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India's foreign policy in the post-cold war era: Initiatives, challenges and prospects India's connect central Asia policy

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Abstract
India's Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP), launched in 2012, represents a strategic change in New Delhi's foreign policy that aims to promote intensive political, economic and security cooperation with five Central Asian Republics. In the context of a rapidly changing world system - marked by multiproofing, the decline of American monipotia, the revival of Russia, and India's vocal regional posture - India's engagement with Central Asia has achieved renewes within the international relationship discourse. This paper analyzes the development of CCAP within the broad structure of India's foreign policy in an Eurasian space. It critically assesses recent developments such as institutionalization-Central Asia Summit (202,2024), India's expansion footprint in regional connectivity projects like International North-South Transport Corridor (Instc) and Chabahar Port, and China led a road initiative to lead a road initiative (Bri). India's soft power tools - Buddhist diplomacy, education exchange and development partnership - are tested as instruments of ideal impact in the region. Nevertheless, India's outreach faces structural and strategic obstacles: lack of direct land connectivity due to Pakistan, fluid security status in US Afghanistan, and China-Rasi-Russian dominance in regional geopolitics. This paper applies the principles of complex intellectuals and regionalism to evaluate India's strategy and has the ability to shape a stable, multipolar eurasian architecture. Recently, the summit, driving on policy changes and multilateral busyness, paper argues that India's Central Asia engagement is no longer peripheral, but central for its broad strategic stones. In the era of reconstruction and new regional orders, India's CCAP promises not only for bilateral advantage, but also to contribute to the regional order based on more balanced, inclusive and rules in Eurasia. However, due to lack of direct access in India, Chinese infrastructure dominance, volatility in Afghanistan, and limited private sector engagement continues to face important invoices including geographical boundaries. Paper argues that it is important to strengthen the Indo-Middle-Central Asia relations with constant strategic investment, regional groups such as SCOs, and soft power.

Keywords: India’s foreign policy, centra Asia policy, post-cold war era

Introduction
To reduce challenges to re -join Central Asia and expand the regional appearance, India launched the "Connect Central Asia Policy" in 2012. The policy enables it to pursue the link with Central Asia through Afghanistan, but is yet to secure a regional strategic appearance compared to other powers. According to former India Foreign Minister Shri Ahmed, the "Connect" policy is based on both individual and collectively, active political, economic and people to engage with mid-south Asian countries. While Russia defeated India in the race for military bases and geopolitical influence, China has crossed it for markets and Jio-economic presence-an area of activity that makes a heavy component of CCAP of India. Later, cooperation between India and Central Asian Republic, energy market. India's main focus as part of the "Connect" policy has been on Afghanistan. Over the last decades, it has invested US $ 2B in the country's infrastructure and has won the rights to develop attendance and other deposits. India, Pakistan, China can benefit greatly from the connectivity initiative to be advanced throughout Eurasia. The empires that now used to rule the occupied areas of the three states, once had already extracted major geo-economic benefits from Silk Road by convenience of transcendental circulation of goods and ideas. India's relationship with the Middle East was mainly focused on Iraq, Palestine and Egypt. India also used the major Suez Canal (located in Egypt) and Hormuz (Iran). These channels were not only important for India to be able to trade routes located in the Middle East region such as Bab Al-Mandeb

(between Yemen and Somalia) as well as the trade with the MENA region, but also served as a transit point for Indian goods going to Western Europe and the United States. At that time India's major trade partners included both oil and due to the production of oil and their sea routes in countries such as Egypt, Iran and Iraq.

Cold war after era

Kenneth Waltz, "International politics is not foreign policy". India's foreign policy has been continuously revealed and national interests continue to reveal, although the UPA government is a cause of concern for separate bridges and pressure policy makers due to coalition politics. National interests can be considered or may be real but the issue of national security is supreme. The late 1980s and early 1990s. India had to improve its relations to imbalance its laxity on the international landscape with India and other Western countries due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. India established formal diplomatic relations with Israel, South Africa, made efforts to form relations with China, Pakistan and other members of the South Asian region and the desire to attract foreign investments and the discovery of oil and natural gas led to more international engagement with Asian and African countries. The Connect Central Asia Policy of India was focused on joining the Central Asian countries Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan during the Cold War. 1 India Central Asia Dialogue was held on 12–13 June 2012 at Bishek, Kyrgyzstan. India is now looking at the region through its Connect Central Asia Policy structure, which is based on supporting political, economic and people for interaction with Central Asian countries. India wants to play more roles in Shanghai Organizations and Membership. India signed strategic partnership agreements with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan in areas of education, sports, textiles, social and labor relations, health.

