

ANALYSING THE CONNECTIVITY AND SECURITY PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN CENTRAL ASIA AND INDIA

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Abstract: In the present times, the Central Asian Republics are at the forefront of global geopolitics. More than one factor is responsible for this dramatic change. Its location is the first factor that makes it a geographical crossroad. The Central Asian region is sandwiched between Europe, Russia, and China. China has been reasserting its role as a regional hegemon through various initiatives such as the belt and road project. The second factor is its natural resources. Central Asia has the third-largest oil and gas reserve on the planet which is leading to a world scramble in the region. The third factor is what political scientists have termed as 'great power chauvinism' between the USA and Russia. There is a growing convergence between India and Central Asia, which is a positive sign of growth in the sphere of international relations for both parties. It is also visible that the contemporary leadership has bettered relations with the five countries that had been left unattended for decades. However, the absence of any clear policy for the region of Central Asia since the year 2012 has made it pertinent that the developments are paid more attention to and the government shall proceed systematically.

Index Terms—Central Asian Republics, India, Connectivity, Security, The Great Game, Power Competition

I. INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is formed of five countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It is a subregion of Asia and is known for its varied geography, abundant mineral resources, and multiplicity of cultures. Geographically, this region extends from the borders of Iran and Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north. In its east lies China and, in the west, lies the Caspian Sea. The term Central Asia came into usage in the mid-twentieth century because of the need to group the Post-Soviet States. At a point in time, this region was known as 'Turkistan' because most of the people who lived here spoke Turkish. Subsequently, it gained popularity as the "The -Stans." All the countries have names ending with "-stan" which means "land of" in the Persian language. This is also a sign of the ethnic diversity that exists in the region. The region was dominated by nomadic tribes until the 16th century after which Chinese and Russian influence increased and till the 20th century, the region was colonized by Russia. The year 1991 saw the dissolution of the USSR, and the Central Asian states came into existence along with ten other post-Soviet states.



Figure 1.1 A Map of Central Asian Republics

The importance of this region was highlighted by the Heartland theory, as proposed by British Geographer, Halford Mackinder. According to his political viewpoint, the Eurasian region was the most important. 'Heartland' refers to the Central Asian region. He had put forth the idea that controlling the region of East Europe and Central Asia is equivalent to controlling the whole world. This view of heartland theory formed a theoretical basis of confrontations that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This Great Game was a struggle between the British empire and the Russian empire to control the region of present-day Afghanistan, Central Asia, and South Asia. With the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the situation has become more complex as Russia is now posturing to take advantage of the absence of the USA and is seeking to claim its influence over the region. The recent

developments portray India's efforts for rekindling relations with the five nations namely the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

27 January 2022 marked the completion of thirty years of relationship between India and Central Asian countries. The same day saw the very first India-Central Asia Summit. It was hosted by India's prime minister and was attended by Presidents of the Central Asian Republics. Before this, in December 2021 the third meeting of the India-Central Asia Dialogue saw the participation of Foreign Ministers of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The first edition of which was held in the year 2019, where the then foreign minister of India, the late Smt. Sushma Swaraj mentioned the natural partnership between India and Central Asia.

It is the power competition revolving around connectivity, trade, commerce, infrastructures, energy, pipeline politics, ideology, ethnicity, and even terrorism that has been conceptualized in the theory of the New Great Game. This competition involves many players including regional, extra-regional, and superpowers. The prominent countries are Russia, the US, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Britain, Turkey, and Israel. This research analyses the challenges that have arisen out of the roles of the major superpower in the New Great Game in the context of India. India needs to reconsider its policy and position in Central Asia and needs to take up a proactive role in ensuring closer ties with the five Central Asian countries. Economic and military security along with connectivity are the two major aspects that need to be focused upon. Energy cooperation is at the heart of India's engagement with Central Asia. Along with enhancing cooperation, India will also have to partner with Central Asia on overcoming regional geostrategic challenges.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this research is from three major sources - books written with a focus on the region of Central Asia, highlighting its importance for geographical and strategic importance; scholarly articles observing the developments in bilateral relations; and the policy of India towards the CARs (Central Asian Republics). To understand the topic better, the existing work of eminent scholars, thinkers, academicians, political analysts, governmental reports, and statements were also referred to.

