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## Role Of India In Regional Integrations In Eurasia

India is considered one of the rising powers in international relations and a candidate for future regional hegemon. Though a regional hegemon, India has been unwilling to engage in region-building to create stability in the conflict-ridden region. Moreover, India has been reactive rather than proactive in creating regionalism, as seen in the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). How do we explain the puzzle of India's hesitance of involving region-building? Which International Relations theory best explains the behavior of India? I argue that liberalism and constructivism fit to explain the behavior of India. In terms of constructivism, Indian identity, shaped by long colonialism and struggle for independence and by establishing non-alignment movement during the Cold War, prevents India from taking much active role beyond its border. Over conscientious about its sovereignty, India is less willing to be bound by any regional organization. Regarding Liberalism, the protectionist policies caused by the domestic structure of protective industry hinder India's regionalism efforts. However, seeing other regionalism efforts around, India takes small steps in Eurasian regionalism.

**Keywords:** Eurasian Regionalism, Eurasian Economic Union, Belt and Road Initiative, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, India.

## Avrasya'da Bölgesel Entegrasyonlarda Hindistan'ın Rolü

Hindistan, uluslararası ilişkilerde yükselen güçlerden biri ve gelecekteki bölgesel hegemon adayı olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Ancak Hindistan bölgesel bir hegemon olarak hareket etme ve çatışmaların kol gezdiği bölgede istikrar yaratmak için bölge inşa etme çabalarına katılma konusunda isteksiz davranmaktadır. Üstelik Hindistan, Çin liderliğindeki Kuşak ve Yol Girişiminde (KYG) görüldüğü gibi belgeselcilik yaratmada proaktif olmaktan ziyade reaktif davranmaktadır. Hindistan'ın bölge inşasına dahil olma konusundaki tereddüdünü nasıl açıklayabiliriz? Hangi Uluslararası İlişkiler teorisi Hindistan'ın davranışını en iyi şekilde açıklıyor? Bu makalede Liberalizm ve Konstrüktivizmin Hindistan'ın davranışını açıklamaya uygun olduğu savunulmaktadır. Konstrüktivizm açısından bakıldığında, uzun sömürgecilik ve bağımsızlık mücadelesi ile şekillenen ve Soğuk Savaş döneminde Bağlantısızlık Hareketi'ni kuran Hint kimliği, Hindistan'ın sınırlarının ötesinde çok daha aktif bir rol almasını engellemektedir. Egemenliği konusunda aşırı hassas olan Hindistan, herhangi bir bölgesel kuruluşa bağlı kalmaya daha az isteklidir. Liberalizm açısından ise ithal-ikameci sanayinin yapısından kaynaklanan korumacı politikalar Hindistan'ın bölgeselcilik çabalarını engellemektedir. Ancak diğer bölgecilik süreçlerinin farkında olan Hindistan, Avrasya Bölgecilği konusunda küçük adımlar atmaya başlamıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrasya Bölgeselciliği, Avrasya Ekonomik Birliği, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi, Şanghay İşbirliği Örgütü, Hindistan.

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# Role Of India In Regional Integrations In Eurasia<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, international relations have witnessed two opposing major trends: Globalization and Regionalization. Globalization involves the increasing movement of goods, services, ideas, and people across borders, fostering interconnectedness among countries. Conversely, regionalization entails the collaboration of states with shared interests, forming regional groupings like the EU, NAFTA, and ASEAN for specific purposes. The relationship between globalization and regionalization has sparked a debate, raising two central questions. First, whether regionalization or regional integration is an inherent aspect of the globalization process. Second, whether regionalization serves as a mechanism to balance and control globalization. In Central Asia, these two processes are observed to be intricately intertwined.

In the post-Soviet era, three primary integration processes have unfolded in Central Asia. Firstly, the last fifteen years witnessed re-unification and integration efforts within the former Soviet Union, culminating in Russia's reassertion and the cessation of its isolation. In Eastern Europe, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has emerged as an alternative to the European Union, establishing itself as a significant regional force. The EEU has also become an alternative for several Central Asian countries, with Kazakhstan as a founding member, Kyrgyzstan joining in 2015, and Tajikistan expected to follow suit. Secondly, following the military invasion of Afghanistan by the United States after September 11, 2001, the New Silk Road initiative was conceptualized in 2011. This initiative aims to facilitate Afghanistan's deeper integration into the region by revitalizing traditional trade routes and rebuilding critical infrastructure disrupted by decades of conflict. Thirdly, China has increasingly focused on Central Asia in recent years. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping visited four Central Asian nations and introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This ambitious project involves the development of pipeline infrastructures and economic links, connecting China to Western Europe through Central Asia.

