

# India's Engagement with Central Asia

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## Abstract

This chapter examines India's evolving policy toward Central Asia as a multidimensional strategy shaped by geopolitical, economic, and security considerations. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India gradually reoriented its foreign policy to engage with the five Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—recognizing the region as part of its “extended neighbourhood.” The study highlights the geopolitical significance of Central Asia as a strategic bridge between Europe, Russia, West Asia, and South Asia, as well as its importance for India's energy security and trade connectivity. The chapter argues that India's Central Asia policy is built upon three core pillars: security and regional stability, economic engagement and connectivity, and cultural diplomacy. Special emphasis is placed on the role of Afghanistan as a critical link in India's access to Central Asia, forming a strategic “Afghanistan–India–Central Asia nexus.” India's efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan, while expanding connectivity through initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar Port, are analyzed as key components of its regional strategy. Furthermore, the chapter situates India's policy within the broader geopolitical context shaped by the competing influences of China, Russia, and the United States. It examines India's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative and its attempt to position itself as a transparent and non-hegemonic alternative partner. The role of institutional mechanisms, particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the India–Central Asia Summit, is also highlighted in strengthening diplomatic engagement and policy coordination. The chapter concludes that while India has made significant progress in enhancing its presence in Central Asia, challenges such as connectivity constraints, regional instability, and great power competition continue to limit the full realization of its objectives. Overall, India's Central Asia policy reflects a balanced and adaptive strategy aimed at fostering long-term regional stability, economic integration, and strategic influence in the Eurasian region.

**KEYWORDS:** - India–Central Asia Relations, Geopolitics of Eurasia, Connectivity and Energy Security, Afghanistan Nexus, Strategic Competition (China–Russia–US)

## 1. Introduction

India's Central Asia policy has evolved into a multidimensional political, economic, and security-oriented strategy since the 1990s (Cooley, 2012). The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the emergence of five independent Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—prompting India to reorient its strategic focus toward the region. Although India's engagement with Central Asia remained limited during the early post-Cold War years, from the 2000s onward, the region has been recognized as a distinct and significant component of India's foreign policy. This policy enables India to balance multiple dimensions: the cultural legacy of the historic Silk Road, contemporary energy and connectivity needs, and the security challenges emanating from the Afghanistan–Pakistan region. Historically, the Silk Road facilitated centuries of trade and cultural exchange between India, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. India's present approach draws upon this shared heritage, utilizing cultural diplomacy to reinvigorate historical ties and foster goodwill (Kundu, 2015).

In the current strategic framework, India considers Central Asia as part of its “extended neighbourhood.” This concept reflects a shift from a purely geographical understanding of neighbourhood to a broader strategic outlook, where regions beyond immediate borders are viewed as integral to India's security and economic interests. Consequently, India prioritizes building long-distance connectivity beyond its immediate neighbours such as China, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Myanmar. It seeks to establish equal, transparent, and cooperative partnerships with the Central Asian republics, emphasizing multi-engagement rather than dependence on any single partner (Frankopan, 2015). Another major driver of India's Central Asia policy is energy security. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan possess vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and minerals, which are crucial for sustaining India's rapidly growing economy. To access these resources, India has actively supported alternative connectivity routes and infrastructure initiatives. These include the Chabahar Port route via Iran and Afghanistan, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Muni & Pant, 2013). These projects are strategically important as they provide India with access to Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan, thereby reducing geopolitical constraints and enhancing trade efficiency.

In addition to economic and connectivity considerations, security concerns also play a vital role. The instability in Afghanistan, particularly after the resurgence of the Taliban, has significant implications for regional security, including terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. India's engagement with Central Asia thus also aims to strengthen regional stability and counter these transnational threats through cooperation in security and intelligence. Overall, India's Central Asia policy is not merely an economic or political initiative but a comprehensive and carefully calibrated strategy. It integrates cultural linkages, energy security, connectivity development, and regional stability. By doing so, India envisions Central Asia as a crucial pillar in its broader Eurasian strategy and as an important partner in shaping its future geopolitical and economic trajectory.