Palgrav Maxmillan has talked about 5 major changes in foreign policy orients:

- Consensus to transform a Socilaist Society into a Modern Capitalist one
- Emphasis from "Politics" to "Economics"
- From Third Worldism to the promotion of self interests
- Rejection of "anti west" mode of foreign policy
- From Idealism to Pragmatism

India's aspiration to become a dominant and key role player in international relations and achieve great power status remain a distant dream. India still fails to project it's power abroad in a coherent and consistent manner. It must not remain aloof to new developments and tranformations arising in the international field.

Unlocking India's strategic capacity in the Middle East

The construction of a gas pipeline spread from Russia for Central Asia and then Russia is a proposal that is proceeding to facilitate its resource acquisition strategy in India and Central Asia. Piplin will transport gas from Russia to Kashgar in Zingjian, China via Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, before crossing India through Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh. The CASA-100 can already be expanded to increase electricity exports to Pakistan and India. As Tapi, it will bring India and Pakistan closer together, if not politically, at least financially, to ensure that they are on a continuous development path and are not an important source of security threats for neighbors. India imports dried fruits from the area when exporting cotton, raw materials, zinc, uranium, iron, steel, tea, textiles, IT technologies, pharmaceuticals. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, India has been included in the initiative of hydropower development. India is interested in seeing the Central Asian states as members of the SAARC, as well as more generally the outline of its cooperation with other states in the Central Asia and the Middle East, including SAFTA, Multisectoral Technical Economic and Cooperation for the twelfth Gulf of the twelfth Gulf of Bengal initiatives, and the South East Asian Nations. India's relations with external actors in Central Asia demonstrate competitive and collaborative mobility. China's growth as a global power and it is expanding India's maritime and continental appearance in the respected regions, and potentially changing Iran into a primary component of Beijing's transcontinental resources acquisition strategy and a platform of power launch with Remlands and Eurasia. China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), in its current design, passes through Pakistan and is a ruled region in Kashmir, which India disputes. India's positive relationship with Iran is also important to carry forward transcontinental connections in Central Asia and India's strategic presence, especially if Iran and United States begin to improve relations

- Import of crude oil in India comes from Iran,
- Indian refineries are defined to process Iranian oil,
- India has deep cultural relations with Iran,
- Iran is a friend of India and also acts as a counterweight for India, Pakistan,
- India has a royal wealth in India. The USA must abandon its policy, "If you are not with us, you are against us".

India's central Asia policy through John Meirsheimer's lens of offensive realism

The Connect Central Asia Policy of India, when viewed through the lens of the theory of aggressive realism of John Mercymeer, reflects a strategic effort by India to maximize its security and its impact in the important field for geopolitical interests. Aggressive realism suggests that great powers are naturally motivated to find dominance to ensure existence in a chaotic international system in their respective fields. India's Outreach for Central Asia-International North-South Transport Corridor (Instc) was marked by diplomatic enclosure, energy cooperation, defense participation, and connectivity projects-can be interpreted as a calculation for the increasing presence of rival powers in China and Pakistan. By complicating the Central Asian republics through multilateral platforms such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), establishing military relations (e.g., with Tajikistan), and chasing the routes of infrastructure that bypassing the hostile region, demanding India power, is demanding energy routes. This behavior aligns with the main perception of Mearsheimer that regional powers serve aggressively when opportunities arise and to prevent the relative power and prevent potential hegms from dominating their circumference. Therefore, India's Connect Central Asia Policy is not only economic or cultural - it is an expression of a realistic drive to shape the regional balance of power in its favor.

Michael Barnett's taxonomy of power to analyze the middle east strategy

Seeing India's Connect Central Asia Policy through the classification of Michael Barnett's power relations - which classifies the power as compulsory, institutional, structural

