

# India-China in Central Asia: Converging Views and Diverging Interests

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## Abstract

In the post-Soviet period, a new great game resurfaced in Central Asia, with more participants; the geopolitical landscape of the region gradually shifted. Since the 1990s, India initiated diplomatic engagement with all Central Asian States, for oil, trade and security interests. After two decades of policy overdue, India re-emphasized its look north strategy by reviving the “Connect Central Asia” policy in 2012. In the following years, Prime Minister Modi then took subsequent visits to all five Central Asian States to deepen friendship relations. China is an important and influential player in the region and India cannot ignore that. The involving of two Asian powers in Central Asia and having unresolved tension over their border disputes at home had drawn much attention among scholars. In the same vein, for many, it raises concerns about the prospects of India’s Central Asia policy. India-China’s dispute cannot extend into Central Asia. If so, that would jeopardize India’s interest. Thus, in Central Asia, India- China’s fresh engagement based on common goals is important. In the literature survey, it had observed that there is little focus given to understanding the scope and prospect of India-China’s greater interaction and engagement in Central Asia. Hence, the current study explores the scale and scope of India-China engagement in various sectors in Central Asia. The study concludes that India-China engagement is limited to the security sector. Both countries share a common interest in fighting against „three evils“. From the Chinese perspective, India is a benign player and China welcomes India-Central Asia friendship. However, the lack of transparency, skepticism and trust deficit is the components that continue to impede meaningful cooperation between the two, any time soon. Nevertheless, the Central Asia region offers numerous opportunities wherein both states could optimize their cooperation and strengthen mutual trust. Dominants such as medical assistance for post-Covid-19 recovery and regional security cooperation are important areas for which both states can extend their cooperation.

**Keywords: India, China, Central Asia, Geopolitics, New Great Game, SCO, Cooperation**

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## I. Introduction

Central Asia is located at the Centre of Eurasia landmass and it consisted of half of the ancient Silk Road. Given the strategic location of Central Asia as a pivot for geopolitical transitions, the region proved a huge potential for a large market. Besides that, Central Asia is also an energy-rich region with global significance. Given the excessive energy potentials and market opportunities in this remote region, it had gravitated more players in the recent year. Consequently, it changed the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia and this evolution is considered the emergence of the “new great game”. As Halford Mackinder put it, “whoever rules Eurasian heartlands will control the world” (Mackinder, 1943; Sempa, 2015). Central Asia observers and experts had noticed the growing intense competition among the major players including United States(U.S), Russia, China and the European Union (EU) (Cooley 2012).

The core strategic interests of both the E.U. and America are to secure energy connections and establish a Strategic foothold. To deepen the connection with the region, both E.U. and the U.S pursue a policy of promoting democratization and improving human rights conditions. But given the existence of semi-authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, democratization and promotion of human rights are often perceived as a threat to the regime's security. Russia and China are the two important players and both countries share close geographical proximity with the region. As the former Soviet Republic, Central Asia member states share a close political, economic and language connection with Russia. Russia still has significant influence in the region, particularly in the military and security sectors. Russia’s core interests are defined as rejuvenating and strengthen its earlier soviet influence and turning the region into a sphere of Russia’s strategic hold. China, on the other hand, is considered one of the dominant players in Central Asia, especially in the economic sector. China, through the ancient silk route, shares a long history of cultural exchange and trade links with Central

Asia (Frost, 2009).

In 1992, soon after the independence of five Central Asia states, China called to revise the historical silk-route connection. In the following month, China then initiated its first diplomatic engagement and ever since Beijing continues to advance relationships with all five states. China's key interests in Central Asia are often described as stabilizing its Xinjiang autonomous region and exploiting oil and gas energy resources. By the mid- 2000s, China became the most important trading partner in the Central Asian region. Eventually, Central Asia's economy became highly reliant on Chinese investment (Umarov, 2020). In the post-2013 period, China's economic engagements and influences were further intensified through Xi's BRI development project. While, other important players including Japan, South Korea, Iran, Pakistan and India are also deepening their presence in the region. Respectively, each member state emphasized to revise their ancient silk route connection and attempts to build strategic cooperation and energy links. Among the other players, India shares close cultural and historical links with the Central Asian region. In the early 1990s, India began to renew its old civilization ties with Central Asia and promote goodwill and friendship relations. Subsequently, India assists to develop the region's information technology, pharmaceuticals and healthcare (Wani, 2020).

