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ABSTRACT

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, India established official ties with the five former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan; so did China. In recent years, both India and China have come up with different strategies to strengthen their respective ties with these resource-rich economies, collectively called the Central Asian Republics (CARs). China's strategy is the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and India's, the 'Connect Central Asia' policy. China's proximity with the CARs, its financial prowess, and the coherence of its policy, have driven its progress faster than that of India's. This paper analyses the trajectory of these rivals' aspirations, and argues that New Delhi's approach in the CAR region is 'Constructivist' while China's is 'Hegemonic'. It attempts to outline a roadmap for India's Connect Central Asia policy.

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INTRODUCTION

The fledgling economies of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) have faced political and economic problems since their creation following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The CARs—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—have had to deal with their lack of governance structures, as well as economic issues like inflation and low GDP. Tajikistan would eventually erupt in a civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997, Kyrgyzstan would witness a revolution in 2005, and Uzbekistan would be occupied with the rise of extremist pan-Islamic identity. The rise of terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region in the 1980s had a significant impact on these new countries, too. Organisations like Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) came into existence. The *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* numbering 15,000 to 20,000 in 2003 was active in Uzbekistan and to a lesser extent in neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹ The IMU, comprising 500 members, was behind many terror attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.²

During this period of tumultuous transition, the CARs had to reach out to other countries for assistance. Countries such as the United States (US), Russia, China, Iran, India, Turkey, and certain European states, were only too eager to take the opportunity. The CARs region, after all, has historically been rich in natural resources: gas in Turkmenistan; oil, gas and uranium in Kazakhstan; uranium and gas in Uzbekistan; hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, with a total population of 33 million in the 1990s, the region was potentially a large market.³

Map 1: Map of Central Asia



Source: <http://www.sairamtourism.com>

Central Asia sits at the heart of Eurasia and, historically, made up half of the ancient Silk Route. The region is strategically vital for many countries like China, Russia, India, the US and Europe, as it served as a pivot for geopolitical transformations within the world island.^{a,4} Indeed, as geographer Halford Mackinder observed, “he who controls the heartland controls the world.”⁵

In recent years, foreign-affairs analysts have begun observing what they call the “New Great Game”⁶ in Central Asia—characterised by fierce

a According to Mackinder, the “world-island” was made up of Europe, Asia, and Africa. The world-island was the largest of the three regions, accounting for two-thirds of the earth’s terrestrial surface and also has the largest concentration of global natural resources. Mackinder contends, “he who controls the heartland controls the world”. He described that the heartland of the world-island which includes Central Asian river basins of the Volga, Yenisey, Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and two seas (the Caspian and the Aral), served as pivot for geopolitical transformations within the world island.

competition between various states all aiming to increase their influence, hegemony and power over the region. In this ‘game’, the important players are Russia, the US, European Union (EU), China, Turkey, Iran and India. The EU’s main concern so far has been to advocate for the promotion of democratisation, rule of law, and human rights.⁷ This has brought discomfort to the pro-communist authoritarian regimes in the region.⁸ Russia, for its part, is focused on not letting the CAR region—its “backyard”—be drawn close to Europe and America, by taking the lead in regional military affairs.

China has perhaps the biggest economic footprint in the CARs region, principally owing to its massive project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). India, for its part, has started reviving its old civilisational links with the region, laying the groundwork for building trust and goodwill by extending assistance through capacity building and human resource development, in the areas of information technology, pharmaceuticals, and healthcare. Many analysts point to India and China as the two major players in the “new great game” in Central Asia.⁹ The region’s abundant natural resources can cater to the needs of both a resurgent China and a growing India. At the same time, India and China, through the CARs, can expand their markets throughout Eurasia.¹⁰

INDIA AND CHINA’S STRATEGIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia has been called “the global chessboard,”¹¹ and not without reason. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the newly formed Central Asian republics urgently needed loans and investments in order to jumpstart their economies. However, they fell short of the World Bank and IMF’s requirements, especially in the area of human rights.¹² Most CARs continued to remain autocratic following their independence, and shared political, ideological and economic legacies with the former Soviet Union; the multilateral lending agencies did not

view them as part of the Global South, which was deemed as priority for assistance.

China took advantage of the situation for its hegemonic pursuits. The concept of ‘hegemon’ or ‘hegemony’ dates back to Ancient Greece and was given theoretical dimension by Antonio Gramsci in his prison writings in the 1950s.^b Since then, scholars of international relations have suggested that a hegemon can use three different strategies to hold sway over another state: being a benevolent hegemon, or a coercive-assertive hegemon, or a self controlled-status-quo-driven hegemon. The benevolent hegemon creates and imposes norms and rules; such benevolence may be seen, for instance, in free trade mechanisms adopted by countries like the United States (US).¹³ The coercive-assertive hegemon, meanwhile, as the name suggests will be aggressive and will aim to dominate another state under its influence; for example, imperial Japan as a coercive hegemon to France under Napoleon.¹⁴ The self-controlled-status-quo-driven hegemon is motivated by its own state-centric economic intentions and is interested purely on its own goals in security and economic self-aggrandisement;¹⁵ the Dutch-style hegemonic path of the 19th century is one example.¹⁶ By strategy, a hegemon dominates a region or an area by expanding its sphere of influence by simultaneously ensuring that the involvement of other countries in the region reduce their involvement in the area or the country under its influence.

