



CONNECTIVITY INITIATIVES: BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

India's rich tapestry of history, the connection with Central Asia has remained profoundly significant. Serving as India's primary gateway to the wider world, Central Asia has intricately woven itself into the fabric of India's cultural, political, and historical landscape. Among all the neighbouring regions, whether reached across land expanses or maritime routes, it is with Central Asia that India shares its longest association and most extensive people-to-people bonds. Central Asia's influence extends beyond mere cultural exchanges; it has historically been a source of both opportunity and challenge for India. From Central Asia, traditional threats to India's security have often emerged, necessitating a nuanced and vigilant approach to foreign policy. Despite its crucial role, the central Asian dimension of India's foreign policy has often been overshadowed. Recognising the profound historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance of Central Asia to India, there arises a pressing need for a reevaluation and elevation of focus within India's foreign policy. Embracing the multifaceted aspects of this relationship can foster not only greater security but also deeper cultural and economic exchanges, enriching the tapestry of both regions.

KEYWORDS : Silk Route, Globalisation, Central Asia, Fundamentalism, Chabahar Sea Port

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, a term ubiquitous in contemporary discourse, embodies a multifaceted process that intricately intertwines economies, cultures, and societies across the globe. However, despite its omnipresence, the true nature and implications of globalisation remain enigmatic, fueling heated debates and discussions. This paper endeavours to unravel the complexities of globalisation, shedding light on its implications for the futures of Central Asia and India, two regions deeply steeped in historical connections and cultural exchanges.

The relationship between India and Central Asia traces back to ancient times, dating as far back as the 3rd century BC with the establishment of the Silk Route. This historic network of trade routes facilitated not only the exchange of goods such as silk, textiles, and spices but also served as a conduit for the dissemination of ideas, religion, and philosophy. Buddhism, for instance, traversed this route from India to Central Asia and eventually reached as far as West China, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural landscape of the region.

However, the dynamics of global trade underwent a seismic shift with the discovery of the sea route from Europe to India in the 15th century AD. This transformative development rendered the overland journey via the Silk Route impractical due to its inherent risks, extended duration, and limited cargo capacity compared to the burgeoning maritime trade (Friedman, 2005). Consequently, the once-thriving land routes gradually faded into obscurity, altering the geopolitical and economic dynamics of the regions they once connected.

In the contemporary era, globalisation has reignited interest in revitalising historical linkages and forging new connections between Central Asia and India. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, both regions recognise the imperative of leveraging their shared heritage and geographical proximity to foster economic cooperation and cultural exchange. Launched in 2012, India's "Connect Central Asia" policy demonstrates its dedication to enhancing engagement with Central Asian countries in various sectors such as trade, energy, and education (Ibid., 34).

Moreover, the advent of digital technology and the internet age have further accelerated the pace of globalisation, transcending physical barriers and facilitating instantaneous communication and collaboration. This interconnectedness presents both opportunities and challenges for Central Asia and India as they navigate the complexities of an increasingly interconnected world.

On the one hand, globalisation offers the promise of economic prosperity and development through enhanced trade relations, investment opportunities, and technological advancements. Central Asian countries, endowed with abundant natural resources, stand to benefit from greater integration into the global economy, while India, with its burgeoning market and skilled workforce, presents a lucrative destination for investment and trade partnerships.

However, globalisation also brings forth a myriad of challenges, including economic disparities, cultural homogenization, and environmental degradation. As Central Asia and India strive to harness the benefits of globalisation, they must also address the socio-economic inequalities within their societies, preserve their cultural identities, and mitigate the adverse environmental impacts of rapid industrialization and urbanisation.

Globalisation serves as a double-edged sword for Central Asia and India, presenting both opportunities and challenges as they navigate the complexities of an interconnected world. By embracing their shared heritage and forging strategic partnerships, both regions can harness the transformative power of globalisation to realise their aspirations for peace, prosperity, and sustainable development in the 21st century.

