



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**Defence Studies**

**INDIA-CHINA'S STRATEGIC-CONTEST FOR SUPREMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA**

**KEY WORDS:** Silk Route, India-Central Asia summit, Great Game etc

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**ABSTRACT**

There has long been a relationship between India, China, and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). The Silk Route served as this triad's conduit to Europe and other western countries historically as well. The major declarations made during the first fictitious India-Central Asia conference under Prime Minister Modi and the competition for the same from his Chinese counterpart show how important Central Asia is to both India and China even now. Even though Central Asian countries and both China and India are members of the S.C.O., there is still a geopolitical struggle and a tremendous game going on. India and China's engagements are still influenced by Afghanistan in distinct ways. This research will discuss the historical and contemporary patterns of Indian and Chinese interactions in Central Asia. By obtaining access to the world's supply systems via Central Asia, it would also draw attention to the struggle for supremacy. As both India and China have enormous production facilities, the huge and untapped market and the availability of raw resources will eventually strengthen these interactions.

**Introduction**

When speaking of Central Asia, a territory is meant that stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China and Mongolia in the east as well as from Afghanistan and Iran in the south to Russia in the north. The Central Asian areas are depicted in the map below:



Source: Google Maps

India and Central Asia have had a long-standing relationship. India and the Central Asian area were connected through the southern branch of the silk route during ancient and mediaeval times. The Sakas, Parthians, and Kushans arrived by this path. Under their rule, the Kushans created a remarkably powerful and cohesive monarchy that included a sizable portion of northern Indian land.

Islam began to take root in Central Asia during the course of the mediaeval era. India likewise saw a slow but steady spread of Islam. India fell under British control when the Mughal empire started to disintegrate. At this period, the Russian Tsars began to have an impact on Central Asia. The Great Game was played out in three stages as a result of the competition between the British and Russians. The establishment of a buffer zone is controlled by the first phase of the Great Game. The Great Game's second phase ran from 1907 through 1917. At this point, espionage began to take place in the buffer zone. After 1917, in the third phase, the Russians firmly cemented their grip over Central Asia. The Russians made aggressive use of the land in Central Asia to support their own country's Industrial Revolution.

**India's Foreign Policy Concerns**

India developed a concentric circle strategy for foreign policy as the cold war came to an end, putting engagement with its close neighbourhood first. The expanding neighbourhood appeared at the second level, and then the tremendous power. In terms of foreign policy, Central Asia was positioned within the context of its larger neighbourhood.

At the conclusion of the Cold War, the Central Asian Republics gained the strategic and independent space to examine their connections with other countries. India has started to make overtures once more to forge prospective partnerships based on its historical and cultural closeness to Central Asia. New diplomatic agreements were reached between India and each of the five Central Asian Republics. India's foreign policy in Central Asia during the Cold War was entirely filtered via the USSR. At the conclusion of the cold war, India now had the chance to interact directly with the states in the area. India transitioned its domestically from a closed to an open economy, and it also started to feel the need to acquire resources to support its own economic growth. Thus, given that Central Asia is an area with abundant natural resources, it became even more important for India.

But because the Central Asian Republics had just recently attained independence, India's first priority was to make sure that no religious fanaticism spread over the area. In Central Asia, religious fanaticism posed a serious concern. The USSR's collapse led to the cessation of financial and military assistance to Islamist groups. Given that the majority of these nations were Islamic, there was a significant risk that these extreme forces might spread to Central Asia. India was worried that if this radicalism spread to Central Asia, Pakistan would have an advantage in maintaining strategic depth against India. India saw that it needed to rekindle its ties with Central Asia in light of their shared historical and cultural heritage, but it also needed to take precautions to prevent the area from endangering India's security. India started to understand that its own democracy, secular attitude, and multicultural polity are its advantages that India may utilise to promote itself in Central Asia, which would be seeking certain role models to imitate after gaining its independence. India's Look North Policy was introduced by Rao during his visit to Turkmenistan.

In addition to reasserting its cultural history and re-establishing its link with the Central Asian area, India would be able to advance these three objectives if it were able to do so. The security situation in the Central Asian area grew worse over time. The Taliban seized control of Afghanistan in 1996. The fact that Pakistan acknowledged Taliban authority in Afghanistan heightened Indian concerns. There was a civil war in Tajikistan as a result of the extremism that originated in Afghanistan. In the 1990s, there was an intense push from Pakistan to resurrect militancy in Kashmir. The closest neighbours in the area suffered as a result of this instability.

India, together with Russia and Iran, sponsored a force known as the Northern Alliance when the Taliban seized over Afghanistan. India uses the Ayni air station to deliver aid and support to the less fortunate. In contrast to bilateral relations, security cooperation between India and Tajikistan is growing. However, achieving the aims of the Look North Policy grew more challenging when the area was taken over by extremist elements.

