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Geopolitics of Eurasia and its Strategic Significance for India



Dr Pravesh Kumar Gupta

VIF Paper

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Acknowledgement

The Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF) established an expert group on Eurasia with a specific focus on Russia. The group, led by Amb DB Venkatesh, convened approximately once a month in a hybrid (physical and virtual) mode to deliberate on key developments in Eurasia. The members of the group included experts such as Amb D P Srivastava, Amb P S Raghavan, Lt Gen Ravi Sawhney, Amb Skand R Tayal, Amb Ajay Bisaria, Amb Ashok Sajjanhar, Amb Pankaj Saran, Amb Ashok Kantha, Dr Nandan Unnikrishan of ORF, Lt Gen Rakesh Sharma, Dr Pravesh Kumar Gupta, Prof Gulshan Sachdeva of JNU, and Dr Athar Zafar of ICWA, among others.

The primary motivation behind the formation of this group was to develop a critical understanding of India's Eurasia policy. The group aimed to provide an integrative holistic view of India's Eurasia policy in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis and to establish a new strategic framework for India's approach to the Eurasian region in light of evolving regional and global developments. Furthermore, the group sought to address the underdeveloped nature of Eurasia as a distinct geopolitical concept in Indian thinking, with the primary task of filling this gap in Indian strategic thinking. This was seen as the first step in a long process of India engaging more productively on the Eurasian Continent, which is considered one of the weaknesses of India's continental strategy.

The paper resulting from VIF Eurasia Group meetings offers a regional perspective on Eurasia in terms of geopolitics and geoeconomics. It presents a broader perspective for India's engagement with this region and outlines the way forward.

Arvind Gupta
Director, VIF

June 2024

Executive Summary

Given the rapidly evolving global geopolitical landscape and India's ascent to prominence internationally, a balance between maritime and continental strategies is highly required. In this regard, India's geopolitical and geoeconomic goals align effectively with Eurasia's. New Delhi's potential focus on the Eurasian region is driven by its historical and cultural ties to numerous countries, especially Russia and Central Asian countries. However, more than ever, there is a need for an active Eurasian strategy because of a number of geopolitical, economic, and strategic elements that highlight the region's increasing importance in world affairs. The resource-rich nations of Eurasia have profited from global economic development. Eurasia holds more than one-third of the world's oil, gas, bauxite, and gold reserves, and commodity prices have risen since 2000, bolstering resource-related profits. The other Eurasia countries have benefited from their neighbors' abundant resources through trade, capital flows, and remittances. Conflicts have frequently brought the region to the spotlight. The conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Israel and Hamas are a few examples. China and Russia are the two most influential players in this region, making Eurasia an ongoing struggle for influence with the West.

Engaging actively in Eurasia enables India to forge strategic partnerships and alliances with countries with common interests in regional stability, economic development, and multilateral

cooperation. By leveraging its historical connections with the region, India can foster stronger people-to-people relations, promote tourism, and enhance cultural diplomacy. The Eurasian region, which includes countries in Central Asia, Russia, and parts of Europe and the Middle East, also presents immense economic opportunities for India. Rich in natural resources and strategically located along key trade routes, this region offers the potential for enhanced trade, investment, and energy cooperation. India can tap into these markets, diversify its economic engagements, and strengthen its energy security. India's engagement in Eurasia is also crucial for maintaining a balance of power in the region. Given China and Russia's increasing assertiveness in Eurasia through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), India needs to actively participate in safeguarding its interests and counterbalance regional dominance.

Eurasia is vital to India's connectivity initiatives, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port project in Iran. Strengthening ties with Eurasian countries will facilitate smoother connectivity and trade routes, reducing dependence on traditional sea routes and expanding India's reach into landlocked regions.

The region is susceptible to security threats from terrorism, extremism, and regional instability. Collaborative efforts with Eurasian countries through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can help materialize India's security interests by facilitating intelligence sharing and strengthening counter-terrorism measures. By adopting a proactive approach towards Eurasia, India can position itself as a key player in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century.

Strategic Significance of Eurasia

Sir Halford John Mackinder, a British geographer, wrote a paper in 1904 titled “The Geographical Pivot of History.” Mackinder’s study argued that control of Eastern Europe was critical to global dominance. Mackinder proposed the Heartland Theory, which states that whoever controls Eastern Europe commands the Heartland, and whoever controls the Heartland controls the World Island. The “heartland” was also known as the “pivot area” and the core of Eurasia, and he saw all of Europe and Asia as the World Island. According to Mackinder, a country that controls that territory could overpower any future competitor. With its frontiers free of challenges, it could focus on developing unrivaled navies. This suggests that continental dominance could serve as a launching pad for maritime control.

Nonetheless, Mackinder’s idea is regarded as outdated in the era of modern warfare. When he developed it, he only considered world history in the context of conflicts between land and maritime powers. The capacity to dominate territory and provide defensive capabilities has changed significantly in the contemporary era with the advent of advanced military technology. However, the importance of this heartland remains vital today due to the region’s geostrategic location and its resources.

As the most critical country in the region, Russia’s Concept of Eurasianism is an ideological and socio-political current born

within the environment of the first wave of Russian emigration, unified by the concept of Russian culture as a non-European phenomenon, presenting among the varied world cultures- an original combination of Western and Eastern features; as a consequence, Russian culture belongs to both east and west and at the exact times cannot be reduced either to the former and nor to the latter. In the document “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,” authorized by Vladimir Putin in 2023, Russia embraced a Eurasianist, anti-Western foreign policy agenda. The document defined Russia as a “unique country-civilization and a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power” seeking to form a “Greater Eurasian Partnership” with China, India, Islamic countries, and the rest of the Global South (Latin America and Southern Africa). The strategy defines the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries as “the main inspirer, organizer, and executor of the aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West” and strives to undermine American geopolitical supremacy on the global stage.

Eurasia can be divided into various geopolitical regions, each with unique dynamics. However, there is less agreement regarding the geopolitical definition of Eurasia, which results from the region’s increasing importance in international politics and is primarily influenced by the political and national orientation of those defining it. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the word “Eurasia” became increasingly popular among political scientists in Western Europe and is now used to refer to the political and economic integration of Russia and Europe, including Ukraine. On the other hand, on the eve of World War I, Russian political scientists first thought of Eurasia as corresponding with the borders of imperial Russia, which included parts of Eastern Europe. Russians in the twenty-first century are more likely to consider Eurasia to include central and western Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine,

Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and parts of the Caucasus. One of the various geopolitical conceptions of Eurasia is that “Greater Eurasia” includes Russia, China, and Central Asia.

Eurasia’s abundance of energy resources, particularly oil and natural gas, is a key factor in shaping regional geopolitical interests and conflicts. The control of these resources and the pipelines that transport them often spark tensions and disputes. The region has been a hotbed of conflicts, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, all of which have significant geopolitical implications.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a monumental geopolitical project to bolster China’s economic and strategic influence in Eurasia. This initiative involves extensive infrastructure development and investments in numerous Eurasian countries, with far-reaching implications for the region and all other stakeholders.

Security alliances, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) led by Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) involving China and Russia, were conceptualized as critical in shaping security arrangements in Eurasia. However, due to Russian and Chinese domination, these organizations have not been able to bear more significant and broader results in terms of security and economic development of the region.