The Meaning of Globalisation

The globalising process intricately weaves individuals from all corners of the globe together, fostering a worldwide interdependence characterised by the swift and extensive movement of people, goods, and ideas across sovereign borders. This phenomenon, known as globalisation, has the potential to diminish national autonomy and blur individual and collective identities. David Held and his collaborators encapsulate this concept as "the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life, from the cultural to the criminal, the financial to the spiritual" (Held et al., 2006: 549). At its core, globalisation embodies the "multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation-state. It defines a process through which events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals in quite distant parts of the globe" (Ibid. 554). In essence, globalisation creates a network where events in one region reverberate globally, impacting individuals far removed from the initial occurrence.

In today's globalised world, the frequency of interactions among people and the exchange of ideas burgeon, propelled

by advancements in communication, travel, and commerce. These advancements foster mutual awareness among individuals, breaking down geographical barriers and fostering cross-cultural dialogue. The proliferation of digital platforms and social media further amplifies these connections, enabling instantaneous communication and information dissemination on an unprecedented scale. Exposure to a diverse array of perspectives and experiences enriches individuals' understanding of the world and fosters cultural exchange.

Moreover, globalisation engenders economic interdependence among nations as trade and investment flows transcend borders. Multinational corporations operate across various countries, leveraging global supply chains to optimise production and distribution processes. While this integration fosters economic growth and innovation, it also poses challenges, such as heightened vulnerability to financial crises and the exacerbation of income inequality. Moreover, the pursuit of economic interests in a globalised world can lead to the exploitation of labour and environmental degradation in pursuit of profit maximisation.

The exchange of cultural products and practices facilitates cultural globalization, which has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it fosters cultural diversity and promotes appreciation of different traditions and lifestyles. However, there is also a risk of cultural homogenization as Western ideals and consumerism permeate societies worldwide, potentially eroding indigenous cultures and identities.

Furthermore, globalisation has significant implications for governance and sovereignty. As supranational organizations and global governance structures gain prominence, they challenge traditional notions of state sovereignty. Issues such as climate change, terrorism, and pandemics require coordinated international efforts, transcending individual state boundaries. Consequently, there is a tension between the need for global cooperation and the preservation of national sovereignty.

Globalisation reshapes the fabric of society, fostering interconnectedness and interdependence on a global scale. While it presents opportunities for economic growth, cultural exchange, and collaboration, it also poses challenges, including the erosion of national autonomy and the potential homogenization of cultures. Navigating these complexities requires concerted efforts to promote inclusive and sustainable globalisation that prioritises the well-being of individuals and communities worldwide.

Significance Of Central Asia

Landlocked countries, often seen as disadvantaged due to their lack of direct access to the sea, have historically faced challenges in establishing robust economic relations with the rest of the world. However, many of these nations have turned this perceived weakness into a strategic advantage through innovative infrastructure development and resource utilization. Central Asian states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan exemplify this trend, leveraging their abundant natural resources and strategic geographical location to foster economic growth and regional connectivity (Luong, 2002: 17).

Kazakhstan stands out as a prime example of this transformation. With the world's second-largest reserves of uranium and significant deposits of various minerals, including iron ore, coal, oil, and gas, Kazakhstan has capitalised on its resource wealth to become a major player in the global energy market. The country's extensive network of roads, railways, and pipelines facilitates the transportation of goods and energy resources to consumer markets in Europe,

Russia, China, and the Middle East. Additionally, Kazakhstan's initiatives in the renewable energy sector, particularly in wind and solar power, underscore its commitment to sustainable development.

Uzbekistan, too, boasts significant reserves of gas, uranium, and gold, which form the backbone of its economy. Despite its relatively closed and controlled society, Uzbekistan has made strides in infrastructure development, particularly in the transportation sector. The country's strategic location at the crossroads of Asia makes it a crucial transit hub for goods and energy resources flowing between East and West.

Turkmenistan, with the world's fourth-largest reserves of natural gas, has positioned itself as a key player in the global energy market. The country's ambitious projects, such as the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, aim to diversify its export routes and reduce reliance on traditional markets (Luong, 2002: 18). Additionally, Turkmenistan's efforts to develop its tourism sector highlight its potential for economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons.

Tajikistan's abundant hydroelectric potential presents a valuable opportunity for renewable energy development. With its mountainous terrain and numerous rivers, Tajikistan has the capacity to generate significant amounts of clean energy for domestic consumption and export. However, challenges such as financing and infrastructure constraints have hindered the realisation of this potential, highlighting the need for international cooperation and investment.