India, for its part, has so far chosen to take the ‘constructivist’ approach. The concept of constructivism in international relations was introduced by Nicholas Greenwood Onuf in 1989.¹⁷ Constructivists like

b Hegemony implies that some power or authority (most usually a state) is able to determine the operation of the system by setting the rules as well as determining to some extent the external relations between member states, while leaving them domestically independent.

Griffiths and Collaghan insist that international relations cannot be reduced to rational action and interaction within material constraints or within institutional constraints at the international and national levels (as argued by some liberal internationalists).¹⁸ Defining constructivism, Wendt acknowledges that “the character of international life is determined by the beliefs and expectations that states have about each other, and these are constituted largely by social rather than material structures.”¹⁹ Therefore, according to constructivists, there are no interests based exclusively on economic or security interests. Interests always assume the establishment of relations with certain states but interact with each other according to their identities.²⁰ Constructivism considers international politics as a sphere of interaction which is shaped by the actors’ identities and practices and influenced by constantly changing normative institutional structure. Though they play a role in this relationship, national interests and identities are intertwined and are shaped by interactions with other states.²¹

SPOTLIGHT ON CHINA

A ‘self-controlled-status-quo-driven hegemon’

Xinjiang is a province in the northwest part of China that provides a critical link to the country’s BRI. It is home to the Uyghurs, one of a number of persecuted Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. Beijing is facing accusations of using hardline methods to suppress the Uyghurs.²² Following their independence, the CARs countries, which are home to an estimated 400,000 Uyghurs, became the hub of anti-China political activities. Parties like the Uyghur Liberation Organisation and Free Uighuristan Party were formed in different parts of Central Asia. Furthermore, there are some 1,810,507 Kazaks, 196,320 Kyrgyz and 21,000 Uzbeks who are living in Xinjiang. Even generally, since ancient

times, the people of Central Asia have had strong cultural and political ties with the indigenous people of Xinjiang.²³

As CARs were reeling under constant economic and political instability that could have spread to the highly volatile province of Xinjiang, Uyghurs living in Xinjiang started anti-China agitations in 1980, 1981, 1985 and 1987. The situation changed after the collapse of the Soviet Union as the Afghan mujahideen gained power in their country. The Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), later known as Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) is a Muslim separatist group founded by militant Uyghurs, members of the Turkic-speaking ethnic majority in Xinjiang.²⁴ Before founding this terror outfit, Uyghurs actively worked in terror organisations such as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Central Asia. Provoked by Pakistani mullahs, separatism in Xinjiang gained momentum and demonstrations erupted in certain places at Urumchi, Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, Aksu and Artush. The tipping point for China was the Baren incident, where Uyghurs started a mass protest on 6 April 1990 to wage *jihad* against the Chinese and establish the East Turkestan state. The ensuing riots – where the Uyghurs used bombs and pistols against the police and government officials – resulted in the deaths of six police officers.²⁵

While the rise of pro-Uyghur sentiments in CARs – given their proximity to the mainland – was a matter of grave concern for China, the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and rising terrorism in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region added to China's worries on its western border. Therefore, it is in Beijing's interest to not only safeguard its security concerns in Xinjiang, but also create a friendly buffer zone along its 3,500 km-long western border with CARs.

Furthermore, Beijing regarded CARs as vital not only for its security, but also as a gateway to the markets of Eurasia, Europe and Russia.²⁶

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Beijing was also apprehensive of increased US-led NATO influence over the region that would have led to the “containment” of Chinese power. Following the US military intervention in Afghanistan and establishment of US military bases in the region in the aftermath of 9/11, Beijing pursued its Central Asian policy more rigorously. After 2001, Beijing labelled America’s heightened activities in CARs as “U.S. Grand Strategy for global domination” to “contain the rise of China”.²⁷

The establishment of economic and political stability in Central Asia was critical for China, as instability and possible conflict in the region could have spilled over to its restive Xinjiang province. China was quick to recognise this and resolved its long-standing border dispute with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 1994, 1996 and 2002, respectively. In the resolution of its border disputes, Beijing used the regions’ economic and political instability as bargaining chip and got 22 percent, 32 percent and 3.5 percent of land of its total claim from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, respectively.²⁸ China also used the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a multilateral forum established under its leadership in 2001, as a tool to increase its grip over the region. In return for Chinese loans and investments, the CARs banned Uyghur organisations in 1997. They also intensified surveillance of the resident Uyghur population.²⁹

