



Central Asian Republics: India's Shifting Foreign Policy Landscape under Narendra Modi

Khodayar Barari Reykandeh¹ | Maziar Mozaffari Falarti^{2*}

1. Assistant Professor, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: khbarari@ut.ac.ir

2. Corresponding Author, Assistant Professor, Faculty of World Studies, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Email: mmfalarti@ut.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Since the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 and the subsequent formation of independent republics in Central Asia, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the region has become a focal point for complex competition among regional and international powers. This study seeks to examine and analyze the evolution of India's foreign policy towards Central Asia under Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-) and the factors that have influenced this transformation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of independent Central Asian republics, which sparked a complex competition among regional and international powers in the region. Recognizing the significance of Central Asia, India established diplomatic ties with these republics. The research problem addressed in this article is to understand how India's foreign policy towards Central Asia has evolved under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, considering the region's geopolitical importance, India's pursuit of energy resources, security concerns related to Pakistan, China, and Afghanistan, and its aspiration for regional influence. The primary research question centers on the key drivers and motivations behind India's shifting foreign policy approach towards Central Asia under Prime Minister Modi. To investigate this research question, a comprehensive research method employing qualitative analysis of primary and secondary sources is utilized. Primary sources include government documents, official statements, and diplomatic agreements, while secondary sources encompass scholarly articles, books, and reports. Adopting a multi-disciplinary approach encompassing political science, international relations, and area studies, this study aims to achieve a holistic understanding of India's evolving foreign policy towards Central Asia. The theoretical framework of this research is grounded in theories of international relations, foreign policy analysis, and regional studies. Concepts such as regionalism, power competition, strategic alignment, and non-alignment are applied to examine India's engagements in Central Asia and their broader implications for regional stability and India's global positioning. The goals of this research are to provide a comprehensive analysis of India's shifting foreign policy landscape in Central Asia under Prime Minister Modi. The study aims to identify the key factors and drivers influencing India's strategic engagements, economic partnerships, cultural exchanges, and security collaborations with the Central Asian republics. Furthermore, it seeks to assess the impact of India's presence in Central Asia on its broader foreign policy objectives, regional influence, and alignment with global powers. The expected results of this study will contribute to the academic discourse on India's foreign policy, international relations, and the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia. It is anticipated that the research will reveal the evolving significance of Central Asia for India, shedding light on the motivations behind India's engagements and policies providing insights into the strategic calculations and aspirations of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in the region.

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Introduction

In accentuating the key objectives of holding a joint India-Central Asia Summit held in January 2022 the incumbent Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-) concluded that it was necessary for "security and prosperity" of India since the region is "central to India's vision of an integrated and stable neighborhood" (The Indian Express, 20 January 2022). The remark by Modi is of particular interest since in actuality India and none of the Central Asian Republics share a physical boundary together. Rather as he points out both regions can benefit each other multilaterally and mutually. Here the Central Asian Republics refer to the five independent republics in Central Asia (that of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) that emerged subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The remarks by Modi are also important as none of the earlier Indian prime ministers has had gone as far as acknowledging the centrality of the region in India's foreign policy and relevance for the security and economic prosperity of India.

Since their formation in 1991, the Central Asian region continues to be an arena for the multifaceted competition and rivalry of regional (particularly China, Russia, Turkey and Iran) and international powers (including the European Union and the United States). The region is in fact both rich in natural resources and geo-politically (as the 'Heartland'), as well strategically imperious, in a region located between Asia and Europe. Therefore, due to its location and economic potentials this region has historically been in an arena of rivalry, competition and contention for dominance, power and influence amongst many nations and international players. Central Asia similarly for India holds immense economic value in terms of energy procurement and trade. The region is rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas reserves, making it a crucial source for India's energy needs. The Central Asian republics have in fact since independence been substantial within India's foreign policy. India was indeed one of the first countries to officially recognize the independence of these Central Asian republics shortly after 1991, and in establishing diplomatic relations with them. This early recognition showcased India's proactive approach to engaging with the region and laid the foundation for deeper and the expansion of future ties. The establishment of diplomatic and bilateral relations between India and the Central Asian nations solidified their commitment to mutual cooperation and collaboration.

Then again Modi's 2022 remarks on the bond between India and Central Asian republics are also significant as both domestically and internationally many view his government as unique in India due to its strong focus and commitment on economic development and growth, security, infrastructure, and technological advancement. Additionally, Modi's emphasis on an independent foreign policy and diplomatic efforts to strengthen India's global position, particularly as far as the Central Asian republics are concerned, have contributed to the distinctiveness of his administration. In fact, Prime Minister Narendra Modi soon after assuming office in 2014 has actively pursued closer engagement with Central Asia; emphasizing its strategic importance for India's foreign policy and regional connectivity. His 2015 visit to the region is indeed noteworthy as making him as the first Indian prime minister to embark simultaneously on a historic visit to all five Central Asian republics and during the first year of his time in office, signaling India's commitment to deepening ties. The subsequent India-Central Asia Summit held in 2022 further solidified this growing partnership. These diplomatic efforts reflect India's intention to integrate Central Asia into its vision of an integrated and stable neighborhood, highlight the region's tradition of being significant to Indian foreign policy objectives.

