport Corridor and its role as a transit hub on that corridor suggest that it has the potential to become one of the most important commercial centers in the region. In addition to being one of the few Iranian cities not subject to American sanctions, Chabahar greatly facilitates trade with other countries (Aliasgary & Ekstrom, 2021).

According to the most recent data provided to the Indian parliament, India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) has handled 215 vessels, 16,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), and four million metric tons of bulk and general cargo through its wholly owned subsidiary, India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ) since taking over the operations of the Chabahar Port in December 2018 (Sibal, 2023).

The port has also aided in the distribution of humanitarian aid, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, India has also used the Chabahar port to export 75,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian food assistance in 2020. In 2021, India supplied Iran with 40,000 liters of environmentally safe pesticides to combat the locust threat. With the changing regional dynamics following the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan, the strategic significance of this port has further increased as India routes its humanitarian aid shipments to Afghanistan through this port. This port will additionally help India to pursue its engagement with the Taliban regime (Sibal, 2023).

With the opening of the Chabahar Port, Afghanistan and other landlocked countries in the region now have access to the sea and the vast Indo-Pacific market, making it easier and cheaper for them to trade with India and the rest of the world.

It provides them with easy access to maritime trade routes and protects them from Chinese and Russian efforts to monopolize the region's economy. Iran's international standing could also benefit from increased trade with Afghanistan and the Central African Republic (Aliasgary & Ekstrom, 2021).

In an effort to further boost the development of regional connectivity, India and Central Asia recently had their first Chabahar Joint Working Group meeting in April 2023 in Mumbai, with the goal of encouraging landlocked regions to get access to the Indian Ocean through the port. The meeting held was of great significance, reflecting the countries' strong commitment and sense of urgency to enhance their collaboration and utilize the port as a means to advance their economic objectives (Sibal, 2023).

In 2017, India was granted a permanent membership of the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)." As a result of India's permanent membership in the SCO, bilateral ties between India and Central Asia have progressed. India's participation was further energized with the establishment of the "SCO Division in MEA" and the selection of a "National Coordinator and Permanent Representative" to SCO. The SCO is viewed as a Eurasian organization in New Delhi. For more important global issues, there are BRICS and RIC, but the SCO is the best venue for Eurasian matters. New Delhi does not use the SCO as a forum to challenge US power in the area, in contrast to Russia or China. Moreover, India's membership in the SCO is consistent with its pursuit of issue-based alignment in this volatile and uncertain geopolitical environment (khurshid, 2023).

The SCO benefits immensely from India's membership. The fact that India is a democratic country enhances the legitimacy and credibility of this organization. India's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization prevents it from being portrayed as an organization of authoritarian governments seeking to undermine world order and also prevents it from becoming an anti-Western alliance. New Delhi presents itself to the world as a helpful force. India serves as a non-threatening partner for both Russia and the Central Asian nations.

Furthermore, in order to diversify their strategic partnerships, Central Asian nations have also been eager to collaborate with India. In doing so, they have made it possible for New Delhi to participate in the Ashgabat Agreement, granting it access to trade and commercial networks with Central Asia and Eurasia as well as the natural resources of the region (Pant & Wani, 2021, p. 02).

As part of India's regional approach to pursue greater engagement with this region, the first India-Central Asia Dialogue between India and Central Asia took place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in January 2019. Sushma Swaraj co-chaired the meeting with her Uzbek colleague while serving as the foreign minister. Building stronger political, economic, and cultural relations with the region was the goal of

the discussion. With its development initiatives in Afghanistan, India was able to win over Afghans' hearts and minds, and New Delhi aspired to replicate this achievement in its neighboring Central Asian countries. To support important development initiatives in the fields of energy, IT, education, healthcare, and agriculture, India has announced a \$1 billion line of credit. These development initiatives are referred to as high impact development initiatives since they may be carried out quickly and easily.

