

“India’s Policy and Strategy Engagements in Central Asia in the 21st Century”

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Abstract

This article explores India’s policy and strategy engagements in Central Asian Republics with the aim of fostering close proximity in the field of economic development, security and political cooperation. It focuses in particular on actions, ways, directions, vision, achievements, methods, which play an important role on the bilateral and multilateral cooperation between them. Because the geopolitical competition already has begun for the natural resources and energy between the major powers (Russia, USA and China) and regional powers (Turkey, Iran, India and Pakistan) in the post-cold war period which is known as ‘New Great Game’ in Central Asia. In this dynamic geopolitical environment, India’s policy with the region should reflect on the economic development, geopolitical engagement including strategic interaction, advantage, political support, mutual cooperation. Whereas India’s engagement with Central Asia can provide an opportunity to be a part of a multilateral cooperative system particular, in security and trade ties. In this context, India should strive close to Russia, South Korea and Japan which emphasize close proximity, continue to engage in a resurgence policy to maintain geopolitical space with the proper diplomatic channel. Thus, this article has been divided into two parts, the first part of the paper has examined a comprehensive analysis and used level of analysis for explaining the foreign policy between India and Central Asian Republics. And another part has discussed the policy and strategy engagements of India with the Central Asian region in the 21st century.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Policy, Economic Development, Central Asia, Security Cooperation.

Introduction

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) emerged as sovereign and independent at the heart of the Asian continent which is significant in terms of geopolitics, geostrategic and geo-economics point of view. Due to this, the global and regional powers have been attracted particularly, in this region. This is a new type of competition among the players for energy, natural resources and hydrocarbon resources in the Post-Cold War Period. It is important to understand three aspects, first aspect is the geographical location of the region which makes the landlocked region with no access to the Oceans. The second aspect is the closeness of the region to the important world powers like China and Russia. Finally, these countries are rich in energy resources and gas. From this perspective, India looks its engagement with Central Asian countries with the objective of building a long-term partnership through bilaterally and mutually ties. India has recognized as keen interest partner and part of its extended neighbourhood policy with Central Asian countries. Therefore, New Delhi has

now expressed its desire to play an expanded and more meaningful role in different angles from different aspects through regional organizations, summit, dialogue, economic output, diplomatic channel, and geopolitical interests (Muzalevsky,2015). In recent, India's relations with the region have gained momentum through a strengthened with an active approach to enhance the multilateral relationships. New Delhi should follow a milestone and cooperative approach with the region.

Furthermore, new challenge in front of Indian foreign policy in 21st century, China's investment approximately USD 400 deal with Iran, as 'comprehensive strategic Partnership agreement' by 25 years. This is a long-term investment in the field of port, railroads, highway, maritime, aviation etc. This is part of One Belt and One Road initiative led by China as a multifaceted transport system. This type of deal may be fundamentally change Iran's relationship with India. It can put Tehran in Beijing's corner as well as India could see its influence weaken over time¹. In this context, one question has considered here. How to impact these agreements on India and Iran regarding Chabahar port as a challenge to New Delhi in the coming years². There are some various types of concerns on India and Iran relationship including, the security influence of Iran on the impact of the bilateral relationship, effect on long-term energy security, effect on the structure of mechanism for sustainable relations between India and Iran, encouraging companies by a partnership because Chinese's public and private sector is very much fast rather than India Chinese's dream is a very long and close partner with Iran in the field of petrochemical, oil, raw materials, infrastructure and so on. On the other hand, Iran had removed India from the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway Line project due to the fund deficits. At the same time, another example is Iran's decision to exclude India from the Farzad-B project, while giving the reason that India has not done enough as part of its deal³. There are some other challenges like lack of connectivity, Pakistan's hostility and Afghanistan's security problems, geopolitical factor etc. Both countries Iran and Afghanistan are India's gateway to Central Asia which appears the proactive domestic and foreign policy approach with new types of opportunities like climate change, start-up, innovation, research and development, investment, military education and exercise etc. However, New Delhi has sought to build new prospects and should take independent strategy to shape opportunities for strengthening bilateral and multilateral relationships, including connectivity and investment. India enjoys a strategic partnership and friendly image in Central Asia through Iran.

Research Objectives

Central Asian Republics are the most important countries to India in the field of economic, political and security in the 21st century. Because changing the security architecture, geopolitics, and economic environment in Asian continent have been rapidly transformation after the rising of China, emerging of India, NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan (August 2021), Russia and Ukraine crisis

¹Tiwari, O. (March 2021). \$400 billion China-Iran deal and concerns about India's Chabahar port project. Available at <https://www.indiatvnews.com/opinion/news-400-billion-china-iran-deal-and-concerns-about-india-s-chabahar-port-project-694678> Accessed on 4 January 2022.