With a desire to diversify its energy providers, modern India also considers Central Asia as an attractive alternative to traditional sources in West Asia (or the Middle East) and Russia. Central Asia is not only historically important to India as far as diplomacy or procurement of energy and other commodity supplies is concerned but also for security and strategic purposes in its political and regional rivalry with Pakistan and China, as well as political uncertainties that persist in neighbouring Afghanistan. Indeed, Central Asia plays a significant role in India's security and strategic considerations. The region acts as a vital component in India's political and regional rivalries, particularly with China and Pakistan. Moreover, given the ongoing political uncertainties in neighboring Afghanistan, Central Asia assumes added strategic importance in ensuring stability within the extended neighborhood. India recognizes the importance of fostering relationships with the Central Asian republics to address security challenges and maintain regional stability.

This article argues that since the election of Prime Minister Modi in 2014 the significance of the region for India has not only continued as before, but has in reality become a key, more pragmatic and an integral aspect of its foreign policy and international relations. The historic visit to all the five Central Asian republics by Modi a year after being elected in 2015; as well as the recent 2022 India-Central Asia Summit (amongst others), surge in bilateral trade and India's inclusion of the region in its 'vision of an integrated and stable neighborhood' certainly attest to this phenomena. Energy rich Central Asia is also vital for India as an alternate supplier in its efforts to diversify its rising oil and gas import providers (particularly in West Asia and Russia). Separately by relying on an admixture of Persian-Farsi, Russian and English sources this study contends that for the Central Asian republics the presence of India, with its sheer size of economic potentials and influence, in the region is of utmost importance in their quest for independence, security and in outbalancing the growing influence of China and Russia in the region.

India's Evolving Foreign Policy towards Central Asia: A Post-Cold War Perspective

Since India's independence from Britain in 1947 and throughout the Cold War era (1945-1991), the Indian government has steadfastly maintained a neutral and non-aligned foreign policy. The objective behind this approach has been to safeguard the nation's growth, development, security, and autonomy (Dehshiriand Norouzi, 2021).

The end of the Cold War in 1991 brought about a shift in global dynamics, presenting India with challenges in terms of adjusting its foreign policy, economic policies, diplomatic relations, and security concerns. It became imperative for India to reassess its post-1947 policy regarding domestic economic control and market relations with global players. Additionally, there arose a need to question its long-standing political neutrality and strategies in order to prioritize growth and security. In the words of Abid Hussain, the Indian ambassador to the United States, to questions posed by journalists on India's recent implementation of the 1991 reforms "One economist described India as a tiger in a cage. When the cage is opened, the tiger will show its real strength. The cage is open now but the tiger refuses to come out. Instead, it is asking outsiders to come into the cage." (Hussain, 1993). The remarks by Hussain are important as they point out to the historic apparition of India that it views itself as a global power-tiger that has a lot to offer and must be taken seriously by the international community.

The economic reforms implemented in 1991, which opened India's domestic market and expanded its global linkages for trade, energy, and security, have been instrumental in its sustained growth under different governments. Throughout the 21st century, Indian political entities have effectively maintained economic growth, security, and self-reliance. Notably, India's governments have adeptly adjusted their foreign policy to navigate the new political rivalries and realities in the country's immediate neighborhood, particularly with nuclear Pakistan and the People's Republic of China. They have also focused on strengthening ties in the extended neighborhood, especially in Central Asia, and fostering relations with Russia and the United States. Furthermore, India has responded effectively to global challenges post-September 11

Central Asia, located at the heart of Eurasia and bordering the northwestern Indian Subcontinent, possesses immense strategic and geopolitical importance. Historically, during the 19th century, the region served as a focal point for the "Great Game," signifying the power struggle and colonial expansion between Russia and Britain in the Asian heartland. The region's significance, shaped by its abundant energy resources, has endured not only throughout the Cold War era (1945-1991) but also in the post-Cold War period (Smith, 1996: 1).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the emergence of five independent Central Asian Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) further complicated the geopolitical alliances and security dynamics within the region. However, it is important to note that the present struggles, challenges, and regional dynamics are distinct from the 19th-century "Great Game" scenario, where Central Asian states were mere pawns in the power games of external forces. Instead, the Central Asian states have become active participants in the pursuit of regional power. They find themselves in a unique geostrategic position to independently engage and influence their immediate neighbors such as Russia, China, Afghanistan, Iran, as well as reaching out to countries like India and the United States (Fateminejad and Eslami, 2022: 209).

For India the Central Asian region has been traditionally considered as part of its strategic and extended neighborhood and therefore continues to occupy a pivotal role in its foreign policy. Indeed, when the Central Asian States of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan were first formed in 1991s, India was not only one of the first nations to officially recognize them but also the first to offer credit to them as development assistance. This was soon followed by India offer for technical training and consulting for construction ventures. Apart from the past relations, common strategic, security and economic interest continue to bind modern India and Central Asia on a short and long term basis. Particularly since the post September 11 period India has sought to further deepen its political and strategic engagements with Central Asia. It became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, providing a platform for dialogue and cooperation on security, counter-terrorism, and regional stability. Additionally, India has actively participated in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), further strengthening its engagement with Central Asian nations on various issues (see Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2023).