Due to the pandemic, the second India-Central Asia Dialogue was virtually convened on October 28, 2020 (Guha, 2021). For the region to experience enduring peace, all attendees urged Kabul to establish an inclusive political system. Afghanistan was not invited this time because India, along with the rest of the world, has not yet recognized the Taliban regime (Guha, 2021).

“The third India-Central Asia Dialogue, which was conducted in 2021, had a catalytic impact due to the strengthening of the two sides, particularly in light of the fast moving regional and global geopolitical fault lines, the beginning of joint celebrations for the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between India and Central Asian countries in 2022, the rising conflict in Afghanistan, which is in each side's backyard, and the changing climate (Manhas, 2022).” The “4cs”-“commerce, capacity building, connectivity, and contact-which include the dimensions of security and terrorism, trade and economy, development partnership, energy security, healthcare, and climate change-as well as the importance of deepening strategic engagement were also covered at the meeting.” Even Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the significance of New Delhi's longstanding ties with Central Asian countries while reiterating his commitment to greater politico-economic integration in India's “extended neighborhood (Bhattacharya, 2022).”

“Despite the impact of the pandemic, our countries have preserved the pace of our relations, Jaishankar said in his opening remarks. The state of our bilateral relations makes us quite happy. However, we are aware that there is much more potential. Rebuilding our economy is a test that each of us must pass now.” He continued, “But together we can do things better and India, I assure you, would be your steadfast partner. All nations face an arduous challenge. We've worked well together in the past. But now, I want to encourage you to be ready to advance. Now, the four pillars of our relationships must be commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity, and contacts (Guha, 2021).”

The Third Dialogue made a subtly pointed reference to the debt trap that China's BRI represents by emphasizing the responsibility, sustainability and transparency of projects. The special thing about this dialogue was that it made a pointed reference to China's debt trap lending and the grand geostrategic design of

these BRI projects. China is putting countries under debt and taking their land on lease. Through this initiative, China is influencing the foreign policy choices of other countries and building dual-use infrastructure that can be leveraged for military purposes. These projects are not economically viable, as they don't generate any returns; instead, they put countries under Chinese influence and control, and the terms and conditions of these BRI projects also remain hidden and are determinative for the countries that sign for them (Chauhan A. N., 2022).

“The Dialogue focused on key strategic engagement areas for strengthening defense and security ties, economic and connectivity initiatives, and energy cooperation, particularly in the context of open and cordial discussions about India's US \$1 billion Line of Credit for Central Asian projects, connectivity efforts through the Chabahar Port, and the Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI), gas pipeline (Manhas, 2022).” Another important accomplishment was the two parties' agreement to keep enhancing the region's logistics network while also maximizing transit and transportation capabilities (Manhas, 2022).

The heads/secretaries of the National Security Councils of the Central Asian nations, as well as Russia and Iran, participated in the regional security dialogue sponsored by India in November 2021 and also discussed a shared regional strategy for Afghanistan. They decided to give the Afghan people immediate humanitarian aid and reaffirmed their support for an Afghanistan that is peaceful, secure, and stable (Pandita, 2022).

The governments of India and Central Asia decided to continue holding frequent meetings of the “Security Council secretaries/NSAs,” to review regional developments as a result of the success of the “Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan,” which took place in New Delhi in November 2021. (Pandita, 2022). Mr. Jaishankar again focused on “China's Belt and Road Initiative,” at CICA (BRI). He criticized China's BRI promotion strategies, saying that while increased connectivity is vital to support regional stability, it shouldn't be sought for personal gain (Pant & Wani, 2021).

On January 27, 2022, a virtual summit between India and Central Asia took place. This summit, which was convened by Indian Prime Minister Modi, had the participation of the Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In reality, the five leaders were planned to attend the Republic Day celebrations as a potent sign of India's overall interest in this area. The switch to a virtual state, however, was compelled by the epidemic (Pandita, 2022).