²The week. (2021). India dropped from Chabahar rail project amid China-Iran billion dollar pact: Report. Available at <https://www.theweek.in/news/biz-tech/2020/07/14/india-dropped-from-chabahar-rail-project-amid-reports-of-china-iran-billion-dollar-pact.html>. Accessed on 17 January 2022.

³Mishra, A. (May 2021). Chinese influence led Iran to sideline India. Available at <https://www.sundayguardianlive.com/news/chinese-influence-led-iran-sideline-india>. Accessed on 13 January 2022.

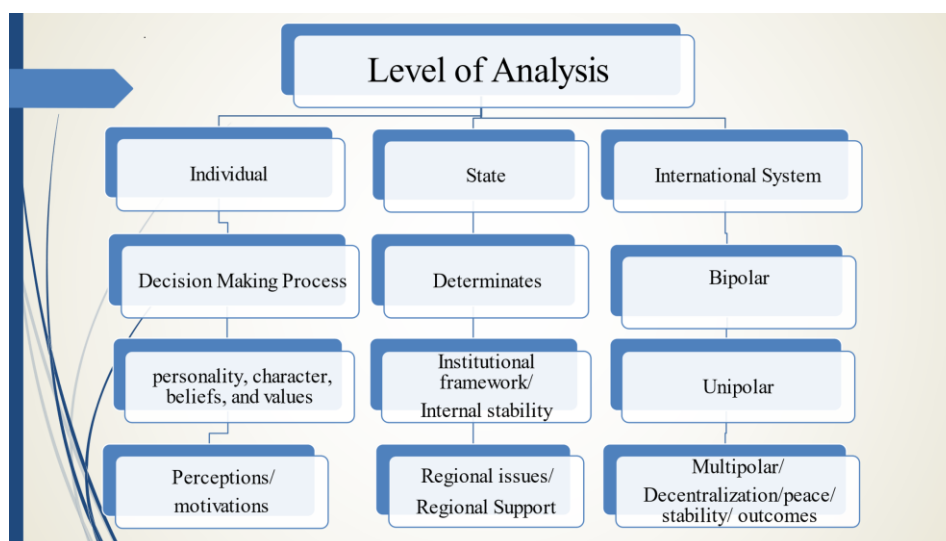
(2022). In this context, it is important to understand that India’s initiatives and strategies have been taken for engagement of Central Asian region. Thus, this paper has decided three objectives which are following:

1. To discuss the approach, policy and strategy of Indian foreign policy in Central Asia in the Post-Cold War period.
2. To examine the Indian foreign policy in the field of economic, geopolitical, and security engagement for the region of Central Asia in the last three decades.
3. To analysis India’s strategy in the context of level of analysis for engagement with Central Asian Republics in the 21st Century.

Research Methodology

India and Central Asia’s relationship focus on the development policy for cooperation in the field of political, security, and economic domain. In this context, the research methodology used qualitative in nature which emphasizes in broader aspects at the multilateral perspective for the study of India and Central Asian countries. The study has been analysed the multilateral relations with the method of descriptive and analytical approach for understanding the whole relationship in the last three decades. The descriptive method has used to describe the nature of the phenomenon segment in the research paper. This paper has been conducted through analytical approach with the help of empirical evidences through direct and indirect observation or experience, which are necessary to validate the qualitative analysis of state’s behaviour at the international system. The study has been conducted by analysing the data that have been collected from secondary sources including books, articles (published in various academic journals). In addition, this study used to apply the existing paradigm “Level of analysis” given by J. David Singer for examining and understanding of national interest, state’s behaviour relations between/among nation-states at the international system. It can understand in detail table No. of 1.1

Table No. 1.1
Explaining the Level of Analysis



Source: Structured by author and terminology taken from: Singer, J. D. (1961). The Level of Analysis Problem in International Relations. Cambridge University Press: 14.1, 77-92.

Table No.1.1 indicate that the concept of level of analysis focused on the three aspects individual, state and international system. The first aspect, individual level, there are the most important to study in foreign policy regarding decision-making process within a state. The capacity of the decision-making process for the foreign policy amongst the phenomena, balance of power, geography, capability, to engage the multilateral relationship among the countries. Therefore, this level must have analytical capabilities especially, in direction of Indian foreign policy with Central Asian countries to treat the fundamental relationship in the proper manner for maintaining peace and stability in the decision-making process for foreign policy. The decision-making process within the multilateral approach is still beneficial, more rapidly, accurate and diplomatic process for improving mutual cooperation. The second aspect, the state level emphasizes on institutional framework and domestic factors (includes ethnic group, public opinion, civil society) economic development, culture and history of any country. These elements reflect on the structure of foreign policy of any state. From this perspective, the state-level of analysis is significant in the field of analyse of Indian foreign policy with CARs. And final aspect is international system in the context of level of analysis comprises assessments, interactions, and exchanges of goods and services among the states. The international system is defined as a set of states whose interactions are guided through their relative capabilities like the natural resource, military, history, human resources, etc. These elements of capability effects on the Indian foreign policy with Central Asia countries. At present, the international environment has best option for cultivating the multilateral engagement. There are various appropriate and comfortable atmosphere for engaging among the states. Because there are several options to make the relationships in the field of economic and strategic sphere in the 21st century.