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In this article, the creation and development of the Eurasian Economic Union and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are studied, and then the possible positive and negative effects on Central Asia are analyzed and how India comes into the equation.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is extracted from Proceedings of the International International Conference on Transport Diplomacy and the Silk Roads, Allameh Tabataba'i University Press, 2019.

Is it possible for these two integration processes to coexist and progress simultaneously? The central argument of this paper posits that given the current strong economic and political ties between Russia and China, coupled with China's predominantly economic influence over Central Asia, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can indeed thrive harmoniously alongside each other. I also argue that the reluctance of India in terms of regionalization can be explained by Constructivism and liberalism. This stems from identity problems, historical, and domestic reasons; conscientious about its sovereignty due to colonialism and being a part of the non-alignment movement during the Cold War, and still having residues of import-substitution industrialization which prevents India from opening up to the world fully.

The structure of this article unfolds in the following manner: The initial section delves into an analysis of the primary trends in international relations, namely globalization and regionalization. It outlines the relationship between these trends and delves into theories related to integration. The subsequent section provides a comprehensive overview of the integration processes in Central Asia, with a primary focus on the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This section delves into their historical evolution, structural components, and institutional frameworks. Furthermore, it draws a comparison between these two processes and ultimately asserts that they can coexist concurrently. The third section analyzes why India is reluctant as a region-builder. The fourth section deals with India's relations with Central Asia. The final section puts forward strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in terms of regionalization between India and Central Asia with a SWOT analysis.

## **2. Central Asian Regionalization**

### **2.1. Eurasian Economic Union**

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, local attempts at integration within Central Asia, excluding involvement from major powers, proved unsuccessful. Presently, there are two predominant and successful integration processes in Central Asia. The first is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), marking the culmination of fifteen years of reunification and integration efforts within the former Soviet Union. This period witnessed Russia's resurgence and the termination of its isolation. In Eastern Europe, the EEU has positioned itself as an alternative to the European Union, serving as a gravitational center. Many Central Asian countries view the EEU as a viable alternative; Kazakhstan, as the founding member, was joined by Kyrgyzstan in 2015, with Tajikistan anticipated to follow suit. The underlying rationale is to establish a power bloc around Russia to counterbalance Western powers.

However, since 2014, the crisis in the Eurasian zone has cast doubt on Russia's ability to fulfill economic commitments in the region. Moscow's economic influence is diminishing, evident in the declining value of remittances and the return of some migrant workers to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russia withdrew from financing Kyrgyzstan's major hydropower projects, namely the Upper Naryn cascade and the Kambar-Ata 1 dam. Despite these challenges, Russia is inclined toward having China fill the vacuum in Central Asia, as opposed to the involvement of the United States and Western countries.

### **2.2. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**

The second integration process involves the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has increasingly focused on Central Asia in recent years. In September 2013, President Xi Jinping visited four Central Asian nations and introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a comprehensive project encompassing pipelines, infrastructure development, and economic initiatives that connect China with Western Europe through Central Asia. This initiative reflects China's broader strategy to strengthen ties with neighboring regions through the development of

pipelines, roads, railways, and ports. The overarching goal is to gain access to the energy resources of Central Asia and facilitate the development of Western China. Importantly, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not merely a conceptual project; it is already a functioning reality. “November 18, 2014: it’s a day that should live forever in history. On that day, in the city of Yiwu in China’s

Zhejiang province, 300 kilometers south of Shanghai, the first train carrying eighty-two containers of export goods weighing more than 1,000 tons left a massive warehouse complex heading for Madrid. It arrived on December 9” (Escobar, 2014).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is often compared to China's equivalent of the U.S. Marshall Plan, which played a crucial role in the reconstruction of Europe after 1945, involving sixty countries. To support this initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, with a capital of \$50 billion, was established, alongside the creation of the \$40 billion Silk Road Fund. The realization of these objectives relied on anticipated investments from both Chinese private enterprises and state-owned firms.

Yet, the lingering question persists: Can these two integration processes coexist and progress simultaneously? Some contend that. “There is a good chance that economic jockeying between China and Russia in Central Asia will intensify in the coming months. For Russia, Chinese economic expansion could put a crimp in President Vladimir Putin’s grand plan for the Eurasian Economic Union.” (Rickleton, 2014). Nonetheless, the central argument presented in this paper asserts that given the current robust economic and political ties between Russia and China, where Chinese influence over Central Asia is primarily economic rather than political, the Eurasian Economic Union and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) could indeed coexist and thrive concurrently. Notably, following the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's quest for energy market diversification, energy-hungry China emerged as a natural partner, leading to the signing of substantial energy agreements between the two nations. “After Russia and China clinched a massive \$400 billion natural gas deal in May 2014—around the Power of Siberia pipeline, whose construction began this year—they added a second agreement worth \$325 billion around the Altai pipeline originating in western Siberia” (Escobar, 2014).