In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated that, “Central Asia is central to India's vision of an integrated and stable extended neighborhood” and outlined the summit's three main goals: close cooperation in regional security,

the development of an interaction framework, and a roadmap for cooperation. The creation of an India-Central Asia secretariat, a collaborative working group on Chabahar, joint counterterrorism drills, and annual ministerial meetings at the foreign, trade, and cultural levels are some of the main outcomes of this summit. India has pledged to host a 100-person youth delegation every year and provide diplomat training. These actions are consistent with India's strengthening collaboration with this crucial strategic region (Koparkar, 2022).

The "India-Central Asia Summit" represents a milestone for the relationships with this region. It was released on the 30th anniversary of India and Central Asian nations first establishing diplomatic ties and lays out an ambitious plan for the future (Koparkar, 2022). This historic endeavor was attended by the presidents of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan as well as Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Koparkar, 2022).

The relevance of Central Asia as a whole is highlighted by this summit. First off, the area is geopolitically and strategically very important for India, as a great game is going on there among different powers. Despite being "landlocked," it also serves as a link between different areas and is vital for connectivity efforts. Its abundance in natural resources, such as oil, gas, and uranium, is a blessing for energy-hungry nations like India. Third, it offers a prospective market for Indian goods with a population of roughly 72 million. The region has also experienced security issues, which is made worse by its proximity to Afghanistan. As a result of the Taliban's comeback, the situation has gotten worse (Koparkar, 2022, p. 02).

Challenges

Greater economic engagement between India and Central Asian Region is hindered by the unfavorable geophysical terrain and the complex dynamics of the India-Pakistan border. However, because to the region's porous borders, countries like Russia and China have benefited from geographical proximity (Menon & Rajiv, 2019). India has been looking at Iran for connecting with Central Asia in addition to pipeline routes through the region. India, Iran, and Turkmenistan signed an MOU in April 1995 to establish transit corridors across the latter two states to promote trade between the three countries and transit through the territories that cross those states. However, this route's full potential has not yet been attained (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

"The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)," which Iran, Russia, and India established in St. Petersburg in September 2000, aims to encourage interstate transportation cooperation. This route links the Caspian Sea, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, and the Russian Federation before connecting to St. Petersburg and North Europe. Later, the INSTC

gained eleven additional members: the Republics of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, the Republic of Turkey, the Republic of Ukraine, the Republic of Belarus, Oman, Syria, and Bulgaria (Observer) (Johny, 2023). While the “INSTC” travels via Iran’s “Bandar Abbas port,” India has also looked into the possibilities of transiting via Iran’s “Chabahar port” and then overland corridors that traverse through Afghanistan to connect with Central Asia (Menon & Rajiv, 2019, p. 03).

Nevertheless, despite the purported potential of the project and the significant attention it garnered from influential nations, there was a lack of progress in its implementation for an extended period of time. The imposition of Western sanctions on Iran in response to its nuclear program was a contributing factor to the hindered advancement. Due to apprehensions regarding potential U.S. sanctions, other nations and their private enterprises exhibited reluctance to undertake sizable investments in the Islamic Republic (Johny, 2023). Nevertheless After the relaxation of sanctions imposed on the Chabahar port, there was a notable increase in the activity of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). By the year 2018, an estimated 11 million tonnes of commodities had been successfully carried over this corridor. (Jha, 2023). Consequently, the first shipment using the INSTC arrived at Jawaharlal Nehru Port in Mumbai in July 2022, having originated at Russia’s Astrakhan Port.

However, the INSTC project continues to face various challenges. While certain project components, such as the Azerbaijan and KTI railway lines, the Chabahar Port, and the Ashgabat Agreement transport corridor, have received financial support, the majority of associated projects have not received support from prominent international financial institutions such as the World Bank, ADB, European Investment Bank, or Islamic Development Bank. This lack of support can be linked to US sanctions against Iran and Russia (Jha, 2023).