For instance, Iran has been helping with India to connect the Central Asian connectivity through Chabahar port. Another option is available as the strategic and economic proximity through Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Ashgabat Agreement. It is the most important instrument to regional forum in the multilateral perspective. It can be more resolve regional issue like border, water management, terrorism, and so on.

The level of analysis examines systemic analysis the foreign policy of India with the Central Asian region at the international system because systematic analysis provides a comprehensive and an overview of the international system. Within the international system, state is the main unit regarding in foreign policy because the state remains at the heart of foreign policy. Therefore, this research has present and overview of the relationships between India and Central Asia relations with explains, describe and predication and accurate a picture of these phenomena. Thus, this methodology is used to understand and explain the behaviour and nature of India's foreign policy with Central Asian states at the international political system.

India's Policy for Central Asia

The importance of Central Asian countries to India is not only civilizational and culturally but also geopolitical, security and economic interest. However, India's engagement and approach have been modest and uncertain compared to China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S.A. The development of India's policy towards Central Asia can broadly be classified into three parts- after the independence of CARs in 1991 to 2001, after the 9/11 terror attack to 2012 and after Connect Central Asia policy in 2012 to onwards. In this context, India's policy and approach should be assessed in the new changing dynamics and trends at the regional as well as global politics. Recently,

India has taken various types of initiatives such as military exercise, investment, institutionalize of multilateral relationships includes India-Central Asia Business Council, India and Central Asia Summit and so on. In the changing and strengthen cooperation between them are the most important to understand the multidimensional relationship in the changing geopolitics of Asian continent particular, after withdrawal of the USA from Afghanistan (August 2021). In emerging regional players such as Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, South Korea are renovating ties with Central Asian countries through mutual cooperation. At the same time, after rising of China through OBOR initiative in the region, appears to favour intra and inter regional, trade, connectivity and engagement. This dynamics approach reflected on India’s interest and approach which is discussed some policy of India for promoting the bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Central Asian nations.

Extended Neighbourhood Policy

The government of India has integrated the phrase extended neighbourhood into their foreign policy formulations for beyond of South Asian countries, whether headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party after 1998 and the Congress Party after 2004. They have done response to Indian analysts in 1997 that “Beyond South Asia, India’s wider neighbourhood is represented. It examines philosophy, identifying India's concerns and interests under the framework of extended neighbourhood concept which examines extended community in depth, determining how far such Indian concerns and ambitions have been achieved, and how well an extended neighbourhood strategy has been executed and effected towards India’s projection of soft power, whether economic projection, cultural outlook as crucial to this notion of an expanded interests. The extended neighbourhood has become the conceptual umbrella for India beyond South Asia. This was well expressed in 2006 through the Minister for External Affairs (MEA), Government of India, Pranab Mukherjee remarks, “India’s foreign policy today looks at India’s environment in expanding circles . . . starting with the immediate neighbourhood . . . moving on to . . . the extended neighbourhood.” Even the term “extended neighbourhood” was absent in the Annual Report of 1999-2000 and 2000-01 by MEA, Government of India. As something to be distinguished from India’s “immediate neighbourhood.” This certainly represented the transformation of Indian position at the international level (Krishna, 2020).

By 2004, Indian government has affirmed the concept of extended neighbourhood for India which stretches to Suez Canal to the South China Sea and includes within it’s the West, Central, South East, East Asia, Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region.” Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh has reiterated the importance of the extended neighborhood within Indian security and foreign policy formulations. Such a concept has also lodged itself within the official bureaucracy, diplomatic services and military circles. They include other neighbours, and countries immediately adjoining this region of our ‘extended neighbourhood’.” (Scott, 2009)

In recent, the first India-Central Asia Summit in January 2022, which coincided with the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic and political relations between India and the Central Asian nations are regarded as a significant and historic moment to take their relations to new heights in a comprehensive and long-term policy. The summit has taken into account the far-reaching implications in determining stability, security, and geostrategic equilibrium to display the efficacy of India's “Extended Neighbourhood Policy” in addressing the region’s growing cooperation with a strong commitment, in the spirit of transformation of multilateralism and transparency in global governance as well as global order. Based on mutual trust, understanding, cooperation and a shared

vision of security, development, and growth for the people of Central Asia are substantial and an aim of expanding economic, political, and security engagement (Bhattacharya, D. 2022).

