



A Critical Analysis of India's Engagement with Central Asia

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Abstract:

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and emergence of newly independent Central Asia nation marks a significant point in India's relation with Central Asia. The research paper explores the economic and security relations with Central Asia while examining the various facets of the engagement over a past decade. The study assesses the effectiveness of current research on the research question concerning the continuities and changes in India's foreign policy towards Central Asia by employing the critical review method emphasizing upon interpretation and evaluation of selective literature. The paper aims to contribute to deeper understanding of India's engagement with Central Asia while identifying the gaps in the current research in the concerned area.

Keywords: Central Asia, India, Foreign policy, Continuities, Changes, Engagement

Introduction:

In 1991, the fall of the Soviet Union was an epochal event transcending both international chronicles and Indian geopolitics. In August 1971, an Indo-Soviet treaty on peace, friendship, and cooperation was ratified, offering significant military support to India throughout its involvement in the Cold War conflict. The agreement furthered an extensive partnership between these countries, safeguarding India's rights within the post-Soviet Central Asia area. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the global political landscape changed dramatically as several regions proclaimed sovereignty over themselves, resulting in the formation of five newly independent states known collectively as Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. India faced an important obstacle

requiring it to reconnect with every country separately.

The presence of the USSR had offered India a strong buffer, but its dissolution removed this support. Consequently, Indian policymakers faced both a new opportunity and a challenge in establishing India's presence and influence in the strategically important Central Asian states. Over the past two decades, India has worked to re-engage with Central Asia, aiming to make a substantial impact on the region's hydrocarbon sector and diversify its economy. India's objectives include securing energy resources for growth, countering Pakistan's Islamist agenda, protecting its security interests in Central Asia, and monitoring drug trafficking. The aim is to advance business interests while addressing trafficking and potential weapons proliferation in this strategically vital area (Pradhan, 2018).

From a national security standpoint, Central Asia is crucial to India's security framework. India perceives the Central region, along with Afghanistan, as sources of religious extremism and radical Islamization, which lead to the formation of radical extremist groups involved in terrorist activities. The fall of the Soviet Union has also provided a fertile ground for militant organizations in the area to thrive. If swift action is not taken, groups like the Taliban, Hizb-ul-Tahrir, and other terrorist organizations waging war on India could become even more dangerous. These security concerns are exacerbated by the increasing prevalence of drug trafficking in Central Asia. India's role and interests in international politics and statecraft have gained prominence due to its remarkable economic growth over the past two and a half decades. Importantly, this has positioned India alongside China, another aspiring Asian superpower eager to intensify competition for influence and resources globally. Both nations are resource-hungry, rapidly developing countries seeking a new role within the regional and international systems. Meanwhile, the war has exacted a heavy toll on the US and its allies in terms of lives lost and financial costs, yet the US has exited Afghanistan without achieving significant political or military victories (Muzalevsky, 2015).

The real connection between India and Central Asia dates back to its economic reforms of the late 20th century. During this era, there was an important turning point for India's economy, requiring it to reshape its ties across multiple international fronts, particularly those involving Central Asian countries. India initiated in 2012 the "Central Asia Connectivity" program aimed at strengthening diplomacy, altering regional balances by focusing on energy, commerce, and transportation links between South and Central Asian regions. Indonesia commits to working

alongside neighboring countries like Kazakhstan on issues including managing natural resources for power generation, establishing joint ventures involving atomic energy technologies, enhancing economic exchanges through streamlined customs procedures, constructing transportation networks across borders, strengthening alliances between armed forces and security agencies, advancing scientific endeavors related to outer space research, and maintaining global geopolitical stability. (Joshi, 2017).

Following the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1991, India smoothly moved towards becoming more economically liberalized, swiftly joining international trade networks. In 2008, an economic downturn impacted many nations worldwide; however, India maintained its prosperity by experiencing robust growth of seven percentage points during this period. The Department for Trade reports that India's overall exports amounted to \$443 billion during fiscal year 2022-23, signifying heightened participation within international markets. Nevertheless, export revenues within the Commonwealth of Independent States were modest at \$5 billion during this period, underscoring a significant gap when contrasted against other areas. Therefore, professionals recommend that India might experience substantial gains in its economy by strengthening ties with Central Asian nations.

The forthcoming study will analyze India's commercial and defense connections with Central Asian nations, examining their multifaceted interactions in depth. This study assesses how well existing work has examined India's diplomatic strategies toward Central Asian countries during the last ten years by using an organized scholarly approach. In recent years, due to rapid economic expansion in India, there is an increasing need for new forms of renewable energy to sustain national progress. Several scholars in this regard highlight the significance

of interactions with Central Asian countries. In Kothari's research focusing on India's geopolitical concerns within Central Asia, he highlights the critical role these elements—natural gas, oil, uranium, and hydroelectric power—play in securing India's energy stability. Exploring issues related to establishing connections within Central Asian countries involves addressing obstacles like limited physical proximity due to geographical barriers and disruptions caused by conflicts in neighboring nations—specifically those involving Pakistan and Afghanistan—which impede India's ability to interact directly. Pradhan R agrees with Kothari by emphasizing undeveloped hydrocarbons and uranium deposits as significant sectors for focus and interaction.

