

India and Its Extended Neighbourhood: Central Asia in the Emerging Eurasian Geopolitical Order

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1. Introduction

India's neighbourhood policy has evolved considerably in response to shifting geopolitical realities in the 21st century. Traditionally centred on South Asia, India's strategic outlook has expanded to include what is increasingly termed its "Extended Neighbourhood," encompassing regions such as Central Asia, West Asia, and Southeast Asia. This shift reflects a recognition that India's economic, security, and geopolitical interests are no longer confined to its immediate borders but are deeply intertwined with broader regional dynamics. Central Asia has emerged as a critical component of this expanded strategic horizon due to its geographical location at the crossroads of Eurasia, its abundant natural resources, and its role in contemporary connectivity initiatives.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created new opportunities for India to engage with the Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. However, early engagement remained limited due to structural constraints, particularly the absence of direct land connectivity and competing regional influences. In recent years, renewed strategic focus, driven by energy security concerns, connectivity imperatives, and geopolitical competition, has revitalized India's engagement with the region. This paper argues that Central Asia is not merely an extension of India's neighbourhood but a central pillar of its Eurasian strategy.

Central Asia in Eurasian Geopolitics

The geopolitical significance of Central Asia can be best understood through both classical and contemporary theoretical lenses. Halford Mackinder's Heartland theory remains foundational in explaining the enduring importance of Eurasia. Mackinder argued that control over the "Heartland"—largely corresponding to Central Asia and surrounding regions—would enable dominance over the "World Island" and, by extension, global power (Mackinder, 1904/2004). Although formulated in a different historical context, this framework continues to resonate in contemporary geopolitics, where Central Asia remains a site of strategic competition among major powers.

In the 21st century, this classical perspective has been adapted into what may be termed "neo-Heartland dynamics," characterized by competition among Russia, China, and other external actors for influence in the region. Russia seeks to maintain its historical influence through institutional mechanisms such as the

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while China has significantly expanded its presence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the same time, India's engagement reflects an alternative approach that emphasizes connectivity, sovereignty, and balanced regional cooperation.

The concept of Greater Eurasia further enriches this theoretical framework by highlighting the emergence of a multipolar regional order. Rather than being dominated by a single power, Eurasia is increasingly characterized by overlapping institutional arrangements and competing visions of integration. Central Asia, situated at the heart of this evolving order, serves as both a connector and a contested space.

Historical and Civilizational Linkages

India's engagement with Central Asia is not a recent phenomenon but is rooted in deep historical and civilizational connections. The ancient Silk Route facilitated extensive economic, cultural, and intellectual exchanges between the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia. Goods such as textiles, spices, and precious stones flowed from India, while Central Asia contributed horses, metals, and intermediary trade goods. More importantly, the Silk Route enabled the transmission of ideas, religions, and cultural practices, creating a shared civilizational space across Eurasia.

The spread of Buddhism from India into Central Asia and further into East Asia exemplifies these interactions. Monastic networks and pilgrimage routes played a crucial role in disseminating religious and philosophical ideas, while artistic traditions such as Gandhara art reflected a synthesis of Indian, Hellenistic, and Central Asian influences. Central Asian cities like Samarkand and Bukhara emerged as vibrant centres of learning and cultural exchange, embodying early forms of globalization.

These historical linkages continue to shape India's contemporary engagement with the region, providing a foundation for soft power and cultural diplomacy. They also reinforce the perception of Central Asia as an integral part of India's extended neighbourhood.

Central Asia in India's Eurasian Strategy

Central Asia occupies a strategic position in India's broader Eurasian policy, functioning as a gateway to Russia, Europe, and beyond. India's engagement with the region is driven by multiple factors, including access to energy resources, participation in regional institutions, and the need to balance competing influences. By strengthening its presence in Central Asia, India seeks to enhance its role as a significant actor in Eurasian geopolitics.

From a strategic perspective, Central Asia enables India to connect with the wider Eurasian landmass and integrate into emerging economic and security architectures. Participation in multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides opportunities for engagement with key regional actors, including Russia and China. At the same time, Central Asia serves as a testing ground for India's broader foreign policy objectives, including its commitment to multipolarity and strategic autonomy.

Contemporary Relevance: Energy, Connectivity, and Strategy

The contemporary relevance of Central Asia for India is most evident in three interrelated domains: energy security, connectivity, and strategic balancing. The region possesses vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium, making it an important source of energy for India's growing economy. Diversification of energy imports is a key strategic priority for India, and Central Asia offers significant potential in this regard.

Connectivity initiatives are equally critical in shaping India's engagement with the region. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the development of Chabahar Port in Iran represent major efforts to overcome geographical constraints and enhance access to Central Asia. These projects aim to reduce transit time and costs, bypass Pakistan, and integrate India into Eurasian trade networks. Beyond their economic significance, they also have important geopolitical implications, strengthening India's strategic presence in the region and providing an alternative to China's BRI.

Strategically, India's engagement with Central Asia reflects an effort to balance competing influences and promote a multipolar regional order. By emphasizing principles such as sovereignty, transparency, and mutual benefit, India seeks to differentiate its approach from other external actors.

India's Policy Framework Towards Central Asia

India's engagement with Central Asia is guided by a structured policy framework that reflects its evolving strategic priorities. The Connect Central Asia Policy, launched in 2012, marked a significant shift from ad hoc engagement to a more comprehensive and institutionalized approach. The policy emphasizes political dialogue, economic cooperation, connectivity, and cultural exchanges, aligning Central Asia with India's broader foreign policy objectives.

The India–Central Asia Dialogue, initiated in 2019, represents an important institutional mechanism for high-level engagement. By bringing together foreign ministers from India and the five Central Asian republics, the dialogue facilitates coordinated policy discussions and enhances diplomatic engagement. Similarly, India's participation in the SCO provides a platform for addressing regional security challenges and strengthening cooperation with key stakeholders.

These institutional mechanisms reflect India's commitment to sustained and structured engagement with Central Asia, moving beyond symbolic diplomacy to more substantive partnerships.

Challenges and Constraints

Despite growing engagement, India's presence in Central Asia faces several structural and geopolitical challenges. The most significant constraint is the lack of direct land access, which limits trade and connectivity. Although initiatives such as the INSTC and Chabahar Port aim to address this issue, their full potential has yet to be realized.

China's expanding influence in the region represents another major challenge. Through the BRI, China has established extensive economic and infrastructural networks in Central Asia, creating asymmetries that are difficult for India to match. At the same time, regional instability, particularly in Afghanistan, poses security risks and complicates connectivity efforts.

Additionally, trade between India and Central Asia remains relatively low, reflecting both logistical challenges and limited economic integration. Addressing these constraints requires innovative policy approaches and sustained engagement.

Conclusion

Central Asia occupies a central position in India's Extended Neighbourhood policy and its broader Eurasian strategy. Historically connected through trade and cultural exchanges, the region has re-emerged as a critical arena for contemporary geopolitics. India's engagement with Central Asia is shaped by a complex interplay of opportunities and constraints, reflecting both its strategic ambitions and structural limitations.

While initiatives such as the INSTC, Chabahar Port, and participation in regional institutions provide important avenues for engagement, significant challenges remain. A multi-vector approach—combining connectivity, diplomacy, and strategic partnerships, particularly with Russia—will be essential for deepening India's presence in the region.

Ultimately, Central Asia is not peripheral but integral to India's emergence as a Eurasian power. Its successful integration into India's foreign policy framework will play a crucial role in shaping the future of Eurasian geopolitics.

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