and producer - as a fine understanding of how India is entangling the area beyond the traditional hard power dynamics. The compulsory power, which is defined as direct control, practice on another, is relatively limited in India's Central Asia policy. India lacks immediate military or economic lests for the Central Asian states, especially when compared to the entangled influence of Russia and China. However, examples such as India's military collaboration with Tajikistan, especially the Farcor airbase, depict the selective use of this form of power to increase strategic effects. Institutional power is more prominently visible. India is actively shaping regional norms and policies through its participation in multilateral institutions such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where it uses its membership for voice concerns on terrorism, trade and connectivity. Through institutional engagement, India indirectly wants to affect decision -making processes and embeddes its interests within the regional structure. Structural power - which refers to shaping the structure within which the states define their interests - is reflected in India Efforts to create alternative connectivity and business networks. Lowering its dependence on the dominated routes of China and Russia, the target is to convert India's investment into regional trade architecture into the International North-South Transport Corridor (Instc) and India's Chabahar Port in Chabahar Port in Iran. By doing this, India tried to re -configure regional dependence and interdependent with ways that serve their long -term strategic interests. Producer power, which worries about shaping identity, discourses and social practices, is also evident in India's soft power diplomacy. India invites shared historical, cultural and civilized relations with Central Asia - which lies in Sufism, business routes and educational exchange - to build a story of mutual respect and historical partnership. This discourse locates India as a gentle, culturally familiar actor, which is sometimes contrary to the notion of neo-liberalism associated with China's belt and road initiative. In short, the Taxonomy of the Barnet helps to explain how India's policy of Central Asia is multidimensional. While being forced into tremendous power, India is taking advantage of institutional, structural and productive forms to shape the geopolitical orientation of the region by cultivating influences, creating strategic depths and coaling with its national interests.

India's new Middle East strategy takes shape

The Middle East policy of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is often seen as both successful and surprising. The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas has made the diplomatic balance of New Delhi between the "new" Middle East and it is traditional support for "old". The new is defined by close proximity to New Delhi's United States's security ecosystem, while the old is exposed by a visible change away from the idea of non -conversion. Along with the Gulf countries, the situation of India as well as terrorist groups was also reflected by the Gulf countries. This was a result of American pressure on Gulf countries, which was a result of focusing on all support for terrorist groups, as well as focusing on bomb blasts carried out by Al Qaeda and United Arab Emirates in Saudi Arabia, resulting in focus on that it focused on the "remote enemy" (America) (America) (America) (America) (America)) and, therefore, therefore, a better countertoriarridge from American area, "Middle East" sector " Included in, which could provide security guarantee in the region. As a result, Indian relations with the Gulf countries improved both bilateral and multilateral, with seven countries signed various memorandums to the GCC countries in buying oil. In the case of Qatar, India has also begun to increase its import of liquid natural gas (LNG) in its dialect to buy a cleaner source of energy. 3 All these have kept India in a strong position to Gulf nations, one that India did not do a decade or two decades ago. The Modi government also signed adequate agreements and advanced relations with these countries and demonstrated its diplomatic cleverness even while maneuvering around the Intra-GCC struggle. Currently, under the Modi administration, India has seen many high-profile foreign visits. This has led to new development about border security and intelligence cooperation when both the Middle East and South Asia are monitoring the Islamic State and Jihadi actors such as Al Qaeda and its colleagues. Bilateral trade shot up to about 5 $ billion, with arms purchases from Israel alone for a fifth of this business. Relations are strengthened by Indian migrant people on a large scale of this region. India's relations with the Gulf states traditionally revolve around trade and oil. Despite the increased border tension between India and Pakistan, India was invited as a respected guest of the biennial organization of the Islamic Cooperation Summit in Abu Dhabi, UAE in March 2019. This innings was shown the most at that time. Despite Pakistan's frequent objections, the invitation was extended and continued. A week after New Delhi, it decided to cancel the special status of Kashmir; Saudi Arabia is showing a new desire to have a better relationship with India before worrying about Kashmir, when Saudi Aramco announced in August 2019 that it would invest $ 15 billion in India in 2019. In the early years after independence, the Indian Foreign Policy put itself in position in opposition to the US in Asia, especially on regional security issues. This trendline ended well in the 21st century in India's regional policies. The previous barriers have been abandoned amid growing rest levels with the presence of America in India's neighborhood. New Delhi no longer looks at the Middle East through Pakistan lens and has started appreciating its huge stakes in regional security. Following some of these changes, India has the first part of India's participation in the multinational exercise Bright Star in September 2023. It is a series of biennial military exercises led by Egypt and America. More than 30 countries including Pakistan participated in the 2023 edition of the practice.