Eurasian geopolitics is subject to ongoing shifts and changes, including China’s growing influence, the weakening of Russian influence, and the evolving role of other players such as Turkey, Iran, the US, and the European Union. Understanding Eurasian geopolitics involves analyzing these and other factors to make sense of the complex interactions and conflicts that shape the political landscape of this vast and diverse landmass.

Key Players

Russia

Russia is the traditional partner of the Eurasian countries. The post-Soviet states are economically dependent on Russia. Not only this, but Russia is also considered the security guarantor of the regional countries. However, Russian influence has been waning in recent years due to Moscow's neglect of this region. At the same time, Chinese influence has gradually increased at the expense of the Russian sphere of influence. Despite this, Russia will remain one of the essential players in the region due to its close political, economic, and cultural connection with these countries. Central Asian countries consider Moscow a significant partner in balancing deep Chinese penetration. To maintain its position in the region, Russia needs to invest more and give the required attention to the regional countries.

Turkey

Turkey is making deep inroads in Central Asia, especially by rejuvenating Turkic civilizational links with these countries. Similarly, the Central Asian Turkic republics are responding well to Turkey's regional cultural and civilizational endeavors. Turkey is promoting its Turkish feature to strengthen ties with the region's Turkic-speaking countries. Though unintentionally proportional to Russia, Turkish and Chinese influence is also significant.

Turkey has also expanded its economic and military cooperation with Central Asian countries. Turkish Drones are prevalent in these countries. There are reports about the joint drone production between Turkey and Kazakhstan. Although only a dialogue partner, the Turkish president attended the SCO summit in Samarkand and expressed his desire to join SCO as a full member during a meeting with the Russian president.

However, Turkey appears to be overplaying its cards in Eurasia. Its economy is deteriorating, and inflation has skyrocketed. In this case, retaining influence over an extended period is questionable. India views Turkey through the lens of its competition with Pakistan, which causes problems. However, if this is ignored, there is room for India-Turkey ties to improve.

On the one hand, the Central Asian republics support the restoration of civilizational ties with Turkey while suppressing historical ties with India, particularly with Buddhism. There is a need to retain space for our civilization and cultural links with Central Asian states, including through Buddhist connections.

China

China has acquired a significant profile in Central Asia—around USD 70 billion in trade and USD 20 billion in investments (through BRI) have been made, as China claims, and thousands of Central Asian students are studying in China. China's growing multidimensional influence in Central Asia, which includes not just economics but also defence, security, BRI, and digital connectivity, among other things, is worrying.

Beijing held the China-Central Asia summit as part of its continental strategy. China's hosting of the Xian Summit deliberately

coincided with the G7 summit in Hiroshima, and this contrast was symbolic. It can't be a more considerable expression of China's continental strategy and its Chinese hinterland. China promised 26 billion yuan (USD 3.7 billion) in fresh loans and grants to five Central Asian countries. This summit should also be seen in a larger context of SCO and BRICS and as a significant grouping in the global South, where China's presence is prominent.

The China-Central Asia joint statement has some notable points. 'Changes unprecedented in history' is mentioned in the joint statement. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, it connotes the peril and dangers of the current time due to the changing world order; secondly, it can also be seen as an opportunity that never came before. For China, it is certainly an opportunity rather than a danger. This can be seen as the institutionalization of China-Central Asia relations.

Given the Central Asian concerns regarding Russian actions in Ukraine, China reiterated its support for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Central Asia countries. Moreover, there has been an affirmation of the role of the Communist Party of China in the joint statement. It is surprising to see an endorsement of CCP in an international document; whether this phenomenon is new or has already been included may be debated. China also promised Central Asian states to back up on color revolutions, which is a pro-Russian and anti-western statement.

This year, the BRI will complete ten years since its start. China has aligned the BRI with Central Asia's individual domestic development strategies. For example, the Nurlı Zhol program on the development of Kazakhstan's economy was synced with BRI. With this alignment, Beijing indicates that the BRI is a negotiated project rather than one that will be developed according to Beijing's aims and interests.

The China-Central Asia Corridor is crucial regionally and globally, with Central Asia serving as a junction. The joint statement mentions three directions in which Central Asia will be a nodal point for China in global engagement. The first leg goes to Southeast Asia, followed by the Middle East, and the third leg goes to the European-Western China link, which goes through Central Asia and is entirely at the cost of Russia's existing transport linkages. In the context of transport corridors, there is a strong receptiveness among the Central Asian states regarding Chinese projects.

So, if we look at the overall gamut of the China-Central Asia transport linkages, there are two powers at whose cost these projects will be taken forward: Russia and India, as the connectivity projects these powers are part of have been delayed. The transport corridors initiated by China are not like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which, in the current scenario, is the most realistic but is still marginalized.

The Chinese are also showing quite an amount of sophistication by recognizing important Central Asian initiatives, both regionally and at the U.N., for example, the Turkmen initiative for 2023 as an international year of dialogue, the guarantee of peace, or the Samarkand solidarity initiative for common security and prosperity proposed by Uzbekistan. Though these initiatives may not seem significant, the Central Asian countries attach great importance to them.

In return, China gets the endorsement from these countries for its One China Policy, supports the Uyghur issue, and endorses its Global Security Initiative, Global Development Initiative, and Global Civilizational Initiative. It is significant to note that China is not challenging Russia in terms of security affairs in Central Asia. However, it is actively occupying space in sectors such as trade and

economy, connectivity, influencing culture, digital, climate change, and space cooperation.

Ribbon of Energy Pipelines in Central Asia



(Source: <https://prod-upp-image-read.ft.com/06a382f8-15f1-11e6-9d98-00386a18e39d>)

Trade between China and Central Asia increased to USD 89 billion in 2023, jumping 27% from the previous year. Chinese exports accounted for more than USD 60 billion. Trade increased with all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan. In 2022, Kazakhstan's trade with China increased by nearly one-third to USD 41 billion, while Tajikistan's trade increased by 50% to USD 3.9 billion. Uzbekistan's relationship was upgraded to an "all-weather" comprehensive strategic partnership when Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev visited the Chinese capital in January 2024, and the two nations agreed to raise trade between them to USD 20 billion from USD 14 billion in 2023.

China emerged as the primary capital investment source for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan; in the latter two, it accounted

for almost 40% of all foreign direct investment. Chinese data indicates that as of the end of March 2023, China had invested over USD 15 billion in direct investment in the five Central Asian nations and had awarded USD 63.9 billion worth of engineering and construction contracts. China entered into currency exchange arrangements with every nation in Central Asia. Except for Turkmenistan, all Central Asian nations accept Chinese UnionPay cards.

With a greater Chinese presence in Central Asia, political elites in these countries are pro-China. Anti-Chinese sentiments among the local population also used to exist, but that has also diluted now. Chinese soft power in terms of scholarships, language training, Luban workshops, Confucius institutes, etc., has helped it improve its image in Central Asia.

Pakistan has been attempting to entice China to play a more significant role in Afghanistan, which will directly affect Indian interests. Pakistan is paying for Russian energy in Yuan. This situation involves using Chinese currency for transactions, and the Chinese are recruiting Pakistan, Afghanistan, and CARs with this idea of using Yuan.

There is a sense of insecurity in China regarding Indian engagement in the region. China also seems to be following India's footprint in terms of political engagement. China had many proposals, such as the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilizational Initiative, but India does not have alternate proposals to put forward. Such proposals are necessary to increase engagement with Central Asian countries.