One significant aspect of India's relations with Central Asia since the end of the Cold War in 1991 has also been focused on expanding economic ties. The "Connect Central Asia" policy has aimed to boost trade, investment, and connectivity between India and the region (Roy, 2013: 301-310). Current trade between India and the Central Asian republics has been growing steadily. This indicates the existing potential for further expansion in bilateral trade (Kothari, 2020). Diversification of trade sectors and increased value-added exports from both sides can contribute to stronger economic ties. Central Asia offers significant investment opportunities for Indian businesses as far as investment opportunities. Sectors such as energy, infrastructure development, agriculture, manufacturing, information technology, and tourism hold potential for collaboration. India's investments in Central Asia have focused on sectors like oil and gas exploration, pharmaceuticals, mining, agriculture, and small-scale industries. Central Asia possesses abundant energy resources, including oil, natural gas, and uranium. India's energy needs are growing, and there is potential for collaboration in energy exploration, production, and transportation. Strengthening energy cooperation can diversify India's energy sources and contribute to Central Asia's economic development. Initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) have been pursued to enhance connectivity through multimodal transportation networks (Raza, 2019; Granger, 2023). The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a key connectivity project that aims to enhance trade and connectivity between India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asia. It offers an alternative transportation route, reducing transit times and costs for goods traveling between regions. The operationalization of the INSTC holds the potential to significantly boost economic cooperation. These efforts have the potential to open up new trade routes, reduce dependence on traditional sea routes, and provide landlocked countries in Central Asia access to maritime trade. However, the full operationalization of the INSTC faces challenges related to geopolitical complexities (such as the situation in Afghanistan), bureaucratic hurdles, and infrastructure gaps (Kumar and Kumar 2022).

Cultural and people-to-people exchanges have been another focus area for India in its relations with Central Asia. The "India-Central Asia Dialogue" initiative launched in 2019 aims to promote cultural understanding, academic cooperation, and tourism between the two regions (Kothari 2020; Kumar and Kumar 2022). Efforts have been made to revive historical linkages, including the promotion of shared cultural heritage and the establishment of educational and research collaborations. These initiatives may take time to translate into significant policy outcomes yet they certainly contribute to building stronger bonds at the grassroots level, fostering mutual understanding and goodwill.

India believes that the Central Asian region plays a pivotal role for its own security, regional rivalries (particularly with Pakistan and China) and geopolitics (such as political developments in Afghanistan). An example is in 2002 in which a highly controversial agreement was signed on the reconstruction of the Ayni air force base, located 10 km from Dushanbe in Tajikistan. India invested up to \$70 million to upgrade the runway, build hangars and control tower. The Indian side undertook to train Tajik military pilots, sent a group of engineers to the base and in return got the opportunity to deploy its Mi-17 helicopters there. The issue of transferring the military base to the full use of India was actively discussed; there were reports of the possibility of sharing it with Russia. However, Moscow refused Delhi at the last moment, largely due to fears about the build-up of Indian-American military cooperation. Tajikistan also opened an Indian military hospital in Farkhor (2 km from the

border with Afghanistan which, according to some reports, was subsequently used by Indian military intelligence. (Deb Sheersshoo, 2021; Shchedrov, 2022). Separately India has also expanded its military engagement (particularly security cooperation agreements and counter-terrorism pacts) with the other Central Asian republics and the 2019 military exercise with Uzbekistan (Marjani, 2020).

On the whole the governments of India and Central Asia deal and interact with each other at manifold and multifarious levels (VIF India, 2020: 24). Firstly, at the bilateral level, secondly, at the multilateral level through platforms (particularly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or SCO, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia or CICA, as well in the United Nations). Thirdly, multi-layered diplomatic as well as political engagement and exchanges between India and Central Asia (such as the India-Central Asia Dialogue at the foreign ministers level) remain fundamental to their relations. However, India's political influence in the region is constrained by competing interests of major powers, regional rivalries, and overlapping alliances.

Despite notable achievements, India's engagement with Central Asia since the end of the Cold War in 1991 has faced several challenges. One major hurdle is the dominance of regional powers like China and Russia, which have established deep economic and political ties with Central Asian countries. This limits India's ability to establish a strong foothold in the region and compete for influence. Additionally, the security situation in Afghanistan poses a significant challenge for India's connectivity and trade aspirations. The instability and terrorist activities in Afghanistan disrupt the smooth functioning of transportation corridors and pose risks to regional stability.

A significant obstacle to the development and expansion of relations between Central Asia and India is the geographical distance between them. Pakistan, located to the west of India, blocks any land transport links between India, Afghanistan, and the rest of Central Asia. Similarly, China restricts direct trade between India and Central Asia through its western province of Xinjiang, which lies between northern India and Central Asia. As a result, trade between India and Central Asian countries is complex, costly, and mainly carried out in a "circular way" through the maritime ports and transport network of Iran, which is situated west of Pakistan. Despite the recent surge in relations between India and Central Asia, the growth of India's political influence and economic presence from the end of the Cold War to 2012 remained low and insufficient to serve the common interests of the countries in the region.