- 'India-Central Asia Summit: Shaping geopolitics in the extended neighborhood'

Debasis Bhattacharya in his research article titled 'India-Central Asia Summit: Shaping geopolitics in the extended neighborhood' writes a comprehensive description of how the summit acts as a landmark decision in enhancing strategic partnership. The most important aspect is that India and the five Central Asian countries have all come together to discuss the burning issue of Afghanistan. The author has also elaborated on the other significant aspects of bilateral and multilateral relations including Trade, Health, and Energy Cooperation.

- 'The New Great Game and the new great gamers: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder'

'The New Great Game and the new great gamers: disciples of Kipling and Mackinder,' discusses the reinvigoration of the power game in the Central Asian Countries because of their importance in the mineral industry. The analysis of Central Asia from the year 1994 and after has been dominated by the issue of oil and gas reserves in the area.

- Address by the minister of state at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue, 2012

The keynote address by the minister of state at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue, 2012 in the speeches and statement records of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, mentions the long-established diplomatic relationship between India and Central Asia. Giving a detailed account of India's Connect Central Asia Policy, 2012, Shri E. Ahamed's address stresses enhancing the friendly ties between the two parties. The key feature of this policy is improving air connectivity by promoting Central Asian countries as attractive holiday destinations and foreign locations for Indian films.

- Press release MEA of India - First Meeting of the India-Central Asia Summit

The press release of the Ministry of External Affairs of India on the First Meeting of the India-Central Asia Summit throws light on India's 'Extended Neighbourhood Policy'. The summit was held on 27 January 2022 and was the first summit in the history of India and the Central Asian Republics.

- 'The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia'

Peter Hopkirk - In his book titled 'The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia,' Peter Hopkirk writes a detailed account of how Great Britain and Russia conflicted with each other during the 1800s. The book is mostly focused on how in the early nineteenth century the struggle for taking over the region of Central Asia created a tumultuous situation.

- China and India in Central Asia a New "Great Game"?

Sébastien Peyrouse (2010) - Comparing the Economic Involvement of China and India in Post-Soviet Central Asia; (China and India in Central Asia a New "Great Game"? Edited by Marlène Laruelle, Jean-François Huchet, Sébastien Peyrouse, and Bayram Balci) analyses the loopholes that India needs to overcome while countering China's colossal presence in Central Asia. Amplifying China's role as the workshop of the world, the chapter focuses on how India must also build up its trade and transport infrastructure through greater investment in Central Asia.

- 'Kim'

'Kim' was a novel published in 1901. Written by the popular author Rudyard Kipling, the novel brought into common use the term 'Great Game' Though, the fictional work is set in India, the protagonist is seen being appointed to participate in the Great Game. Readers get to know about Russian intelligence agents during the Great Game through Kim's adventures.

- 'Eastern Approaches'

The memoir 'Eastern Approaches' is another book that describes the Central Asian region in its first section, specifically Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. As a junior diplomat in Moscow, the author, Fitzroy Maclean visited the entire region of the Caucasus and Central Asia and recounted his memories in the book. The policy of India is positively motivated towards enhancing the relations. On reviving the relations, it states that India is reconnecting with this neighbourhood, with which we are bound by the silken bonds of centuries of common history.

- 'Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia - India's Position and Policy'

‘Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia - India’s Position and Policy,’ focuses on the development of India and Central Asia’s relationship based on energy security. The need to diversify the sources through which India gets its energy resources makes it a necessity that Central Asian countries are made a priority in developing friendly international relations.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research utilizes qualitative methodology. All the relevant study sources have been referred to, including the press releases and policy briefs by the government of India. Books form a major part of the information utilized in developing ideas for this research. Interviews of individuals in authentic positions have been referred to scrutinize the varying point of view about the study. The region focused on, in this research is Central Asia and India. With a focus on pre-existing records and a track of developments, the study of the region has been conducted with the help of the library and the internet. The data and information utilized in this research are from the official website of the Ministry of external affairs of India and certified scholarly articles.

IV. CONNECTIVITY AND SECURITY BETWEEN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS AND INDIA

Connectivity and Security are important for all countries and the peaceful coexistence of the entire world. But during the study of international politics, a meagre part of attention has been extended to the connectivity and security of countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. A war-ravaged Afghanistan and the rule of the Taliban have raised severe concerns for these countries and India too has an important role in this situation. India plays an important role in regional peace, security, stability, sustainable economic growth, and prosperity in the region. India must utilize its economic prosperity and technical abilities to extend its infrastructural projects in the Central Asian countries.