Along with that, India also extended its support in capacity building and human resource development in Central Asia (Wani, 2020). Though India and Central Asia's active diplomatic engagements were held off for decades, Indian leaders had continuously recognized the energy and strategic significance of the region and recognized the region as vitally important for India's security and energy. In June 2012, the Ministry of State for External Affairs Shri E Ahamed revived India's "Connect Central Asia policy". In his keynotes, he asserted that "India is ready to deepen meaningful and sustained engagement with Central Asia" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2012).

"He highlighted that India's Connect Central Asia policy would be consistent with India's overall policy of extending its engagement in Eurasia region" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2012). "This embraced India's objective to strengthen relations with Russia, Pakistan and China" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2012). In the following year 2015, Prime Minister Modi took subsequent visits to all five Central Asian States. In his statement, Prime Minister Modi reasserted India's goodwill to strengthen and deepen its relationship with the region. These developments illustrated the reinvigoration of India's long-overdue policy known as the "look north policy strategy". It signified the advancement of India's geo-strategic interest and calculus. Nevertheless, the presence of both India and China in the Central Asian region received large attention from academic scholars and experts. Given that, India and China a rapidly growing power and have complex bilateral relationships, it amalgamated perceptions of possible power rivalry. Many scholars are captivated by the question of whether two countries will go rival each other or attain feasible cooperation.

In the literature survey, there are broad perspectives and scholarly discussions that indicate the emerging trajectory of India-China rivalry in Central Asia. Scholars such as Jean Francois Huchet, Emilia Kalvaski, and Ajayz Wani had argued a possible scenario of India-China rivalry in near future. By and large, scholars tend to draw their perceptions based on India-China's complex bilateral relationship as well as from the perspective of energy competition and regional power struggle. However, India-China relationship in post- 2000 indicates growing aspiration and interest of reinforcing cooperation, by both sides. Therefore, the current study emphasized understanding India-China's presence in Central Asia and their shared common interests and policy strategy.

The current study employed thematic analysis methods and examined the patterns of new development in India-China's bilateral relationship and multilateral engagement, in Central Asia. The paper was divided into five sections. The first section discussed India and China's aspirations and core interests in Central Asia. The second section then discussed the diplomatic engagements of both states with their Central Asian partners. The third section discussed India-China's converging views and their aspiration in building coordination and joint force. This section identified the scope of India-China's cooperation. The fourth section, it had discussed diverging aspects of India-China in terms of their core national interests and policy preferences. The final section evaluated the scope and challenges of India-China's cooperation.

### **India's Central Asia Policy and Its Core Interest**

The Central Asia region has captivated a special focus in India's Eurasian policy. The region is considered India's "extended neighbourhood". Since the inception of diplomatic engagements between the two, India presents itself as a friendly neighbour of Central Asia (Wani, 2020). Though there is no direct contiguous border between the two regions, India shares close cultural and historical links with the region. During the Soviet period, Bollywood films and Hindi songs were popular. Even today, the Central Asian publics are very much fond of Hindi films and songs, particularly among the elder generation (Ghosh, 2022).

In India, Central Asian influences in works of literature, architecture and food cultures are infused early on Mughal period. The history and the cultural linkages between the two rejuvenate an aspiration to install formal relations and reinforce friendship (Firdous, 2006; Ghosh, 2021). The share of cultural and historical proximity gave

India significant soft-power advantages and leverage in the region (Zhao, 2010). Soon after the independence of five central Asian states, India initiated diplomatic engagements and attempted to build India-Central Asia's cooperation within the framework of its "look north policy". The "look north policy" was first introduced by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and the policy was defined to improve relations and connection with Central Asia and beyond (Ghosh, 2021). The key objective of the policy was defined as strengthening India– Central Asia relations in the spheres of economics, trade, strategic culture and education. In the initial phases of their diplomatic relationship, India offered limited financial aid and assistance and subsequently, established bilateral security, energy, cultural, economic and trade ties (Ghosh, 2021).

However, India's challenges such as India-Pakistan's proxy war in the 1990s and India's balance of payment crises at that time had impeded realizing India's Central Asia policy. In the decade of 2000s India then commenced its active diplomatic engagements with Central Asian republic (Singh, 2015). Nonetheless, India's activities in the key sectors including security, trade and energy were relatively minimal. Experts and scholars urged needs of reassess India's engagement in wake of the "new great game" in Central Asia (Zhao, 2010). Similarly, policymakers and leaders share the notion of the growing strategic, security and energy importance of the Central Asian region.