North Look Policy

Central Asia has focus of Indian foreign policy within the conceptual framework of the Look North policy. For most of the 1990s, however, India's financial crisis and global power competition in Central Asia prevented India from playing a prominent role in the region. After one decade, India's proactive policy toward Central Asia in the context of Look North Policy began in the post-2000 era. India is closer to Central Asian countries as a result of expanding the economic, security and political cooperation.

India's active participation in Central Asia has grown fast in the field of investment, banking sector, solar energy, climate change etc. Kazakhstan, as one of the Central Asian countries is strategically position in the "Heart of Eurasia." It is the world's ninth largest country in terms of land area and rich in natural resources and energy. The signing of the strategic partnership agreement of India with Kazakhstan in 2009, strategic partnership of India with Uzbekistan in 2011, and strategic partnership of India with Tajikistan in 2012. These strategic partnerships are as one of the strategic milestones that opened the doors for India in the Central Asian countries. In addition, the signing of an agreement on nuclear cooperation between India and Kazakhstan in April 2011 is one of India's most significant achievements in Central Asia. One of the most significant obstacles for India in Central Asia is the absence lack of geographical connectivity. At the same time, Central Asia offers India's pharmaceutical industry in the huge potential market. There is a great opportunity for promoting pharmaceutical manufacturing units due to lack of connectivity and security concerns. Furthermore, collaboration in the healthcare industry, particularly in medical tourism appears to be beneficial and a positive direction. This policy emphasise the position of India and Central Asia's rich civilizational and cultural legacies to strengthen bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Connect Central Asian Policy

While India has increased the intensity of its involvement with the CARs, with the goal of aiming long-term cooperative partnership with the region. New Delhi announced its new 'Connect Central Asia' policy in 2012 to achieve national interests and strengthen connections with the Eurasian region. The policy focuses on proactive political, economic; security and people-to-people contact with Central Asian countries. This is a broad-based policy strategy that encompasses India with Central Asia in the field of political, economic, and cultural involvement. India's perspective of the role wants to play in Central Asia which reflected in the strategic and economic goals. It's about reuniting with the region. India has a shared history, cultural linkages that reflect on the multilateral engagement (Roy, 2013). Therefore, E. Ahmad, Minister of State for External Affairs, described the new policy approach during the inaugural first India-Central Asia Dialogue in Bishkek in June 2012 where he remarks, "*India is now looking closely at the region through the framework of its 'Connect Central Asia' policy, which is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people*

engagement with Central Asian countries, both individually and collectively.⁴” In the table of 1.2 indicate the major objectives of India’s Connect Central Asia Policy.

Table No. 1.2
The Objectives of Connect Central Asia Policy

| S. No. | Broad Area of Policy | Objectives |
|---------------|----------------------------------|--|
| 1. | Political Cooperation | to make the political relations by the exchange of high-level visits and interactions through both, bilateral and multilateral relations. |
| 2 | Security Cooperation | To strengthen security partnerships in the field of military training, military education, counter-terrorism, and close consultations on Afghanistan. |
| 3. | multilateral engagement | SCO, Custom Union, Eurasian Economic Community, India has already proposed a Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement to participate its markets with the joining Eurasian space. |
| 4. | Energy Cooperation | Make a long-term partner in the field of natural resources and energy. |
| 5. | Social cooperation | medical field is significant sphere that provides massive potential for cooperation and to encompass cooperation through setting up civil hospitals as well as clinics in the region. |
| 6. | Education sector | to promote in the setting up of Central Asian University in Kyrgyzstan that could come up as a centre of excellence to connect world-class education system which focus on ICT, management, languages, philosophy etc. |
| 7. | Digital Connectivity | setting up a Central Asian e-network with the help of India, through tele-education and tele-medicine connectivity, connecting Central Asian nations |
| 8. | Construction Sector | India’s capability in the field of construction sector as well as world-class structures and several medium-size steel systematic mills. |
| 9. | Geographical Connectivity | To engage land connectivity through INSTC. To join efforts to thoughtful ways between India and Central Asian countries. |
| 10. | Banking Sector | Absence of a viable banking sector is a main barrier to improve trade and commerce, investment as well as to expand a favourable policy environment. |

⁴Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2022). Keynote address by MOS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue. India’s ‘Connect Central Asia’ Policy. Available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/> Accessed on 6 February 2022.

| | | |
|------------|---------------------------------|--|
| 11. | Air Connectivity | to expand air connectivity and to promote the people to people contact between India and Central Asian countries. |
| 12. | People to People Contact | To encourage regular exchanges of scholars, academics, experts, and NGOs to gain deeper insights into each other's cultures. |

Source: Keynote Address by MoS Shri E. Ahamed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue, June 12, 2012, India's 'Connect Central Asia' Policy. Available at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/19791/> Accessed on January 8, 2022.