Recently, there has been a lot of fascination with what China is or can do in Central Asia. If we examine the trends for BRI, it has been declining over the past few years. West Asia and Southeast

Asia have gotten more attention than Central Asia. With regard to BRI, there is more hesitancy than traction. Central Asia does not seem visibly high on the list of China's over fifty projects last year. Most of it is in Southeast Asia.

Iran

Iran's historical, cultural, and economic ties to the Eurasian space make it a strategic subject for analysis. Its presence and interests in the region are considerable. Iran, which borders the Central Caucasus and Central Asia, aspires to gain influence in these regions to strengthen its geopolitical importance and capacities. Iran has formed a strategic partnership with Russia, aligning interests in the Caucasus and coordinating militarily, notably in crises such as Syria. Iran adopts a Eurasian identity and contributes to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). On the other hand, views on the future of Eurasia differ among those participating.

Iran aims to become a regional transportation hub, evidenced by its efforts to transport cargo through its ports. Central Asian countries are landlocked; thus, Iran is seen as a transportation facilitator for these countries. Iran's role in the wider region also impacts India's foreign and strategic policy, making it an essential player in India's extended neighborhood. India has invested in the development of Chabahar port in Iran. Tehran is essential in its connectivity initiatives to reconnect with Afghanistan and Central Asia without a direct land route.

European Union (EU)

The EU is committed to strengthening partnerships with Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Tajikistan. It acknowledges Kazakhstan has significant stakes in the region. The EU is a key trade partner and foreign investor in

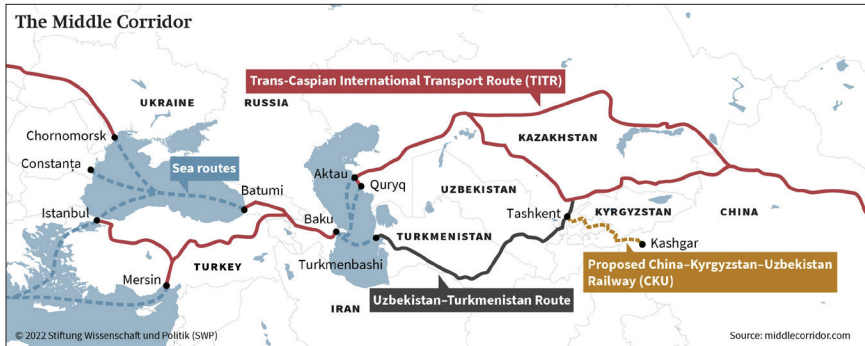
Kazakhstan and maintains a robust economic relationship with it. Kazakhstan, in turn, is the leading trade partner for the EU in Central Asia.



The China-Europe Railway, a multimodal container train service, part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, was launched in 2013, connecting cities in China and Europe. It allows overland freight transit, circumventing the conventional maritime routes that connect these two destinations. Since the Russia-Ukraine war started and heavy sanctions were put on Russia, the EU-China rail that traverses through Russia also needed an alternative to reduce the EU's dependency on Russian routes. In this context, Central Asia is essential for the EU as an energy source and an alternative transit route for East-West connections. This dynamic plays a crucial role in the EU's regional interests.

The European Union is ready to cooperate with Central Asia to use and promote the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). The TITR, also known as the Middle Corridor, is a network of transportation routes from China to Europe, passing via Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and Turkey. The Middle

Corridor, operational since 2017, is a multimodal transportation system that primarily relies on existing primary rail and port infrastructure.



The EU's expanding engagement in Central Asia aims to counter security challenges and contribute to developing connectivity, trade, and security in these countries. The EU is actively interested in enhancing cooperation with Central Asian states against common security issues, including radicalization, reflecting the growing European engagement in the region.

United States of America (USA)

As part of its Eurasian strategy, the United States of America has sought chiefly to counter Russia and China while evangelizing for human rights and democracy to the regional countries. Also, regional security has become integral to US policy after 9/11. However, there has been a shift in US policy from more emphasis on long-term security concerns to more immediate and ubiquitous issues such as energy security and climate change, as well as expanding trade and commercial links and transportation routes. This is a sign of mutually beneficial cooperation. Given that Russia's influence in Central Asia has declined in the wake of the Ukrainian crisis, Washington's continued focus on the region, with a particular emphasis on effective

commercial partnerships in trade, transportation, and the energy sector, will undoubtedly contribute to the broadening of Central Asia's foreign relations. Additionally, this will support preserving the balance of power in the region.

Central Asia

Central Asia remains the center of Eurasia. Its geostrategic location at the intersection of East and West is geopolitically critical, exposing the region to geopolitical rivalry for centuries. The 19th century Great Game between the Russian Empire and British India was played because these powers intended to increase their influence in this region. In the 20th century, major powers like Russia, China, the European Union, and the United States had interests in this region, which led to competition and rivalry. However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent republics in the region, Central Asian countries have emerged as separate entities with expanding economic, political, and international contacts with the rest of the globe. Along with this, the geopolitical dynamics have also altered. To maximize the advantages of the great power struggle, the post-Soviet republics leveraged their resources and geographic position to benefit from this situation.

Regional Groupings

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a multifaceted international institution that has garnered praise and criticism since its establishment in 2001. The SCO was founded by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan with the primary aims of enhancing regional security, combating terrorism, and fostering economic cooperation among member states. Over the years, the organization has expanded its scope to include observer states and dialogue partners, showcasing its growing influence in Eurasia and beyond. In 2017, India and Pakistan were granted permanent membership in the SCO, paving the way for additional members. Iran is the newest member, and Belarus plans to become a full member of the SCO in 2024. With this, the geopolitical and geo-economic scope of SCO has further widened.

One of the notable strengths of the SCO lies in its role as a platform for diplomatic dialogue and cooperation among diverse nations. The SCO has facilitated discussions on pressing issues such as counter-terrorism and regional stability by bringing together countries with significant geopolitical importance. The organization has also conducted joint military exercises, signaling a commitment to collective security and defense cooperation. However, despite these positive aspects, the SCO faces several critical challenges that

cast doubt on its effectiveness and long-term impact. One primary concern is the divergent interests among member states, particularly China and Russia, which often prioritize their geopolitical agendas over collective objectives. This power imbalance within the organization raises questions about its ability to act as a cohesive and unified entity.

Another issue is the perceived lack of tangible outcomes from SCO initiatives. While the organization has held numerous meetings and signed agreements, progress on critical issues such as counter-terrorism and economic integration has been slow and uneven. This raises doubts about the SCO's capacity to effectively deliver meaningful results and address complex regional challenges. Moreover, the SCO's expansion and growing influence have triggered apprehensions among Western powers about its potential to undermine the existing international order. As China seeks to assert its influence through institutions like the SCO, there are concerns about the implications for global governance and the balance of power in Eurasia.

While the SCO has made significant strides in promoting regional cooperation and dialogue, it remains a complex and contentious institution with inherent limitations. Its effectiveness is constrained by geopolitical rivalries, divergent interests among member states, and persistent challenges related to China's governance and domination. The SCO must address these critical issues to realize its potential as a credible and impactful regional organization in the Eurasian landscape.

Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a regional intergovernmental military alliance in Eurasia that plays a

significant role in the region's geopolitical landscape. Established in 2002, the CSTO is often seen as a response to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It consists of several former Soviet republics and aims to promote collective security and cooperation among its member states. CSTO member countries include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

The primary purpose of the CSTO is to provide for the collective defense of its member states. In the event of aggression against a member state, the organization is committed to providing military assistance and support. This has implications for regional security and stability in Eurasia. Even with its focus on collective security, the organization has hardly ever intervened in regional disputes involving its member nations. However, it played a crucial role in the January protests in Kazakhstan 2022. At the request of Kazakh President Tokayev, within hours, the CSTO approved Tokayev's request and sent 2500 soldiers to safeguard critical infrastructure throughout Kazakhstan.

The CSTO also works to address shared security threats like terrorism and drug trafficking, which have far-reaching geopolitical consequences. In this context, the member nations conduct annual military exercises. By addressing these issues collectively, member states aim to enhance regional stability. The organization has a significant presence in Central Asia, where several member states are located. Tajikistan has a long and porous border with Afghanistan and has been vulnerable to security challenges emerging from the AfPak region. CSTO's presence in Central Asia influences regional geopolitics and stability.

Russia is the dominant member of the CSTO and often exercises significant influence within the organization. The CSTO's activities can be viewed in the context of Russia's broader geopolitical

interests in Eurasia. The CSTO maintains relationships with other regional and international organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

It's important to note that the CSTO's influence in Eurasian geopolitics is not as extensive or far-reaching as that of organizations like NATO, and it has faced challenges and criticisms regarding its effectiveness. However, it remains a significant player in the security landscape of the post-Soviet space and can influence regional politics and security dynamics in Eurasia.

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is a regional economic organization that plays a significant role in Eurasian geopolitics. Established in 2015, the EAEU aims to promote economic integration and cooperation among its member states, which include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.

The primary goal of the EAEU is to create a common economic space, remove trade barriers, and promote economic cooperation among its member states. This has influenced the economic dynamics of the region, potentially increasing trade and investment among member states and impacting their relations with other countries.

A distinctive long-term economic strategy serves as the foundation for the EAEU. With the Russian ruble acting as the primary currency and making up over 72% of all payments, the EAEU's trade turnover exceeded USD 73 billion in 2021. This issue has become even more significant because of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine since February 2022 and Russia's expulsion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications

(SWIFT) system. Russia has, therefore, advocated for alternate channels of international trade, ideally using its currency.

The EAEU has free trade agreements with Iran, Vietnam, Singapore, and Serbia. Talks have also begun with Saudi Arabia. The EAEU hopes to broaden its purview by incorporating nations like Egypt, India, and Indonesia.

Member states of the EAEU, particularly Armenia and Belarus, have had to balance their membership in the EAEU with other geopolitical considerations. For example, Armenia, while an EAEU member, also has close ties with the European Union. This balancing act has impacted these countries' geopolitical positioning. The fact that Armenia is now seriously considering joining the EU (although Yerevan hopes to do so) will also have significant implications for the EAEU.

The EAEU's interest in expanding its partnerships with other countries, including China and India, can have broader geopolitical implications, as the two major economic powers in Asia can influence the relationships between EAEU member states and other major global powers.

The EAEU is also involved in various infrastructure and connectivity projects, which can enhance transportation and trade links across the Eurasian landmass. Projects like the Eurasian Economic Union's digital agenda and transport corridors can impact the region's geopolitical significance. An Agreement on creating a consortium of development institutions was signed on the sidelines of the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council held on June 8, 2023, in Sochi. The consortium is a platform for exchanging experience and best practices, supporting the EAEU States' entrepreneurs, and forming common approaches to promoting promising cooperative projects.

Its status has significantly shaped Moscow's geoeconomic ties with its neighbors as the most influential member of the EAEU. Russian exports to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) exceeded USD 45.3 billion in 2021, up from USD 33.1 billion in the previous year. The highest value of goods was exported to Belarus and Kazakhstan, at approximately USD 22.8 billion and USD 18.5 billion in 2021, respectively.

The EAEU links with various regional organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States. These links could influence broader geopolitical trends in the region, which is rich in energy resources. The organization's operations impact the energy security of its member nations and their relations with energy importers.

While the EAEU's primary focus is on economic integration, its activities have geopolitical implications due to the interconnectedness of economic and political factors. The organization's role in Eurasian geopolitics continues to evolve and is subject to changing dynamics and challenges in the region. Furthermore, the EAEU can be viewed as an instrument of Russian influence in the post-Soviet sphere, as member countries' economic dependence on Russia remains unchanged.

BRICS (PLUS)

BRICS, formerly known as "BRIC," was created in 2001 by Goldman Sachs economist Jim O'Neill to present Brazil, Russia, India, and China as emerging economic powerhouses. South Africa joined the group in 2010, establishing BRICS as a recognized international organization. The BRICS strives to advance partnership and dialogue among its member countries on various issues, including economics, trade, finance, technology, and geopolitics.

The primary objectives are to promote inclusive economic growth, support sustainable development, improve global governance, and strengthen multilateralism. Recently, there has been an increased interest in many countries in joining BRICS, which has led to BRICS expansion. The expansion of the BRICS is also crucial in the context of multipolarity. In January 2024, four new members, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, were admitted, thus leading the way for BRICS PLUS. However, the expansion of this organization may also impact its internal coherence because the new members have fewer commonalities.

Kazakhstan had also applied for BRICS membership, but it was not successful. This indicates that the Eurasian nations other than Russia, particularly those in Central Asia, are becoming keener to become members of various international and regional organizations. These nations attempt to connect their economy with the rest of the world, as they rely heavily on Russia and China.

China's role in BRICS is essential. With the expansion, Chinese intentions have become more apparent; China will try to hijack this group as an instrument of its power play. Beijing would also like to make BRICS more of a geopolitical platform than an economic organization. New Delhi must play its card properly to utilize its role as a founding member of BRICS. India should focus more on enhancing its role as a giver by offering some profitable and suitable proposals. Concrete proposals on climate change, food security, migration, terrorism, etc., will be very suitable and productive.

BRICS expansion will undoubtedly alter the organization's decision-making process since the goals and objectives of the member countries will undoubtedly contradict. However, BRICS Expansion is inevitable, and therefore, instead of worrying about it, New Delhi should strengthen bilateral ties with the newly joined

members and others interested in joining. India's presence in BRICS is essential because its membership in the organization assures the other smaller low-income economies that China will not take over the organization. In other words, India's presence is a counterbalance to China in BRICS.

India should also be willing to exercise a veto as BRICS is a consensus-based organization. Additionally, blocking the BRICS expansion will not reflect well on India's image; New Delhi should encourage like-minded countries to join the organization. There is a need for a serious examination of India's foreign policy to see what can be done bilaterally and multilaterally to push back against Chinese influence. To achieve this objective, India should have the flexibility to cooperate with Americans in QUAD and the Saudis and Iran in the Middle East.

India and Eurasia

India has a long and rich history of relations with the Eurasian region. Trade, cultural exchanges, diplomacy, and strategic interests have shaped the historical interactions. The interaction between the two regions began in the Bronze Age when the Indus Valley civilization and the ancient towns of Central Asia began trading items such as lapis lazuli and tin. A Harappan settlement of Shortugai, discovered in 1976 in Northern Afghanistan, served as a trading station on the banks of the Amu Darya (Oxus) River, where the mines of Lapis lazuli were situated. Even in the Vedic period, Central Asia was known to Indians as Uttar Kuru, and the routes leading to it may have been known as *Uttarapatha*.