At the beginning of the 2010s, India was observed prioritizing the Central Asia region as an essential part of its Eurasia policy. Consequently, India proposed its broad-based policy strategy named Connect Central Asia policy. The "connect Central Asia policy" was revive in 2012 by Shri E. Ahmed, minister of state for external affairs of India. "It is a comprehensive policy strategy that comprises of links areas' politics, economies, and cultures" between two regions"(Ghosh, 2021). It stated India's deep, meaningful, and persistent involvement with the region is its main policy goal (Ghosh, 2021). In this regard, it underlined the importance of advancing India's efforts to strengthen political ties and cooperation with Central Asia, especially in the fields of security, trade, strategic planning, education, and energy (Ministry Of External Affairs, 2012). Along with that, building proactive political, economic, and people-to-people connections between India and Central Asian member states was mentioned as a primary focus of the "connect Central Asia strategy," (Ghosh, 2021). To strengthen its cooperation, India emphasized to capitalize on its soft power asset, with a specific focuses on people-to-people contracts, cultural exchange and academic interaction. These were regarded as the cornerstone of India's diplomatic approach in Central Asia.

In 2013, during the second India-Central Asia dialogue at the regional conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Ministry of External Affairs, Shri E. Ahmed stated that, "I am confident that the India-Central Asia dialogue which was initiated on the 20th Anniversary of India's diplomatic relations with Central Asian countries in 2012 will be sustained. It will no doubt impart further momentum to academic exchanges and people-to-people contacts. It will help connect us in the most important way... (Ministry of External Affairs, 2013). In 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took subsequent visits to Central Asian countries namely, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and later signed bilateral trade and energy agreements. This evolution also reflects New Delhi's earnest efforts in revitalizing India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, in periods of China's rise in Central Asia.

### **Why Central Asia is important for India?**

Central Asia is vitally important for India's energy and security interests. India already imported forty per cent of its oil but given the country's rapid economic growth its foreign energy dependence continues to increase. To eliminate India's growing energy demands, leaders had strategies to diversify its energy supplies. With Central Asia's global energy potential, strengthening its relations with the region became India's top priority (Patnik 2005). From the aspects of India's security concern, countering terrorists in the homeland and neighbouring states is considered vital. Therefore, strengthening security ties with Central Asia became an essential part of India's Central Asia policy.

Above that, Central Asia is geo-strategically important for India. As the region is situated at the heart of the Eurasian landmass, India wants to extend its influence in Central Asia and convert it into a sphere of "India's soft-power projection and cultural power play" (Mukerji, 2020). Moreover, the establishment of India's presence in Central Asia is crucial since it enables India to closely watch Pakistan by keeping track of Pakistan's strategic depth in the region. Hence, the revival of India's Central Asia strategy is driven by all of these factors.

### **Trends of India's engagement in Central Asia**

Since the inception of their diplomatic relation, India-Central Asia states has gradually extended and strengthened their political, economic, security and diplomatic engagements and cooperation ( Firdous, 2006). After decades of high-level official meetings and exchanges, it fructified the general consensus on establishing

strategic partnerships between Indian and Central Asian states. Both sides (India and Central Asia) mutually shared views of importance of deepening diplomatic ties and engagements. In 2009 India and Kazakhstan signed a strategic partnership-agreement (Singh, 2015). With the gradual improvement of their bilateral relation, the two countries then signed a nuclear cooperation agreement in 2011(Singh, 2015). This development was considered a great strategic landmark that opened a gateway to strengthen India’s connectivity with the Central Asian region (Singh, 2015). Along with Kazakhstan, in 2011 India also signed a strategic partnership with Uzbekistan and later in 2012, India signed treaty for greater strategic partnership with Tajikistan.

Terms of India-Central Asia’s bilateral trade engagements; it had steadily improved over the decades. Compared to the initial phases of the total volumes of import-export exchange, India’s trade had grown moderately.

Based on prior studies, from the 1990s to the 2000s India’s total trade exchanges in Central Asia have increased by 474.04 million USD (Singh, 2015). In 1996, during the first phase, the total volume of India-Central Asia trade exchanges accounted for only 43.96 million USD. By the end of 2009, India’s total trade exchange had reached 518 million USD (Singh, 2015). According to P, Stobtan (a former ambassador and fellow at IDSA), in 2017 the total trade exchange between India-Central Asia had exceeded up to 1.5 billion USD, which constituted merely 0.11 per cent of India’s overall global trade (Stobtan,2018).