Beijing also started offering the CARs loans under flexible conditions in 1994, when Kyrgyzstan borrowed US\$7.4 million credit and another US\$14.7 million in 1998.³⁰ In 2005, Uzbekistan received a US\$600-million loan from Beijing for the joint exploration of energy deposits.³¹ In April 2009, Beijing signed a US\$10-billion ‘loan-for-oil’ deal with Kazakhstan, and in the same year China announced another US\$10-billion loan for the SCO to help economically struggling members. In 2011, another US\$4.1-billion loan was sanctioned for Turkmenistan.³²

Eye on Central Asia's Hydrocarbons

Growing domestic energy demand and expanding its external markets for finished goods were other important factors for China to exert its influence over the region. China's demand for energy rose significantly after the 1990s. Its daily consumption of oil increased from 4.2 million barrels in 1998 to 13.5 million barrels in 2018. According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), China's energy demands including oil imports will double between 2018 and 2050 and its use of natural gas is expected to increase by nearly 190 percent in the same period.³³ Accounting for 16.7 percent of the global crude oil imports in 2019, Beijing has already become the world's largest importer of oil, far ahead of the United States, which imported 13.5 percent of global crude.³⁴

Central Asian countries, rich in hydrocarbon resources, were considered vital for diversifying China's domestic energy mix, especially considering its disputes in the South China Sea with Japan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.³⁵ Furthermore, more than half of China's supplies that come from the West Asian countries of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Oman, Yemen and Kuwait are exposed to geopolitical risks. The transit routes for China's oil and gas trade, particularly in the Strait of Hormuz in West Asia and the Strait of Malacca in South East Asia, are controlled by the US. With proven oil reserves estimated at 40 billion barrels and natural gas reserves in excess of 131 trillion cubic feet, CARs can help China reduce its overdependence on West Asia for its energy security. CARs also have rich uranium deposits in the Tianshan mountains. According to estimates by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the Reasonably Assured Resources (RAR) estimated uranium deposits of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are pegged at 450,400 tonnes, and another 477,800 tonnes of inferred uranium.³⁶ The total amount of reserves in Central Asia accounts for about 16.9 percent of the world's total uranium resources. China has commissioned 13 nuclear power projects with installed capacity of 14.7 GW and will enhance capacity to 58 GW by 2020

by constructing new 31 reactors.³⁷ China's rapidly spiralling demand of uranium is yet another factor to have triggered China's hegemonistic approach in CARs.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

Strategically located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, with vast swathes of empty steppes and rugged mountains, the Central Asian region is poorly connected. Besides the physical barriers, factors such as trade regulatory hindrances and political fragility have often created obstacles in the free flow of trade within the region. In 2013, while unveiling the much-hyped Chinese concept of One Belt One Road (later rechristened BRI) in Kazakhstan, President Xi Jinping said that all Central Asian countries "should take an innovative approach" and collaborate with China in setting up "an economic belt along the Silk Road".³⁸ Out of the six economic corridors of the BRI, two run through Central Asia. As shown in Map 2 and Map 3, the New Eurasian Land Bridge connects China with Kazakhstan, Russia and Europe, while another route establishes China's connectivity with Central Asia and West Asia, giving it a direct geostrategic footprint on the region.

Map 2



Source: One Belt One Road Europe: <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/beltandroad/one-belt/>

Map 3



Source: One Belt One Road Europe: <https://www.oboreurope.com/en/beltandroad/one-belt/>

Under the BRI, infrastructure projects like railways, ports and highways are constructed exclusively by Chinese companies with loans from Chinese state-owned banks. So far, China has invested more than US\$ 100 billion in these infrastructure projects. The estimated cost of 70 BRI economic corridors is US\$ 575 billion. According to the World Bank, the completion of the BRI projects will boost trade and reduce travel time in the economic corridors by 12 percent, and lift 7.6 million people from extreme poverty and increase incomes by 3.4 percent. However, the World Bank has also cautioned about the debt risks, stranded infrastructure, environmental and social risks, and corruption.³⁹

The Central Asian economies, too, earlier viewed BRI as their chance to blur their shared physical barriers with China-implemented cross-country connectivity projects. They also hoped that the BRI would once again enable them to assume centrality in terms in global trade. However,

quite unlike what they hoped, Beijing used the BRI as a geostrategic and geopolitical tool to merely strengthen and expand its own hegemonic quest in the region. The region only became a transit route for Central Asia and Europe-bound Chinese goods, while not resulting in clear benefits to the economic development of the region. China has successfully used the BRI to relieve the pressures of overproduction in the mainland and exploit the much-needed hydrocarbon reserves of the region, while landing the CARs in its deep debt trap.⁴⁰ By 2016, half of the external debt of Kyrgyzstan (US\$ 1.4 billion) and Tajikistan (US\$ 1.1 billion) comprised of loans from China's EXIM Bank. Debt from all other global institutions including the World Bank, IMF, Asian Development Bank and others, made up the other half.⁴¹