Connectivity between Central Asia and India

Reports have reflected that the demand for resources that are used in linking countries and economies has increased manifolds. This proves that in the twenty-first century, countries around the world have given a significant amount of attention and importance to connectivity. India and Central Asia have kept connectivity central to their policy in all the summits and meetings held till the present date. Connectivity is largely about increasing interactions, productivity, competition, and market opportunities between cities. By increasing interactions with the Central Asian Republics, India has ensured that the question of connectivity is addressed. A major part of connectivity also depends on the trade interactions along with the CARs. The receptive willingness of the Central Asian countries should be utilized by India to extend its investment in trade and infrastructure. Kazakhstan’s envoy to India, Nurlan Zhalgasbavyev 2021, announced the extensive assistance to Indian investors by the office of Kazakh Invest. Since 2019 there have been 59 projects worth USD 992 that are signed along with Uzbekistan. These have been in the field of agro-processing, chemicals, petrochemicals, pharma, IT, energy, innovation, and mining. Indian private investment in Tajikistan is considerably higher than in bilateral trade. It is because the transportation of goods is through a circuitous route that passes through Bandar Abbas, the port city of Iran, and then through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. On 2nd April 2022, President Ram Nath Kovind signed four agreements with his Turkmenistan counterpart Serdar Berdimuhamedov during a meeting, in Ashgabat. These were based on financial intelligence and disaster management which will further increase the prospect of bilateral trade. Giving a boost to the bilateral ties India has extended a USD 200 million line of credit to support developmental projects in Kyrgyzstan. Proving its policy of respecting the sovereignty of other countries in foreign affairs India has worked over ‘constructive’ aspects with the five Central Asian countries. While India’s investment offers development and enhance connectivity, countries like China are pursuing their ambition of becoming regional hegemons. This positive approach lends a superior hand to India in increasing connectivity with the Central Asian countries. India recognizes and amplifies the ethics of connectivity initiatives - good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency, and equality.

Table 1: India’s trade with Central Asian countries. Data for 2017-18 (Value is in US billion Dollars)

Country	Exports	Imports	Total
Kazakhstan	125.37	907.43	1032.81
Kyrgyzstan	28.59	30.94	59.53
Tajikistan	23.94	50.29	74.24
Turkmenistan	54.31	26.15	80.46
Uzbekistan	132.72	101.67	234.39
Total	364.93	1,116.49	1,481.21

The above table is significant in understanding the trade between the Central Asian countries and India. The data brings into light a crucial need for India to increase the minimal trade with Central Asian countries which is a mere 0.11 percent of India’s overall trade. It is coherent that India the potential for trade between India and Central Asia is very high because of the complementary aspects. Both sides offer rich resources, a fair amount of production, and lucrative markets with demand, however, there is a need to increase investment in settling trade facilitation centres, setting up manufacturing units, and resuscitating trade routes and linkages

in order to bolster trade. Initiatives like the India-Central Asia Business Council (ICABC) are major facilitators of accelerating business relations. A major loophole that exists in the trade and investment relationship between the two sides is the lack of sufficient and direct transport corridors. Even if New Delhi has made Central Asia a partner in connectivity the approach lacks the implementation of connectivity projects in the identified regions. The following regions and projects form the core of India-Central Asia connectivity:

- International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) - A game-changer for the policy of India towards Eurasia, the INSTC is a network route that enables freight movement between important cities of its countries. India, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Ukraine, and Syria form the member states of INSTC.