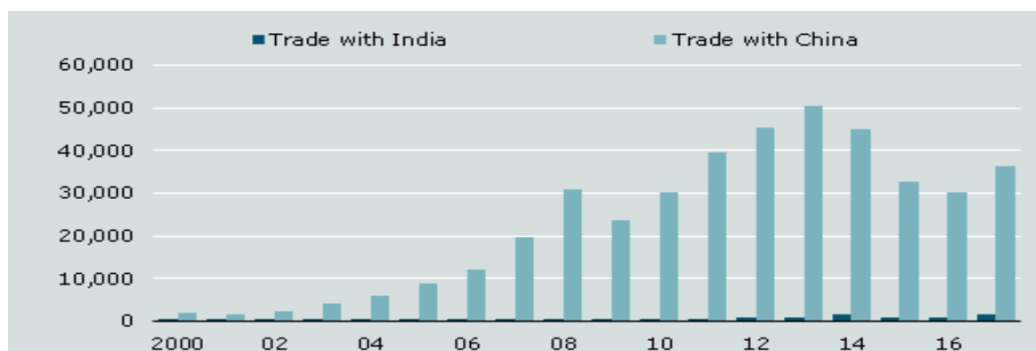
**Table no 1, India- Central Asian total trade exchange in 2017-2018 (Values in million USD)**

Country	Exports	Imports	Total
Kazakhstan	125.37	907.43	<b>1032.81</b>
Kyrgyzstan	28.59	30.94	<b>59.53</b>
Tajikistan	23.94	50.29	<b>74.24</b>
Turkmenistan	54.31	26.15	<b>80.46</b>
<b>Total</b>	364.93	1,116.49	<b>1,481.21</b>

Source; Department of Commerce: Export Import Data Bank, cited in Stobtan, 2018, available on <https://www.idsa.in/policybrief/indias-economic-opportunities-in-central-asia-pstobdan-170918>

Moreover, the scale and magnitude of India’s trade exchanges with five Central Asia states are limited and less significant as compared to that of China. One of the major factors that limit India’s trade engagement is due to lack of direct geographical connectivity. This challenge has continued to impose a hindrance to India’s trade engagement (Peyrouse, 2010).

**Table no 2, Central Asia’s Total Trade with India and China (Values in million USD)**



Source; Economist Intelligence, available at <https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=747505258&>.

**India’s Security Cooperation in Central Asia**

India’s security cooperation in Central Asia is primarily focused on common threats such as terrorism and drug-related transnational crime. It is perceived that the social, political, and economic instability, as well as the existence of religious fundamentalist groups in Central Asia, have a major impact on India’s security. As Rajiv Sikri, an Indian strategist and a former secretary of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, put it, “We would like to encourage the establishment of stable and secular regimes in Central Asia. Weakened and unstable states with centrifugal tendencies become bases for jihadist, separatist, and fundamentalist elements, link up with Pakistan and Afghanistan” (Sikri, 2007). India seeks a limited military presence in Central Asia for two reasons. First, Central Asian members lack strong military strength as well as combat strategy. Therefore, India wants to “keep a close eye on the internal situation in Central Asia. Second, India also emphasized keeping vigilance over Pakistan’s strategic plans (Dash, 2008; Zhao, 2010).

Since the inception of India and Central Asia's diplomatic relations, New Delhi has been developing close security ties with the region. India identified its three key security objectives in Central Asia, which include, (1) to prevent the spreading of religious radicalism and the formation of united politico-religious regimes, (2) breaking the fraternity and affiliation between Kashmiri religious extremists and Central Asian terrorist groups (3) Also undertake strategic monitoring and remain vigilant over Pakistan (Zhao, 2010). To attain these prioritised goals, India emphasises both multilateral and bilateral engagement and cooperation with central Asia as well as with Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) members (Mukerji,2020).

In 2005, India attained observer member status in SCO and Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Both CICA and SCO are important forums that originated in Central Asia. The objectives of both forums are to maintain and promote stability, security and peace in the Asian region. Then, in 2017 India became a permanent member of the SCO, which provides a greater opportunity to strengthen its cooperation (Mukerji, 2020). "The SCO forum provides an opportunity for India's equal participation and engagement with all SCO members. Within the SCO's regional anti-terrorist RAT framework India actively participates in a series of joint military drills and counter-terrorist exercises which are known as a "peaceful mission" (Mukerji,2020).