India’s lack of a shared land border with any of these states has posed a substantial obstacle to building and expanding relations (Manhas, 2022). Pakistan denies direct access to Afghanistan and Central Asia; China is the time-consuming and costly land transit route for trade. However, India has still made considerable headway in improving connectivity by striking a trilateral agreement for the rehabilitation of “Chabahar port,” the development of the “International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC),” and joining the Ashgabat Agreement. The membership of India in both the “Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)” and the “Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)” promises to close this gap to a certain extent (Chauhan A. N., 2022).

The geo-strategic significance of the CAR Republics to India

Central Asia is well located at the geographic center of both Asia and Europe. It serves as a passageway between the continents of Asia and Europe, linking the two regions. Central Asia's geopolitical, geo-economic, and geostrategic importance is well acknowledged. Central Asian states have long been strategic hubs for international trade, geopolitical competition, and geostrategic rivalry. Central Asia presently connects North and South, East and West (Sarma, 2023). The Central Asian states' strategic location has made this region extremely important. Aside from its strategic location, outsiders regard the Central Asian Region as the epicenter of important global geopolitical and geo-economic upheaval. Over 2000 years of conflict have been etched into its history as former great empires fought for control of the Silk Route, a vital trade route connecting Europe and Asia (Sarma, 2023). At the confluence of South Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and the Far East are CARs. Every change in the region's geopolitics unavoidably affects a number of neighboring states (Menon & Rajiv, 2019) Central Asia, a landlocked region in the center of Eurasia, is a component of India's extended neighborhood. Due to its proximity to neighboring countries, strategic location, common historical heritage, and vast resources, the region is critical to India's diplomatic outreach (Narang, 2021).

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Central Asia has become a significant geopolitical flashpoint. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, three Central Asian Republics, have a porous 2,500-kilometer border with Afghanistan, making the region susceptible to emerging geopolitical developments in Afghanistan (Menon & Rajiv, 2019).

India's growing interest in this region can also be linked to the region's shifting geopolitics, particularly the expansion of China's "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" and consequently the concerns about security challenges that it generates. "Through the OBOR strategy, the Chinese policy makers have made significant strides in this region of the world that British Geographer Halfrod Mackinder named the "Heartland," in keeping with their geostrategic style of blending trade with a covert ambition to control resources. Some of the fundamental elements of China's political outreach in Central Asia include 'debt diplomacy' taking over the strategic oil and gas industries, and controlling important pipeline routes. Through its geostrategic Belt and Road Initiative, China is building dual-use infrastructure projects in these countries that can be leveraged for military purposes. China's involvement was even blamed for the 2020 Kyrgyz political crisis (Mohapatra, 2022). It is also true that there is growing discontent with expanding China's influence in Central Asia. This is not a recent occurrence; rather, it can be linked to the Aksai riot in Kyrgyzstan, during which residents of the southern region protested against a land agreement that the Askar Akaev government had made

with China at the time. Similar to this, one notices sporadic violence directed against Chinese investment throughout Central Asia. (Mohapatra, 2022).”

India has been constrained by emerging regional geopolitical dynamics to take a more assertive stance and search for fresh opportunities for strategic collaboration as a result of China’s BRI initiatives in the area and its unmet commercial interests there. China has been able to take advantage of the area’s geographic position, resources, and populace to ensure that its initiatives can contribute to the achievement of its major geostrategic goals (Menon & Rajiv, 2019). Currently, Central Asia is the scene of a great power game. Despite the fact that the five post- Soviet Republics of Central Asia have historically been seen as being within Russia’s preferred sphere of influence due to their closeness to Moscow, Beijing has been working to lessen Russian strategic influence in the region (Narang, 2021).

Russia views Central Asia as its backyard and is wary of other hegemonic powers because of its historical ties to the region (Kumar R. , 2022, p. 01). Moscow finds China’s expanding geo- economic influence in the area unsettling. Russia is thought to have included India in the SCO to balance out China. Russian efforts to unify the Eurasian region through the Eurasian Economic Union are supported by New Delhi (EAEU) (Kumar R. , 2022).