Kyrgyzstan, rich in gold and hydroelectric power, faces similar challenges in harnessing its natural resources for sustainable development. The country's mountainous terrain and limited infrastructure pose logistical challenges for resource extraction and export. Nevertheless, Kyrgyzstan's efforts to attract foreign investment and improve its business climate signal its commitment to economic reform and growth.

Despite their economic potential, the Central Asian republics grapple with various socio-economic challenges. Development disparities between countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, compared to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, highlight the region's uneven distribution of resources and opportunities. Moreover, issues such as water security, border disputes, environmental degradation, and transnational crime pose significant threats to stability and prosperity.

The legacy of the "great game" continues to shape geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia, with major powers vying for influence and resources in the region. Russia, China, the United States, Turkey, Iran, Europe, Japan, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan all have strategic interests in Central Asia, ranging from security cooperation to energy partnerships. As such, the region remains a focal point of geopolitical competition and cooperation, shaping its future trajectory and stability.

In conclusion, while the challenges facing landlocked countries are significant, Central Asian states have demonstrated resilience and ingenuity in leveraging their resources and geographic location to foster economic growth and regional connectivity. Through strategic infrastructure investments, resource development, and international cooperation, these countries have the potential to overcome their geographical constraints and emerge as dynamic players in the global economy.

Relations With India

India has not been able to take full advantage of its civilizational and historical ties with the Central Asian region

due to a lack of adequate attention accorded to bilateral relations. One significant obstacle hindering the development of robust ties is India's lack of "physical borders" with any of the Central Asian states. This absence of direct adjacency poses a considerable challenge in fostering economic, commercial, energy, and tourist links between India and Central Asia (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004: 193).

Pakistan's refusal to allow the passage of goods, cargo, or people through its territory to Afghanistan, let alone to Central Asia beyond it, exacerbates the absence of direct routes from India to Central Asia. Consequently, China has become the primary route for trade with Central Asia, a process that is both time-consuming and costly. Alternatively, shipping cargo by sea to Northern Europe necessitates its subsequent rail and road transportation through Russia and other neighboring countries.

Despite these challenges, India has made significant strides in improving connectivity with Central Asia. Efforts such as the trilateral agreement for the renovation of Chabahar port, the development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and India's membership in the Ashgabat Agreement reflect a commitment to overcoming logistical barriers (Collins, 2006: 88). Furthermore, India's inclusion in organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) holds promise for bridging the geographical gap and fostering greater economic cooperation.

India uses soft power as an instrument to strengthen bilateral ties with Central Asian states. Indian classical dance, music, Bollywood films, yoga, and literature enjoy immense popularity in these countries (Rosenau, 1990: 239). India regularly organises cultural events in Central Asian nations and offers scholarships for young men and women from these countries to study Indian art forms. After receiving training in renowned institutions such as Kalakshetra in Chennai, Ganesa Natyalaya in New Delhi under the leadership of Guru Saroja Vaidyanathan, and Asavari in New Delhi under the guidance of Guru Shovana Narayan, many of these scholars return to their native countries. Upon their return, they often establish their own institutions to teach and promote Indian culture, thereby further reinforcing ties with India (Ibid., 113).

While India faces geographical challenges in fostering closer ties with Central Asia, it has demonstrated a commitment to overcoming these obstacles through various initiatives aimed at enhancing connectivity and leveraging soft power. By capitalising on shared cultural affinities and investing in strategic partnerships, India aims to cultivate enduring and mutually beneficial relationships with Central Asian nations.

The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme stands as a testament to the profound ties between India and its partner countries, offering a robust platform for the exchange of knowledge and expertise. Through ITEC, young professionals from participating nations delve into a diverse array of disciplines, spanning from banking and remote sensing to agriculture and information technology, at esteemed institutions across India. This initiative not only bolsters human capacity development but also fosters a deeper understanding of India's economic strides and cultural heritage among the youth of beneficiary countries. Indeed, ITEC has played a pivotal role in propelling the economic and social progress of these nations.

