

## Transitions in India's Foreign Policy Landscape with Central Asia

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### Abstract

India has been persistently making efforts in order to establish sustainable relationships with Central Asia on geo-strategic and geo-economic front. These efforts are attributed to expansion and strengthening of Foreign Policy Landscape with the Central Asia and deriving benefits on account of the collaboration. The advent of this collaboration got spark post the Independence of Central Asian Republics (CARs) in the 1990s. Since then, Central Asia became a buzzword in the world politics. As a result, each power is now trying hard in order to ensure congenial geostrategic and geo-economic relationships with the Central Asia. USA is economic donor and security manager for the region. China through economic policies is trying to expand relationships with the region. Russia remains at the outskirts of the region and is trying to influence the region by utilising traditional linkages. Before dissolution, India though did not show much interest initially due to Russian influence in the region. But now the efforts are being made through certain policy initiatives that can further expand its relationship with the Central Asian Region (CARs). These CARs include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The major areas of deliberations include elevating trade and connectivity, spurring economic development, expansion of partnership, ensuring energy security, etc. With this premise, it becomes imperative to understand the geostrategic relationship between India and Central Asia. The paper, at the outset, discusses the historical perspectives of India and central Asia. Thus, the present paper gives its justification by delineating the strategic interests of India with Central Asia from the perspective of India's foreign policy. The paper further talks about the strategic interest of Central Asia with India. Thus, an attempt has been made to explain the major policy initiatives undertaken that aim at solidification of India-Central Asia relationships.

**Keywords:** Central Asian Republics, Geo-economic, Geostrategic, Foreign Policy Landscape

### 1. Understanding Central Asia

Central Asia is characterized as a landlocked region in Asia, encircled by several significant economic powers. It is bordered by the Caspian Sea to the west, China to the east, Russia to the north, Turkey to the northwest, and Afghanistan and Iran to the south (Refer Map 1). On geographical parameters, Central Asia links Asian and European continents (Kothari R.K., 2014, Kothari, 2018). The historical significance of Central Asia can be traced back to from 3000BC to 2000BC. This time was characterised by massive migration of Indo-European people to Samarkand, Tashkent, Bukhara and Merv. The importance of The 'Silk Route' found by the Chinese traders also requires a mention as the Mongol nomads used this route for trading purposes between China and Central Asian regions during period 138BC – 484AD (Kharkongor, 2014). Thereafter, the Huns and the Turks invaded Central Asia from the middle of the 5th century to the middle of the 7th century. This was followed by Arab rule who ruled the Central Asia for three hundred and fifty years, from 651-992 AD. Then Mongols, Tamerlane and Uzbek Khanates ruled the region till the Russians arrived and controlled Central Asia from 1717-1917. Central Asia was part of Tsarist Russia and later the Soviet Union until 1991 (Kharkongor, 2014). The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the establishment of five independent Central Asian Republics (CARs): Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. These countries often referred to as the "five Stans," have since gained significant importance on the global stage. However, the abrupt dissolution of the USSR as one of the largest political entity undoubtedly shocked and surprised the Indian political establishment. As a result, India's foreign policy underwent a substantial shift, transitioning from Nehruvian idealism to a more realistic and pragmatic approach towards the region (Pradhan, 2016).

Map 1: Map of Central Asia



Source: <https://www.dailypioneer.com/uploads/2021/story/images/big/india---s-connect--a-central-asia-policy----2021-12-17.jpg>

Since 1991, India has been trying to consolidate the relations with Central Asia by endorsing the concept of 'extended neighbourhood' policy. The purpose is to promote mutually advantageous economic relations among the nations (Bawasingh, 2015). In this direction, India has shown a great deal of interest in trade with Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2010; Sachdeva, 2006).