The hijacking of IC 814 in 1999 egregiously revealed India's security flaws. In addition, following 9/11, the environment in the region shifted. The US attacked Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001. For its worldwide war on terror, the US started to build airbases and military logistics facilities in Central Asia. India also realised how difficult it would be to advance the Look North Policy's objectives and started to realise that engaging with Central Asia could never be a viable strategy. The regional equality has also been altered by the United States' involvement in the area. The United States vanquished the Taliban, and if not completely eradicated, extremism had at least been much reduced. India's proximity to the United States in the middle of the 2000s paved the stage for the nuclear agreement in 2005, and India's NSG-specific waiver in 2008 ushered in a new era of strategic cooperation. India's need for resources increased at the same time as the Indian economy started to show indications of expansion. Rebuilding a connection with Central Asia using new criteria became crucial for India. India now understood that it needed to change its policies in order to obtain resources from Central Asia. The foundation of the new approach has to be economic diplomacy. India's current task was to plan a balanced course of action in Central Asia. The Indian Council of World Affairs launched the India-Central Asia Dialogue Track-11 effort to accomplish this.

On June 12, 2012, the Connect Central Asia strategy (CCAP), which sought to re-engage with the area, was unveiled. The CCAP's major goal was to improve connectivity with Central Asia in order to ensure energy security. A massive connection project called the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is being planned to increase communication with Central Asia and help that region's own development. There are several CCAP projects in this area. In the first civilian project, India and youth exchange programmes are envisioned as offering training in IT skills to young people in Central Asia. The second idea focuses on military cooperation. Additionally, there are options for cooperative exercises and anti-terrorism training. As we will see in the next sections, frequent information exchange is also provided at the bilateral level. India is given a comprehensive framework by the CCAP to interact with the area.

**China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI)**

The Central Asian area is not well linked despite being strategically situated at the intersection of Asia and Europe, with huge expanses of uninhabited steppes and Rocky Mountains. In addition to physical barriers, issues with trade regulations and political instability have frequently made it difficult for trade to move freely throughout the area. President Xi Jinping stated that the Central Asian nations "should take an innovative approach" and work with China to establish "an economic belt along the Silk Road" in 2013, when introducing the much-hyped Chinese idea of One Belt One Road (later renamed BRI) in Kazakhstan. Two of the BRI's six economic axes pass through Central Asia. A different path builds China's connectedness with Central Asia and West Asia, as indicated in Maps 1 and 2. The New Eurasian Land Bridge connects China with Kazakhstan, Russia, and Europe.

**Importance of Central Asia for India**

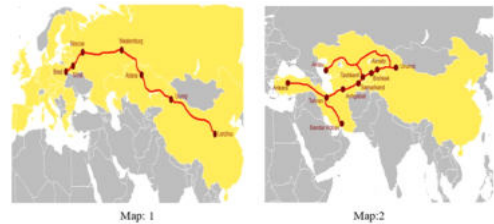
**Geostrategic Importance:** Central Asia is one of the most practical transit routes because of its location in the heart of the Eurasian Continent.

**Geopolitical Interest:** At the moment, Iran, China, the US,

and Europe are vying for more influence in this area. High-stakes power politics are expected to result from all of this in Central Asia.

**Energy Security:** The massive hydrocarbon resources and uranium reserves in Central Asia. India is expected to depend more and more on energy imports, therefore developing other energy sources has become a crucial issue.

Apart from that commercial & Security Related Interests.



Source: Google Maps

**Major Challenges**

Despite this, a number of obstacles have prevented the relationship between these two areas from developing to the required degree. Which are:

- The main issue India is facing in this area is geographic connection.
- Russia has recently sought to converge with China in the Central Asian area.
- India lacks a thorough knowledge of Central Asia's political, linguistic, and, most importantly, complex socio-tribal structural foundations.
- Central Asian economies are fragile, and their cultures are rife with corruption. They dangerously experience poverty, social divisiveness, and a lack of the rule of law.

Regarding employment, the ability to support India's growth and meet local demands, Central Asia has the potential to become the next Middle East for India. India has thus made a number of moves to strengthen its position in this area. A few of these are:

1. In 2012, the government launched the "Connect Central Asia" policy.
2. India now has an additional chance to expand its connectivity to Central Asia thanks to its SCO membership.
3. The First India-Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Minister level took place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in January 2019. This will assist in formalising the conversation process.
4. In 2020, India opened a second \$1 billion line of credit to be used for various development initiatives.
5. The government is putting various connectivity plans into action, such as the Chabahar Project and the International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC), to address connectivity-related issues.

**Conclusion**

While China now has the greatest regional footprint in Central Asia, India will soon be well beyond China's grasp. To ensure that no one nation dominates the area, the CARs are, nonetheless, keen in diversifying their economic connections. India may use this, together with the goodwill it already has among the CAR nations, to greatly increase its influence. In order to advance on this front, India might also attempt to use its long-standing ties with Russia, one of the most powerful nations in the area.

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