The BRI investments and loans to CARs increased trade between the two regions manifold. In 2016, trade reached US\$ 26,267.1 million⁴² against US\$ 1.5 billion in 2001.⁴³ China, like the Soviet Union, is primarily interested in importing raw materials, energy, and mining resources from the region, while flooding the Central Asian markets with their over-produced goods in Chinese industries and factories. For example, when the cargo train service was started in 2017 between Xian in China's Shaanxi Province and Uzbekistan, Tashkent sent 1,000 tonnes of cotton yarn to China, with the eventual goal of delivering 3,000 tonnes of cotton per month.⁴⁴ The other key exports from Central Asia are food products, iron ore, other metals and uranium. China imported 306.9 thousand tonnes of wheat, 123.7 thousand tonnes of sunflower seeds, and 44.5 thousand tonnes of other oil seeds from Kazakhstan alone.⁴⁵ Over 80 percent of Kazakhstan's exports to China comprised raw materials like ferrous and non-ferrous metals, while exports from Kyrgyzstan to China included raw materials for textiles like leather and wool (23 percent) and ferrous and non-ferrous metal waste (60 percent). Turkmenistan exports to China mainly constitute energy sources – 83 percent of total exports.⁴⁶

As a result, CARs, instead of benefitting from the BRI, continued to fare poorly on ease of doing business parameters. According to the World Bank data of 2019 that ranked 190 countries on an Ease of Trading Across Borders Index, Kyrgyzstan was ranked number 89, Kazakhstan, 105 Tajikistan 141 and Uzbekistan 152.⁴⁷ Factors such as regional competition, weak governance, economic stagnation, tension over water resources, and high cost of border trade are the main reasons for the CARs' poor ranking. China's infrastructure projects under the BRI are tactical and meant to only draw benefits for the mainland, not to aid the regional economic integration. Furthermore, the BRI failed to remove the hindrances of intraregional trade within the CARs as investments in road and infrastructure projects under the initiative are mostly bilateral. Of the total 51 road and infrastructure projects, only 18 are multilateral as shown in Table 1. Also, as shown in Table 2, Chinese investments in road and infrastructure projects in the region are at third place, exposing how China has clearly focused on exploiting the region for its own interests.

Table 1: Number of Bilateral Vs Multilateral Chinese projects in Central Asia

Country	Total by country		Road and Infrastructure		Energy connectivity		Trade and industrial development	
	Bilateral	Multilateral	Bilateral	Multilateral	Bilateral	Multilateral	Bilateral	Multilateral
Kazakhstan	100	2	13	1	20	0	60	1
Kyrgyzstan	41	5	8	3	5	0	16	1
Tajikistan	35	9	8	8	6	1	17	0
Uzbekistan	38	5	2	3	0	1	16	1
Turkmenistan	23	3	2	3	4	0	12	0
Total	237	24	33	18	46	2	127	3

Source: *BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese Projects, Central Asia Regional Data Review 20 (2019) 1–5*

Investments in Energy Infrastructure

China began making investments in the hydrocarbon reserves in CARs nearly three decades ago. It has already built cross-country pipelines through Central Asia to fetch gas from Turkmenistan, gas and oil from Kazakhstan and other CARs, to Xinjiang. Investments in CARs has been amongst President Xi Jinping's priority from the time he assumed office. China's investments in Central Asian oil and gas sector date back to 1997, when a US\$9-billion deal was signed with Kazakhstan and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). Since then, CNPC has become a leading investor in the oil and gas sector of CARs. It has also played an active role in opening the doors for other Chinese state-owned and private firms in the energy sector. After 1997, the CNPC obtained a majority of exploration licences for the Texaco-North Buzachi oil field in Kazakhstan, the Bagtyyarlyk gas contract area on the right bank of the Amu-Darya River, the South Yolotan field in Turkmenistan, and the Mingbulak field in the Namangan region of Uzbekistan.⁴⁸

The 3,666 km-long Central Asia-China gas pipeline that starts from Gedaim in Uzbekistan/ Turkmenistan and offloads gas at Xinjiang was completed at an estimated cost of US\$ 7.3 billion.⁴⁹ Constructed by CNPC, the pipeline transported 4.38 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas to China from Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in 2010. China's gas imports increased to 36.2 bcm via this pipeline in 2017.⁵⁰ As the demand for gas has increased tremendously in China and the existing network of pipelines is no longer sufficient, new pipelines – financed by Chinese state-owned companies – are being constructed to connect all the CARs gas reserves with China. The dependence on Chinese investments and gas pipeline grid has created huge constraints for CARs, especially Turkmenistan. Since 2017, following the cutting off of imports by Russia from the world's largest gas fields in Turkmenistan,

this isolated Central Asian country has become completely dependent on China for gas exports.⁵¹

The China-Kazakhstan crude oil pipeline connects Xinjiang and Kazakhstan. Other countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have also sought more cooperation with China in oil exploration. The China-Kazakhstan crude pipeline passes through a 1,500-km desert area, 340 km of marshes, 830 km of area that experience some of the world's strongest overland wind currents. The pipeline was completed in 2009 and the capacity reached to production of 12 million tonnes of crude oil in 2012. This capacity was doubled to 24 million tonnes in 2018.⁵² As shown in Table 2, most of the investments from Beijing were in hydrocarbons exploration and processing and energy connectivity sectors.