This connection was maintained throughout the Mauryan and Kushana Empires. Buddhism played a crucial role in connecting India with Eurasia. The spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia facilitated cultural exchanges and diplomatic ties across Eurasian regions.

In the medieval period, Central Asian rulers such as the Timurids and Mughals developed formidable empires that covered both areas throughout the medieval era. Indian goods, including textiles, spices, and precious stones, were highly sought after in markets across Eurasia. These links continued even in the colonial period, and even after that, when the Soviet Union collapsed, many independent republics emerged in the region.

Despite the closed historical ties and consistent bilateral engagement, India's presence in the region is below its potential. There is little clarity in India about Eurasia as a geographical entity. However, the term "Eurasia" is often used to refer to the post-Soviet space, particularly Russia, the Central Asian republics, the Transcaucasian republics, and nearby territories like Turkey and Mongolia. The region of Eurasia also includes Afghanistan. However, there is a need to expand the notion of Eurasia beyond Central Asia, which may be a Soviet-era concept and, therefore, outdated.

Eurasia is crucial for India's national and foreign policy interests. Formerly, policymakers in India dealt with the region in silos, such as divisions in Russia, Iran, China, and so on. However, there has been little from the Indian side in the last 2-3 years to bring together the *conceptual framework while dealing with the notion of Eurasia*. There is an overemphasis on maritime strategy in India, which impacts its continental strategic objectives. Regarding resources and diplomatic spectrum allocated by India to Africa and the Indo-Pacific, Eurasia ranks a distant third. Some of the security challenges India faces today have risen from continental Eurasia; therefore, we cannot ignore the continental aspect of Eurasia. Central Asia and the Middle East have become highly critical components in this context.

India also has significant economic interests in the Black Sea. The South Caucasus conflict and India's growing defence partnership with Armenia are encouraging developments in India's Eurasia strategy. The Ukrainian war and the broader consequences for the Red, Black, and Caspian Seas are driving a shift in Eurasian policy. Russia may be a receding power, while China is seen as ascending. India is an extended partner of Russia. Although India should lead an India-branded strategy in Eurasia, it may consider partnering

with Russia as the sole continental power, which is friendly to India as we don't have other readily available options.

India's focus on Afghanistan without linking it with its impact on the broader region has weakened its Eurasia policy. As a result, it is time to *recognize Eurasia as a concept that is not separate but encompasses Afghanistan*. India's Eurasia, as well as Indo-Pacific strategies, are based on controlling China. India's Eurasia strategy is centered on either Russia or Central Asia. Nevertheless, if Russian influence deteriorates and Moscow moves closer to China, who will India count as a regional ally? To progress India's Eurasia policy, what New Delhi commits to the countries of the region must deliver even more and faster. The focus nations should be Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Central Asia as the Core of India's Eurasian Strategy

Central Asia is a Soviet construct. Thus, one should look at Eurasia and that too in a broader context as a kind of continuum beyond Central Asia through West Asia and to the Caspian and Caucasus. The assumption that China and Russia are destined to control the Central Asian region is misguided. Central Asian nations are rising on their own. India should relate to their aspirations and capabilities more closely, considering their desire not to be dominated by any one external power. Also, Russia as a security guarantor and China as the economic superpower in Central Asia is a broad generalization that requires further investigation to evaluate these dynamics and opportunities that may arise for India.

Central Asia's Trade with Russia and China

Central Asian Countries	Trade with Russia (2022) in USD million		Trade with China (2022) in USD million	
	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
Kazakhstan	8,640.3	18,294.8	14,728.5	8,562.8
Kyrgyzstan	964	2,271	61	4,069
Tajikistan	57.8	1,687.9	81.5	883.5
Turkmenistan	133 (2021)	769 (2021)	9,730	920
Uzbekistan	1,958	5,789	1,549	6,620

(Source: ADB database, Compiled by Author)

India-Central Asia Trade, 2022-23 (in USD million)

	Exports	Imports	Total
Kazakhstan	436.50	205.13	641.63
Kyrgyzstan	52.38	4.19	56.57
Tajikistan	49.40	0.52	49.92
Turkmenistan	90.29	101.72	192.01
Uzbekistan	283.31	48.40	331.4

(Source: <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/default.asp>)

The above figures show that India has a weak economic and trade footprint, which must be improved if India is considered a serious partner by the Central Asian states. Due to India's deficient performance in Central Asia, the CARs have realized that there is not much scope for cooperation from countries like India on the economic and investment front. This perception needs to be corrected as soon as possible. India's substantial soft power influence cannot substitute the hard economic and security influence.

The existing framework of interaction with Central Asia should be maintained without interruption. The fourth ministerial dialogue between India and Central Asia (India-Central Asia Dialogue) has been delayed since the third meeting in 2021.

India-Central Asia: Mechanism of Multilateral Cooperation

India Central Asia Dialogue- 2019
India Central Asia Summit- 2022
India-Central Asia NSAs meeting- December 2022
India-Central Asia JWG on Afghanistan- March 2023
India-Central Asia JWG on Chabahar Port- April 2023

In the current situation, where regional dynamics are fast shifting, there is now a *need for a review of India's Central Asia policy in the context of the larger Eurasian region and evolving geopolitical dynamics*. Implementation is crucial for Indian engagement in Central Asia. India should make sure that whatever commitment is made is fulfilled. Air connectivity should be improved, which will boost tourism. Maintaining regular flights is crucial for enhancing people-to-people connections. There are constraints on resources and challenges presented by countries moving into the Eurasian region. With the changing circumstances, new elements need to be added to the existing framework of Indian foreign policy. Spending more resources and investments should be vital to a renewed strategy.

In January 2022, a virtual summit provided an institutional framework for India's engagement with Central Asia, especially at the highest diplomatic levels. The leaders deliberated extensively on the bilateral and regionally significant issues during the summit. Following the summit, a joint declaration known as the Delhi Declaration was issued. Several notable initiatives were proposed

in this document. Many of the proposals recommended during the summit have already been implemented. A few notable and successful initiatives are the India-Central Asia NSAs meeting (first held in Delhi in December 2022 and again in Astana in 2023), the India-Central Asia JWG on Afghanistan (March 2023), the India-Central Asia JWG on Chabahar Port (April 2023), and the 100-member youth delegation from five Central Asian countries to India (first delegation in November 2022, second delegation visited India in March 2024). An India-Central Asia Secretariat was also supposed to be established in New Delhi as part of the Delhi Declaration to support the new framework. Still, there are currently no indications that this has come to fruition. The next summit will take place in India later this year, and it should be fully exploited to elevate ties to the next level.

The mutual security concerns posed by the *changing regional and international landscape demanded India and the Central Asian republics strengthen defence cooperation*. India's military cooperation with Central Asian countries has been notable but far from exhaustive. In the defence sector, Initial interactions emphasized common threats like religious extremism, terrorism, narcotic-funded violence, and transnational crime. The region's overall military cooperation is constrained mainly to military education, exercises, infrastructure, and training.