Certainly, amid the rekindled Cold War tensions between the West and Russia, there is an increasing likelihood of Russia and China drawing closer and expanding cooperation across various domains, including the military. “On the military front, Russia and China are now committed to large-scale joint military exercises, while Russia’s advanced S-400 air defense missile system will soon enough be heading for Beijing. In addition, for the first time in the post-Cold War era, Putin recently raised the old Soviet-era doctrine of “collective security” in Asia as a possible pillar for a new Sino-Russian strategic partnership” (Escobar, 2014). China and Russia, in collaboration with Central Asian nations, have engaged in cooperation across various domains, addressing issues such as terrorism, extremism, and secessionism. Additionally, these two countries exhibit joint efforts in global politics, evident in their aligned positions during UN Security Council voting.

These two processes are not contradictory, and we can address this question by comparing the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Firstly, the EAEU is a tangible integration project modeled after the EU, whereas the BRI's nature remains unclear. Secondly, the EAEU is a multilateral agreement, while the BRI is a bilateral agreement between China and Central Asian states. Thirdly, the EAEU is institutionalized, unlike the BRI. Fourthly, the EAEU aims to contain economic activity within a regional bloc, while the BRI focuses on connectivity between Asian and European regions, covering larger areas, including the Eurasian Economic Union countries. Consequently, if the EAEU continues as a unified economic entity, China is likely to engage with it as a single unit, mirroring its approach to the European Union. Notably, southern Central Asian countries, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have expressed their reluctance to join the EAEU, creating no institutional challenge for Chinese projects in their dealings with these countries.

### **3. India and Region-Building**

Powerful states initiate regionalism to promote their economic and political interests, such as the US's role in the creation of the EU and ASEAN. Similarly, Russia, China, and South Africa engaged in region-building. However, not all-powerful states are willing to act as a hegemon and engage in region-building such as India (Destradi, 2010). India considered one of the rising powers in international relations and an aspirant for future regional hegemon, failed to advance an idea for how to achieve stability in the volatile region. As Destradi states, "India appears to have aspirations for regional leadership but so far refrained from developing a vision for how to create stability in the conflict-ridden region" (Destradi, 2012).

India has been reactive rather than proactive in creating regionalism as in the case of the Chinese-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). How do we explain the puzzle of India's hesitance of involving region-building? Which International Relations theory best explains the behavior of India? This study hypothesizes that liberalism and constructivism fit to explain the behavior of India. In terms of constructivism, Indian identity, shaped by long colonialism and struggle for independence and by establishing non-alignment movement during the Cold War, prevents India from taking much active role beyond its border. Over conscientious about its sovereignty, India is less willing to be bound by any regional organization. Regarding Liberalism, the protectionist policies caused by the domestic structure of protective industry hinder India's regionalism efforts. However, seeing other regionalism efforts around, India takes timid steps.

The SAARC is the most significant regional organization in South Asia and has been offering its members a broad framework for 'regional cooperation' since 1985. However, the Indian-Pakistani war and India's hegemonic position in the region are overshadowing any attempts at 'regionalism' in this 'sub-region' (Börzel et al., 2016, p. 230). Due to a prominent security issue and slow progress toward 'economic regionalization', the region has the weakest levels of 'economic integration and intra-regional' commerce in the world. India is now working to strengthen the Indian Ocean Rim Association's capacity to foster cooperation among its member states. IORA functions as a 'transregional' alliance of African, Asian, and Arab nations. IORA expressly shuns legally enforceable agreements (Börzel et al., 2016, p. 230).

For example, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in part so that its members might negotiate over the cost of 'natural resources' as a bloc and raise their 'collective voice' on security issues in a region that is controlled by the United States and China (Börzel et al., 2016, p. 118). "ASEAN+" agreements not only link significant Northeast Asian nations with the nations of Southeast Asia, but ASEAN also serves as a bridge between East Asia and South Asia due to India's growing involvement in the ASEAN context (Börzel et al., 2016). The East Asia Summit (EAS) has welcomed the participation of the leaders from all nations that make up the ASEAN+3 group, as well as leaders from India, Australia, and New Zealand since 2005. In 2011, the EAS enlarged its membership by incorporating Russia and the United States (Börzel et al., 2016).