Furthermore, from the energy security point of view, that region also becomes significant for India, as it is the fourth-largest energy user in the world, and subsequently, the need for greater energy diversification has been acknowledged in New Delhi’s policy circles. Central Asia, with its rich oil, gas, and uranium deposits as well as its hydropower potential, is essential to lowering its reliance on the Middle East for energy (Wallace, 2014). This region contains enormous energy reserves, including oil, natural gas, and coal, making it an important provider of energy to also Europe and Asia (Sarma, 2023). The region, also referred to as the “second Middle East” or the “second Persian Gulf,” is rich in energy resources, with 16 major sedimentary basins, 10 of which produce oil and gas and are primarily distributed in the Caspian Sea’s three neighboring countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

As India it develops further, its energy needs would certainly grow. Additionally, due to the inefficiency of its coal-based domestic energy, it urgently needs to explore for a variety of alternatives in order to address its increasing demands. This reality has encouraged India to incorporate the energy component in its foreign and strategic policy. This makes its ties to the CAR even more important (Gill, 2022).

India’s strategic interests in each of the five Central Asian nations are more specifically as follows, “India’s main strategic goal in Kazakhstan is to gain access

to its uranium reserves in order to assist India's national nuclear energy security policy. With an estimated 15% of the world's recoverable uranium in its possession, Kazakhstan is the world's largest uranium producer. Since 2014, approximately 80% of India's uranium imports have come from Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that India has not ratified the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Kazakhstan has diplomatically supported India's efforts to obtain an exemption that would permit civil nuclear cooperation with the other members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The two nations have signed several contracts to supply uranium to India, most recently in 2019 with a uranium supply contract for 2020-2024. With the support of the Kazakh Indian Business Council, established in 2016, they have also agreed to increase cooperation in the fields of oil, gas, and renewable energy (Rowden, 2020)."

India's nuclear power industry places a critical importance on Uzbekistan, the world's seventh-largest uranium exporter, and the two nations agreed to a long-term supply agreement in 2019. India is primarily interested in Turkmenistan because of the long-planned, "Turkmenistan- Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline," which, in the future, might give energy-dependent India up to "33 billion cubic meters of gas," each year. The fourth-largest natural gas reserves in the world are found in Turkmenistan. Even though construction delays have extended until 2020, the pipeline's long-term effects are crucial for India's national energy security policy (Rowden, 2020).

"Kyrgyzstan and India have only had sporadic economic interactions, but there are indications that this may soon change given that India has interests in the country's gold, coal, uranium, antimony, and other metal deposits as well as the expansion of its hydroelectric capacity for the export of electricity to India (Rowden, 2020)."

Despite Tajikistan's modest economy and lack of interest from India in terms of trade or investment, the country's strategic importance stems from its location in the heart of Central Asia (Rowden, 2020). Its southern boundary lies just north of the Wakhan Corridor peninsula in eastern Afghanistan, a strategically important area that shares borders with China to the east and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir to the south. However, due to Pakistan's occupation of some parts of the J&K state in 1947, India lacks direct land access to the area. Additionally, India has also established its sole overseas military base in Tajikistan, which it jointly runs with the Tajik Air Force (Rowden, 2020).

This region's significance has further grown as a result of the post-Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan and its subsequent fallout, as well as the threats of "narco-terrorism" spreading to Central Asia, Russia, and China. India and the Central Asian Republics have strong links with Afghanistan; three of these nations,

Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, border Afghanistan. The prevalence of drug trafficking in Central Asia exacerbates these security concerns. Drug trafficking has developed into a very lucrative sector due to poor border management, high levels of corruption, and the failure to stop opium cultivation in Afghanistan. A significant portion of the revenue is a crucial source of income for terrorist organizations (Chauhan A. N., 2022). And finally, making the long story short, geostrategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic factors are shaping India's engagement with these Central Asian Republics, and as a result, this area has become increasingly important for India's security interests.