India has increased defence cooperation in the region, with a defence attaché deployed in each of India's Central Asian embassies. In 2011, India and Kyrgyzstan held their first joint military drill, Khanjar. During Prime Minister Modi's 2015 visit to the five Central Asian nations, India strengthened the institutional foundation for bilateral defence cooperation. The visit led to the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and agreements for defence and military-technical cooperation with

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan. Joint Military exercises with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan commenced in 2016 and 2019, respectively.

With Eurasia's rapidly changing security dynamics, Central Asian countries have also expanded their defence budget in recent years. Kazakhstan's military spending increased by 4.50% to reach USD 1,618 million in 2021 from the previous year's USD 1,548 million. The military budget for Kyrgyzstan was USD 125 million in 2021. Kyrgyzstan's military spending grew at a 9.0% annual rate from USD 26 million in 2002 to USD 125 million in 2021. Tajikistan spent USD 82 million on its military in 2021. Despite significant fluctuations in recent years, Tajikistan's military spending tended to rise from 1998 to 2021, reaching USD 82 million. Uzbekistan's military spending increased by 2,560.79% between 2003 and 2018, from USD 54 million to USD 1,440 million.

Given the recent development in relations between India and Central Asia, the defence sector has many growth opportunities. India's attempts to indigenize its defence sector through the Make in India Program and Central Asia's expanding defence requirements complement each other. As a result, joint defence production, military medicine, and other types of expanded defence cooperation are now required in addition to training and exercises.

India has prioritized state-to-state relations rather than people-to-people contact in its dealings with Central Asia. There is also a lack of framework for institutionalizing people-to-people contact. There is a significant gap between India's Central Asia policy and the opportunities present in the region. As India presided over the G20, it should have invited the Central Asian countries to the summit meeting. Overall, India must be more realistic and proactive when it comes to expanding its presence in Central Asia.

Connectivity

Connectivity has been a severe impediment in India-Central Asia Relations. In order to bridge the gap of connectivity, India invested in Chabahar port in Iran and has launched the *International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)* along with Russia and Iran. However, since connectivity is essential for good bilateral relations, it is concerning why New Delhi has failed to make INSTC operational. Because of exaggerated fear of US sanctions among the Indian business sector and lack of political will, INSTC remained marginalized. It should be noted that there is no sanction on transit trade. On INSTC, the rail and road network already exists in Iran and may be used to access Central Asia.



INSTC can be an alternative to BRI. If Southeast Asian countries join INSTC, its outreach can be expanded, and a suitable alternative to BRI may be projected. Studies have revealed that if INSTC can take over 7 percent of the trade of the Suez Canal, it is commercially viable. INSTC might be marginalized in the context of more considerable transport linkages that are coming up between China-Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, the Caspian Sea, and back into Iran. And from Iran or Azerbaijan to Turkey. The second such project is the proposed Trans Afghan railways, where

Uzbekistan is interested in accessing Indian Ocean Ports in Pakistan (Gwadar or Karachi) through Afghanistan. Still, there are multiple issues related to the Trans-Afghan railways, such as financing and the situation in Afghanistan.

The meeting between Indian NSA Ajit Doval and his American and Saudi counterparts in May 2023 is crucial. They discussed the multimodal connectivity connecting West Asia with Bangladesh, Myanmar, and beyond. If this endeavour moves faster than the other proposed and stalled projects, then a reconsideration of India's connectivity with Central Asia will be needed.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) affirming joint efforts to construct a new *India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)* was launched on September 9, 2023, on the margins of the G20 Leaders' Summit by the leaders of India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and the European Union. The IMEC will be divided into two corridors: the east, which connects India to the Gulf, and the north, which connects the Gulf to Europe. The corridor is supposed to create a dependable and cost-effective cross-border ship-to-rail transport network to augment existing marine routes. It aims to boost efficiency, cut costs, protect regional supply chains, improve trade accessibility, strengthen economic cooperation, create employment, and decrease greenhouse gas emissions, culminating in a revolutionary integration of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East (West Asia). The project is still in its early stages, but if all parties maintain the appropriate fervor, it may get the necessary mileage, demoralizing India's other connectivity initiatives, particularly those aimed at connecting with Eurasia.

There has also been a limitation of resources on connectivity. Of the USD 80 million India promised to develop the Chabahar port, only USD 25 million has been spent so far. India has also not paid much attention to the Chabahar-Zahedan railway corridor. India

is also working to integrate Chabahar port with INSTC, requiring more infrastructure and resources. So, connectivity constraints and a lack of resources are the main challenges. Institutional support (Banks, etc.) at all levels is required for connectivity facilitation to strengthen the institutional mechanism. As per the latest reports, a long-term agreement between India and Iran on Chabahar port might help expedite the development of the port facility at Chabahar.

While India must focus on its connectivity with Central Asia, it should also consider how countries like Japan and Korea, which also lack direct connectivity with the region, are doing far better than India in their bilateral trade and commercial relations with Central Asia.

Domestic Changes in the Region and its Impact on India

A religious revival is visible in Central Asia, particularly in the Fergana Valley region. Religious appearances such as beards, girls wearing hijabs, mosques packed with people performing Namaz, and so on are examples of religious revival. The current leaders in the countries of Central Asia have a Soviet-secular mentality. And they are fully aware of the effects of the growing religious tendencies in their nations. Increasing religiosity in the region may lead to Islamic fundamentalism, which can only be contained if the regimes are undemocratic. There has also been a noticeable resurgence of nationalism based on religion in Central Asia. Considering it as India's extended neighborhood, India has indirect security concerns from this region. More focus on expanding security cooperation between India and Central Asia is required.

Other Factors

Russia's declining power in Central Asia is an objective reality, but this will take time; the question is who will replace Russia. With

Russia's diminishing influence, the dynamics in Central Asia are also swiftly changing. Major Powers like the EU and the USA have essentially withdrawn from or have very little presence in the region, allowing other nations like China, Turkey, and Pakistan to make advancements. New Delhi shouldn't link its Eurasia policy with its interests with the US or EU or see it through their prism, just as it is inadvisable to depend on them to take forward our Eurasian strategy. *India should pursue its continental strategy in Eurasia and its maritime strategy in tandem.*

Another challenge India might face in the long term is that Turkey's influence is rising, whereas India has almost no role to play in the region. India is also losing its cultural relevance as the once-popular Bollywood has lost touch with the youth in these nations, who prefer Korean and Turkish cinema instead. To meet this challenge, people-to-people contact should be given priority to bring back memories of the historical and cultural connection between India and Central Asia.

SCO: India's Priorities and Achievements

Though there has been an ongoing debate about the SCO's importance for India, the debate has gained traction since the virtual summit 2023. Some experts argue that because China dominates the SCO, India should not place too much emphasis on it. However, SCO was always intended to be dominated by China. Also, the SCO caters to China's expanding influence in Central Asia at the expense of Russia.

Besides, as far as engagement with the Central Asian Republics is concerned, China does not need SCO and has now floated this China-Central Asia Summit, where it will dominate. However, China would still engage with SCO and push it as an anti-Western group of countries. However, India should not see its interests in the SCO solely through the prism of its conflictual relations with China or its cooperative relations with the US; instead, it should pursue its long-term interests.

Within the SCO, India must utilize its veto power judiciously, just as it does when it opposes China's BRI on the justifiable grounds of protecting sovereignty and territorial integrity interests. However, its opposition to the Chinese BRI will have more credibility if India can offer alternatives in connectivity that are attractive to the Central Asian states.