## 2. Geopolitical Significance of Central Asia

Central Asia holds immense geopolitical importance due to its strategic location at the heart of Eurasia. Comprising Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the region serves as a crucial transit hub connecting Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and East Asia. For India, this geographical positioning is particularly significant, as Central Asia provides an essential link to West Asia, Russia, and Europe through its western and northern corridors (Amineh, 2004). India's access to land-based trade routes toward Europe and Russia is heavily constrained, especially due to political and security challenges in Pakistan. In this context, Central Asia emerges as a vital alternative corridor that enables India to bypass such constraints and establish more secure and diversified connectivity. Initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and connectivity through Iran and Afghanistan further enhance this strategic access, positioning Central Asia as a gateway to broader Eurasian markets.

Beyond its geographical advantage, Central Asia's geopolitical significance is greatly reinforced by its abundant natural resources. Countries like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan possess vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals, making the region an important component of the global energy landscape. For India, which faces rapidly increasing energy demands, these resources are of immense strategic importance. Access to Central Asian energy supplies can help diversify India's energy imports, reduce overdependence on specific regions, and ensure long-term energy security. These resources are essential for sustaining India's industrial growth, electricity generation, and transportation sectors. Moreover, the region's importance is closely linked with developments in Afghanistan. Stability in Afghanistan plays a critical role in facilitating India's connectivity with Central Asia. By leveraging routes through Afghanistan and Iran, India can strengthen trade, economic engagement, and security cooperation without relying on Pakistan. At the same time, Central Asia is strategically relevant in addressing transnational challenges such as terrorism, extremism, and narcotics trafficking, which often originate from or pass through the Afghan region. In addition, Central Asia has become an arena of major power competition, involving actors such as China, Russia, and the United States. India's engagement with the region is therefore not only about connectivity and energy but also about maintaining strategic balance and enhancing its presence in the evolving Eurasian geopolitical landscape. Overall, Central Asia functions not merely as a resource-rich region but as a strategic corridor that integrates economic, security, and geopolitical dimensions, making it indispensable to India's long-term foreign policy objectives (international crisis group, 2021).

## 3. Core Principles of India's Central Asia Policy

India's Central Asia policy is structured around three major strategic pillars: security and regional stability, economic engagement and connectivity, and cultural linkages and human cooperation. Together, these pillars reinforce India's vision of Central Asia as its "extended neighbourhood" and aim to build an equal, multidimensional, and sustainable partnership with the region.

### **Security and Regional Stability**

The first pillar focuses on security cooperation and the promotion of regional stability. Developments in Afghanistan remain central to India's strategic calculations, as instability there directly affects Central Asia and the broader region. India seeks to work in coordination with Central Asian states to address shared threats such as terrorism, religious extremism, narcotics trafficking, and cross-border insecurity. This includes strengthening intelligence-sharing mechanisms, counterterrorism cooperation, and capacity-building initiatives. Multilateral engagement plays a crucial role in this regard. India actively participates in platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where it engages with Central Asian countries on issues of regional security, political stability, and counterterrorism. Through such forums, India promotes a cooperative security framework that reduces dependence on any single dominant power and instead encourages a balanced, multi-aligned regional order (Sahini, 2015). This approach allows India to position itself as a responsible stakeholder committed to maintaining peace and stability in Eurasia.

### **Economic Engagement and Connectivity**

The second pillar emphasizes economic cooperation and the development of connectivity networks. India aims to build long-term economic partnerships with Central Asia through investments in energy, minerals, agriculture, technology, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). While oil and natural gas remain central to this engagement, there is increasing focus on sectors such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, digital infrastructure, and capacity-building. Connectivity is a key enabler of this economic vision. India supports multiple transport and trade corridors that link it to Central Asia and beyond. Notable among these are the Chabahar Port route via Iran and Afghanistan, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which connects India with Russia and Europe through a network of sea, rail, and road links (Hillman, 2020). Additionally, emerging initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are expected to further integrate India into global supply chains. These connectivity initiatives are strategically important as they provide India with alternative routes that bypass Pakistan, thereby reducing geopolitical constraints and enhancing trade resilience. Central Asia, in this context, serves as both a transit hub and a potential market, contributing to India's broader economic and geopolitical outreach.