Table 2: Total investment of Chinese projects in Central Asia (US\$ millions)

	Rail & road connectivity	Energy connectivity	Industry	Agriculture & food	Hydrocarbon exploration & processing
Kazakhstan	14539	18849	10545	1049	37778
Turkmenistan	1402	9410	NA	NA	1403
Tajikistan	4515	4516	679	342	465
Kyrgyzstan	1773	2713	150	31	676
Uzbekistan	1269	205	923	28	2209
Total	23499	35693	12299	1451	55159

Source: BRI in Central Asia: Overview of Chinese Projects, Central Asia Regional Data Review 20 (2019) 1–5

The deals worth US \$30 billion including building an oil refinery in Kazakhstan, are among 22 agreements signed between China and Kazakhstan in 2013. In Kashagan, the discovery of the world's largest oil field increased Kazakhstan's offshore and on-shore oil reserves to an

estimated 37 billion barrels. The country now sells 8.3 percent of offshore oilfield to Beijing for US\$ 5 billion after the Kashagan deal in 2013.⁵³ In Kazakhstan, Chinese shares in the Kazakhstan hydrocarbon and uranium explorations are more than 60 percent and even some of the companies have exclusively 100-percent Chinese shares.⁵⁴ In Turkmenistan, China's largest natural gas supplier, President Xi Jinping has announced the opening of the world's second-biggest gas field in production. In Uzbekistan, another US\$ 15-billion deal was inked for oil, gas and uranium exploration.⁵⁵ In oil exploration and refineries, Sinopec, China's largest oil refiner, has constructed many facilities in the CARs. Sinopec has also bagged many contracts in the region for the modernisation of these facilities.

Gradually, with the economic and global ascent of China, Beijing has increasingly resorted to using coercive-assertive strategies without respecting the cultural identities of Central Asian countries, especially after 2017.⁵⁶ The ancient Silk Route that passed through the CARs established between the people of Xinjiang and Central Asia centuries-old cultural and ethnic bonds based on shared history, religion, language. After the announcement of the "great wall of iron" in 2017⁵⁷ to safeguard the China's restive western region of Xinjiang, more than one million Uyghurs, including Kazaks, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks⁵⁸ were sent to "re-education camps" in Xinjiang.⁵⁹ These people are forced to pledge loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), learn Mandarin and denounce Islam and their culture.⁶⁰

In the past three years, the people in Central Asia are increasingly worried about the fate of their ethnic brethren in neighbouring Xinjiang who have been subjected to a cultural onslaught by China. The Kazak foreign ministry have termed the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang a delicate issue.⁶¹ Though officially the CARs are reluctant to speak out on

the issue of re-education Camps because of their growing indebtedness to Chinese BRI investments,⁶² anti-Chinese sentiments are high, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan has witnessed protests against the Government's pronouncement to allow China to set up 55 factories that will deepen Kazakhstan's economic dependence on China. The situation has worsened to such an extent, that the government of Kazakhstan has arrested prominent anti-China activists to avert violence.⁶³ In Kyrgyzstan, there were protests against Beijing in January 2019.⁶⁴ In August 2019, more than 500 villagers in Kyrgyzstan entered a mine operated by Chinese company and injured 20 Han workers.⁶⁵

The CARs Countries Push Back

From 1991 onwards, Beijing has expanded its commercial footprint in the CARs countries. China has increased its access to the region's huge hydro-carbon resources, while flooding the markets of the region with Chinese products through Khorgos, a special economic zone and dry port on the Kazakh-China border. Khorgos, located in Xinjiang's Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, is a bustling duty-free and visa-free centre flooded with people from Kazakhstan and other CARs for discount deals on the over-produced Chinese goods.⁶⁶ More than 80 percent of the shipped goods at Khorgos go to the countries of the former Soviet Union, and 35 to 40 percent go to Uzbekistan alone.⁶⁷ The rotation of capital illustrates the classical form of colonialism in a new perspective – while China invested to buy the hydrocarbons of the region, it flooded the markets with finished goods without any regard for the region's indigenous industries and factories. Furthermore, most investments from China have come with Chinese workers and security personnel. The presence of Chinese security personnel in the region increased manifold⁶⁸ after the bombing in 2016 at the Chinese embassy in Kyrgyzstan.⁶⁹