## 2. The Mutual Strategic Interest of India and Central Asia

The factor endowments of Central Asia in terms of immense natural resources such as oil, natural gas, hydroelectric resources (Financial Express, 2022), minerals like gold, copper, aluminium, iron, zinc has attracted immense global attention (Kothari, 2018). Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer and possesses the second-largest uranium reserves. Uzbekistan is rich in gold, uranium, and gas. Turkmenistan is home to the fourth-largest natural gas reserves. Tajikistan has enormous hydroelectric potential. In addition, Kyrgyzstan is abundant in both gold and hydroelectric power (Financial Express, 2022). India imports metal zinc from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Central Asia is a desirable trading location due to its vast hydrocarbon and resource deposits (Kothari, 2014). Thus, the Indian economy can rely on these regions to ensure natural resources and minerals.

CARs are interested in expanding trade relationships as the geostrategic partnership with India is more benign as compared with other nations as it may expand their influence (Mullen, 2014). India's major exports to CARs include pharmaceuticals, tea, leather goods, cosmetics, cotton yarn, machinery and equipment, plastic items, electronics, chemicals, and ready-made apparel (Pratibha, 2012).

## 3. India and Central Asia- The Major Transitions in India's Foreign Policy Landscape with Central Asia

Since the dissolution of USSR and emergence of CARs as independent entities in 1991, India has been making efforts in the direction of strengthening and consolidating the bilateral relations with Central Asia (Bawasingh, 2015; Roy, 2013). Both regions are emphasising the concept of 'extended neighbourhood' to strengthen economic relations (Bawasingh, 2015). In this direction, several policy initiatives have been undertaken. In order to consolidate and strengthen the geostrategic and geo-economics relationships with Central Asia, India initiated 'Look North Policy' in 1990s. Keeping pace with this, the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visited Turkmenistan in September 1995 and highlighted that importance of Central Asia and called it a 'high priority.' In addition, it was added that the purpose is 'to

open friendship and to promote stability and cooperation with Central Asian Republics (CARs) (Roy, 2013; Kothari, 2014). However, 'Look North Policy' only remained in discussions and its implementation was limited. Hence, India could not give strategic priority to the CARs in the 1990s. However, the same time was earmarked with the engagement of world powers in CARs. On the other hand, India could not avail the strategic advantage on account of commitment towards Kashmir and the turbulences on economic front during that time. Later on 'Gujural Doctrine' outshined in 1997 wherein India's foreign policy doctrine again became a buzzword (Sen Gupta, 1997). With the involvement of Bharatiya Janata Party Government in early 2000's efforts were again made for consolidation of relationship terms with Central Asia. This opened up Central Asia to India and the two Asian neighbours recognised the strategic necessity of each other in the emerging Asian geostrategic dynamics. In 2002, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was formed to offer a platform for Asian and Eurasian nations to coordinate security measures and foster regional, political, and economic development. The SCO created the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent, to handle counterterrorism and security collaboration among member states (Bawasingh, 2015). As a key regional power, India joined the SCO and has shown a strong commitment to reestablishing economic ties with Central Asian Republics (CARs), particularly in trade and energy sectors (Research and Information Systems for Developing Countries (RIS) Report, 2019). Another important initiative was the development of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, which transports natural gas (Kothari, 2014) (Refer Map 2). On April 24, 2008, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan reached an agreement in Ashgabat to procure natural gas from Turkmenistan. The construction of the pipeline began in Turkmenistan on December 13, 2015, and was finished by mid-2019 (Ratna, 2014).