Furthermore, the historic influence of other regional powers in the Central Asian Republics, particularly China and Russia, cannot be discounted. Although India has strengthened political ties and military cooperation with Tajikistan, gaining an additional military-political advantage in its rivalry with Pakistan, Delhi has not been able to compete with the strengthening of Chinese positions in Central Asia. Moreover, connectivity initiatives and security collaborations with the region have been hindered by geopolitical strains and logistical challenges on the ground. Transitioning to the next section on India's relations with Central Asia during the tenure of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, it is important to examine how his leadership impacted these dynamics.

India's Relations with Central Asia during the Tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (2014-)

In 2014, Narendra Modi's election as the Prime Minister of India was accompanied by significant political controversy. Initially, his critics described his five foreign policy goals as reflecting a "lack of strategic vision," "lack of an overall national security strategy," and "lack of new ideas and synergy" (Jaishankar, 2016). However, these goals were later implemented and considered successful. Modi's five goals were as follows: prioritizing an integrated neighborhood with a "Neighborhood First" policy, leveraging international partnerships to promote India's domestic development, ensuring a stable and multi-polar balance of power in the Indo-Pacific with an "Act East" policy, dissuading Pakistan from supporting terrorism, and advancing Indian representation and leadership on matters of global governance (Jaishankar, 2016).

As a means to achieve these foreign policy goals, Modi advocated for the use of India's cultural attractions to strengthen its soft power. India boasts not only an ancient history as the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism but also modern advancements and a vibrant pop culture encompassing cinema, music, food, and arts. The attractiveness of Indian culture stems from its longevity and diversity, encompassing various racial, religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups (Kugiel, 2017: 66).

Under Modi's leadership, India actively engaged with its neighbors through the "Neighborhood First" policy, recognizing the importance of regional stability and cooperation in achieving broader national interests. Efforts were made to strengthen ties with neighboring countries, promoting mutual trust, economic growth, and people-to-people interactions (Venkatachalam, 2021). Additionally, India harnessed its soft power resources by connecting with the Indian diaspora worldwide. The diaspora, comprising millions of Indians living abroad, became an asset for Indian diplomacy and economic growth (Jha, 2015). Programs like the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* (Non-Resident Indian Day) were initiated to foster stronger relationships and tap into the potential of the Indian diasporas.

To project India's soft power globally, cultural exchanges, tourism promotion, and educational collaborations were actively pursued. Bollywood movies, a prominent aspect of modern Indian culture, gained popularity worldwide, including in countries with strained political relations with India (Walker, 2008). The influence of Bollywood films even reached nations like China, which is considered India's rival. During the 2017 summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Chinese President Xi Jinping mentioned his enjoyment of Bollywood films, highlighting the impact of Indian cinema on international audiences (SCMP Reporter, 2017).

Furthermore, yoga was utilized as a cultural attraction and diplomatic tool by India. Prime Minister Modi's appeal to the United Nations led to the declaration of June 21 as the annual 'International Day of Yoga,' showcasing India's ancient tradition and promoting its soft power globally (Mohan, 2014). These efforts, along with India's active participation in global organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (S.C.O.), BRICS, and the Non-Aligned Movement (N.A.M.), have provided opportunities for India to strengthen its power and influence in the international arena (Jaishankar, 2016).

Overall, while initially criticized, Narendra Modi's foreign policy goals and his emphasis on leveraging India's cultural attractions as a means to enhance soft power have yielded positive outcomes. Through regional diplomacy, engagement with the Indian diaspora, Bollywood movies, and the promotion of yoga, India has successfully projected its rich cultural heritage and expanded its global influence under Modi's leadership.

In the economic front during Narendra Modi's tenure as Prime Minister of India since 2014, there has been a significant expansion of trade and relations between India and Central Asia. Under the "Connect Central Asia" policy, India has actively pursued closer economic ties with the region, focusing on enhancing trade, investment, and connectivity. Several key initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen these relations. One notable initiative is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which aims to establish a multimodal transportation network connecting India, Iran, Russia, and Central Asian countries. The INSTC provides an alternative route for trade between India and Central Asia, reducing dependence on traditional sea routes and offering faster access to landlocked nations. This project enhances India's connectivity with the region and opens up new avenues for trade and investment.

Another important development is the signing of bilateral agreements and the establishment of Joint Economic Committees with various Central Asian countries. These agreements provide a framework for increased cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. For instance, India has signed agreements with Kazakhstan to enhance cooperation in sectors like oil and gas exploration, uranium, pharmaceuticals, and IT (Stopdan, 2020: 268). Similar agreements have been made with other countries in the region, promoting mutual economic growth. Furthermore, India has actively participated in regional forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). These platforms have provided opportunities for India to engage with Central Asian nations on various issues, including trade, security, and cultural exchanges.