India hosted the SCO Summit for 2022-23, but it received insufficient attention. Even though China dominates the SCO, the presidency should have been exploited to its full potential with greater effort. India's G20 Presidency overshadowed the SCO Presidency. Hosting an SCO meeting in person in New Delhi would have demonstrated an assertion of India's diplomatic heft. New Delhi would have organized the summit in a hybrid mode, allowing PM Modi to engage with Central Asian leaders bilaterally.

India needs to re-graph and re-energize its approach to have a meaningful policy on SCO, particularly to engage with CARs. India today has capacities that did not exist fifteen to twenty years ago, and it must use them properly. India now has a robust India-Central Asia forum at the Heads of State and ministerial levels. The discussions or outcomes of these forums should also complement its SCO ambitions.

Pakistan and China cannot be allowed to have a paralyzing effect on Indian foreign policy objectives in the SCO. Similarly, the US cannot be allowed to have a paralyzing effect on India's engagement with the INSTC. The SCO is expanding; Iran became the organization's ninth member, and Belarus will be the next to join. How this expansion may affect the dynamics in SCO and any opportunities that may present for India should be seriously mulled over by Indian policymakers. The SCO reforms have also been a topic of debate among the members. Significant concerns are how the SCO might be reformed (if it can be reformed) and how India might position itself in these issues.

PM Modi stated at the New Delhi Summit that SCO should focus on Central Asia's interests and concerns. Delhi Declaration also mentioned that Central Asia is the core of SCO. However, as the group expands, Central Asian members (four out of five CARs are

SCO members) will be underrepresented. In this situation, Should the SCO ambit be expanded to Eurasia? And is India comfortable if SCO shifts its focus to Eurasia from Central Asia?

India can work bilaterally with Central Asia, but there are a few areas where SCO remains significant, such as cooperation with SCO-RATS in its struggle against terrorism, countering radicalization, and connectivity. Central Asian countries are interested in multimodal connectivity through Iran rather than Afghanistan, which Uzbekistan has been pursuing regressively.

Many challenges have arisen as the SCO expansion takes place. Efforts are being made to give the SCO an anti-Western image, and now that Iran has joined, this will be underlined even more. The Central Asian countries, on the other hand, want it to stay neutral. In his address at the Delhi Summit, Uzbek President Mirziyoyev emphasized that the SCO must remain nonaligned. The question of SCO's effectiveness is being asked now. PM Modi posed a critical question: "New challenges are emerging, but is SCO capable of addressing them?" he also suggested that to meet the new challenges, SCO needs to be reformed and modernized.

Although SCO has limitations and is dominated by China and Russia, it's still significant. It is the largest organization in Eurasia, and Eurasia is gaining importance. Therefore, India must continue its engagement with SCO. There are undoubtedly opportunities for India, and it needs to use them. The SCO is a venue for advancing efforts, and New Delhi needs to be shown to be delivering.

Recommendations

Eurasia has been a region of utmost importance for India for a long time. India has initiated a number of policies, such as the Look North policy (1991) and Connect Central Asia policy (2012), to establish a strong foothold in the region. However, due to a lack of substantial political attention, the region remained neglected by Indian policymakers. PM Modi visited the region in 2015. This was a historical visit which reinvigorated India's relations with the region. In order to give India's Eurasia policy substance, a number of measures have been undertaken since then. A few notable accomplishments are the First India -Central Asia Summit, military exercises (Khanjar with Kyrgyzstan, Prabal Dostyk with Kazakhstan, Dustlik with Uzbekistan), a modest increase in trade, and the India and Central Asia dialogue Foreign Ministers' level.

As Russian, Chinese, and Turkish influence is gradually increasing in Central Asia, it is in India's interests to preserve the strategic autonomy of the Central Asian republics to the extent possible by strengthening their capacities. And a more substantial and wide-ranging Indian presence in the region is needed to achieve that. However, in comparison with other nation engagements, India's footprint in this region remains small. Partly, it is due to neglect arising out of inadequate appreciation of the strategic importance of this region to India and partly due to the lack of connectivity, investments, implementation, and human resources.

Therefore, India needs to revitalize its Eurasian strategy in light of the current geopolitical setting. This strategy should include more regional investments, facilitation of connectivity, expansion of the trade basket, enhancing people-to-people contact, educational cooperation, rejuvenating cultural connections, more dialogues on security and strategic issues, and substantial diplomatic interaction at all levels including at the very top.

India's priorities must include developing and enhancing bilateral relations with individual Central Asian countries (CARs). Areas of convergence of interests with each CARs must be identified and efficiently implemented. For example, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are looking for partners to develop their clean and green energy sector. New Delhi could provide expertise and fulfill the technological requirements in that area.

While discussions between Indian and Central Asian leaders and foreign ministers are crucial, dialogues at the various ministerial levels should also be encouraged. Some areas where regular ministerial-level interactions are needed are energy, defense, human resource development, IT, and health. The India-Central Asia Summit should be held annually instead of biannually, similar to the India-ASEAN Summit.

Promotion of Historical ties

India shares strong pre-Islamic historical ties with the Eurasian region, which needs to be promoted in the following ways:-

- India and Central Asian republics should encourage cooperation between their national museums. The Archeological Museum of Termez, Uzbekistan, holds antiquities of Buddhist heritage. A cooperation agreement

between the Indian National Museum and Termez Museum may be signed for collaborative study.

- In cultural cooperation between India and Central Asia; apart from cultural troops, exhibitions, etc., there is an urgent need to start joint projects related to history and archaeology.
- Joint archaeological research between India and Central Asia will help to overcome historical prejudices. A one-sided Silk Route narrative that mainly focuses on China needs to be countered. Central Asia's pre-Islamic past and its historical and cultural links with India need to be emphasized. China should not be allowed to run away with the Buddhist narrative. Buddhism originated in India and then traveled to China from India. Today, China is claiming to be the paragon of Buddhism.

Educational Cooperation

India and Central Asia need to expand their educational links by establishing more Indian educational institutes in Central Asia and increasing scholar exchanges between them. Some Central Asian experts may be given a long-term fellowship in Indian Institutes for India oriented research. This may be reciprocated by Central Asian countries as well.

Fellowships

- A few Indian universities (Amity, Sharda) have opened campuses in Uzbekistan, which may also be expanded to the other CARs. More Indian teachers should be encouraged to join Central Asian universities to raise awareness about Indian culture. India should position itself as a hub of education for Central Asian studies.

- More scholarships should be granted to Central Asian students and experts in order to achieve this objective.
- Indian think tanks should build up more significant expertise in Central Asia. They should lead in establishing and maintaining links with think tanks in the larger region to understand local perspectives and shape their perceptions of India.

Human Resource and Capacity Building

- Through programs like the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), India is creating a large group of friendly professionals in Central Asian countries. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) should prepare a proper database of former students/ trainees of these programs. This goodwill can be used to develop Indian IT businesses in these countries. The government and institutes conducting these courses should also regularly assess their relevance.
- India has been unable to deploy human resources on the ground, besides its meager presence in the Central Asian economies. This refers to the lack of Indian experts in universities, limited investments, and lack of tourism and cultural exchanges. Additionally, there is a shortage of intelligence officers to gather information on developments in Central Asia.
- A proper framework is also needed to provide internship opportunities in India and vice versa (especially in the IT sector).