### **Cultural Linkages and Human Cooperation**

The third pillar is rooted in cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections. India and Central Asia share deep historical ties dating back to the Silk Road, which facilitated centuries of cultural exchange, trade, and intellectual interaction. Historical cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara stand as enduring symbols of this shared heritage. India leverages this cultural legacy to strengthen its soft power in the region. Initiatives include educational scholarships, academic exchanges, medical assistance, and cooperation in digital governance and technology. These efforts not only enhance mutual understanding but also contribute to the socio-economic development of Central Asian societies. Furthermore, India's emphasis on human-centric development—through healthcare, skill development, and technological support—helps build trust and long-term goodwill. By promoting inclusive growth and knowledge-sharing, India positions itself as a reliable and development-oriented partner in the region (Frankopan, 2015). In sum, the core principles of India's Central Asia policy reflect

a carefully balanced and integrated strategy. By combining security cooperation, economic connectivity, and cultural diplomacy, India seeks to establish a stable, diversified, and mutually beneficial partnership with Central Asia. The synergy among these three pillars ensures that India's engagement with the region remains sustainable, multidimensional, and aligned with its broader geopolitical objectives in Eurasia.

#### **4. Institutional Framework and Processes**

India's Central Asia policy is supported by a multidimensional institutional framework that combines both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. This framework has helped transform Central Asia into a stable and integral component of India's "extended neighbourhood" approach. Two key institutional pillars underpin this strategy: the India–Central Asia Summit and India's engagement within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

##### **India–Central Asia Summit**

On 27 January 2022, India hosted the first India–Central Asia Summit, marking a significant milestone in its engagement with the region. The summit brought together the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Conducted virtually and coordinated from New Delhi, the summit focused on four major areas: security cooperation, economic engagement, Afghanistan policy, and connectivity initiatives (ministry of external affairs, 2022). At this forum, India reiterated that Central Asia lies at the core of its extended neighbourhood policy and emphasized its commitment to fostering long-term cooperation in regional peace, prosperity, and connectivity. The summit institutionalized high-level political dialogue between India and Central Asia, transforming their engagement into a structured and regularized process. It also opened the possibility for periodic summits and ministerial-level meetings, thereby ensuring continuity and policy coordination. Importantly, the summit elevated Central Asia from being merely a regional partner to a distinct multilateral engagement platform within India's foreign policy architecture. It has contributed to aligning strategic priorities, particularly in areas such as counterterrorism, trade facilitation, and infrastructure development. As a result, the India–Central Asia Summit format has emerged as a key diplomatic mechanism for strengthening long-term cooperation.

##### **Role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)**

India's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) constitutes another crucial institutional dimension of its Central Asia policy. India became a full member of the SCO in 2017, and since then, it has actively used this platform to engage with Central Asian countries at both the political and operational levels. The SCO primarily focuses on regional security, counterterrorism, economic cooperation, and connectivity development. Within this framework, India collaborates with Central Asian states on joint initiatives related to security, education, technology, and environmental sustainability (stronski & Ng, 2018). Mechanisms such as intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism exercises, and regional dialogue forums have strengthened mutual trust and cooperation. Moreover, the SCO provides India with a unique platform to interact with major regional powers such as China, Russia, and Iran in a multilateral setting. This enhances India's ability to pursue a balanced and multi-aligned strategy in Eurasia, while also safeguarding its strategic interests. Through the SCO, India can actively contribute to shaping regional norms, addressing shared challenges, and

promoting cooperative security frameworks. Together, these two institutional pillars—the India–Central Asia Summit and the SCO—provide a structured and sustainable foundation for India’s engagement with Central Asia. While the summit format establishes a dedicated and focused platform for bilateral and regional dialogue, the SCO expands this engagement into the broader Eurasian geopolitical space. Collectively, they transform India’s Central Asia policy into a well-institutionalized process that integrates security, economic, and cultural dimensions, ensuring long-term cooperation and strategic stability.

## **5. Geopolitical Context: Influence of China, Russia, and the United States**

An analysis of India’s Central Asia policy remains incomplete without considering the influence of three major powers—China, Russia, and the United States. The strategic competition and cooperation among these actors significantly shape the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia and directly affect India’s policy choices and regional positioning.