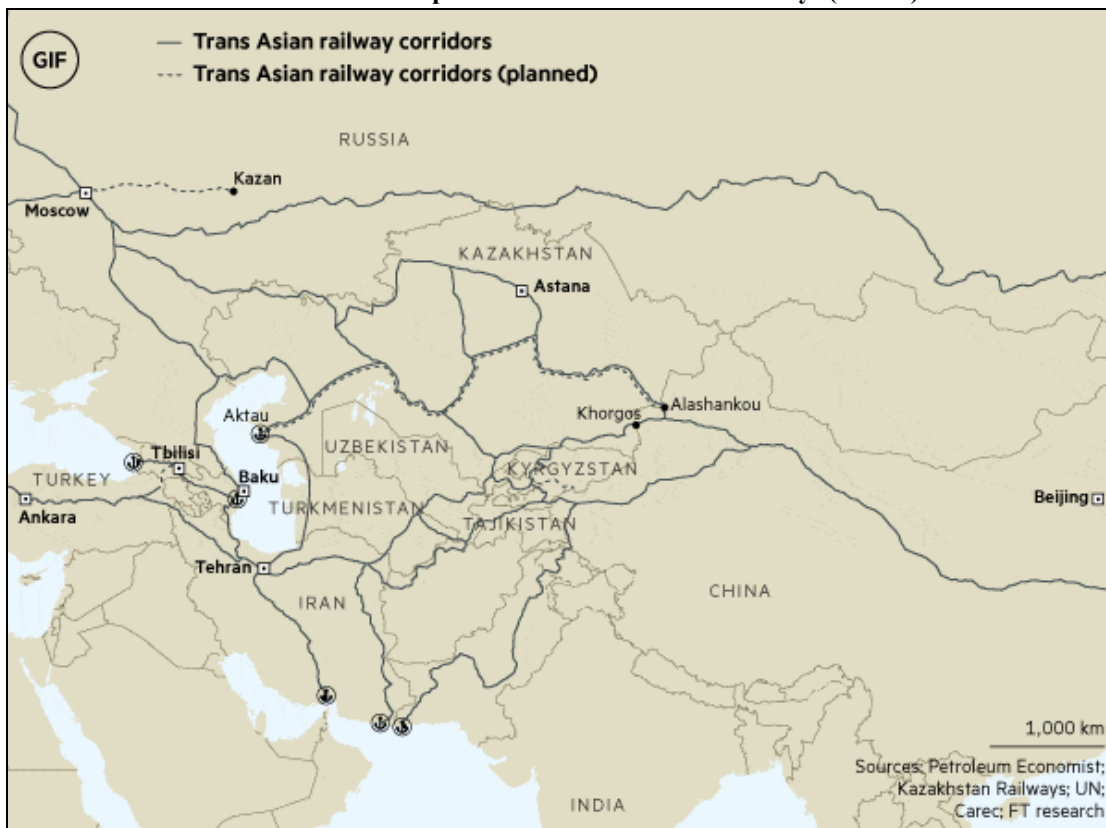
**Map 2: TAPI Gas Pipeline**



**Source:** <https://foreignpolicynews.org/2015/12/31/tapi-a-geopolitical-binding/>

This was followed by the introduction of the 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP) on June 12th and 13th 2012, by E. Ahmed, the then India's Minister of State for External Affairs, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (Muzalevsky, 2015) (Refer Map 3). The primary objective was solidifying India's ties on political, economic, cultural, educational, transport, and communication front with the Central Asian Economies (Roy, 2013; Kothari, 2014). The policy placed a strong focus on the establishment of colleges, medical facilities, IT hubs, and e-networks for telemedicine that link India and the CARs. In addition, the strategy emphasizes cooperative business endeavors, enhancing air connectivity to promote travel and commerce, cooperative scientific research, strategic alliances in military and security-related matters, and other initiatives (Pradhan, 2016; Kothari, 2018).