Bilateral and multilateral dialogue and connectivity projects

Between 2020 and the present, India's engagement with the Middle East has deepened through both bilateral and multilateral dialogues, as well as a series of connectivity initiatives that reflect a strategic development in their foreign policy. The change began to gain momentum during the final years of Donald Trump's presidential post, which saw a renovation of the US policy in the region - especially the Abraham Agreement of 2020, which normalized relations between Israel and several billion states including the UAE and Bahrain. India began to rebuild its Middle East policy from a traditional, energy-centered and migrant-centered approach centered around strategic, economic and technical cooperation, recognizing the transformative capability of these developments. Under Trump, U.S. Has

pushed for close cooperation among its colleagues in West Asia, creating a favorable environment for India to carry forward multilateral initiatives such as the I2U2 group (India, Israel, UAE and United States), which emerged in 2021 and later matured under American administrators. The aim of this platform is to promote joint investment in important areas such as food security, renewable energy, water and technology, and represents a significant development in India's foreign policy - which ranges from passive bilateralism to active multilateralism in the region. The i2U2 also throws light on how India is taking advantage of changing geo -political alignment to integrate itself in the West Asian Economic Infrastructure and Supply Series. Another major initiative was the Indo-Midil East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which was declared in 2023 on the occasion of the G20 summit in New Delhi. IMEC implemented India an integrated transport and trade corridor connecting India with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and eventually Europe. It provides a strategic counter for China's belt and road initiative by promoting the development of transparent infrastructure and increasing inter-regional connectivity. This initiative is not only a diplomatic success for India, but also reflects the approach to a mature foreign policy that seeks long-term economic and geopolitical dividends through regional participation. India's foreign policy on the Middle East has also benefited from continuous bilateral dialogues with countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman, focusing on business diversification, defense cooperation and investment in technology and startups. The Trump Yuga opened the gates for a more open strategic dialogue in the Gulf, which India raised its role as a reliable partner.

These enclosure to be developed indicate a comprehensive Indian strategy for the situation as a major bridge between Asia and Europe through the Middle East, reflecting a practical, multi-vegetable foreign policy approach in the rapidly changing world system.

In 2003, India and Iran initially reached an agreement to cooperate to increase trade and transport connections in Central Asia, focusing on directing them to the Chabahar port of Iran located in the Indian Ocean. However, this would require an additional ten years, before the two sides could come on an agreement with Afghanistan, eventually achieved in 2016. The progress of the Chabahar port and two primary aspects with the infrastructure with it is important for India. First, it facilitates easy access to oil imports from Iran. Secondly, it probably serves as an imbalance for the initiative of Chinese trade and development in Central Asia and Middle East, especially its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In particular, the Chabahar region presents an option for China's efforts with the aim of increasing the impact in the region, including the initiative to increase the port of Gwadar on the Pakistani side of the border. At the G20 summit in September 2023, India unveiled the ambition to build an economic corridor between the subcontinent and Europe, along with the US and Saudi Arabia. In the fifth round of 'Two Plus Two' dialogue, further advancement of Indo-American cooperation was observed in the Middle East. The joint statement released at the end of the talk welcomed India's complete membership of the multinational joint maritime forces (CMF), headquartered in Bahrain. The decision to become a full member of India's 38-nation CMF is in the Arabian Sea and Africa's horny water and is led by an American Admiral. It wants to protect marine safety in a huge body of water that hosts communication to some of the world's most busy sea lines. In all these years, India's decision to separate from CMF was based on the underlying impulsion to perform unilateral tasks rather than an alliance. Pakistan's membership in CMF was also a dampaner coalition membership.

Relations after 2021 Taliban acquisition and China's BRI implications

India's foreign policy has seen significant reconstruction in recent years, especially China's detailed belt and road initiative (BRI) and shifting in response to the Jio political realities after the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021. China's BRI, launched in 2013, has been seen as a strategic tool by India which uses Beijing to expand its influence in Asia, Africa and Europe. New Delhi has consistently opposed BRI, mainly about the concerns of sovereignty, especially about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. But beyond regional sensitivity, India's opposition also stems from BRI's widespread strategic implications. It looks at the initiative by China as an attempt by China to make China-centered global orders that is through debt diplomacy and infrastructure control. In response, India has taken deliberate steps to offer alternative development and connectivity models. This has strengthened partnerships with similar -ideology countries through initiatives such as Quad (quadrilateral security dialogue), which incorporates the US, Japan and Australia. The revival and growing institutionalization of the quad after 2017 marked a significant twist point in India's foreign policy, aligning it with other democracy, which unbalanced China's growing outspoint in Indo-Pacific. India has also launched its connectivity and development initiative. Projects such as the Indo-Central East-European Economic Corridor (IMEC), International North-South Transport Corridor (Instc), and increased collaboration with ASEAN countries reflect their intentions of strategic infrastructure and building economic corridors that provide viable options to BRI. Additionally, India has greatly promoted its development aid for neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, which offers concession lines of credit, grant aid and capacity-manufacturing assistance with the objective of combating China's economic impact in South Asia. In the Middle East, China's approach has focused a low focus on military appearance. The Modi administration has expressed concern about China's growing economic and the presence of Navy within the region. Especially anxiety for India is that China has the development of ports that are entitled to double use capabilities, both serve trade objectives and enable Navy Shakti Launch (Leo, 2015). India and China have nurtured effective cooperation on the Gulf region for energy supply. The formation of a collaborative task force to identify regions for mutual coop-arguments in energy domains is an example approach. This includes strategies to reduce the challenges caused by ups and downs in crude oil prices and to increase their collective impact during the interaction with OPEC (organization of Petroleum Exports countries). After 10 years of competition on oil and gas reservoirs in the Middle East, these two Asian juggles have joined the army in a novel cooperative venture.