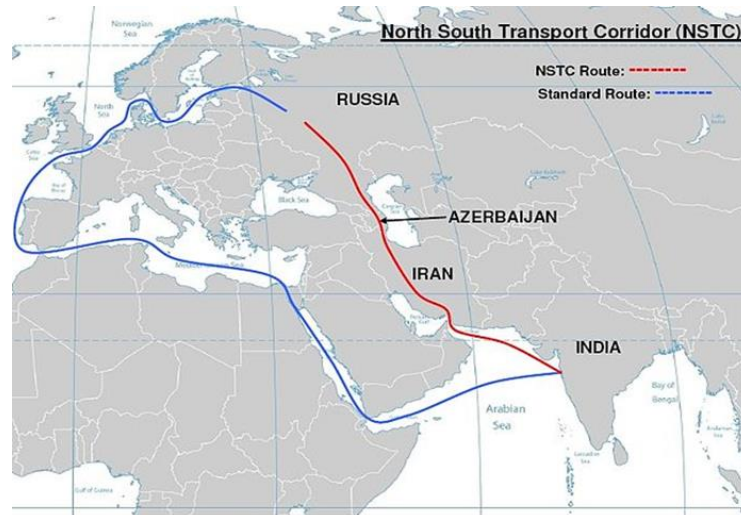


Figure 1 - North-South Transport Corridor route via India, Iran, Armenia, Georgia, and Russia

Uzbekistan forms an important partner for India however this country is double landlocked and has extended in-principal concurrence to join the INSTC project. This is a megaproject that will have far-reaching implications for India's trade connectivity with not just The Central Asian countries but also the entire Eurasian region. As the competition for economic relations with Central Asia is increasing, the INSTC corridor route is proving to be a prime connectivity project as it is shorter than the route from Suez and the Mediterranean Sea. The corridor is a multi-mode network including road, rail, and ship routes that spread for a length of 7,200 km. Since the International North-South Transport Corridor is 30 percent cheaper and 40 percent shorter than the current traditional route, it will increase the trade between its member countries significantly. Considering the evolving geopolitical developments in Central Asia and surrounding regions, there is thus a strong political and commercial case for India to allocate more political capital to better access to the INSTC via Iran. For that to happen, India needs to expand the scope of its customs cooperation agreement with Iran to get transit facilities via Iran to the Caspian Sea and other Central Asian countries.

Ashgabat Agreement on International Transport and Transit Corridor - It plays a major part in the transport and transit network for the transportation of goods. While India joined this agreement in 2018, its founding members are Turkmenistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Oman, and Qatar which shows the combined aim of connecting Gulf countries with Central Asia. Since this would be synchronized with the INSTC, it holds importance for India's connectivity. Its success would mean the development of an inexpensive, time-saving, and efficient trade route.

- Chabahar Port - The sole port city of Iran that is on the coast of the Indian Ocean. Shahid Beheshti Terminal makes an important point at Chabahar Port for facilitating trade with India. Moreover, it is just 170 kilometres away from the Gwadar port of Pakistan, which is India's immediate neighbour. Time and again there have been hurdles like sanctions against Iran which have made it impossible for India to complete its envisioned plan. In 2016 a Transit Trade Agreement was signed between India-Iran-Afghanistan, which led to easy access for trade between India and Afghanistan. While a bilateral agreement (between India and Iran) also allowed India to develop two berths of the Chabahar port, which is a considerable development for India's connectivity projects with its extended neighbours. Chabahar Port remains the centrepiece of connectivity between India and Central Asian countries.

- Turkmenbashi Port - Turkmenistan makes an important partner for India, with elevated importance because of the Ashgabat Agreement. Turkmenistan extending a proposal for including Turkmenbashi port in International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a milestone development.

- TAPI gas pipeline project - It is a natural gas pipeline project that will be laid between Turkmenistan and India, connecting other cities in between and spreading for 1,814 km. In 2010 two basic documents were signed, which marked the beginning of the TAPI project. TAPI is an abbreviation for the four countries Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India which are signatories of this project. While in 2018, Afghanistan's Taliban group had claimed to keep the project construction safe, the current takeover has put the project in a delicate situation. Furthermore, India-Pakistan relations will have to be made stable to get this project completed amongst lingering security concerns.



Figure 2: The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Natural Gas Pipeline (TAPI) Project

Security between Central Asia and India

The Central Asian region is at crossroads, its geographical location making it a buffer to prevent various dangers like smuggling, trafficking, and terrorism. Therefore, for security purposes, India must ensure a strengthened partnership with the countries of Central Asia. India must counter its immediate neighbours on its North-Western and North-Eastern frontiers namely Pakistan and China which makes it, even more, important for India to have security partners in its extended neighbourhood. The Central Asian societies are perceived to have a bias against the West, which will be largely reduced, benefitting the CARs. Promoting security is not merely for India's own benefit but would directly lead to regional security and stability.