**Map 3: 'Connect Central Asia Policy' (CCAP)**



**Source:** Financial Times (May 10, 2016) retrieved from

In June 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all five CARs —Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (Bhattacharya, 2022). This strategic visit aimed to enhance India's engagement with a key region in its strategic vicinity (Stobdan P., 2020). The diplomatic visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to five Central Asian nations, followed by the state visits of Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon and Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev in December 2016, have greatly strengthened the ties between India and Central Asia. During Mr. Atambayev's state visit to India in 2016, various agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) were signed, solidifying the bilateral ties between India and Kyrgyzstan (Kothari, 2018). It is important to highlight that, despite Central Asia not being an immediate neighbor to India; the region holds substantial strategic importance for New Delhi. Consequently, India prioritizes Central Asia in its foreign policy framework. Both parties have been diligently working to deepen their bilateral relations and mutual understanding (Kothari, 2018). The relationship between India and Central Asia has significantly improved following Prime Modi's visit to these five Central Asian nations. This was followed by return trips to India by the presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in December 2016. Emomali Rahmon and Almazbek Atambayev both visited India. During Mr. Almazbek Atambayev's official visit to India in 2016, numerous MOUs and agreements were signed between Kyrgyzstan and India. It's worth highlighting that, although not India's direct neighbour, Central Asia holds great significance for New Delhi in various aspects. India sees Central Asia as a pivotal location for its foreign policy strategy. While both parties have made considerable efforts, there is still substantial room for further deepening of their bilateral understandings (Kothari, 2018). India and Iran are now negotiating the completion of incomplete sections of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which would shorten the time it takes for cargo headed for Central Asia to pass from Iran to the Afghan border (Financial Express, 2022) (Refer Map 4).



**Map 4: The International North- South Transport Corridor**



**Source:**<https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/20201218-India-Rowden-INSTC-2-1024x763.png>

The INSTC, which was started by Russia, India, and Iran, will thereafter connect to Afghanistan. Constructed by India in 2009, this infrastructure project connects with Afghanistan, subsequently integrating with the Afghan ring road, which links to key cities within Afghanistan, some of which are proximate to the Central Asian Republics (Muzalevsky, 2015). Beyond providing a secure route for Indian goods to access Central Asian markets, these efforts are also expected to enhance India's energy imports from the region (Kavalski, 2009).

India and Iran have entered into a 10-year agreement to operate the Chabahar port, aiming to bolster their foreign trade relations. India is working on the development of the port on Iran's south eastern coast along the Gulf of Oman to streamline the transportation of goods to Iran, Afghanistan, and various Central Asian countries. In this case, goods going to Afghanistan and India will enter via the ports in the Strait of Hormuz at Bandar Abbas and the Gulf of Oman at Chabahar, Iran. In May 2013, a promise of US\$ 100 million was made for Chabahar (Muzalevsky, 2015). In addition, Afghanistan, Iran, and India are drafting a trilateral agreement on the construction of the port at Chabahar. A railroad runs between Zaranj, Afghanistan, to Chabahar (Muzalevsky, 2015; Bhattacharya, 2022). India has transported 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses to Afghanistan via Chabahar Port (Reuters May 14, 2024).

#### 4. Conclusion

The political and economic interests together collaborate and give rise to strategic and sustainable relationships when the economies have favourable and congenial orientations towards each other. The geographical proximity and the factor endowments inspired the strategic relationship between India and Central Asia. The geostrategic and geo-economic interest of India in CARs is on account of factor endowments of CARs concerning natural resources and minerals. Kazakhstan - the second-largest uranium reserves. Uzbekistan is rich in gold, uranium, and gas. Turkmenistan is home to the fourth-largest natural gas reserves. Tajikistan has enormous hydroelectric potential. In addition, Kyrgyzstan is abundant in both gold and hydroelectric power. India imports metal zinc from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Thus, the Indian economy can rely on these regions to ensure natural resources and minerals. In addition, The CARs are interested in expanding trade with India. India's major exports to CARs include pharmaceuticals, tea, leather goods, cosmetics, cotton yarn, machinery and equipment, plastic items, electronics, chemicals, and ready-made apparel. A number of policy initiatives were undertaken in India. These included Look North Policy, Gujural Doctrine, joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, The Connect Central Asia Policy,

The International North- South Transport Corridor and Chahabar Port are Indian foreign policy initiatives as it elevated the importance of regional cooperation and security arrangements. However, in some cases, proposals are far away from reality. The benefits will accrue and materialize only when persistent efforts would be made and the sub-plans as executed in a phased manner. Their implementations require careful consideration, and any deviations must be corrected by follow-ups.

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