By most accounts, China's BRI investments lack transparency. Out of the 68 countries that have agreed for Chinese investments under BRI, 23 face the risk of landing into China's debt trap.⁷⁰ In the case of CARs, especially, only three countries – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—have been able to sustain the Chinese debt with returns from hydrocarbons and uranium exports. However, the less resource-rich countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan already owe China an estimated US\$ 4 billion and US\$ 1.38 billion in loans, respectively. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were forced to insert a clause in their respective BRI agreements that transfer greater control over the assets to China if they defaulted in the repayment of loans. Under this clause, Beijing already acquired ownership of a lucrative gold mine in Tajikistan.⁷¹ In 2011, Tajikistan, where only six percent of the total land mass is arable, was forced to cede 2,000 hectares of that arable land exclusively to 1,500 Chinese farmers for rice cultivation.⁷² In this case, China not only exploited Tajikistan for its geostrategic advantage, but also for its food security. Stung by the experience of its neighbouring republics with China's BRI, resource-rich Kazakhstan has responded with its own plan of Nurly Zhol ('Bright Path') in 2015. Under this plan, US\$ 9 billion are being invested to upgrade and build 7,000 km of roads and 4,000 km of railways in Kazakhstan.⁷³

The Central Asian countries themselves are looking towards new partners like India to balance China. Such "suspicions" of China are not new. Buhar-Jiru, an adviser to the 18th-century political leader Abulai Khan of Kazakhstan, had used the metaphor of a rider and a horse to present his perception of China: "Russian yoke is made of leather that can gradually be worn out, while Chinese yoke is made of iron and one can't free oneself from it."⁷⁴ The CARs countries recognise that China's increased engagement in the region presents many opportunities; at the same time, China's hegemonic thrust has provoked mistrust among its civil societies.⁷⁵ Under these conditions, as most of the Central Asians

regimes are authoritarian with weak governmental institutions, they are likely to bandwagon with China anyway.⁷⁶ “Bandwagoning involves unequal exchange; the vulnerable state makes asymmetrical concessions to the dominant power and accepts a subordinate role ... Bandwagoning is an accommodation to pressure (either latent or manifest) ... Most important of all, bandwagoning suggests a willingness to support or tolerate illegitimate actions by the dominant ally.”⁷⁷ CAR under such pressure, is trying to balance China with India. The CARs countries are seeking closer relations with India by enhancing diplomatic channels, making more frequent mutual visits, signing various agreements, and pushing for stronger trade relations as shown in Table 3.

SPOTLIGHT ON INDIA

India has a long history of cultural and commercial relations with Central Asia, facilitated by its geographical proximity and the Silk Route. However, India-Central Asia relations stagnated in the 20th century, due to the Anglo-Russian rivalry in the “Great Game” and the consequent emergence of nation-states with differing ideologies. The Great Game which started in 1830 was intense rivalry between British and Russia empires over Central Asia and the trade routes. Britain sought to influence or control much of Central Asia to buffer the “crown jewel” of its empire, and Russia sought to expand its territory and sphere of influence.⁷⁸ After the breakup of the Soviet Union and the formation of the independent republics in Central Asia, India redesigned its ties with the region. The heads of states of the CARs countries officially visited New Delhi, and India sent a semi-official delegation led by former Union Minister R.N. Mridha to Tashkent (Uzbekistan) and Almaty (Kazakhstan) to establish diplomatic relations in 1991-92. As CARs were reeling under economic crises, India provided a much-needed financial aid of US \$10-15 million to the region. Then Prime Minister Narasimha Rao visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in 1993, followed by Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1995.⁷⁹

Subsequently, India revived its “Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation” (ITEC) programme to provide assistance to the CARs countries, as well as capacity building through training programmes, study tours, technology transfers and, in some cases, aid for disaster relief. The ITEC programmes covered information technology, management, journalism, diplomacy, entrepreneurship, and banking. New Delhi also signed the Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPA) with three of the five CARs—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—to stimulate defence cooperation and deepen trade relations. Through various initiatives under the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), India also stressed on rekindling the country’s ancient mutual cultural linkages with the region. Until today, the ICCR organises cultural conferences, and provides scholarships to students of CARs to study Indian arts and culture. New Delhi has established Indian Cultural Centres in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. At the India-Central Asia Dialogue in January 2019 at Samarkand, India’s External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj remarked, “We (India-Central Asia) are bound together through shared history, cultural linkages and common habits and traditions.”⁸⁰

New Delhi’s constructivism is more concretely manifested in its ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy. The policy, launched in 2012, aimed to enhance India’s political, economic, historical and cultural connections with Central Asia. Portraying India’s Connect Central Asia policy as a means to reconnect with Central Asia, “with which we are bound by the silken bonds of centuries of common history,” the then External Affairs Minister, E. Ahmad said, “[The] policy is based on pro-active political, economic and people-to-people engagement with Central Asian Countries, both individually and collectively.”⁸¹ However, India’s strategic, economic and cultural interests remained severely curtailed as such aim was stonewalled by Pakistan’s lack of willingness to allow India passage through its territory.

Connectivity Projects

The planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline—which could have helped meet the energy needs of South Asia—has been stalled since 2006.⁸² Consequently, India has had to explore other options for establishing connectivity with CARs to obtain direct access to the hydrocarbon-rich and geostrategically important region as well as war-torn Afghanistan. New Delhi announced its plans to invest in Chabahar port in the Sistan-Balochistan province of Iran in 2003. However, the major push to developing the port came after the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) between India and Iran in 2015.