### **4. India and Regionalism in Central Asia**

India has been late in engaging Central Asia compared to Russia and China and this engagement was security-oriented rather than economic. At the very first 'India-Central Asia Summit', which took place in January 2022, almost 10 years after China announced BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013, headed by the Indian Premier Narendra Modi, all five heads of state from Central Asia were present. The online conference was a demonstration of India's promises to its "Extended Neighborhood Policy" which requires New Delhi to expand its 'geopolitical' allies and diplomatic aims, as well as India's desire to work with its Central Asian allies on a variety of areas. The policy demands India to expand its 'geopolitical partners' and 'diplomatic' interests (Schulz, 2022).

National security counselors from India and Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan gathered in New Delhi for the first summit of its kind on December 6, 2022. In this event, the bond between India and Central Asia was highlighted by India's 'National Security Advisor' Ajit Doval, who emphasized the two regions' common priorities, including the stabilization of the peace in Afghanistan and the reinforcement of the integrity of their borders (Schulz, 2022). Nonetheless, India and Central Asian countries are part of several regional organizations as we will see in the next section.

#### **4.1. Joint Regional Organizations**

##### **4.1.1. Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO)**

The "Shanghai Five" and its enlargement and institutionalization into the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) are important international relations events because they group Russia, China, and Central Asia into a 'multilateral mechanism for regional security and economic cooperation' as the earliest one of the kind. China first contacted Central Asia two thousand years ago via the Silk Road, but immediate ties were lost once CA joined Czarist Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union (Chung, 2004).

After the fall of the Soviet Union in late 1991 and continuing until 1995, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan worked together to settle on their common boundaries with China. This process began shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The goal of these border talks was to prevent China, which has grown more 'nationalistic and economically powerful' since the fall of the Soviet Union, from using the opportunity to assert sovereignty rights in the Russian Far East and in Central Asia that date back to the Czarist and Soviet eras. Despite Tajikistan and China's border conflict, on April 26, 1996, the leaders of these five nations met in Shanghai and largely reached agreements with Kazakhstan, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan that allowed them to leave China's border disagreement far behind and focus on other matters of shared interest (Chung, 2004).

For the time being, the "Shanghai Five" was translated into the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) in 2001. India became an observer in 2005 and a full-fledged member of the SCO in 2017. It signals India's official and organized engagement with Central Asia. The group serves as an example of the Chinese attempt to strengthen its security ties with and exert sway on China's Central Asian and Russian 'continental' neighbors. It was created as a means of containing NATO's growing influence in 'Central Asia' (Chung 2004).

Afghanistan officially joined the SCO as an observer during Afghan President Hamid Karzai's travel to China in 2012. The Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) inked a 'counterterrorism' pact with Afghanistan in 2015. In the same year, Kabul requested for its full inclusion in the SCO. Moreover, Afghanistan signed a protocol in 2018 to discuss "political issues and the fight against terrorism, extremism, and illicit drug trafficking, as well as involving Afghanistan in the regional economic cooperation processes" (Khalil, 2021). Though Afghanistan has not gained its full membership yet, its engagement with SCO helped stabilize Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Moreover, after being accepted as members of the SCO, based in Beijing, in 2017, both Pakistan and India sent their respective leaders to the summit for the first time. It is anticipated that the membership of India and Pakistan in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization will increase the organization's overall might. In the opening address, Xi, who was hosting the 18th SCO summit in 2018, stated that Modi and Hussain's attendance at the summit in the port city in eastern China was "of great historic significance" (*Entry of India and Pakistan into SCO*, 2018). Consequently, it creates hopes for Easing India's tension with China and Pakistan.

#### ***4.1.2. The Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA)***

The CICA, an intergovernmental organization, works together among its members to strengthen Asia's safety and security. External Ministers from Belarus, Bahrain, Qatar, India, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were among the roughly one hundred high-ranking officials in attendance. Developing multilateral strategies to advance 'peace, security, and stability in Asia' is the goal of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), a forum for improving collaboration. At the 47th UNGA in 1992, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan proposed the creation of CICA. There are now 24 countries that make up this organization: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Cambodia, China, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Republic of Korea, Russia, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. India became a participant in CICA from the beginning.