India's bilateral security cooperation is limited. Occasionally, India provides basic military combat training, joint military exercises and military education (Gupta, 2022). Since 2001, an undersized Indian team with members of the Indian air force (IAF) has been deployed in Tajikistan to help with logistics. In 2003, India-Tajikistan's first joint military exercise was conducted. India's alignment with Tajikistan provides an opportunity to scrutinise Tajikistan's fragile boundary and keep a close watch over terrorist activities (Zhao, 2010). To strengthen bilateral cooperation, India provides free cadre training for considerable numbers of Tajik military officers and personnel in various national defence colleges and military academies (Gupta, 2022). Also, remarkably, in 2006, India renewed Tajikistan's strategic airports and established its military air base near Ayni village, which is six kilometers from the capital Dushanbe (Zhao, 2010). Some experts supposed that if relations between the two improve, India will likely play a significant role in restoring Tajikistan's military capability to counter terrorism and expand its military influence. Meanwhile, India Kazakhstan also conducted bilateral joint military exercise in 2016 known as PRABAL DOSTYK later dubbed KAZIND. Their latest joint military drill was held in Kazakhstan in 2021, under the name KAZIND-21. India and Uzbekistan initiated a joint combat training and military exercise as early as 2015. From 2018 to 2021, two countries successfully conducted military joint exercises; DUSLIK-I in 2019 and DUSLIK-II in 2021. Similarly, in 2015, India- Kyrgyzstan initiated the first joint combat training and military exercise, named Khanjar-I. In 2020, two countries conducted Khanjar-VII, in Madhya Pradesh (Gupta, 2022).

Recently, India stressed building cooperation in developing military and defence technology. "During Prime Minister Modi's visit in 2015, India and Central Asia had signed memoranda of understanding (MoUs) and agreements for defence and military-technical cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan" ( Jha, 2015). India desired to deepen its cooperation in producing and manufacturing defence technology. During the webinar "Theme Make in India for the World" held in 2020, both Kazakhstan and India exchanged plans for collaboration in developing high-tech defence technologies. At the meeting, India's state-owned aerospace and defence manufacturing company, Bharat Electronic Limited (BEL), pledged to build a representative company office in the country (Ministry of Defence, 2020). The BEL was expected to eventually lay the groundwork for Indian firms such as L&T Defence, Ashok Leyland Limited, Bharat Forge, Elcom Innovations, Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Alpha Design Technologies, and others to expand their leading presence in the region.

### **India's Regional Infrastructural Development**

As aforementioned, though India shares close geographical proximity with Central Asia, there is no contiguous border between the two regions. This posed a major problem in realizing "India's look north policy". To eliminate the challenge, India assigned three main infrastructural development projects including Chabahar port, International-North-South-Transit-Corridor (INSTC) and Turkmenistan Afghanistan Pakistan India (TAPI) pipeline construction. The prime focus of these objectives is to build a network of energy- transit routes through pipeline, railway-road links and land-Sea trade connectivity.

The Chabahar port is located in the southeastern part of Iran. The port consisted of two separate ports known as Shahid Kalantari and Shahid Beheshti. For India, Chabahar port is significant as it provides a strategic transit route between Iran -India-Afghanistan. In 2003, India initiated a series of talks with the Iran government on building the Chabahar port. More than a decade later India and Iran then signed a memorandum of understanding MoU, in 2015. According to their agreement, India signed a 10-year contract for operating Iran's strategic port. In Afghanistan, India built the Zaranj-delirium highway, which is around 880 km from the

Chabahar port (Singh, 2015). By connecting Chabahar port and the Zaranj-delaram highway it provides an easy connectivity road to Afghanistan. By stretching Zaranj-delaram highway further to the southern tips of the Wakhan corridor, it provides India with a direct access road to the Farkhor air base in Tajikistan (Singh, 2015).

Based on the current study, the Chabahar port has the capacity to reduce sixty per cent of shipment cost and fifty per cent of the transit period. It was anticipated that the Chabahar port will facilitate India's greater connectivity routes in the Eurasian region and subsequently enhance India's trade and energy engagement (Singh, 2015). The INSTC corridor is multi-nation shipping and railway-road network that enables India to extend its connectivity with other important ports, cities and energy-rich countries in the West and Central Asian region. The INSTC corridor emerged during the second Europe-Asian conference on transport, held in 2000. During the conference India, Iran and Russia signed an agreement to build trans-regional corridor, the INSTC. Later, ten more signatory members including Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Turkey Kazakhstan, Oman, Belarus, Ukraine, Tajikistan, Syria and Armenia were also jointed (Singh, 2015).