- Countering the Looming Threat of Taliban - The importance of the Central Asian region has been accentuated with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In the last few months of the year 2021, the Afghanistan government was toppled by the Taliban, leading to a volatile situation. It was when the USA troops were withdrawn and the militant group gradually took over the entire country. The president of Afghanistan fled, leaving the administration and the government in a helpless situation. The citizens and the security forces faced thousands of casualties and millions were displaced. Central Asia's landlocked nations have close proximity to Afghanistan. As Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan share borders with Afghanistan it becomes apparent that the tumult poses a renewed challenge for entire Central Asia. Taliban-controlled Afghanistan holds the looming fear for the entire world that the region will be converted into training grounds for terrorists. The Delhi Regional Security Dialogue for Afghanistan was hosted within the initial three months of USA troops withdrawing from Afghanistan. It gave a very clear message that Afghanistan's territory should not be used for sheltering, training, planning, or financing any terrorist acts. India recognized the importance of deliberating with the Central Asian countries over the topic. In the first India-Central Asia Summit hosted by India, the Prime Minister of India remarked, "We all are concerned about the Afghan situation and this makes cooperation between India and Central Asia all the more important for regional stability and security." The CARs reciprocated with the same level of optimism reflecting the will for countering such challenges as a collective responsibility. The foreign ministers of the five Central Asian countries chose to attend the third India-Central Asia Dialogue instead of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) hosted by Pakistan which coincided on the same date.

Strategic and security experts have expressed concern that pan-Islamic groups will gain ground support from the new regime in Afghanistan and with the Taliban itself working in close tandem with Pakistan-backed militant groups, there are chances of spill over into India via the LoC. The security concerns have further increased because of the presence of terror groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), who have joined the ranks of different terror groups in Afghanistan. The threats of narco-terrorism have also increased manifolds. The conclusive agreement in all the discussions was on the need for an inclusive government, unhindered humanitarian aid, and preservation of the rights of women, children, and minorities in Afghanistan. There has also been an emphasis on UNSC Resolution 2593 (2021) which mentions non-interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan and respect for its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

- "World Free of Terror" - Terrorism is a matter of concern for the entire world and so it is the resolve of all the nations to ensure a terror-free and secure world. The countries which have surfaced as safe grounds for terrorist activities are a matter of concern and specifically for their immediate neighbours. Given that India and the CAR do not share any geographical borders, the level of connectivity will greatly rely on the stability of key countries that serve as bridges. Pakistan and Afghanistan are two countries that come between Central Asia and India. A major challenge that comes in enabling smooth and safe transit between the two sides is the threat of terrorists or militants affecting it. Therefore, both sides have been loud and unequivocal in announcing their resolve to have a "World Free of Terror" The efforts have been in the direction of working globally, following the UN-led global counter-terrorism cooperation. The progressive aspect of the India-Central Asian partnership toward ending terrorism is the

urgency expressed for fully implementing the relevant UNSC resolutions that define the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and FATF standards. Combating terrorism has a direct relation with security and development. Thus, the conclusive recommendation was on setting a code of conduct that will be universal and will help in achieving a world free of terror. In a virtual summit organized between India and Uzbekistan in December 2020, a combined statement was announced on the urgent need to finalize India, Uzbekistan condemns terrorism in all its forms, calling for early finalization of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT). The purpose of this treaty is to criminalize all types of terrorist activities along with preventing finance, funds, safe havens, and arms to terrorist organizations. Building an international consensus over isolating the radical forces that nurture terrorist activities require diplomatic efforts that the Central Asian countries and India are taking in the contemporary world. In his 2015, visit to all Central Asian countries, the President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov vowed to combat terrorism, organized crime, and illegal drug trafficking while signing seven important pacts on bilateral cooperation including defense cooperation. India can initiate establishing Joint Working Groups on counter-terrorism with CARs for an efficient fight against terrorism.

V. THE NEW GREAT GAME AND GEOPOLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Heartland Theory

The Great Game of the nineteenth century was the basis on which Mackinder had claimed the region of Eurasia and specifically the region of Central Asia to be the global pivot point. The theory is being proven true today when the heartland is forcing the major powers to reconsider their diplomatic and military priorities in the region.

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
 Who rules the Heartland commands the World-island;
 Who rules the World-island commands the World.
 — Halford Mackinder

The Heartland is synonymous with the pivot area, which forms the core part of the geostrategic land that lies in Eurasia. This region was considered so important by Mackinder that he stated about any country having political control over the region has supremacy over world politics. The following map shows the area of Eurasia as marked as the Pivot Area according to the theory.