Given the geographical constraints, India's soft power strategy might potentially open the door for more collaboration, as seen by its 'Connect Central Asia' policy. Because there are of its historical ties, friendly image, scientific and technical advantages and economic potential. India has an opportunity to reenergise its present connections with the Eurasian region as compared to other key nations in Central Asia. In the light of the security challenge in the Afghanistan-Pakistan factors, India's new strategic approach toward Central Asia must be assessed. One of India's primary national interests is Afghanistan as a commercial bridge between South Asian region and Central Asia region. India's current strategy reflects to grow the economic and security proximately with the region (Roy, 2013).

India's Strategy for Central Asia

India has composed to leverage its in close proximately, historically and cultural links as well as positive image in Central Asia. The CARs look favourably upon India to create a close partnership with them. Therefore, India has been included in many initiatives such as INSTC, Chahbahar Port in Iran, TAPI, Ashgabat Agreement etc. The major objectives of these initiatives are to promote and encourage bilateral and multilateral engagement in the field of trade, diplomatic, security, investment, education, research and development and so on. This robust political engagement reflects into a more meaningful in security as well as economic cooperation. Apart from being geographically disconnected from India, as part of Pakistan's policy denial mood to New Delhi in the Central Asian countries. Thus, India as the economic emerging power on the world map which would enable greater strategic equity in the region. Some of them are the most important India's strategy towards Central Asia are examined in brief here.

INSTC

In September 2000, India, Russia, and Iran established the International North-South Transport Corridor. This is a freight shipping, rail, and road route connecting Russia, Iran, and India. INSTC is a multi-modal transportation route that connects the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf with the Caspian Sea via Iran and northern Europe via St. Petersburg, Russia. INSTC looks at cargo being transported by water from Mumbai to Bandar Abbas of Iran, then by road from Bandar Abbas to Bandar-e-Anzali (an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea) and finally to Astrakhan, Iran (a Caspian port in Russia). The major objectives are examined here. The first objective is to improve the efficiency of transportation linkages in order to better coordination and passenger transportation along the INSTC. Second objective is to encourage the parties to the agreement to use rail, road, sea, river, and air transportation and to gain access with the world market. Third objective, to assist in expanding the amount of international passenger and cargo transportation. Fourth objective is to focus on offering

regional security, cargo security, and environmental protection in accordance with best practice. Fifth objective is to unify transportation policies, as well as the legal and legislative framework in the sphere of transportation, in order to carry out this agreement. And finally, to provide a level playing field for all kinds of transportation service providers from all parties involved in the transportation of goods (Report of Dry Run, 2014).

The INSTC’s advancement has been gradual and under progress. The INSTC’s Coordination Council has met on occasion to examine various issues concerning the corridor and has approved suggestions given through the INSTC’s Expert Groups. As a consequence, a meeting of INSTC member nations was convened in New Delhi on January 18, 2012, to examine methods for moving and carry out the INSTC initiative forward. During the discussion, it was noted that countries like as Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey would be necessary to complete the missing links in the North South Corridor in the coming years. Nevertheless, the most unpleasant aspect of the India-Central Asia relationship has remained reciprocal commerce at the very slow. Furthermore, there needs growing awareness of the need to overcome India’s geographical barrier to the region. It is to build a “north-south” trade corridor connecting India with Russia via Iran, and then the CARs and Europe (Bhattacharya, 2022). For example, Uzbekistan is a close and strategic partner of India. Therefore, the primary objectives of extended neighborhood policy are to promote the regional connectivity, development, investment and economic collaboration. Thus, INSTC plays a critical role in establishing connectivity for promoting between the two countries.

Following this, the member countries activities pick up speed, and the sixth meeting of the Experts Group first and second of the corridor’s Coordination Council was held on May 28-30, 2012 in New Delhi, followed by the 5th Coordination Council meeting on June 24-25, 2013 in Baku (Sarkar, 134). After two years, these initiatives were given a boost during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Central Asia in July 2015. India-Uzbekistan ties and connections have been continuing processes on the development of South and Central nations in this environment. PM Modi highlighted the future significant to enhance the connectivity with the region and the development of INSTC and he remarks:

*“As we look forward, we would lend our support to improving transportation and communication networks in the region. We can create a vast network of physical and digital connectivity that extends from Eurasia’s northern corner to Asia’s southern shores. INSTC is a step in that direction.”*⁵ (MEA, GoI, 2015).

While India, which has a positive image in the region, as a critical component of this strategic calculation. The leading regimes admire New Delhi’s successes in nation-building, an optimistic economic outlook in a time of slowing global development after Covid-19 pandemic, and the calibration of a new regional cooperation strategy. India is likewise in a position to take advantage of the inconsistencies in the geopolitics rivalry among the major powers. Russia, with which India has along-standing’ amicable relationship, may not be opposed to India expanding its footprint in Central Asia.