People-to-People Contact

- For enhanced People-to-people contact, proper air connectivity with two-way regular flights and easing of visa facilities are required. Kazakhstan has announced a 14-day visa-free travel policy for Indian citizens, which India may reciprocate as well.
- Cooperation between Indian and Central Asian media is required to enhance their mutual awareness. Institutes like the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC) can lead the way in this field. Central Asian students should be encouraged to study in the Indian media, film, and television institutes.
- Bollywood films and music are popular in Central Asia. At the same time, Central Asian countries are also promoting their tourism sector. Musical shows and Bollywood award functions may be organized in one of those countries for much better outreach.
- Outreach to Rural Central Asia—Some good initiatives must be launched in areas such as art and craft, agriculture, culture, food security, etc. This is another crucial aspect of enhancing people-to-people contact.
- More contacts with civil society groups can be established.

Health Sector

- India is a popular destination for medical tourism in Central Asia, which needs to be standardized, and proper mechanisms (Bilateral agreements, etc.) should be introduced to regularize

and promote it. A standardized mechanism for Indian medical students studying in Central Asia is also essential. A framework for providing work permits (both ways) may also be developed.

- Traditional medicine—this field has a vast scope; specific proposals must be carved out according to Central Asian needs and should be promoted. India can provide some scholarships to Central Asian students to study Ayurveda. Yoga and meditation are already popular in Central Asia. Some Yoga institutes may be opened in each Central Asian country.

Trade and Investment

- The private sector should be encouraged to investigate business and investment opportunities in Central Asia. The Private sector should also commit to national interest in pursuing India's trade and investment goals in a geopolitically important region. However, the government must provide incentives to the private sector. For the private sector to be enticed to invest and conduct business in Eurasia, the obstacles of shipping, banking, and customs must be resolved.
- In the absence of connectivity, India should look for opportunities to invest in Central Asia's manufacturing sector. Textiles, light machinery, and automobiles are some sectors to explore. Agriculture and food processing are also promising sectors for India to invest in these countries.
- To utilize connectivity and enhance trade, India must focus on importing Petrochemicals from Central Asia (especially Uzbekistan). Indian companies can also invest in the petrochemical sector in Uzbekistan.

Connectivity

- INSTC and Chabahar should be given the priority they deserve for facilitating access to Central Asia. India's participation in the IMEC should not be at the expense of our engagement with the INSTC. India should be more assertive on its connectivity interests with regard to countries like the US or China which push their own priorities.
- There are reports about India finalizing the long-term contract with Iran on Chabahar port. The new long-term agreement is intended to replace the original contract, which only covers India's operations at the Shahid Beheshti terminal in the Chabahar port and is renewed annually. The new agreement will be valid for ten years and automatically extended. This opportunity should be used expeditiously to develop the facilities at Chabahar Port and as a connectivity facilitator between India and Central Asia.
- The Taliban is also showing keenness to use this port for trade. India should open the possibility for them to utilize this port.
- Chabahar's strategic location is a great advantage for developing it as a transshipment hub. The linking of Chabahar with INSTC will connect it with the Caspian Sea and further to Central Asia. This may also boost INSTC, which has been delayed for a long time.

Defence Cooperation

India's military relations with the Central Asian countries have been significant but far more limited. The overall military cooperation with the region is primarily limited to military education,

infrastructure, and training. There are still a lot of opportunities for India to advance its defence cooperation with Central Asian countries.

- India must strive to execute its defence manufacturing agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.
- Russia is the security manager in Central Asia. India shares solid and cordial relations with Moscow. So, New Delhi-Moscow cooperation in Central Asia concerning defence and security may be another agenda for multilateral cooperation.
- Russia and India may engage in joint defence production and military exercises with Central Asian countries. India can also work with its Central Asian partners to exchange defence expertise and knowledge.
- The establishment of an India-Central Asia Defence Ministers' forum may accelerate cooperation in this sector.
- India-Central Asia NSAs and the Head of the Security Council may also form a forum on defence and security cooperation. Additionally, an India-Central Asia joint military training can be promoted. India's 40 million USD line of credit for procuring goods and services by Uzbekistan may be extended to other CARs.

To implement the above ideas, a special representative to Central Asia should be constituted to pursue India-Central Asia concerns, provided the envoy has a specific mandate by the MEA that reflects the priority importance that India attaches to the region. Otherwise, a special envoy will not deliver the necessary heft to our Central Asian diplomacy.

Conclusion

The international order is evolving rapidly, with Eurasia emerging as a key geopolitical hotspot. Amidst the influence of external actors like Russia, China, and Turkey, India's development of an advanced continental strategy is not just a necessity, but a promising opportunity. The region's rich natural resources, strategic geographic position, and dynamic political environment make it a crucial arena for India. The strong historical and cultural ties with Eurasian countries, particularly Russia and Central Asia, lay a solid groundwork for deeper engagements. In this changing landscape, a proactive and multifaceted strategy is not just a response to various geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors, but a pathway to an enhanced engagement for India in Eurasia.

The resource-rich nations of Eurasia offer significant economic opportunities for India. With over one-third of the world's reserves of oil, gas, bauxite, and gold, as well as strategic trade routes, the region is crucial for enhancing India's energy security and economic diversification. Strengthening trade and investment ties with Eurasian countries can greatly boost India's economic growth and reduce dependence on traditional maritime routes. The strategic importance of Eurasia is underscored by ongoing conflicts and the influence of major powers like China and Russia. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its increasing economic and strategic presence in the region pose both opportunities and challenges for

India. To counterbalance China's influence and advance its own strategic interests, active engagement in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is not just a necessity, but a platform for India to exert its influence and shape the future of Eurasia.

Furthermore, the geopolitical concept of Eurasia, often defined differently by various stakeholders, encompasses crucial sub-regions such as Central Asia. Central Asia is at the heart of India's involvement in Eurasia. However, the lack of direct connectivity with the region has hindered India's ties with Central Asia. To bridge the gap, initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port project in Iran are crucial for improving connectivity and trade routes. Strengthening relationships with Central Asian countries can promote regional stability, drive economic development, and expand India's strategic influence. Security concerns, including terrorism, extremism, and regional instability, further highlight the need for robust engagement with Eurasian countries. Collaborative efforts through the SCO and bilateral partnerships can bolster India's security interests, facilitate intelligence sharing, and strengthen counter-terrorism measures. A proactive approach will position India as a key player in shaping the security and stability of the Eurasian region.

In addition, India's involvement in Eurasia is crucial for ensuring a balance of power in the region. China's growing assertiveness, exemplified by initiatives such as the BRI and its dominance in regional organizations, makes it necessary for India to protect its interests actively. India can strengthen its soft power and influence in Eurasia by utilizing its historical ties and nurturing people-to-people relationships, cultural diplomacy, and tourism.

In light of Eurasia's rapidly evolving geopolitical landscape, a balanced approach between maritime and continental strategies is

imperative for India. While the Indo-Pacific remains a crucial focus, the significance of Eurasia cannot be overlooked. A comprehensive Eurasian strategy encompassing economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions will enable India to secure its strategic interests, promote regional stability, and contribute to regional geopolitical dynamics. This comprehensive engagement will also be instrumental in securing its long-term strategic objectives in the region.

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