In his 2018 study, Stobdan, P. handed an overview of Central Asia's untapped natural coffers, including uranium, petroleum, and natural gas. He noted that India's trade with Central Asia is presently valued at \$ 1.5 billion, which accounts for just 0.11 of India's total trade. The study linked several areas for implicit profitable collaboration, similar as agro-industry, construction, and medicinals, and emphasized India's investments in the International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar Port. In a posterior study, "India and Central Asia Need to Expand its Development Partnership Initiative" (2021), Stobdan reiterated the openings in Central Asia that align with India's interests, particularly in terms of profitable growth and request diversification. Also, Behera, B. K. (2023) in "Central Asia in the Foreign Policy Formulation of India," published in *World Affairs the Journal of International Issues*, echoed Stobdan's views, fastening on India's energy security. He conceded the necessity for India to diversify its energy sources, with Central Asia playing a pivotal part due to its rich reserves of uranium, natural gas, and oil painting. Kumar, D. (2021) in "What can

India and Central Asia Offer to Each Other?", stressed the low trade volume between India and Central Asia. He proposed adding trade through air weight, establishing manufacturing installations, and boosting IT trade. Behera and Stobdan participated analogous perspectives in their studies. Grounded on this, Kumar, D. emphasized the significance of developing a mutually salutary relationship with Central Asia grounded on profitable interdependencies. Pradhan, R. (2019) in "Petropolitics and Pipeline Diplomacy in Central Asia Can India Go to stay in the bodies?" bandied Central Asia's geopolitical significance due to its central position in Eurasia and its abundant energy coffers, similar as uranium, oil painting, and natural gas. The author concurred with the findings of Kumar, Behera, and Joshi, asserting that Central Asia is vital for India not only for geopolitical reasons but also for energy security. Another prominent theme in exploration on India's engagement with Central Asia is security, with colorful authors pressingsub-themes over time. still, non-traditional security pitfalls affecting both Central Asia and India, similar as Islamic fundamentalism and medicine trafficking, have been constantly emphasized by multiple authors.

Rahman, K. (2011). *Central Asia, Energy Security and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Policy Perspectives*, has stressed the influence of non-state realities, similar as revolutionist groups, which pose a trouble to the stability, profitable progress, and energy resource development in Central Asia. also, non-traditional security pitfalls, like inter-ethnic pressures, contribute to the rise of unreasonableness. medicine trafficking is another significant trouble, risking the stability of conveyance routes and, accordingly, the profitable growth of Central Asia. also, Sharma, B. K. (2021) in his *Geopolitics in Central Asia* has inked inter-ethnic conflicts, border issues, and

civil wars as sources of insecurity. The rejuvenescence of the Taliban in Afghanistan is seen as a major trouble to Central Asia due to the presence of revolutionist testaments and groups associated with it. The implicit spread of these revolutionist testaments to bordering countries and regions is a concern. thus, both authors agree that India and Central Asian nations must establish ongoing security cooperation to effectively address the challenges of religious unreasonableness and medicine trafficking. The exploration conducted by Chintan Research Foundation. (2025).

India And Central Asia: A decadal review of strategic intent and structural constraints. has emphasized the current factors driving India's engagement with Central Asia, with security cooperation being a crucial aspect. The author notes the pitfalls of unreasonableness, terrorism, and radicalization as areas for collective cooperation between India and Central Asia, as also noted by Kumar (2021) and Das (2024). Blank, S. (2014). how sustainable is U.s.- India cooperation in central and south Asia? has expressed analogous views, admitting the need for a strategic cooperation between India and Central Asia to combat terrorism and anesthetics dealing. Behera, B. K. (2023) in his Central Asia in the foreign policy expression of India discusses the security challenges posed by medicine trafficking forming from the Iran- Pakistan-Afghanistan golden crescent, which directly threatens both Central Asia and India. therefore, cooperation between the two is essential. The studies, while fastening on security cooperation, have also underlined the significance of indigenous associations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. One of the crucial pretensions of the SCO is to enhance security cooperation among its members. Accordingly, the exploration suggests that India, as an active member of the association, can work it to

strengthen security cooperation with Central Asian regions.

Rahman K. (2011) has recognized the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a facilitator for enhancing collaboration between India and Central Asia in addressing non-traditional security challenges. The author believes that the participation of major powers like Russia and China enables India to manage security issues without encountering conflicts of interest. Similarly, Warikoo, K. (2016) in "Central Asia and South Asia: opportunities and challenges," discusses the potential for establishing long-term relationships with Central Asia through active involvement in the SCO. It is important to note that India attained permanent member status in the SCO in 2017. However, both studies do not emphasize the shifts and continuities in policies related to energy security. Therefore, there is an opportunity for further research to understand India's engagement with Central Asia over the past decade, particularly concerning changes or continuities.

The critical review of literature has allowed us to explore the various facets of economic and security engagement between Central Asia and India over a past decade. Though, the literature has highlighted the different aspects, it has not yet analysed the continuities and changes in the foreign policy of India concerning the region. Hence, there is a scope for more research in the area contributing to the better understanding of India's relation with Central Asia.

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