### **India’s Response to China’s BRI**

China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as a dominant force in Central Asia, expanding Beijing’s influence through large-scale infrastructure projects and financing mechanisms (Clarke, 2018). While BRI has enhanced regional connectivity, it has also raised concerns about debt dependency, lack of transparency, and strategic overreach. In contrast, India has adopted a more balanced and partnership-driven approach. Rather than relying on loan-heavy financing models, India promotes connectivity and economic cooperation based on principles of transparency, sustainability, and mutual benefit. Initiatives such as the Chabahar Port route via Iran and Afghanistan, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) provide Central Asian states with alternative pathways for trade and energy connectivity. This strategic differentiation allows Central Asian countries to pursue a policy of multi-engagement, whereby they diversify their partnerships rather than relying on a single dominant power. In this evolving framework, India positions itself as a credible “alternative partner,” emphasizing cooperative development over dependency-driven engagement. This not only enhances India’s diplomatic appeal but also contributes to a more balanced regional order.

### **Russia, the West, and Emerging Geopolitical Dynamics**

Historically, Russia has maintained deep political, military, and economic influence in Central Asia, rooted in its Soviet legacy. However, the geopolitical environment has shifted significantly following the Russia-Ukraine War. Western sanctions and Russia’s strategic preoccupation with the conflict have somewhat constrained its regional dominance, creating space for other actors to expand their engagement (stronski & Ng, 2018). In response, several Central Asian states have increasingly adopted a multi-vector foreign policy, seeking to balance their relations with Russia, China, and emerging partners such as India. This shift has opened new opportunities for India to deepen its engagement through trade, connectivity, and diplomatic cooperation. At the same time, India’s strategic alignment with Western partners—particularly in the context of the broader Indo-Pacific framework—has enhanced its geopolitical relevance. Collaboration with countries such as the United States, Japan, and

European partners has enabled India to integrate Central Asia into wider economic and strategic networks. These linkages connect Central Asia not only with South Asia but also with European and Indo-Pacific markets, thereby expanding its economic horizons. Importantly, India's approach remains distinct in that it seeks to maintain strategic autonomy while engaging with multiple power centers. Unlike bloc-based alignments, India promotes an inclusive and flexible regional order that accommodates diverse interests. In sum, the interplay between China's expanding economic footprint, Russia's evolving role, and the growing involvement of the United States and its partners has reshaped the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia. Within this complex environment, India has crafted a nuanced and balanced strategy. By offering transparent alternatives to BRI, leveraging emerging geopolitical shifts, and strengthening partnerships with both regional and global actors, India is steadily enhancing its influence in Central Asia while contributing to a more diversified and stable regional order.

## **6. India–Central Asia Connectivity and the Afghanistan–India Nexus**

The relationship between India, Central Asia, and Afghanistan forms a strategic triangular framework that has gained increasing importance in India's foreign policy. Due to Afghanistan's unique geographical position as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, its stability is not merely a regional concern for India but a matter of direct economic and security interest. One of India's primary strategic priorities is to ensure the uninterrupted flow of energy, food, minerals, and other economic resources from Central Asia through Afghanistan (pant & joshi, 2016). This approach allows India to establish connectivity with Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan, where political and security constraints have historically limited direct access. In this context, connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar Port in Iran, linked with Afghan transit routes and onward access to Central Asia, have been conceptualized as part of an integrated "Afghanistan–India connectivity cycle." This framework aims to transform India into a key node in a broader trade and energy corridor extending from the Middle East to Central Asia. Beyond connectivity, the stability and peace of Afghanistan are central to the success of this strategic framework. India has increasingly engaged with Central Asian countries through joint working groups, security dialogues, and diplomatic consultations focused on Afghanistan. These collaborative mechanisms aim to address shared concerns such as terrorism, extremism, and cross-border instability. The resurgence of the Taliban and the continued presence of extremist networks such as Al-Qaeda have heightened the urgency of coordinated regional responses.