⁵Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (July, 2015). Remarks by Prime Minister at Plenary of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Available at https://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25454/Remarks_by_Prime_Minister_at_Plenary_of_the_Shanghai_Cooperation_Organisation Accessed on 2 January 2022.

Chahbahar Port in Iran

Since ancient times, India and Iran have had a long-standing cultural, economic, and linguistic relationship. Certainly, the legacy of Persian influence on the Mughal monarchy as the foundation for India-Iran ties implies beneficial role in the current bilateral collaboration. Both countries established official diplomatic ties in modern times in the 1950s. Iran is a close partner of India in the 21st century. Therefore, India invested billions of dollars in the Chabahar port of Iran, marking a great moment for New Delhi's foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Overall, regional connectivity provides benefits from diplomatic, geostrategic, and economic initiatives. However, it appears that in the new millennium, India's foreign policy has improved and deepened, as well as a new chapter of Indian foreign policy in world politics. In 2016, the 'trilateral junction' of Chabahar port was recognised between India, Iran, and Afghanistan. The main goal is to connect Iran, and Afghanistan via Central Asia countries by rail, road, and sea networks, enabling India access to a much wider market and geopolitical participation in Central Asia (Pant, & Mehta, 2018).

On May 23, 2016, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited to Tehran, signed Trilateral Transit Agreement (TTA) with India, Iran and Afghanistan, recognising the commercial corridor that would connect the Chabahar port to Afghanistan via Central Asia. Also, on December 3, 2017, the President of Iran and Minister of External Affairs of India, along with officials from 17 countries, inaugurated the first phase of the Chabahar port, Shahid Beheshti. India dispatched its first supply of 15,000 tonnes of wheat to Kabul via Chabahar Port. On June 9, 2017, which has been viewed as a great platform for providing a unique opportunity and discussion with new areas such as banking, financial, regional connectivity, and development cooperation. It is necessary for SCO members to have a proper exchange of information in these areas (Alimov, 2018). New Delhi's great performance in 2017 was a significant exceptional for encouraging economic, security and political cooperation.

These are new avenues for international collaboration to promote trade and commercial activity. This is in addition to the multi-modal transport of goods and passengers across the three countries. The Chabahar port in Iran and permanent membership of India in SCO, these two great achievements of Indian foreign policy in 2017 are historical efforts or strengths, and as a golden year for connecting with access to the Central Asian region in the field of trade and commercial, security, investment, banking sector, education, ICT, healthcare sphere. In reality, India's connectivity should be pushed for market integration. New Delhi's strategic ties in the rising Asian security architecture indicates new directions for participation in terms of investment, intelligence sharing, and military engagements with Central Asian countries, and so can be a counter to the three evils (terrorism, separatism, and extremism) of the SCO platform. Chabahar port offers India a chance to reconnect its trading ties with Afghanistan while also countering China's Strings of Pearl and BRI initiative in the Indian Ocean and West Asia (Pant & Mehta, 2018). By bypassing Pakistan's routes and ports, Afghanistan sees Chabahar as a new gateway to the outside world for its exports and imports goods, particularly with India. India, Iran, Afghanistan have inked trade agreements and corridor ties that would allow India to access Afghanistan through the Iranian port of Chabahar (Rajagopalan, 2020).

The Indian Ocean port politics have prompted a fresh discussion regarding economic and geopolitical interests. The Chabahar port and India's stake in the project have been thoroughly explored. (Shafiq, 2019). The primary purpose is to provide an alternate path to Afghanistan for commerce with India and other nations, all of these political manoeuvres may put a pall over the neighborhood's peace and stability in the region. These concerns have also emerged in Delhi, which is concerned that its

investment in Afghanistan may be jeopardised. For example, after the withdrawal of NATO's troops from Afghanistan, Taliban came power in August 2021. At present, India face challenges in Afghanistan because New Delhi has already invested approximately, USD 3 billion in the field of road, hydropower, library, dam and construction etc. In this regard, India needs to realign with Afghanistan and the North-South Corridor in order to remain viable certainly looks to have been taken into consideration along with the decision on Chabahar for the dynamic role and regional connectivity (Sanjay Kapoor, 2018).

TAPI

The pipeline connecting Turkmenistan and Pakistan via Afghanistan was initially suggested in the mid-1990s, with the now-defunct Unocal-led consortium and the Argentine firm Bidas negotiating for a deal with the Taliban administration in Kabul. However, due to security concerns and worldwide condemnation of the Taliban regime’s treatment of women and human rights. After the Taliban were driven out of Kabul, the project was renewed. However, three countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Turkmenistan) signed a new agreement at the end of 2002. In 2005, Asian Development Bank completed a feasibility assessment and made the project practicable in the process. After three years in 2008, India became the fourth country to join the project when the Indian government gave its permission. The TAPI project is scheduled to begin in 2012 and be completed by 2016. It plans to build 1,680 km of pipeline with a total capacity of 90 million standard cubic metres per day (mscm/d) of gas (D’Souza, 2011). India and Pakistan would each receive 38 mscm/d of gas, while Afghanistan will purchase 14 mscm/d. The planned pipeline would run 1,650 km from Turkmenistan’s gas reserves to the Indian border town of Fazilka in Punjab, passing via Turkmenistan (145 km), Pakistan (800 km) and Afghanistan (735 km). The pipeline would transport around 33 billion cubic metres of natural gas to use each year. It would give substantial cash and job possibilities for the people of the regions. In addition to supplying clean energy, these nations indicated interest in working together on a variety of energy and gas project for TAPI pipeline (D’Souza, 2011).