The 2021 Taliban acquisition in Afghanistan tested India's foreign policy flexibility. The sudden collapse of the Ashraf

Ghani government and the re -establishment of the Taliban rule disrupted India's strategic investments in Afghanistan, including development projects worth over $ 3 billion. Traditionally, India had maintained a policy of non-discharge with the Taliban, supporting the democratic process in Kabul and the civil government. However, the changed reality on the ground inspired a practical revaluation. Without formally identifying the Taliban rule, India started a limited diplomatic outreach, which includes reopening its embassy in Kabul in 2022, with a technical team to oversee human assistance. This change indicates India's desire to practically engage the will of India, protecting its safety interests. One of the most important concerns for India has been a possible revival of terrorist network in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, especially the relationship of the Haqqani network with Pakistan-based terrorist groups. India has demanded to strengthen security partnership with Central Asian Republic and to increase intelligence cooperation with Russia and Iran and monitor and reduce the threats of terrorism across the border. The acquisition of the Taliban has also inspired New Delhi to intensify its outreach for regional powers like Iran and to attach more deeply with multilateral platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to intensify its outreach and maintain strategic relevance in Afghanistan and Central Asia. In short, India's foreign policy has evolved into a more agile and practical approach, balanced with idealism with strategic needs. While maintaining its traditional principles of strategic autonomy and non-composition, India has embraced issue-based alignment and forged partnerships to secure its national interests. Whether it is providing a reliable option for China's BRI or suited to the geopolitical dynamics after the teliban in Afghanistan, India's foreign policy now reflects a mixture of strategic realism, regional engagement and global ambitions.

Conclusion

India's Connect Central Asia Policy stands at a decisive intersection as the global order goes through deep changes. Initially in 2012, emphasizing cultural, historical and economic linkage was launched as a soft power-LED initiative, the policy has developed into a multi-dimensional strategy by turning the policy geopolitical dynamic dynamics, regional security mandatory, and India's growing aspirations as a global power. The rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, the re -combination of power alignment in the Middle East, and the emergence of new multilateral outlines have forced everyone to re -order India. As we look at 2025 and beyond, it is clear that India's engagement with Central Asia will no longer be limited to historical apathy or cultural diplomacy, but instead will inspire strategic interests, economic imperatives and the need to secure regional effects in a rapid multipulic world. Changing world system - from the weakening of American monipotia, the vigor of China, and the revival of regional middle powers - is displayed as both challenges and opportunities for India. Since major powers compete for the impact in Eurasia, India strategically leading itself as a reliable, democratic and economically viable partner. The growing prominence of forums such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and growing bilateral relations with Central Asian Republic of India shows the intention of securing energy supply, combating terrorism and creating an alternative connectivity corridor such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (Instc). India's frequent support for a multi -polar Asia further complements its Central Asia strategy, making it attached to the great power rivals with regional actors.

In addition, India's outreach indicates a tectonic shift in its regional diplomacy through a groundbreaking initiative like India-Central East-Europe-Europe Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and participation in I2U2 groups (India, Israel, UAE and United States). These initiatives are more than economic undertakings-they symbolize strategic entry into India's trans-regional connectivity framework that bypass traditional chokes and align with western and bay interests. At a time when the Middle East is bringing diversity in its participation beyond the West, India has deployed itself as a civilized partner with modern economic capacity, capable of balanced with competitive actors like Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE. Since India plays a more outspoken global role in the coming era, its policies of Central Asia and Middle East will probably be converted into a broad "extended neighborhood" vision. This will require continuous investment in diplomatic capital, connectivity infrastructure, energy cooperation and defense cooperation. In addition, India should be agile and responsible for regional instability, especially in Afghanistan and West Asia, while taking advantage of multilateral platforms project projecting effects. The changing world system does not only provide a platform to India - it demands from a growing performance of a growing power. Connect Central Asia Policy, once peripheral, is now central for strategic stones of India, and its development would be an important indicator how India successfully navigates the complexities of global geopolitics in the coming decades.

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