Map 4. Chabahar port



US-Iran relations, which were already strained after the unilateral withdrawal of the US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018 and the imposition of sanctions on Iran, became more hostile after the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. The US strike that killed Soleimani took place barely a week after Iran and India reviewed ties after the 2+2 dialogue between US and India in Washington.⁸³ During that dialogue, the US gave India a narrow exemption for the development of Chabahar as a strategic port developed jointly by Iran, Afghanistan and India to trade with CARs. The written assurances by the US include facilitation of funds from the global banks for the purchase of equipment worth US\$85 million to be erected at Chabahar port for warehouses, cranes for loading and unloading and multi-purpose terminals. However, this commitment to India is grounded on certain assurances by India, foremost of which is that Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) cannot participate in the project.⁸⁴

The importance accorded by India to the Chabahar port – despite the uncertainties brought about by the US-Iran tensions– can be gauged by the budgetary allocation to the project, which doubled to INR 1000 million in budget 2020-21 from INR 450 million in the previous year. At the same time, Indian firms are reluctant to invest in the port, posing challenges to India's plans to build and operationalise the Chabahar port. In 2018 India succeeded in partially opening the port; it is not clear when the entire port will be fully operationalised.

Most of CARs countries' leaders view India's Chabahar port as an opportunity to diversify their export markets and control the ambitions of China. These CARs nations have admitted New Delhi into the Ashgabat Agreement,⁸⁵ which allows India to use the existing land connectivity networks to facilitate trade and commercial interactions with both Central Asia and Eurasia and also access the natural resources of the region. One of the railway lines under the Ashgabat Agreement

that connects Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan became operational in 2014. This route gives landlocked Central Asia access to Iran's Persian Gulf seaports. India can use this route to overcome Pakistan's hostility and Afghan instability – and give itself access to markets of CARs and high-value minerals in the region including uranium, copper, titanium, ferroalloys, yellow phosphorus, iron ore, and rolled metal. Kazakhstan has already made a state policy to increase the non-oil exports to 50 percent by 2025.⁸⁶ As the Ashgabat Agreement gives India direct access to CARs, it can exercise its goodwill across the region by using the Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan railway line as shown in Map 4.

Exploring New Opportunities

The growing geostrategic and security concerns regarding BRI has forced New Delhi to fix its ineffectual strategy towards Central Asia, marred by direct access and delayed investments in Chabahar port till 2015 because of US sanctions. Soon after assuming office, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited all the Central Asian countries in July 2015. These visits boosted the momentum of India's "Connect Central Asia" policy of 2012 and set in motion the next stage of cooperation. The visits also marked a major shift in India's diplomatic relations with the region. For the first time, New Delhi was looking at the region as a geographical unit. Eventually, the CARs became the link that also placed the Eurasian region firmly in New Delhi's zone of interest. India and CARs signed several deals on a range of issues including security, energy, trade and culture, with Prime Minister Modi reiterating the need to rejuvenate India's ancient traditional and socioeconomic ties with the region.⁸⁷

Prime Minister Modi's visits to the Central Asian countries—the first such visits by an Indian head of government to the region—were reciprocated by visits to India by the presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and twice by Uzbekistan. Clearly, this has marked the

mutual desire of India and the Central Asian states to strengthen their bilateral and trilateral arrangements.

**Table 3. India–CARs High-Level Official Visits and Agreements
Consequently Signed**

	Who visited	Country	Agreements	Year
1	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
2	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
3	Prime Minister of India	Kyrgyzstan	1) Agreement on Defense Cooperation. 2) MoU and Cooperation in the field of Elections 3) Culture	
4	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 Tourism 4) Defence agreement	2015
5	Prime Minister of India	Tajikistan	1) Exchange of Note Verbale (NV) on setting up of Computer Labs in 37 Schools in Tajikistan.	2015
6	President of India	Tajikistan	1) MoU on 'Cooperation on Peaceful Use of Space Technology for Development' 2) MoU for Renewable Energy cooperation	2018
7	External Affairs Minister, India	Uzbekistan	1) Inauguration of India-Central Asia Dialogue	2019
7	President of Tajikistan	India	1) Agreement to prevent financing of terrorism and money laundering	2016
8	President of Kyrgyzstan	India	1) MoU for youth exchange programmes 2) MoU on agriculture and food security	2016
9	President of Uzbekistan	India	1) MoUs on Tourism, Agriculture & Allied Sectors, Health & Medical Sciences, Pharmaceutical Industry, Science & Technology and Innovation, Military Education	2018

9	President of Uzbekistan	India	1) Agreement on importing uranium from Uzbekistan 2) MoU on cooperation between Gujarat and the Andijan region of Uzbekistan	2019
10	Defence minister of India	Uzbekistan	1) Military medicine 2) Military education	2019
11	Uzbekistan's Internal Affairs Minister	India	1) Security cooperation 2) Counter-Terrorism 3) Human trafficking	2019

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes the following recommendations for India to increase its footprint constructively in the Central Asian region.