The INSTC corridor is important for extending India's connectivity links with other major trading cities. Through, INSTC, it opens a connectivity network of important railway-road links including the R - 297 Amur highway and Trans-Siberian Highway, Russia, and the Herat to Mazar-I-Sharif railway (Singh, 2015). Through these railway road network systems, it enables India to link with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In the meantime, the heads of Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkmenistan and Oman envisioned improving trans-regional trade by building transit and transportation of goods between the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Later in 2011, four members signed the Ashgabat agreement to build the International Transport and Transit Corridor (ITTC), and in 2018, India consented to be part of the ITTC (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019). Being a signatory member of the ITTC, India planned to build a joint network between the INSTC and ITTC corridors (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018). It was considered that India's accession to the Ashgabat agreement would expand its connectivity options with Central Asia (Ministry of External Affairs, 2020). If the ITTC connectivity networks operationalize, it would generate a significant effect on India's trade and commercial ties with all extended neighbouring countries (Ministry of External Affairs, 2018).

TAPI is another ambitious project where India has invested key interest in bringing land base energy links. Its core signatory members are; Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The project was originally signed between Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2006 (Dash, 2008). The key objective of the TAP agreement was to build energy links between West Asia and South Asian regions. In February 2006, India was invited to attend the ninth directing committee meeting of TAP, in Ashgabat. After observing the true potential and benefits of TAP, India pleaded for its full membership. In April 2008 TAP members consented to India's new membership and this led to the formation of TAPI (Dash, 2008). The TAPI pipeline stretches over 1681 km. According to the initial plan, it connects Turkmenistan's Daulatabad gas field to Afghanistan cities include Herat and Kandahar (Ministry of External Affairs, 2019).

From Kandahar, the pipeline stretches further to links with Quetta and Multan cities in Pakistan. Through Multan, the pipeline was planned to connect with Punjab's Fazilka city, in India. The total capacity of the TAPI pipeline is anticipated to be 100 mm /cubic meter per day (CMPD) of gas energy and India's share is 60mm/CMPD (DD news, 2022). According to the study the total cost of the TAPI pipeline is estimated at around 3.0 billion USD (DD news, 2022). However, the existence of India-Pakistan's hostile relationship and political instability in Afghanistan remains a key challenge for completing the TAPI pipeline construction.

According to a statement released after the 2022 regional conference on Afghanistan held in Tuxin China, both Pakistan and Turkmenistan are plausible to resume and implement the TAPI gas pipeline as a part of assisting in war-torn Afghanistan (DD news, 2022). That being said, the TAPI pipeline is far from realizing its full operational capacity and fulfilling India's demands. In short, it is noted that despite India's challenges in Central Asia, there is a trend of slow but steady advancement in India's approaches in the region. These developments indicate India as an upcoming major player in the Central Asia region.

### **China and Central Asia**

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 coursed a scramble in the economic condition of five newly independent states in Central Asia. The Central Asian regimes reached out to the international monetary fund (IMF) and World Bank for financial assistance but these attempts failed. The IMF and World Bank lending agencies made preconditions and declared only global south countries are eligible candidates for receiving financial aid. Central Asia is the former Soviet Republic, throughout the 1990s, even after the Soviet's demise, central Asian members continued to follow the Soviet's economic, ideological and political legacies (Wani, 2020).

Thus, neither the World Bank nor IMF agrees to provide loans and investment funds (Wani, 2020). Given the plight economic conditions of Central Asia in the early 1990s, China seized its opportunity and offered greater economic and trade cooperation with the five states. China was the first among the Central Asian neighbours to offer significant financial aid and assistance. In 1994 Chinese premier Li Peng toured all five

states and promptly offered to reinstall the ancient silk route connections and establish a new era of China-Central Asia cooperation. Initially, China extended Xinjiang and Central Asia's border trade and dissolved China-Soviet's limited trade agreements. "Beijing was mindful of Russia's geo-political interest in Central Asia, thereby China's focus solely on enhancing economic influence and avoid Russia's suspicion" (Wishnick, 2009).