Narendra Modi's visit to all five Central Asian States in 2015 is notable as he not only became the first Indian prime minister to have visited all five Central Asian states during a single trip a year but also took place a year after being elected as India's prime minister. The visit also stipulated a significant growth in India-Central Asia relations; particularly the enhancement and mutual-corporation in the area of defense, bilateral trade, transport, security, cultural exchanges and energy (Kaulgud, 2022: 4). Consequently, the 2015 trip kick-started a boost to India's relations and high level visits with the region not experienced under previous governments (see Table 1). It can further be argued that the visit also marks a major shift in India's diplomatic and foreign policy relations towards

the region. For the first time, New Delhi was realistically looking at the region as a composite geographical, strategical and geopolitical unit placing it firmly in New Delhi's zone of interest and neighborhoods policy. This may explain the extension of one of India's largest Line of Credit (LOC) in 2020 intended for the Central Asian republics to the tune of 1 billion dollars; focusing in the areas of energy, healthcare, education, connectivity, IT, and agriculture (Sharma, 2022; Haidar, 2022).

Table 1. India-Central Asia High-Level Official Visits and Agreements under Modi from 2014-2019

Year	Who visited	Country	Agreements
2015	Prime Minister of India	Kazakhstan	1) Defense and military technology. 2) Railways 3) Uranium supply to India 4) Sports 5) Transfer of sentenced prisoners
2015	Prime Minister of India	Uzbekistan	1) Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism 2) Uranium supply to India 3) Uzbekistan-India Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism
2015	Prime Minister of India	Kyrgyzstan	1) Agreement on Defense Cooperation.2) MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Elections 3) Culture
2015	Prime Minister of India	Turkmenistan	1) MoU on Supply of Chemical Products 2) Programme of Cooperation in Science and Technology 3) MoU on Cooperation in the Field of Tourism4) Defence agreement
2015	Prime Minister of India	Tajikistan	Exchange of Note Verbal (NV) on setting up of Computer Labs in 37 Schools in Tajikistan.
2016	President of Tajikistan	India	Agreement to prevent financing of terrorism and money laundering
2016	President of Kyrgyzstan	India	1) MoU for youth exchange programmes 2) MoU on agriculture and food security
2018	President of India	Tajikistan	1) MoU on Cooperation on Peaceful Use of Space Technology for Development 2) MoU for Renewable Energy cooperation
2018	President of Uzbekistan	India	MoUs on Tourism, Agriculture & Allied Sectors, Health & Medical Sciences, Pharmaceutical Industry, Science & Technology and Innovation, Military Education
2019	India	Uzbekistan	Inauguration of India-Central Asia Dialogue
2019	President of Uzbekistan	India	1) Agreement on importing uranium from Uzbekistan 2) MoU on cooperation between Gujarat and the Andijan region of Uzbekistan

Source:(Harsh, V P. and K. Taneja, 2019)

Writing shortly after Modi's 2015 visit to Central Asia the distinguished Indian diplomat and academic PhunchokStobdan (2015) wrote that the visit is further significant and timely for India as it must be examined against the backdrop of major global and regional developments. Stobdan continues that the major global events and developments in Central Asia that could also impact India are: a) Russia's renewed assertion in Central Asia following its standoff with the West over Ukraine; b) China's fresh push for building connectivity infrastructure to link China with Europe via Central Asia under its Silk Road Economic Belt initiative; c) the prospects of Iran coming to the regional fore following its nuclear breakthrough with the major powers; and, d) the emerging situation in Afghanistan in the context of growing Afghanistan-Pakistan proximity to rehabilitate the Taliban. The importance of touching base with the region at the time for India was therefore critical; and the Prime Minister's visit may have imparted the necessary momentum to India's ties with these newly independent states.

By the end of 2016, bilateral relations and collaborations with all the Central Asian republics had experienced a significant increase, as depicted in Figure 1. It can be contended that the economic success of the trip also encompassed the signing of trilateral transit and trade corridor agreements between India, Iran, and Afghanistan after 2015. The agreement entailed connecting the existing Iranian road and rail network from Chabahar port, situated in the Oman Sea, to Zaranj in Afghanistan. Eventually, this linkage could extend further and connect the region, benefiting all nations involved (Harsh andTaneja, 2019: 63-64).

The establishment of this intricate maritime and land link between India and Central Asia may appear costly. However, it can be justified by considering the geopolitical realities on the ground, particularly India's historical rivalry and differences with neighboring China and Pakistan, which lie

between India and Central Asia. In a recent article from 2019 titled "Land Transportation Link between Indian Subcontinent and Europe is a Strategic Necessity," M. Tsereteli argues that, from an economic standpoint, land routes between India and Central Asia offer the most cost-effective mode of transportation if not for logistical, security, and geopolitical challenges associated with India, China, and Pakistan (Tsereteli, 2019).

Conversely, it can be argued that the surge in political relations between India and Central Asia following the 2015 visit ultimately paved the way for India's easy admission and its acceptance as a full member into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2017 (Shchedrov, 2020).