There is only one area on the planet in which three 'nuclear-armed' powers have lately been involved in armed conflicts along their claimed boundaries, and that place is India, Pakistan, and China. A United States Institute of Peace (USIP) elderly research group found that the issue of nuclear stability in Southern Asia is becoming more challenging to manage due to 'geopolitical' shifts, like growing China-India boundary disputes and advancing 'military technologies', such as expanding nuclear weaponry and more effective modes of delivery. Anti-Indian terrorist acts are also becoming a greater possibility. The Pakistani government's willingness (and competence) to control 'cross-border terrorism' will be put to the test as it deals with increased 'security and economic' constraints domestically. The Taliban rule in Afghanistan exhibits no better commitment to eradicating terrorist safe havens than it did in the 1990s. Additionally, India's suppression of its 'Muslim minority', particularly in Kashmir, is both a response to earlier anti-state insurgency and almost certain to spur fresh 'acts of violence'(Markey, 2023).

#### ***4.1.3. EAEU and India Collaboration***

A free trade agreement (FTA) incorporating the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is being discussed by India and Russia. A deal to safeguard 'investments' is being drafted by the two parties. However, S. Jaishankar, the minister of external affairs, emphasized the pressing necessity to fix the trade deficit of India with Russia. Since 2022, trade between India and Russia has dramatically expanded, partly because of India's growing intake of Russian petroleum at lower rates following 'Western sanctions' imposed on Moscow due to the military assault of Ukraine. India, which has not openly attacked the Russian invasion and has urged for a nonviolent end to the conflict, has already chosen Russia as among its main energy providers (Laskar, 2020). The FTA will grant Indian businesses access to Eurasia's plentiful resource markets, where Beijing is already making significant strides (Chaudhury, 2023).

The International North-South Transport Corridor is a 7-thousand-kilometer-long 'multimodal transportation network' that combines marine, roadway, and rail links to provide the quickest possible connection. It extends from the Indian Ocean via the Persian Gulf, Russia, and Northern Europe to the Caspian Sea. The goal is to cut the travel time in half while cutting the price of carrying between Russia and India by around 30 percent. Its initial partners were India, Russia, and Iran, and in 2002 construction of the corridor started. Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Syria, Belarus, and Oman are just ten of the countries that have joined the INSTC since then. The Bulgarian government has been granted observer status. Also expressing interest in joining the INSTC are the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia. Since Russia and India have good relations, the ties between India and the Eurasian Economic Union will develop further.

## 5. SWOT Analysis

In this section, we will apply SWOT analysis to the relationship between India and Central Asia identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

### 5.1. Strengths

#### ***5.1.1. High Soft Power In CA Compared To China: Low Level Of Xenophobia***

Bollywood has a significant role in shaping the general public's understanding of India globally, including in Central Asia. The popularity of Indian films in the Soviet Union emerged throughout the 1950s, with individuals who were exposed to iconic films such as *Shri 420* or *Disco Dancer* retaining nostalgic memories of their narratives and musical compositions. Translation of Hindi poems into Central Asian languages, co-sponsorship of cultural events, and funding of excursions by cultural teams around the area are activities supported by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. The CA governments have derived advantages from their participation in the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Program, which encompasses a wide range of initiatives such as training sessions, infrastructure-related collaboration, and 'disaster relief' efforts. This program extends its benefits to a total of 161 nations (Wood, 2023).

#### ***5.1.2. Willingness Of CA Countries To Balance China And Russia***

With the expansion of India's economy, there was a concurrent increase in the country's 'energy demand', prompting the necessity to broaden its energy sources outside the Gulf region. During this particular time frame, the region of Central Asia has shown a tendency to explore the provision of energy resources to rapidly developing nations in Asia, notably India and China. This strategic shift aimed to mitigate the region's dependence upon pipeline routes that traverse Russia (Menon & Saharanya, 2019). Historically colonized and dominated by Russia and recently increasingly becoming dependent on China economically, the Central Asian countries have been looking for diversification in their foreign relations with countries such as Turkey, Iran, the European Union, Japan, and India.

Central Asian nations' economic ties with Turkey have experienced substantial growth, resulting in notable advancements in the areas of trade, transportation, and communications. The establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was motivated by the objective of delivering development aid to recipient nations. TIKA has effectively operated in collaboration with regional governments, yielding positive outcomes. In 2019, the total amount of trade between Turkey and the nations in the region amounted to around 8.5 billion USD. Furthermore, a significant presence of nearly 4,000 Turkish enterprises has been established in the region, actively engaged in various business operations. Ties have also evolved in the domains of 'culture and education'. The establishment of the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) in 1993 aimed to facilitate the promotion and preservation of Turkic 'culture, art, language, and historical heritage'. TURKSOY's primary objectives include the dissemination of these cultural elements on a global scale and their transmission to newer generations (*Türkiye's Relations With Central Asian Republics*, 2023). Moreover, Turkey launched the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021 to enhance multilateral cooperation between Turkey and seven CA countries (Akçay, 2022).