Yet, to fully harness the potential of bilateral relations, a renewed emphasis on commercial and economic ties is imperative. A notable hurdle in this endeavour is the dearth of accurate and current information regarding the myriad opportunities available. Chambers of Commerce and governmental bodies must undertake proactive measures to

bridge this "information deficit," as highlighted by Smith et al. (1998). Furthermore, the private sector must show a greater interest and commitment in engaging with these countries. Participating in trade fairs and organising dedicated exhibitions can serve as effective avenues for enhancing visibility and forging lasting partnerships.

Opportunities abound for Indian companies to spearhead infrastructure projects, encompassing rail networks, roads, power stations, and renewable energy initiatives, in partner countries. With support from international agencies and multilateral banks, such as the ADB, EBRD, and IBRD (Rosenau, 1997), Indian firms possess the expertise to make substantial contributions to regional development. The forthcoming entry of institutions like the AIIB and NDB into this domain further underscores the significance of proactive engagement by Indian enterprises.

In addition to traditional sectors like oil and gas, information technology, and pharmaceuticals, a myriad of untapped avenues beckon for deeper collaboration. Higher education, civil nuclear energy, small and medium enterprises, and food processing emerge as promising domains ripe for exploration. By diversifying the spectrum of bilateral trade and economic cooperation, both India and its partner countries stand to reap substantial rewards in terms of sustained growth and mutual prosperity.

In essence, the trajectory of India's engagement with its partner nations hinges on a multifaceted approach that amalgamates strategic initiatives, robust information dissemination, and proactive private sector involvement. By leveraging the synergies inherent in such endeavours, India can fortify its position as a linchpin of regional development while fostering enduring bonds of friendship and cooperation across borders. The journey towards realising the full potential of these relationships is one characterised by collaboration, innovation, and shared prosperity.

Recent Development

Over the past few years, a series of significant events have unfolded, reshaping India's approach towards Central Asia and the global stage. Among these, one of the most pivotal moments occurred in July 2015, when Prime Minister Modi embarked on a historic journey to visit all five Central Asian States, coinciding with his attendance at the BRICS (and SCO) Summit in Ufa, Russia. This bold initiative underscored India's commitment to revitalising its engagement with the region and beyond, signalling a proactive stance towards expanding diplomatic ties. The leadership of the Central Asian States met Modi's outreach with enthusiasm, reflecting a mutual eagerness to strengthen bilateral relations and foster greater cooperation.

The SCO Summit in Russia the same month marked another significant milestone, welcoming India and Pakistan as new members of the organization. This decision marks a significant step forward for India's regional diplomacy, with full membership anticipated to be formalized at the upcoming summit scheduled for June 23 and 24, 2016, in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. The inclusion of India in the SCO presents a valuable opportunity for enhanced engagement, providing a platform for regular interaction among Central Asia and India leaders. This consistent dialogue is instrumental in overcoming previous obstacles that hindered the realisation of the full potential of partnerships within the region.

An important aspect of India's engagement with Central Asia lies in the establishment of annual SCO summits, providing a dedicated forum for leaders to convene and address both bilateral and regional concerns. The regularity of these gatherings fosters deeper understanding and cooperation,

allowing for the exploration of shared interests and the formulation of collaborative strategies. Furthermore, the presence of Russian leadership at these summits offers an additional dimension to the discussions, given the historical ties between Central Asia, India, and Russia/Soviet Union. This confluence of interests opens up avenues for comprehensive collaboration across various sectors, including security, defence, energy, and the economy, leveraging the collective strengths and resources of all involved parties.

We cannot overstate the significance of this development as India prepares to assume its role as a full member of the SCO. It not only reaffirms India's commitment to multilateralism but also underscores its growing influence on the global stage. Through sustained engagement and proactive diplomacy, India aims to harness the opportunities presented by its participation in the SCO to foster stability, prosperity, and mutual development within the region and beyond. Collaboration, dialogue, and a shared vision for a better, more interconnected future mark the journey towards realizing these goals.

The third significant development, although confined to relations with only one Central Asian state and not the region as a whole, is the commencement of construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline on December 13, 2015 (Sheel et al., 2016). India was represented at the ceremony by Vice President Hamid Ansari, while the Presidents of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan and the Prime Minister of Pakistan represented their countries. This project has been under protracted discussion for the last several years. It is significant that this project has been launched in about a year and a half since the NDA government came to power. The 1800-kilometre-long pipeline is expected to be completed by the end of 2019 (Ibid., 67). India is expected to receive about 13 bcm per year once the pipeline is completed.