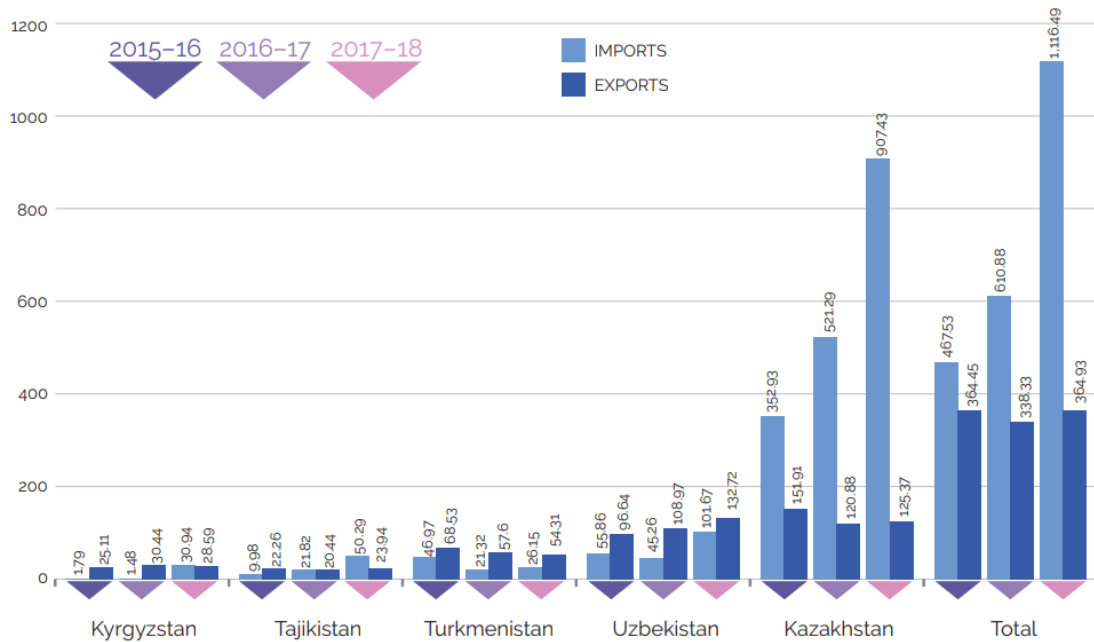


Figure 1. India's Growth in Trade with Central Asian Countries from 2015-2018, Value in USD Millions
Source:(Harsh, V P. and K. Taneja, 2019)

Since the election of Modi in 2014, India has regularly conducted high-level security meetings and military exercises with Central Asian countries (Khaydarova, 2022: 16). These military exercises encompass a diverse range of activities. For instance, Khanjar is an annual joint military exercise between India and Kyrgyzstan, Kazind is an annual joint military exercise between India and Kazakhstan, and Dustlik is an annual joint anti-terror military exercise between India and Uzbekistan (Sharma, 2022; Vinnik, 2022; Khaydarova, 2022). In October 2022, India hosted the multilateral Joint Anti-Terror Exercise (JATE) "Manesar Anti-terror" involving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These military exercises serve significant purposes for both the region and India. They not only demonstrate the Central Asian republics' desire for political independence and their willingness to form partnerships and alliances with Russia and other neighboring powers in the post-Cold War era but also address strategic and security concerns, such as terrorism and religious extremism, which are important for India and all parties involved, given the deteriorating situations in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In December 2021, the third India-Central Asia Dialogue at the Foreign Ministers' Level took place in New Delhi, providing a platform for exchanging views on mutual strategic interests (Kaulgud, 2022: 4). However, one of Modi's key political achievements in developing ties with Central Asia as Prime Minister was the organization of the first India-Central Asia Summit on January 27, 2022 (Shchedrov, 2022). Prime Minister Modi outlined three major objectives for the event (Bhattacharya, 2022): first, to emphasize that cooperation between India and Central Asia is crucial for regional security and prosperity, considering Central Asia's significance in India's vision of an integrated and stable extended neighborhood; second, to establish an effective structure for cooperation, fostering regular interactions at different levels among various stakeholders; and third, to create an ambitious roadmap for India-Central Asia cooperation. The summit, held virtually due to Covid-19 restrictions, was highly symbolic, marking the 30th anniversary of India-Central Asia diplomatic relations and

hosting all the heads of state from the Central Asian nations. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs (2022) stated that the summit aimed to reaffirm India's growing engagement with Central Asian countries and the importance of a comprehensive and enduring India-Central Asia partnership (Kaulgud, 2022: 4). The summit also played a significant role in outlining the future direction of relations between India and the Central Asian republics under Modi's leadership.

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, there was much discussion on how Modi would find it difficult for India to navigate and balance its ties with the West on the one side and Russia on the other. But what began as a balancing act has culminated in New Delhi finding its voice on a critical global issue. India has managed to continue with its engagement with Russia and even enhanced its energy ties with Moscow in search of energy security. At the same time, India's ties with the West continued to gather momentum throughout the year, despite criticism in certain quarters in the West about New Delhi not siding with the West in publicly condemning Russia. For its part, India's stance shifted from framing the issue of Russian aggression around the United Nations (UN) charter, international law and territorial sovereignty to Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly exhorting Russian President Vladimir Putin that this was not the time for war (Harsh, 2022). Undoubtedly Modi's recent foreign policy stance towards the Ukraine and Russia conflict reflects his attempt to promote India as an alternate global, independent and neutral power that makes its own decisions in the eyes of smaller nations and regions (including Central Asian Republics). India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine issue is significant for Central Asia due to several reasons. First, India's balanced approach demonstrates its ability to navigate complex geopolitical situations without aligning with any particular bloc. This independent and neutral stance enhances India's credibility as a reliable partner and promotes regional stability in Central Asia.