The pursuit of new partnerships by Central Asian countries with India and Japan assumes significant importance in their efforts to establish a balance vis-à-vis China and Russia. Assisting the Central Asian countries in overcoming the constraints imposed by their geographical location

will facilitate their ability to broaden their involvement beyond their immediate vicinity. Collaborating with Japan and India has the potential to yield substantial economic benefits while also empowering Central Asian nations to assert greater autonomy from China and Russia.

New Delhi and Tokyo exhibit numerous common objectives in their bilateral endeavors with nations in Central Asia. The challenge is in effectively implementing these mutually agreed-upon interests. Since 2004, Japan has consistently organized the Central Asia + Japan Dialogue, which involves high-level foreign ministerial discussions. Tokyo has implemented a long-time diplomatic strategy known as 'Silk Road Diplomacy', which involves providing economic help, support, and significant investments in the region.

India actively fosters engagement with Central Asia through its Extended Neighborhood Policy. In the year 2022, the esteemed leader of India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, organized the India–Central Asia Summit, whereby he engaged in discussions and collaborations with his esteemed counterparts from the nations of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The convergence of India's security objectives with Japan's financial objectives suggests that both nations are strategically positioned to enhance their involvement with CA. The establishment of a common perspective between India and Japan regarding Central Asia will offer a stable foundation for CA nations to implement a 'strategic policy' that is both 'diversified and balanced' (Shinde, 2023).

### ***5.1.3. Relative Proximity***

Geographically Central Asia and India are not far from each other compared to Europe, Turkey, or Japan. Central Asia has held considerable historical and contemporary importance. India has consistently endeavored to enhance 'political, cultural, and economic' relations with the Central Asian Region (CAR). Historical interactions have been observed between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. The interplay between 'political stability' and 'uncertainties' between Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent has had a significant impact on their respective geo-political, geo-cultural, and geo-economic trajectories, spanning from the 'Indus Valley civilization' to the present day.

The cultural and historical artifacts of India provide evidence supporting the notion that Central Asia served as the ancestral homeland for the initial inhabitants of India. Per a particular historical perspective, it is posited that the migration of the 'Aryans' to India originated from the region of Central Asia. The majority of the reigning 'dynasties' in India, such as the Greeks, Shakas, Kushans, Huns, and Mughals, originated from or passed through Central Asia.

### ***5.1.4. Indian Know-How And CA Natural Resources***

The CA possesses a significant quantity of 'natural mineral resources', such as 'hydrocarbon and uranium ore' reserves, alongside the substantial hydropower potential. These valuable resources have captured the interest of major global powers. Central Asia is a region that has a significant market comprising millions of users. The region has emerged as a crucial hub for both intra and transcontinental commercial and trade connections. Against this context, India has exhibited a growing inclination to Central Asia as a dependable supplier of 'oil and natural gas', as well as a means for advancing its strategic objectives. New Delhi's primary concerns encompass 'energy security, infrastructure development', countering 'Islamic fundamentalism', and fostering 'trade and investment' (Kothari, 2020).

## **5.2. Weaknesses**

### **5.2.1. India's Insufficient Finances To Match China's Pocket**

As of 2012, China has emerged as the second-biggest global economy in terms of nominal GDP, while India has secured the tenth position and now the fifth position. In terms of Foreign exchange reserves, China holds the 1<sup>st</sup> position in the world with 3, 2\$ trillion (July 2023) while India ranks 4th with 602\$ billion (*Reserve Bank of India, 2023*). However, India lagged in the capacity to finance like China.

### **5.2.2. Low Direct And Safe Land, Rail Connections**

India's current engagement with the broader region is exemplified by the introduction of the Connect Central Asia Policy in 2012. This policy serves as a substitute framework for 'infrastructure and transport connectivity', aiming to bolster 'trade and educational' opportunities, while also fostering collaborative efforts in 'commercial and security' domains with Central Asia. The North-South Transport Corridor, which received significant attention in the external Trade Policy 2015-20, is also encompassed within this context. The objective is to incorporate a broader scope of Central Asia no matter where feasible, and by this objective, to extend land transportation networks to encompass Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. India encounters connectivity obstacles in terms of land connections to Afghanistan and Central Asia, notwithstanding the considerable importance of Central Asia within the Belt and Road Initiative.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ensuing establishment of sovereign republics in Central Asia, India undertook a re-evaluation of its relations with the area. This re-evaluation was characterized by diplomatic programs, official visits, financial assistance, and efforts to enhance the capability through various means such as 'training programs, study tours, and technology transfers' facilitated by the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation program. In the year 2021, the Indian government initiated the 'Connect Central Asia' initiative to strengthen the 'political, economic, cultural, and historical' ties with the Central Asian nations.