Figure 3: A Map of The Heartland Theory published in “Geographic Pivot of History,” 1904 by Mackinder

The reason why Central Asia is described as the Heartland region is that Mackinder comprehended the importance of natural resources. Even though the theory is based more on the geographical aspects, the contemporary environment of international politics has made it relevant in the political aspects too. The region forms the center of the world so in the geopolitical process it is important. After the dissolution of the USSR, the five Central Asian countries experienced a high level of closeness with Russia. The Chinese influence has been relatively limited but the China's expansive projects have made it implausible for the increasing attention that it is receiving. Central Asia as a heartland was also important for being the heart of the ancient silk road. The overland trade between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East has been facilitated by this region, a factor that led to China's belt and road initiative. Many experts believe China has the potential of becoming a land power in Eurasia. This aspect was missed out on by classical geopolitics specialists. The heartland is once again at the forefront of Great Power politics, forcing a reconsideration of diplomatic and military priorities in the region.

The New Great Game

According to researchers fear, honour, and interest, manifest themselves in the inter-state behaviours of countries that lead them towards cooperation, competition, and the potential for conflict. These inter-state behaviors are highly affected by past events. World history witnessed a power struggle in the form of the Great Game. In the early nineteenth century, the British Empire and the Russian empire were in contestation for the region of the Central Asian region and the neighbouring territories including Afghanistan and India. It lasted from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. The British were afraid that their then colony, India will be attacked and taken over by Russia. Russia was afraid that the British would interfere in Central Asia through their trade expansion. The term 'Great Game' got popularized and more oft used because of its elaboration in Rudyard Kipling's novel titled 'Kim'. It was

thought to be ended by 1895 but got affected due to many developments that took place in the Soviet Union. Consequently, many wars were fought. In the contemporary world, Central Asia has once again become significant for many powerful countries. Using the reference to the Great Game, journalists and thinkers have titled the twenty-first century's development in Central Asia the New Great Game. Central Asia is an arena of increased Great Power competition. The fact that the Central Asian Republics are no more passive is evident from their intent on ensuring that instability and the looming terrorist threat in Afghanistan should not spill beyond its borders. The withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan has lent a vacuum. The vacuum that has been created in the absence of a Great Power influence would be filled by neighbouring states Russia and China. Both the countries have their own vested interests in the region. The ex-Soviet states of Central Asia - Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are now being highly sought after due to their geographical and geostrategic factors. The political observers have also stated that China's huge involvement in the Central Asian countries, including the One Belt One Road initiative is because of this New Great Game. Thus, the whole scenario of major powers contesting for the region is like that of the Great Game, only the players have changed, rather, have increased manifolds.

3.3 Resource Scramble in the Central Asian Region One of the key features of the Central Asian countries that lend them indispensable attention to countries across the world is the untapped natural resources available in the region. Geopolitics in this region has made it even more important. Known as the "second Middle East" or the "second Persian Gulf," the region is rich with energy resources with 16 major sedimentary basins, including 10 basins producing oil and gas that are mainly distributed in the three countries bordering the Caspian Sea. Most of the resources in the region remain under-developed, especially oil and natural gas in inland waters. Therefore, the potential for energy development is huge, and so is the potential for energy export. The competition for the resources in the region has brought forth many countries to invest their capital and diplomacy. India and Central Asia have a long-standing partnership based on security, economic development, transparency, and mutual understanding. India has understood the significance of the energy resources that Central Asia has been endowed with and had expressed its commitment to enhancing connectivity and building capacity with Central Asia. The large reserves of coal, gas, mineral resources, and crude oil are not to be exploited ruthlessly. The growing demands for energy might increase the risks of a scramble for energy in the region. The Central Asian countries will have to utilize the resources as leverage for building and tackling international relations because being in the hold of energy resources endows the country with wealth and power.

VI. CHALLENGES TO INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

The challenges that India faces in establishing stable and firm relations with the Central Asian countries include the growing presence and hegemonic nature of China. Russia also acts as a regional guardian believing itself to be the sole leader in the region. For countering their increasing dominance India will have to enhance its own role and make sure that it structures a policy framework of mutual benefit with Central Asia.

"Central Asia is the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens."