Secondly, by advocating for a peaceful resolution and emphasizing dialogue over war, India sets an example for conflict resolution that can be relevant for countries in Central Asia facing similar challenges. India's emphasis on upholding the UN Charter, international law, and territorial sovereignty resonates with the concerns of Central Asian nations about maintaining their own territorial integrity.

Furthermore, India's sustained engagement with Russia and its efforts to enhance energy ties demonstrate the pragmatic approach taken by India to secure its energy needs. This approach is relevant for Central Asian countries, which are rich in energy resources and seek diversification of their energy partners. India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine issue reflects its aspiration to emerge as an alternative global power that places a high priority on peace, stability, and independent decision-making. By advocating for peaceful resolutions and emphasizing dialogue over war, India sets an example for conflict resolution that can be influential in Central Asia and other regions. Additionally, India's balanced approach showcases its ability to navigate complex geopolitical situations without aligning with any specific bloc, fostering regional stability and bolstering its credibility as a reliable partner. Furthermore, India's sustained engagement with Russia and efforts to strengthen energy ties demonstrate a pragmatic approach to secure its energy needs, which holds relevance for Central Asian countries seeking energy diversification. This perspective resonates with smaller nations and regions, offering them a model of non-alignment and self-determination amid intricate geopolitical dynamics.

Conclusion

The joint India-Central Asia Summit held in January 2022 highlighted the crucial role of Central Asia in India's vision of an integrated and stable neighborhood. Despite the absence of a physical boundary, India and the Central Asian Republics share mutual interests and multilateral benefits. This article delves into the evolving dynamics between India and the five independent republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, exploring historical context, geopolitical implications, economic potential, and the strategic significance of this relationship.

Examining the developments and progress of recent decades of Indian foreign policy shows that, while increasing its economic power, it seeks to increase its acting power in the international system. Russia's current war in Ukraine has undoubtedly benefited India as great powers are competing more vigorously for New Delhi's affection, particularly the United States and China. India has also prevented its Russia policy from spoiling partnerships with key European, Central Asian and Indo-Pacific partners. These trends, if sustained, will contribute to India's rise to great-power status and, in turn, shift the global

system toward even greater multi-polarity. What could derail New Delhi's success is a serious escalation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which might finally force India to choose sides among great powers. Partners that have so far tolerated India's aloof, realpolitik approach could become frustrated that New Delhi is refusing to carry its weight as an emerging great power (Grossman, 2022). But unless or until this happens, Modi's India is set to continue benefiting from this crisis.

With Modi coming to power in 2014, India behaves more actively and pragmatically in the field of foreign policy and tries to use all sources and potentials to increase its soft-power in addition to strengthening its economic diplomacy. Modi's coming to power indeed coincides with important regional and international developments, including the Crimean crisis and the escalation of tensions between Russia and the West, the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes two countries from Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). They are (along with Russia, Belarus and Armenia) and the activation of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which is India's competitor and one of the main routes of this plan passes through Central Asia. In consequence, Narendra Modi tried to adopt a multi-alignment policy in his relations with western and eastern powers to secure India's interests. India's positions on the Russia-Ukraine war and maintaining relations with both Russia and the West are within the framework of Modi's policy.

At the regional level, Modi tried to strengthen India's relations with its neighbors and geostrategic important regions such as Central Asia. As Modi emphasized in the first India-Central Asia Summit, "Central Asia is central to India's vision of an integrated and stable extended neighborhood". Although India's Extended Neighborhood policy and expansion of bilateral relations with Central Asia were planned and acknowledged, under earlier administration in place, and prior to Modi coming into power they were not followed up in the government before him. But Modi tried to make India one of the important players in Central Asia by traveling to 5 countries in this region and planning initiatives and mechanisms soon after being elected into office. India-Central Asia Summit is undoubtedly one of Modi's more recent and important initiatives that can further strengthen India's presence in Central Asia. The summit has accounted for the far-reaching ramifications in determining stability, security, and geostrategic equilibrium in New Delhi's western frontier, thereby, showcasing the efficacy of India's "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" in addressing the emerging challenges in the region with strong determination, under the spirit of reformed multilateralism and transparency in global governance.

From this point of view, Modi's foreign policy in Central Asia can be considered successful, compared to previous Indian governments. Although the amount of investment and the size of India's economic relations with the countries of this region are still not comparable to China's and Russia's relations with these countries, but considering the plans and agreements reached between India and Central Asian countries during Modi's prime ministership it can be expected that India's relations with Central Asian countries will increase and continue in various fields.