- 1) India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, 12 years after it became an observer. From its inception, SCO was economically dominated by Beijing and politically influenced by Russia. India becoming a full member of SCO opened avenues for the country to shape its ties with the CARs countries. The SCO can also serve as a venue for keeping a watch on Pakistan, which became a full member in 2017.⁸⁸ At SCO summits, India has utilised the opportunities to conduct meetings with representatives of the CARs nations on the sidelines. The SCO summit scheduled in New Delhi in late 2020 can help both India and CARs to take their relationships to newer heights. As a report in a Russian newspaper observed, “Indian presence in the region should balance the growing Chinese influence and prevent the southern part of the CIS from becoming the region of Beijing’s undivided dominance.”⁸⁹
- 2) In the last five years, India has invested in projects such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The INSTC made substantial progress after India joined the Customs Convention

on International Transport of Goods under the cover of TIR Carnets (TIR Convention). The cargo transported through INSTC has increased to 287,000 tonnes in 2018 from a meagre 27,000 tonnes in 2017, or an increase of 963 percent. Trade figures of the first two months of 2019 suggest that the volume of cargo will be 600,000 tonnes in the year.⁹⁰ In February 2019, Kazakhstan’s ambassador to India, Bulat Sarsenbayev, said, “Our trade is growing but the potential is much more. Chabahar and Bandar Abbas are part of one project in reality. Chabahar will be completed, they (Kazakhstan) will construct a railway from Chabahar to the Iranian railway network; it will later go to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.”⁹¹ The opening of Chabahar port and agreements signed between Central Asian countries and India showed positive results in trade (See Table 4.)

Table 4: India’s Trade with Central Asian Countries, 2015-16 to 2017-18
(Value in US\$ millions)

Country	2015-16		2016-17		2017-18	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
Kyrgyzstan	1.79	25.11	1.48	30.44	30.94	28.59
Tajikistan	9.98	22.26	21.82	20.44	50.29	23.94
Turkmenistan	46.97	68.53	21.32	57.60	26.15	54.31
Uzbekistan	55.86	96.64	45.26	108.97	101.67	132.72
Kazakhstan	352.93	151.91	521.29	120.88	907.43	125.37
Total	467.53	364.45	610.88	338.33	1116.49	364.93

Source: Department of Commerce – Export Import Data Bank <http://www.commerce.nic.in/eidb/ergnq.asp> (accessed on 3 Oct 2019)


- 3) Given the direct access through Chabahar port and rising anti-China sentiments amongst the population of the region,⁹² India can

use its soft diplomacy to take the opportunities presented in the resource-rich region. It is in India's interest to expeditiously finalise the much-awaited Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The EAEU includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia and covers a bulk of the Eurasian land mass with a population of 183 million and GDP of approximately US\$5 trillion. If finalised without delay, the FTA with EAEU will give India direct access to the region's huge hydrocarbon resources as well as open doors to the Eurasian markets.

- 4) The CARs are working to strengthen intraregional economic integration by taking steps like the issuance of the Silk Visa, which will allow foreign tourists a single-visa entry to all countries in the region.⁹³ The regional integration will give more leverage to India because New Delhi will also look towards CARs as a geographical unit with socio-economic homogeneity. For India to be able to use this opportunity, its Connect Central Asia policy should be complemented by closer government-to-government ties and purposeful actions that translate policies into practice. The agreements signed between India and Central Asia particularly after should be given priority in New Delhi especially those on counterterrorism, defence and military technology, supply of chemical products, Health and Medical Sciences, Pharmaceutical Industry, Science & Technology, and Innovation.
- 5) New Delhi should give tax rebates to investors from India who show willingness in exploring the Central Asian markets and invest in the strategic Chabahar port with some guarantee and sureties. Furthermore, the tax rebates can play a catalytic role in reviving the close cultural and economic bonds between India and Central Asia.

After the independence of CARs, both China and India interacted with these countries for reasons of security, geo-strategic purposes, energy needs, and trade. China emerged as the dominant player—as compared to India—by providing loans and investing heavily in the region. However, Chinese dominance in CARs became exploitative enough to fit the classical definition of colonial trade—in which one country becomes a raw material appendage of another. After the inception of BRI in 2013, China became more assertive and tried to monopolise the region without any due regard to CARs and their ethnic brethren in Xinjiang.

The CARs started looking for new partners like India to balance China's hegemonic pursuits. India, for its part, reinvigorated its strategy towards the region by the 'Connect Central Asia' policy in 2012. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the region in 2015 set in motion the next stage of cooperation. CARs also made many official visits to New Delhi and signed MoUs and agreements on counterterrorism, military cooperation, and trade. India's SCO membership, the partial opening of Chabahar port, and written assurance from US, added vigour to India's constructive engagements.

How far India and Central Asian countries will take this renewed, centuries-old relations remains to be seen. India must take into consideration its future energy needs and the market potential of the greater Eurasian region, and seize the opportunity to stretch its economic borders while maintaining its constructive approach. 

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