Critical appraisal and way forward

Although the current dispensation in New Delhi has done well to strategically engage with these republics, more needs to be done in terms of increasing India's influence and presence there. The existing framework of using bilateral and regional mechanisms to engage with these CARs is a good strategy, but the focus should be more on bilateral mechanisms. As it sometimes becomes difficult to pursue regional mechanisms of engagement to have convergence on every important issue. Take, for example, the SCO grouping, where there are anti-India elements like China and Pakistan who always oppose India's initiatives there. As already stated, it sometimes becomes difficult to get substantial outcomes while pursuing a collective approach to engaging with any region, so New Delhi needs to focus more on bilateral mechanisms of engagement with these republics. Similarly, New Delhi engages with these countries through India-Central Asia dialogue mechanisms, but it must see to it that these mechanisms do not just become symbolic in nature and must translate into practical outcomes. Moreover, China's strategic investment in this region has substantially gone up, which also gives China the leverage to influence the foreign policy choices of these countries, which should be a cause of concern for India. India can't wait, as it needs to further step up its engagement and investment there because, as India rises, this region will become even more important for India's geostrategic and geo-economic interests (Khurshid, 2023). New Delhi needs to match up the words with action and expedite the delivery and implementation of projects, as there has always been criticism of India for not delivering on the ground. Besides, these CAR also want to have greater engagement with India and diversify their partnerships, as they fear that China and Russia are attempting to control their economies and influence their foreign policy choices. The perception of India as a non-dominating power enables these nations to surmount their apprehensions and subsequently look to pursue greater engagement with India. Also, the government of India should do more in terms of investing in both high- impact projects like schools, hospitals, and road

infrastructure and strategic assets like investment in energy fields, etc. to secure its interests. High-impact development projects generate substantial goodwill and, subsequently, also help secure national interests. As New Delhi has practically shown how its developmental projects have generated substantial goodwill in Afghanistan, it can replicate that strategy in other central Asian countries. Even the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which was once very much antagonistic to India, acknowledges India's contribution to Afghanistan's development and reconstruction efforts today. Consequently, India can utilize this goodwill to achieve its geostrategic and geo-economic objectives. New Delhi should also explore other options to connect with these republics, as geography should not be a constraint for engaging with this important region. But still, the Narendra Modi government, since coming to power in 2014, has shown greater willingness and urgency in terms of reaching out and engaging with these republics. Modi's outreach to this region can be substantiated in terms of the number of visits that were taken and other geo-economic and geostrategic initiatives like the India-Central Asia dialogue started in 2019, India-Central Asia summits in 2022, the recently held meeting of the "India-Central Asia Joint Working Group (JWG) on Chabahar port" in April 2023, and other bilateral initiatives. As already substantiated in this study, before 2014, this region was totally ignored by New Delhi. It was only after this government came to power that there was a greater strategic focus on this region.

Conclusion

Narendra Modi's grand geo-strategic outreach to Central Asia in 2015, as well as subsequent grand initiatives by the Indian government in this region, have altered the dynamics of India-Central Asian relations. India-Central Asia ties have changed in ways that have never before been seen, resulting in a paradigm shift. Under Modi's leadership, India has significantly increased its strategic outreach to the region through both bilateral and regional forums. More significantly, India joined the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" as a full member in 2017 after 12 years as an observer country, which has further accelerated India's engagement with this region. The holding of the first India-Central Asia dialogue in 2019 and the subsequent follow-up dialogues, as well as the convening of the first "India-Central Asia Summit" in 2022, reflects a greater push and urgency in New Delhi for engaging with this region. As India's global profile rises and, consequently, India's interests expand, Central Asia will become increasingly even more important for India's geostrategic objectives and geo-economic pursuits.

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