India's relations with Central Asia since 2014 have witnessed progress in various areas, including trade, connectivity, and cultural exchanges. However, challenges related to geopolitics, regional rivalries, and security concerns remain. To further enhance relations, India needs to address infrastructure gaps, streamline trade procedures, and actively pursue strategic partnerships. By doing so, India can tap into the vast potential of the region, contribute to its development, and foster mutually beneficial relationships with Central Asian nations. To enhance its relations with Central Asia, India needs to address key areas of improvement. Strengthening connectivity infrastructure, streamlining trade procedures, and resolving bureaucratic hurdles are crucial steps to fully harness the potential of the INSTC. Furthermore, expanding people-to-people contacts, encouraging cultural exchanges, and promoting educational collaborations can deepen mutual understanding and strengthen ties. India should also explore opportunities for strategic partnerships with Central Asian nations to counterbalance the influence of regional powers and promote shared interests.

The presence of India in the region holds paramount importance for the Central Asian republics in countering the influence of dominant actors like China and Russia. By engaging with India, the Central Asian nations aim to diversify their partnerships, reduce dependency, and strengthen their position within the global arena. India's economic potential and substantial influence provide a valuable counterbalance to external forces, promoting independence, security, and stability within the region.

India's relations with the Central Asian republics have significantly evolved since their independence. These engagements extend beyond geographical proximity and are driven by shared interests in energy procurement, security imperatives, and regional stability. Prime Minister Modi's proactive outreach and initiatives underscore the growing importance of the region in India's foreign policy objectives. Simultaneously, the Central Asian republics seek to forge stronger ties with India to safeguard their independence, enhance security, and navigate the complex dynamics of power rivalry.

Overall, Prime Minister Modi's government has pursued a proactive foreign policy agenda to enhance India's global influence, strengthen regional ties, and engage with the Indian diaspora, all in an effort to exert greater authority and soft power globally. Although it is difficult to speculate on the future of India's foreign policy as outlined by Prime Minister Modi. However, based on his past statements and policies, Prime Minister Modi has emphasized several key aspects of India's foreign policy. These include:

- "Neighborhood First" Policy: Prime Minister Modi has prioritized strengthening relationships with neighboring countries, aiming to enhance connectivity, trade, and regional cooperation. (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2019)
- Act East Policy: The Indian government seeks to deepen engagement with countries in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region, focusing on economic ties, security cooperation, and cultural exchanges. (Sharma, 2022)
- Economic Diplomacy: Prime Minister Modi has aimed to attract foreign direct investment, promote Make in India initiatives, and boost India's role in global supply chains through bilateral and multilateral engagements.
- Climate Change and Sustainable Development: India under Prime Minister Modi has demonstrated commitment to addressing climate change challenges, including through international collaborations such as the International Solar Alliance. (Kaulgud, 2022).

The future of India's relations with the Central Asian republics holds both opportunities and challenges. This critical examination explores the potential trajectories, key drivers, and areas of focus that will shape India's engagement with Central Asia in the coming years. One significant driver of India's future relations with Central Asia is economic cooperation. Central Asia is rich in natural resources such as oil, gas, minerals, and uranium, while India possesses a growing economy and consumer market. This presents an opportunity for deeper trade and investment ties. India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, combined with initiatives like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), can facilitate increased connectivity and trade flows between the regions. Strengthening economic partnerships, diversifying trade sectors, and promoting investments in key areas like energy, infrastructure, agriculture, and technology will be crucial in leveraging this potential.

Geopolitics and regional security dynamics will also influence India's relations with Central Asia. The region has been a meeting point for major powers, including China, Russia, and the United States, vying for influence. India must navigate these complex dynamics and balance its engagements with various actors while safeguarding its own interests. The evolving situation in Afghanistan will continue to impact regional stability, connectivity, and counter-terrorism efforts. India's active participation in regional forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) will provide platforms for dialogue and collaboration on security issues. Cultural and people-to-people exchanges are vital components of India's relations with Central Asia. Historical and cultural linkages form the basis for shared understanding and goodwill. Strengthening educational collaborations, promoting tourism, and facilitating academic and research partnerships will foster deeper connections at the grassroots level. India's "India-Central Asia Dialogue" initiative and cultural exchanges should be further enhanced to forge stronger bonds and promote mutual understanding. Energy cooperation will continue to be a significant aspect of India's engagement with Central Asia. The region's vast energy resources present opportunities for India to diversify its energy sources and reduce dependence on traditional suppliers. Exploration, production, and transportation of oil and gas can be areas of collaboration. However, geopolitical factors, including competition among major powers and existing energy alliances, may pose challenges.

To navigate these opportunities and challenges, India should adopt a comprehensive approach in its relations with Central Asia. Strengthening connectivity through infrastructure development,

streamlining trade procedures, and resolving bureaucratic hurdles will facilitate greater economic integration. Deepening strategic partnerships with Central Asian nations, particularly in the areas of security cooperation, counter-terrorism, and regional stability, will enhance India's influence in the region. Continued emphasis on cultural exchanges, educational collaborations, and people-to-people contacts will foster stronger bonds and mutual understanding. In conclusion, the future of India's relations with Central Asian republics holds immense potential for deeper economic, political, and cultural engagements. By leveraging opportunities in trade, investment, energy, and infrastructure, India can strengthen its presence in the region and contribute to its development. However, navigating geopolitical complexities, addressing security concerns, and building sustainable partnerships will be essential in realizing the full benefits of this relationship.

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