India and Central Asian states have therefore emphasized intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism cooperation, and regular consultations to ensure that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for militant groups. At the same time, these engagements are guided by principles such as respect for sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, and support for an inclusive and stable Afghan political process. Such cooperation strengthens both regional security and mutual trust among stakeholders. Humanitarian assistance also constitutes a vital dimension of the Afghanistan–India–Central Asia nexus. India has actively provided aid to Afghanistan in sectors such as healthcare, education, food security, and infrastructure development. These efforts are complemented by broader regional cooperation with Central Asian countries, which recognize that Afghanistan's socio-economic stability is essential for long-term regional peace. Through development assistance, capacity-building programs, and people-to-people initiatives, India contributes to strengthening Afghanistan's institutional

resilience. This, in turn, facilitates smoother economic and social interactions between Central Asia and India. Thus, the relationship extends beyond traditional trade and energy concerns, encompassing a broader vision of regional stability and human development. In sum, the India–Central Asia connectivity framework, anchored in Afghanistan, represents a comprehensive and integrated strategic approach. It combines economic connectivity, security cooperation, and humanitarian engagement into a unified policy vision. The “Afghanistan–India cycle” is therefore not merely a geographical linkage but a multidimensional strategic construct that enhances India’s access to Central Asia while promoting regional stability and sustainable development.

## 7. Conclusion

India’s engagement with Central Asia has evolved into a coherent and multidimensional foreign policy strategy shaped by geopolitical realities, economic imperatives, and historical linkages. Since the emergence of the five Central Asian republics after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, India has gradually transformed its approach from limited diplomatic outreach to a structured and strategic partnership. Today, Central Asia occupies a central place in India’s conception of its “extended neighbourhood,” reflecting a shift from geographic proximity to strategic interconnectedness. This study has demonstrated that India’s Central Asia policy rests on three interrelated pillars: security and regional stability, economic engagement and connectivity, and cultural and human cooperation (Kundu, 2015). These pillars are not isolated; rather, they operate in synergy to create a balanced and sustainable framework of engagement. Security concerns—particularly those arising from instability in Afghanistan—remain at the core of India’s strategic thinking, as they directly affect regional peace and the viability of connectivity projects. At the same time, India’s efforts to strengthen intelligence-sharing, counterterrorism cooperation, and multilateral engagement through platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) highlight its commitment to a cooperative regional security architecture.

Economically, Central Asia represents both an opportunity and a necessity for India. The region’s vast reserves of energy resources, combined with its strategic location linking Europe, Russia, and West Asia, make it a crucial partner in India’s pursuit of energy security and diversified trade routes. Connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) reflect India’s determination to overcome geographical and political constraints, particularly those posed by Pakistan. These projects aim not only to facilitate trade but also to position India as an integral part of a broader Eurasian connectivity network. At the same time, India’s approach is shaped by the evolving geopolitical context, marked by the expanding influence of China through the Belt and Road Initiative, the traditional yet shifting role of Russia, and the strategic involvement of the United States and its partners. Within this competitive environment, India has sought to carve out a distinct role as a transparent, non-hegemonic, and development-oriented partner. By promoting principles of equality, sustainability, and multi-engagement, India offers Central Asian states an alternative model of cooperation that aligns with their own multi-vector foreign policies (Muni & Pant, 2013).

The Afghanistan–India–Central Asia nexus further underscores the interconnected nature of security, connectivity, and economic cooperation. Afghanistan serves as both a gateway and a

challenge: its stability is essential for the success of regional connectivity projects, while its instability poses risks that require coordinated regional responses. India's engagement in humanitarian assistance and development cooperation in Afghanistan complements its broader strategic objectives in Central Asia. In conclusion, India's Central Asia policy represents a carefully calibrated attempt to integrate geopolitical strategy with economic ambition and cultural diplomacy. While significant challenges remain—such as connectivity constraints, regional instability, and competition from major powers—the policy demonstrates India's growing capacity to operate as a key stakeholder in the Eurasian region. Looking ahead, the sustainability and success of this policy will depend on India's ability to deepen institutional mechanisms, enhance connectivity infrastructure, and maintain a balanced approach in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment (Cooley, 2012).

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