- General Liu Yazhou of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA)

There has been a significant amount of infrastructural and economic initiatives of China which strengthen its presence in Central Asia. India will have to counter them through its strong historical relations and the present mutual partnership. China in order to satisfy the energy needs of its huge population has entered into bilateral agreements with Central Asian Republics. It has ensured that all the Central Asian countries are made active partners in its ambitious One Belt One Road initiative. As India seeks to bolster its influence and role in Central Asia, it must be understood that it faces tough competition from China. As a result, India needs to craft a more effective policy of engagement that also incorporates in itself strategic calculus. India does have a superior image when it comes to keeping up with international norms and ethics while engaging with its partners. China on the other hand has faced the disenchantment of the Central Asian countries. It is because of the growing Chinese repression of several Kazakh and Kyrgyz Muslims along with Uighurs in the Xinjiang region, resulting in many anti-Chinese protests.

Another major challenge that India faces is the threat of terrorism and extremism that endangers the connectivity projects of the region. Afghanistan has a very important place in all the connectivity projects but it is under Taliban control. India has been very prudent in taking forth its limited diplomacy with the Taliban. This prudence might turn into inactivity if the extremist and conservative rule of the Taliban exists for a longer period. Iran is also a major partner for India in establishing links with the Central Asian countries. Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan Province, in which Chabahar port is located, has become the stage for insurgent activity by the insurgent group Jundallah, which claims to be fighting for the rights of Sunni Muslims, and the local ethnic Baloch. In 2010, Jundallah militants dispatched a suicide bomber to a Shi'ite mosque in Chabahar, killing 38 people. These insurgent activities threaten the initiatives that India is willing to take. Countering it through strengthened regional security and empowered military forces of both sides is yet a challenge for India. To date, New Delhi has been slow in identifying, initiating, and implementing a coherent approach to connectivity in the region. Although it has identified Central Asian countries as key partners in formulating a response, there has been little progress on a plan of action. New Delhi urgently needs a structured framework for providing an alternative to Chinese-led connectivity initiatives to protect its strategic goals and remain a strong partner to Central Asia.

VII. FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR INDIA

- India as an Emerging Alternative for Asian Leadership

Asian countries should not rely on external actors for their growth and development, but take matters into their own hands and shape their own destiny. This is an important message for India to comprehend its capabilities and growing importance as a leader for the Asian countries. India has extended its role as a partner to the Central Asian countries, offering alternative connectivity arrangements. At the India-Central Asian Summit, the Prime Minister of India outlined his principle of "Support of All, Development for All, Trust of All, Efforts of All" for regional development, peace, and prosperity. India has always stressed a global development that is human-centric to ensure that no one is left behind. Through this inclusive approach, India can take a leadership role because Asia needs a country that can lead more collaborative and inclusive global progress and development.

India can put forth the prospect of its connectivity initiatives being a bridge between the rest of South Asia with the Central Asian countries and further alleviating the threats to trade routes. It is time for India to put more weight on the effective implementation of its Connect Central Asia policy through appropriate institutional mechanisms. This will improve its political and economic partnerships with Central Asia countries, including Afghanistan, and will strengthen its connectivity with Eurasian economies. To achieve the goal of this policy, India should establish an India-Central Asia Forum along the lines of the India-Africa Forum. New Delhi comprehends it quite well that the Central Asian countries are in a fragile state due to the takeover of the Taliban in their neighbouring country, Afghanistan. India might have to play the role of an interlocutor while coordinating its own policy towards Afghanistan with that of the regional countries.

- **Leveraging India's Soft Power**

Connectivity and Security are two aspects of the wide array that come under bilateral relations. The complementary aspects to these two aspects are the interactions that take place between the two sides. India and Central Asia have a harmonious past which includes sharing and learning from each other's culture, art, literature, etc. The peoples of Central Asia and India have for centuries been closely linked by political, economic, and humanitarian ties. The present times have seen an increasing amount of attention that the world has given to India's soft power. India must leverage it to increase its proximity with Central Asian Countries and ensure greater success for its connectivity and security initiatives.

"What is soft power? It is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies."

— Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success In World Politics*

India should extend its cultural diplomacy with a renewed energy that can enrich mutual relations. Cultural and humanitarian interaction will accelerate the modernization of the cultural sphere and the development of cultural diplomacy in Central Asian Countries. Indian experience in the development of education, medicine, culture, tourism, and international cultural exchange can be useful for the modernization and development of the humanitarian sphere in Central Asian countries. It will promote mutual enrichment of cultures, intellectual and spiritual progress, and dissemination of thoughts, ideas, religions, and philosophies. Joint promotion of common cultural heritage can stimulate the development of tourism and interaction in general. Active promotion of cooperation on a bilateral and regional basis can help address important challenges in implementing the infrastructural project plans and modernizing Central Asia.

- **Collaborating with Russia over Central Asia**

China's growing presence in Central Asia has been observed by experts. Russia seeks to balance this expanding role, and India must present itself as an important partner. Russia and India have a history of cooperating in terms of defense cooperation which should now be extended to other important aspects like connectivity in Central Asia. The India-Russia partnership is a historic and practical relationship based on mutual trust, respect, and shared strategic visions. The capabilities of both Russia and India can be coupled to extend their cooperation in the economic and political domain. About the evolving India-Russia relations, the Indian Envoy in Russia D.B. Venkatesh Varma has mentioned that the traditional pillars of defense, nuclear, energy, and space have been supplemented by India's engagement in economic, trade, science and technology sectors and inter-regional cooperation. The amount of trust by the Central Asian countries that are enjoyed by Russia is a positive factor in the considerable clout that it has retained. While Russia can be a security provider, India can be the initiator of security initiatives in the region, collaborating for a better regional atmosphere.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan had not received enough attention in the realm of International Affairs. Central Asia is important for geopolitics, energy security, and regional security. Even though it contains "Asia" in its name, Central Asia has not received as much attention as other regions in Asia have. However, in recent years it is attaining a better position because the major players are realizing that Central Asia should not be discounted from global politics. The region plays an important role in geopolitics, energy security, and regional cooperation. The renewed relationship between India and Central Asia is a remarkable development. Connectivity and Security are the two most prominent aspects which have a major impact on the bolstering of relations between the two sides. The willingness of the Central Asian countries to be partner with India in all the initiatives is visible from the active and optimistic participation of the leaders of Central Asian countries.

Until 2015, when the Prime Minister of India gave a visit to all the five Central Asian countries, it had not acquired enough attention in India's international policy. The historical bond shared by both sides had not been utilized for any geostrategic plan prior. The political ambitions of both sides became visible after the first India-Central Asia Summit hosted by India. A strategic dimension has been given to the bilateral ties of India with each of the Central Asian countries.

India and Central Asian Republics are on a common aim of ensuring the success of the connectivity and security projects. However, translating those goals into tangible outcomes is a challenging task. With the various challenges that have been discussed in this research work, it seems that India will have to come forth with a strong policy to counter those challenges. Afghanistan has a volatile situation and has gained international attention. The human rights violations and the severe political tumult has raised concerns for the entire global community. India and Central Asia have already begun cooperating on the Afghanistan aspect, a joint working group seems a viable option. Terrorist and extremist activities can be countered by enhancing regional security which would require long-term active engagements and even greater defense cooperation between the two sides. India also needs to work out a probable solution to give a catalyst force to the working of projects such as the Ashgabat Agreement which are milestones in the connectivity projects of India. For initiatives like the TAPI pipeline project, India would also have to be patient and firm as its immediate neighbour Pakistan has been a potential ground for terrorist activities. No matter how many challenges the bilateral relations currently face, there are some positive aspects that lend India a better reach to the five countries. The strong resolve of the leaders and the long-established relations should be utilized to make sure that the challenges are overcome.

China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed the Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the year 2001. The SCO is one of the largest regional organizations to date in terms of geography, exceeding the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in size. In 2017, India became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. This has elevated India's ability to contribute to the socio-economic development of the region. The presence of India in the group is being appreciated by both Russia and Central Asian countries because India acts as a balancing power to China. The strategic role of India has increased manifold with a pragmatic and assertive nature. Whatever challenges there maybe it is important and necessary to pay attention to the growing partnership between India and Central Asia. As the world witnesses, the emerging new global "order," Central Asia remains a key space to watch and from which to watch.

List Of Abbreviations

1. CARs: Central Asian Republics'
2. India-CAD: India-Central Asia Dialogue
3. INSTC: International North-South Transport Corridor
4. ICABC: India-Central Asia Business Council
5. TAPI: Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India
6. SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
7. CCIT: Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism

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