Despite the existence of numerous 'connectivity projects' that have been planned for several decades, few advancements have been achieved, mostly as a result of geopolitical considerations. The lack of feasibility regarding access routes through Pakistan and Afghanistan remains a significant hindrance and is expected to persist in the foreseeable future. Pakistan has impeded the 'strategic, economic, and cultural interests of both regions' by declining to promote communication through its territory. The progress of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, which can fulfill the energy requirements of South Asia, has been impeded since 2006 as a result of escalated security apprehensions.

### **5.2.3. Low People-To-People Connections, Visa Limitations**

The recent development allows Indian passport holders to go to Kazakhstan without the requirement of a visa. According to the available data, it has been observed that Indian nationals are now permitted to stay in the Republic of Kazakhstan without the requirement of a visa for a maximum duration of 14 days. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that these 'visa-free stays' can accumulate to a sum of 42 days throughout 180 days (Kazakhstan, 2023).

In July 2000, Uzbekistan implemented a distinctive measure by introducing an extra set of visa regulations. This decision marked a departure from the earlier "unified Soviet visa regime" which allowed former 'Soviet citizens' to freely travel between countries using only their passports. Specifically, Uzbekistan started obligating the citizens of Kyrgyzstan to obtain a visa to enter its territory. Uzbekistan is situated at the central point of the 'infrastructure' webs in the

area. Policies made in Uzbekistan play a crucial role in determining the progress of regional advancements in transportation, energy consumption, 'sustainable water' management, interactions, money, trade conditions, and the mobility of individuals.

The creation of the Indian sub-continent and the aftermath lack of a direct border link and inadequate infrastructure connection between India and CA resulted in a low people-to-people connection that continues to date. During the 1990s, India encountered a dual set of challenges as it navigated the process of adapting to the evolving global order following the 'end of the Cold War', while simultaneously undertaking 'domestic economic' reforms. This period coincided with the independence of the five Central Asian republics, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. For some decades, India's relations with the region have experienced gradual development, despite the presence of various advantageous factors. For example, India was among one of the earliest non-communist nations to recognize and establish diplomatic relationships with CA nations. Furthermore, as India adapted to the geopolitical landscape following the Cold War, its foreign policy underwent a transformation that entailed a heightened focus on fostering connections with India's extended regional sphere, encompassing Central Asia (Menon & Saharanya, 2019).

### **5.3. Opportunities**

#### ***5.3.1. Resolving Security Issues Through SCO and CICA***

India and Pakistan were officially admitted as complete members of the SCO in June 2017. As it now encompasses 20% of the global GDP and 40% of the global populace in the 'strategically' crucial Eurasia-South Asia region, the enlargement has significant political, 'security', and financial implications for the organization. The purview of the SCO has undergone expansion beyond its initial emphasis on combating the "three evils" of 'terrorism, separatism, and extremism'. It now encompasses a wide array of subject areas, including 'energy security and cooperation', 'economic development', and several developing 'non-traditional security' problems.

#### ***5.3.2. Increasing trade with CA countries***

Throughout its existence, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has actively pursued the advancement and promotion of enhanced 'economic' and 'energy' collaboration among its member nations. A proposal has been put out for the establishment of a SCO Development Bank to facilitate regional commerce and investment.

#### ***5.3.3. North-South Corridor***

The recent declaration made by Russian President Vladimir Putin about the construction of a railroad linking Iran within the North-South Trade Corridor (NSTC), which serves as a connection between India and Russia through Iran and Azerbaijan, has been received enthusiastically by India's external trade strategy in the Eurasian area (Chourasia, 2023).

#### ***5.3.4. Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) 'Pipeline Project'***

India has initiated further endeavors to revitalize the long-pending Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) 'pipeline project'. India's strategic approach towards the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project establishes Turkmenistan to

serve as a pivotal hub for enhancing India's links with the broader region of Central Asia. Similarly, for the 'land-locked' nation of Turkmenistan, the highly awaited TAPI pipeline gives a potential avenue to explore other export alliances, devoid of significant constraints. The TAPI pipeline initiative aims to facilitate the transportation of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India through Afghanistan. The TAPI pipeline, with an estimated cost of \$10 billion, originates from the Galkynysh 'gas field' in Turkmenistan. This pipeline is designed to transport a significant volume of 33 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas annually, spanning a distance of 1,800 kilometers as it traverses Afghanistan (*India's Plan to Realize TAPI*, 2022).