Following Premier Li Peng's visit, in the midst of 1990s, a series of high-level official meetings and exchanges took place in mid-1990s. Gradually, China then attained its bilateral, trade, energy and military ties with Central Asian member states and established formal trade cooperation. Beijing confirmed that the unrest in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is a national security concern and it identified existent of affiliation between Uyghur extremist group and Central Asian religious extremist and militia groups (Clarke, 2008). Subsequently, China urged an important need to strengthen security cooperation with four members of the Central Asia states. Thus, in 1996, Shanghai five (S-5) regional security cooperation groups were formed. Under this, a new trajectory in China, Central Asia and Russia's diplomatic relationship was built. In 2001, after the joining of Uzbekistan as a new member, the S-5 group transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a new regional organization, headquartered in Beijing. The establishment of the SCO provided China with a significant advantage to maintain a stable environment in Xinjiang as well as in Central Asia neighbours, relatively (Clarke, 2008). Also, Beijing emphasized linking Central Asia's larger oil and gas energy fields with China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region XUAR. Given the strategic location of XUAR, Xinjiang was then designated as a hub of China's "New Silk Road" and converted the region as a safe energy and trade transit road (Clarke, 2008). Within a few decades, China had gained a dominant position in Central Asia's economic sector. In 2008, China-Central Asia's total trade exchange exceeded eighteen billion Euros, which is equivalent to 21 billion U.S. dollars USD (China Briefing, 2021). The trade volume between China and Central Asia was further increased in the 2010s, especially after the successful operation of the China-Turkmenistan gas pipeline and importing around 30 million tons of gas energy from Turkmenistan to Xinjiang. By 2018, China became one of the most important trading partners in Central Asia (China Briefing, 2021).

According to the report, China was considered the largest trading partner in Kyrgyzstan and the top second trading partner in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan, China ranked as the third largest foreign trading partner. In Turkmenistan, China holds top seventh largest foreign trade partner (China Briefing, 2021). Moreover, the commencement of the belt and road initiative (BRI) in 2013 intensified the degree of China's trade and economic engagements. Hence, more Chinese firms and investors are influxes into the region. Furthermore, China introduced hundreds of BRI infrastructure development projects in key areas; energy, transportation, industrial, agriculture, IT so and so forth. Such initiations and engagements of China continue to grow in the region. This provided a significant advantage for China in terms of integrating its economy with the Central Asia region and other parts of the Eurasian landmass. Today, Central Asia's economic growth and infrastructure development become dependent on China despite Russia's dominant influence. Thus, China is the new dominant external player in Central Asia and Beijing is attempting to consolidate its strong footholds in the region.

### **Is there a rivalry between China and India in Central Asia?**

As noted above, in 2012 the ministry of external affairs revived "India's Connect Central Asia Policy" and in the following year, Prime Minister Modi then visited all five member states. It highlighted the major shifts in India's geostrategic focus. This evolution illustrated India's rigorous attempts in building its inroad into the heart of Eurasian space. In the same vein, India also seeks equal participation with other major players such as Russia and China, mainly through SCO (Ghosh, 2022; Jha, 2015).

Is Central Asia a possible flashpoint for India-China rivalry? In Central Asia, if we compare India and China's policy initiations and diplomatic engagements there are considerable gaps between the two. Despite India's strong IT sector and soft power potential, India remains the least influential player in Central Asia. In the early 2000s, when China was gradually reinforcing its economic influence in the Central Asia region, at the time India's "look north strategy" was not fully materialized yet (Ghosh, 2022). Thereby it is considered India as a comparatively latecomer in Central Asia. From the perspective of the Central Asian observers, India's strategic foothold in Central Asia remains less significant and not adequate to compete with China. Zhao Huaseng, in his article titled "Cooperation or Competition? China and India in Central Asia", he argued that India is not a threat, nor a significant competitor to China. He said India is competing as it competes with any other external players in the region.

It is noteworthy to highlight the core of India's challenge i.e. lack of a geographical contract with the Central Asia region continues to cause a substantial disadvantage for India. The connectivity projects such as the INSTC, Chabahar ports and TAPI projects are not fully operationalized, yet. Though India envisaged strengthening its presence in the strategic region its foothold is not substantial. Given this drawback, India remains an inconsequential player in Central Asia and therefore India is not part of the competition in the region, as of now.

### **Perspectives on the presence of India and China in Central Asia**

India-China has long-standing tensions over border disputes. This issue often escalated into a low-intensity military confrontation at the border sides. Despite numerous reconciliation and border agreements signed since the early 2000s, the military clashes continue to escalate, occasionally. The 2017 Doklam military standoff and the 2021 India-China military clashes at Galwan valley in Ladakh are the best examples. These issues have sustained the animosity and mutual trust deficit between the two states and consequently induced an adverse impact on their bilateral relations. Considering both India and China as rapidly growing power and influential player in the Asian region and existent border dispute it had captivated large scholarly discussions in the academic circle. The discourse of the India-China rivalry is often seen from the perspective of a regional power struggle and also viewed from the shared grudge over territorial disputes. These are every so often reflected in the dominant literature. Both India and China attempt to deepen their political and economic sway in the neighbouring states. When spheres of influence overlap, as in the cases of Myanmar (Burma) and Nepal, competition results (Melone & Mukherjee, 2010). Furthermore, the establishment of China's partnerships with Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives, and Afghanistan has increased speculation about China's encirclement of India (Melone & Mukherjee, 2010).