TAPI gas pipeline looks to be moving forward quickly and accessible project in the region. Therefore, the Gas Sales and Purchase Agreement (GSPA) would be signed on April 30, 2011 in New Delhi that following a ministerial-level meeting. The Technical Working Group (TWG) convened in New Delhi on the 25th to 27th of April 2011 to finalise and procedure of the GSPA before to the meeting. During the TWG meeting, discussed some disputes and controversial issues such as gas pricing and gas transit cost (Roy, 2015). The benefits of the TAPI gas pipeline project are presence as an opportunity and a win-win agreement among local and regional stakeholders in South and Central Asian region by tying to a unified economic framework. By leveraging Afghanistan’s status as an energy bridge between an energy-rich of Central Asia and an energy-scarce South Asia. The TAPI pipeline is expected to increase economic interdependence among rival countries, high and collaboration advantages at profitable. However, there need several possible uncertain hurdles that must be overcome before the project can be completed.

Ashgabat Agreement

This agreement is an international transport and transit corridor enabling transportation of cargo and goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region. The Ashgabat Agreement was established in 2011 to construct an international multimodal transport as well as transit corridor between

them. On April 25, 2011, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, and Qatar were the first countries to sign the Ashgabat Agreement. Kazakhstan and Pakistan joined agreement in 2016 and after Qatar withdrew from the deal in 2013. In April 2016, the Ashgabat Agreement went into effect. The main objective is to improve and promote Eurasian connectivity and coordinate it with their regional transport corridors, such as INSTC (Stobdan, 2018).

The Working Committee of agreement examined operational matters, including specifics of the routes via member nations, at its inaugural meeting in March 2017. The Parties presented a number of suggestions to the Depository State (Turkmenistan), which the Coordinating Committee reviewed. Within the Ashgabat Agreement, the Coordinating Committee has a list of road and rail lines that form a single transport transit corridor for the region. Therefore, the regional transport grouping has been considering measures such as creating a “green” corridor for vehicles to reduce time spent at railway checkpoints for replacements, creating favourable conditions and effective schemes for storing and handling cargo and using berths at sea ports, among other things. The committee considered the subject of establishing a single tariff for transit goods by rail in order to boost the attractiveness of the routes as well as the amount of transit cargo (Joshi, 2019).

India expressed its interest in joining the Ashgabat Agreement on March 23, 2016. Turkmenistan, as the repository state, expressed to India on February 1, 2018, that all four original members have accepted to India as a member in agreement.⁶ India gave to the Coordinating Committee with all relevant information on taxes, fees, tariffs, and other payments assessed at ports and checkpoints. At the same, India's participation in the Ashgabat Agreement allows it to make use of the existing transportation and transit corridor to facilitate trade and economic relations with the Eurasian area. Under the Ashgabat Agreement, the Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan (ITK) railway line is the main route. It began operations in December 2014 and is now part of the INSTC, which is supported by India. As a result, the Ashgabat Agreement and the INSTC carry out easy to coordinate. The INSTC's operationalization is getting closer to becoming a reality. It connects India with Russia, Central Asia, and Europe via Iran via sea, train, and road. Joining the Ashgabat Agreement make it simple for India to reach out to Central Asia, which is home to strategic and high-value minerals such as phosphorus, uranium, copper, iron ore, metal, zinc, coal, etc.

India can get the Central Asian resources but needs for its industrial industry if it should have maintain direct access to them. For instance, by 2025, Kazakhstan alone plans to grow non-oil exports by 50 percent. This is a great opportunity to India for investment in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, India's trade with Central Asia countries is currently worth a little more than USD 2 billion and is not rising rapidly. Trade with the area represents only 0.19 percent of India's overall trade volume. In addition, India's contribution to overall commerce in Central Asia is only approximately 1 percent. The likelihood of business connections with the region can only be improved by enhancing transportation links.