## **5.4. Threats**

### **5.4.1. Unstable Afghanistan**

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said in April 2021 that American troops would depart Afghanistan by the end of the year. Despite continuing peace discussions with the Afghan administration, the Taliban increased its attacks on ANDSF camps and patrols and started quickly capturing additional land. The United States military increased the pace of soldier departure in May of 2021. By the last day of July 2021, the United States would have withdrawn approximately 95% of its forces, leaving only 650 soldiers to guard the American embassy in Kabul (*Instability in Afghanistan*, 2023). Needless to mention, the Taliban established a Sharia-based state in Afghanistan opposite to the democratic values that exist in India.

### **5.4.2. Hostility With Pakistan**

India and Pakistan fought a short war over East Pakistan again in 1971, with Indian soldiers supporting the liberation of East Pakistan. The Line of Control (LOC) was drawn up in 1972 as part of the Simla Agreement, a bid by India and Pakistan to kick off a fresh phase of 'bilateral ties' by dividing Kashmir along an interim military control line. However, the development of nuclear weapons by both countries in the decades that followed made the battle much more dangerous (*Conflict Between India and Pakistan*, 2023).

### **5.4.3. Hostility With China**

There had been a prospect in the years after World War II that they may find a shared reason in their global perspectives, but the optimism was rapidly dashed by the frontier conflict in 1962. In 2020, Chinese raid at various sites concurrently in Ladakh, seemingly aiming at creating a fresh 'status quo' on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) between Indian and Chinese-controlled land, marked a turning point in the process of 'competitive security' measures along the border. Twenty Indian soldiers and an untold number of Chinese soldiers were killed in action on 15 June 2020. In the days that came next, each party doubled down on its stance in an apparent effort to secure an upper hand (Muttreja & Tarapore, 2023).

### **5.4.4. New Cold War: Might Force India To Join The Western Camp Because Of Rivalry With China.**

The modern Cold War is a struggle of ideologies. Despite President Xi's claims that China's one-party communist system is superior, President Biden is adamant that the democratic United States would resist authoritarian China's efforts to dominate the 'region' and the globe. India,

which requires powerful allies against China, may welcome Biden's resolve. In Asia, Biden wants the United States and its QUAD stakeholders -Australia, India, and Japan-to keep China "accountable" for its aggressive behavior (Singh, 2021).

The USA wants to foster a strategic alliance between the USA and India, wherein both countries cooperate and engage with regional organizations to enhance 'stability' in the South Asian region. This partnership aims to facilitate collaboration in emerging sectors like healthcare, space exploration, and cyberspace. Additionally, it seeks to strengthen economic and technological ties between the two nations, while also actively contributing to the promotion of a 'free and open Indo-Pacific' region. India is acknowledged as a congruent collaborator and influential figure in South Asia and the Indian Ocean area. It actively engages with and maintains connections to Southeast Asia, plays a pivotal role in the Quad alliance and other regional platforms, and serves as a catalyst for regional progress and advancement.

## **Conclusion**

This paper argues that Central Asian countries have achieved little integration progress since independence, with significant global forces driving prominent initiatives like Russia with the Eurasian Economic Union, the US with the New Silk Road Initiative, and China with the Belt and Road Initiative. American NSRI failed while China's BRI could not attract India which is now a vibrant stake in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. India's renewed partnership with Russia in recent times opened gateways for India to strengthen its efforts for regional integration with the CA nations.

Despite having different limitations, no direct border with CA nations, and being a key partner of the USA, India has high soft powers in Central Asian countries compared with the same of China in the region. Moreover, CA states' willingness to balance China and Russia favors India in the sense that India also can grasp that opportunity in competition with China. CA countries are maintaining multiple partnerships while their very cordial relationship with Turkey is one of the most notable ones as seven countries of CA have been united under the Turkey-led Organization of Turkic States (OTS). It may go against Indian interests as Pakistan is the key ally of Turkey.

India does not have an equal economic capability like that of China for which India may lag in terms of its economic investment in CA countries. The absence of direct land & road connections and the lack of an easy Visa regime are other reasons why India lagged regarding people-to-people connections with Central Asian countries.

India and Pakistan's membership in SCO created hope for cooperation in trade, security, and culture. However, the changing situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan's contested role along the Afghanistan-India border backfooted India so much. The state ideology of the current Afghanistan and India are opposite that may complicate their bilateral relationship. The proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project is not being implemented because of non-cooperation by Pakistan. Moreover, the USA's declaration of India as the key ally of its Indo-Pacific policy seems to have created a new cold war between the USA with its ally and China. It may increase rivalry between China and India impacting India's interaction with CA countries.

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