Moreover, a study was instituted at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2015 to examine the benefits and disadvantages of India's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), whose current members include Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan (Drezner and Farrell, 2004: 36). The issue was initially broached by Kazakh President Nazarbayev during PM Manmohan Singh's visit to Astana in April 2011, but no progress was evident (Llosa, 2001: 69). However, the NDA government has given it a decisive push soon after coming to power.

Discussions on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) have been ongoing for more than 15 years, but scant progress has been visible. The project suddenly came to life with Prime Minister Modi's visit to Iran in April 2016 and the signing of a trilateral agreement with Presidents Rouhani of Iran and Ghani of Afghanistan for the upgrade of the Chabahar seaport and the construction of a related rail network at a cost of USD 500 million, for which allocation has been made by India (Sheel et al., 2016). These initiatives, which are closely linked, can prove to be a game-changer in dramatically improving India's connectivity with Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Russia.

The TAPI gas pipeline, in particular, holds immense promise for regional energy cooperation and economic development. It not only addresses the energy needs of the involved nations but also fosters stronger ties and stability in the region. Additionally, India's potential membership in the EEU could open up new avenues for trade and economic cooperation, tapping into the vast Eurasian market.

The revival of discussions on the INSTC and the concrete steps

taken towards its realization signify a significant shift towards enhancing regional connectivity and trade facilitation. The Chabahar port agreement, in particular, holds strategic importance, offering India an alternative route for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.

In conclusion, these developments mark a turning point in India's regional engagement strategies, emphasising connectivity, economic integration, and cooperation with its neighbours and beyond. As these projects come to fruition, they are poised to reshape regional dynamics and unlock new opportunities for growth and development.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening relations between India and Central Asia holds immense potential for the mutual benefit of all involved nations. Despite common misconceptions, this collaboration doesn't aim to undermine the influence of any particular country, like China, in the region. Rather, India's interest lies in fostering deeper ties with Central Asia to foster security, stability, and economic prosperity for all nations involved.

India's eagerness to expand its relations with Central Asia stems from a strategic perspective. By cultivating strong bonds with these nations, India can play a pivotal role in promoting security, stability, and economic growth in the region. Moreover, fostering good relations with India provides Central Asian countries with access to a reliable market for their abundant resources, such as energy, raw materials, oil and gas, uranium, minerals, and hydroelectric power. India, as the world's fastest-growing economy, provides a stable, assured, and expanding market for these commodities, ensuring mutual economic growth and development.

In today's complex geopolitical landscape, both regionally and internationally, India and Central Asia face significant challenges. However, these challenges also present opportunities for both parties to elevate their engagement to new heights. Not only within their respective regions but also on the global stage, people recognize India and Central Asia as key proponents of peace, stability, growth, and development. Strengthening their relations will undoubtedly contribute to increased security and prosperity for these nations and the broader international community.

We cannot overstate the strategic importance of closer ties between India and Central Asia. By leveraging their geographical proximity and historical connections, these nations can forge partnerships that enhance security cooperation, promote economic integration, and foster cultural exchanges. India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, which emphasises enhanced connectivity through various means such as transport, trade, energy, and people-to-people exchanges, underscores its commitment to deepening engagement with the region.

Furthermore, India's emphasis on connectivity aligns with the objectives of Central Asian countries, which aspire to diversify their trade routes and reduce dependency on traditional partners. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Chabahar port project, and the Ashgabat Agreement are examples of initiatives aimed at enhancing connectivity between India and Central Asia, thereby unlocking new avenues for economic cooperation and development.

Moreover, India's cultural ties with Central Asia, rooted in centuries of historical exchanges, serve as a solid foundation for enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation. Through initiatives such as academic exchanges, cultural festivals, and tourism promotion, India and Central Asia can foster greater people-to-people linkages, enriching their bilateral relations and strengthening their ties at the

grassroots level.

In conclusion, the strengthening of relations between India and Central Asia holds tremendous promise for advancing the common interests of all nations involved. By deepening cooperation in areas such as security, economy, connectivity, and culture, India and Central Asia can pave the way for a more prosperous and secure future, not only for themselves but also for the broader global community.

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