In the wake of entering the Ashgabat Agreement, India must now expand the strategic role of Chabahar port in the development of an integrated transportation network that includes both the INSTC and Central Asian transit corridor. In reality, the Chabahar-Irانشahr-Zahedan-Mashad

⁶Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, (2018). India Joins the Ashgabat Agreement. Available at <https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl29406/India+JoinstheAshgabat+Agreement> Accessed on 8 January 2022.

corridor is an excellent way to reach Sarakhs (Turkmen border). India has already agreed to build a railway line between Chabahar and Zahedan. If the line is extended all the way to Mashad, Chabahar port may be connected to INSTC (Stobdan,2018). Chabahar-Irانشahr-Zahedan-Mashad can, in reality, be connected to the existing Eurasian railway line that connects other parts of the Central Asian region. Similarly, this route can be linked to existing corridor plans and programmes such as TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), CAREC (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation), and others. From this perspective, container transport is considered significant in the Central Asian region, and India’s active engagement in transportation projects is required for India to enter a competitive position in the Euro-Asian transit system. India's connectivity strategy should be confined to growing trade and commerce. It should also attempt to boost investment and services by connecting raw material sources, manufacturing hubs, and markets between India and Eurasia (Stobdan,2018).

Analysis of India’s approach and Policy

While India wants to expand that trade corridor Iran as a gateway to Central Asia and Russia, bypassing Pakistan and China in the 21st century. In this context, India plans to connect the INSTC, Ashgabat Agreement, SCO with other projects in the region which to develop a transit corridor initially connecting South, Middle, Central Asian regions. India, have articulated interest in joining with mutual cooperation. India wants to emerge as an alternative market in Central Asia. India’s engagement in Iran and Central Asia is also aimed at strengthening multilateral economic as well as security ties (Saurav, 2015). The broad outlook and position of India’s security engagement with the region setup Joint Working Groups on counter-terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, India’s strategic partnership with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and seeking improved defence cooperation in areas like, joint exercises, military training, research & development and deeper consultations on Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. Particularly, Tajikistan provides its vital geopolitical position in the field of security cooperation to India. It emerged as a key pillar of India’s strategic outreach in Central Asia which India looks to upgrade the Ayni airbase at a cost of US\$ 70 million as well as build a civil-military hospital at Farkhor. New Delhi had earlier collaborated with Dushanbe, Moscow and Tehran in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in 1997. (Roy, 2017)

As India expands its ambitions, Central Asia provides the ideal platform for it to utilise its political, economic, and cultural ties to play a major role in the region. Central Asia serves as a geographical bridge connecting Asia and Europe, which enhances to its geopolitics and geostrategic consequence for New Delhi. Although, Central Asia’s security, stability, and prosperity are beneficial and valuable to India’s peace and economic growth. Therefore, India has interested in various areas includes, economic prospect, security, natural resource and energy. In this regard, a deeper level of cooperation between India and Central Asian nations would be beneficial in the coming years. But the lack of geographical connectivity is a barrier to promote bilateral as well as multilateral cooperation. Another key essential impacting the India and Central Asia dynamics and emerging trends like Pakistan’s hostility and Afghanistan’s instability in the South Asian region. This is main concerns of India’s foreign policy in Central Asian region. At the same time, the external powers in Central Asia, like Russia, the USA and China, have presented a New Great Game which competes for natural resources and energy, investment, geopolitics interest. In recent time, India has made extraordinary development for making be to a major player in the world politics (Blank,2005). This

needs a constant approach and policy for interest or favour of Central Asian countries which India has capacity to provide. In the changing Asian geopolitics environment, India and Central Asian countries in the 21st Century would advantage everyone's economic growth and development, security, peace and stability. As India looks beyond its borders, Eurasian region provides to accurate interest to leverage its in the field of political, economic and cultural connections to play a significant role in Central Asia.

Conclusion

While India and Central Asian countries are the most important partners in the 21st century which comprises political, economic, security, diplomatic engagements in the coming years. Due to traditional and non-traditional issues, India and all Central Asian Republics needs a comprehensive and multidimensional approach through mutual cooperation and open dialogue at bilateral as well as the multilateral platform. They should focus together through cooperative approach with Russia, Iran and even China under the framework of SCO forum. Iran has been helping certainty to India by Chabahar Port for connecting a direct way and regional connectivity in Central Asia as well as for Afghanistan in the 21st century. Tehran is providing New Delhi to expand its geopolitical as well as economic opportunities in the region. In the last decade, it is improving geopolitical as well as economic relationships between India and Central Asia. Therefore, India is also trying to engage Uzbekistan through INSTC, Connect Central Asia policy, Ashgabat Agreement and Eurasian Economic Union. Iran can provide a significant opportunity to India. Due to its developmental strategy, both countries should improve significantly relations in the field of economics as well as geopolitical point of view. Thus, India should continue to provide infrastructure such as technology, defence assistance etc. New Delhi's engagement can be a big enrichment and remarkable achievement with Central Asian region. India has interest in expanding its engagement with Central Asian states to encourage ties in the field of trade, political, diplomatic cooperation in the coming years.

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