In Central Asia, experts and scholars observed the involvement of India and China in the Central Asian region signified their power struggle for greater economic security. Many scholars attempted to understand the presence of India and China in Central Asia through realist understanding of power rivalry. It is found ubiquitously in current literature that indicates India-China is moving towards a possible scenario of rivalry in Central Asia. To give an instance, Jean F. Huchet, David Melone, Mukherjee, Ayjaz Wani, Basudeb Chaudhuri and Manpreet Sethi highlighted their concerns over the Chinese influence in Central Asia and suggested upgrading India's Central Asia policy. Huchet argued that India-China are the two largest global net oil importers and it is the prime driving factor where the two countries want to deepen ties with Central Asia. Given the overlapping energy interests, competition between India and China is likely to take place (Huchet, 2010). Further, he said, both sides could forge a partnership for pragmatic reasons. Nevertheless, "China's demotion outlook towards India and Beijing viewed extending cooperation with India as less incentive" (Huchet, 2010). He contended, India and China's bilateral relationship also impacted their interaction in Central Asia (Huchet, 2010).

Similarly, both Chaudhuri and Sethi also asserted that given the economic size of India and China the regions have a considerable opportunity in linking their market and trade cooperation. Besides that, improving bilateral relations between the two powers had the advantage to gain assistance in building military, defence, technological and infrastructure development. Both India-China emphasized aggravating collaborations in the Central Asian region's strategic sectors. However, India and China's relationship with individual states in Central Asia also depends on the current India-China bilateral relationship (Chaudhuri & Sethi 2010). Chaudhuri and Sethi stated it is because of each other's perceptions of the potential threat that shadowed any chances of their cooperation in Central Asia. Furthermore, the authors concluded, the India-China adversary would eventually result in the polarization of five Central Asia States (Chaudhuri & Sethi, 2010).

Meanwhile, David Melone and Mukherjee said, "theoretically, China is reluctant to let India become a significant influence outside of South Asia, according to traditional realist beliefs" (Melone & Mukherjee, 2010). Jean F. Huchet made a similar conclusion; he asserted that China wants to check India's growing influence, especially in the southern part of the Central Asia region (Huchet, 2010). To constrain India's growing influence Beijing stresses building pressure on India by devising Pakistan and Kashmir issues (indirectly) (Huchet, 2010).

It is noted, however, that the assumption of India-China competition in Central Asia appears to have oversimplified the situation as it stands. India's connected Central Asia policy is challenged by the lack of geographical proximity, instability in Afghanistan and hostile relations with Pakistan. These are the biggest hindrances that continue to limit India's engagements in Central Asia. Furthermore, India is considered a latecomer in the Central Asian region as compared to that China and Russia. On the other hand, China's diplomatic engagements and economic activities are way ahead compared to other players. Given such asymmetric power structure and influences in Central Asia, it raised the question of what is the magnitude of rivalry between the two Asian giants.

In the same vein, Zhao Huasheng stated that though China and India may be competing for energy resources still the quality and degree of this competition are in no respect different from India's competition with other nations, such as Russia, the European Union, and Japan" (Zhao, 2010). He put "China's relation with Central Asia began much earlier than India and its cooperation extended deeper than between Central Asia and India" (Zhao, 2010). In addition, China has greater geographical advantages (Zhao, 2010), whereas India does not share borders with the Central Asia region. Given this background, India-China competition is not particularly remarkable and in fact, none exists (Huasheng, 2010). He also stated China appreciated India's alignment with Central Asia states.



To summarize, China is vying for global power status and therefore Central Asia and other strategic regions have become increasingly important for that regard. Particularly the Central Asia region as an immediate neighbour with a deposit of abandoned energy resources naturally became a sphere of Chinese influence. While, India since mid- 1990s, revealed its look north policy, which signified the expansion of India's geostrategic focus into Central Asia. Both countries are the largest net oil importers and Central Asia is perceived as an efficient energy supplier. The overlapping geostrategic and energy interest led many to propose assumptions of the possibility of India-China rivalry in Central Asia. But India's significant gap compared to China's engagements with individual states in the region dismissed the notion of the presence of any high-degree competition between the two. Without discarding the existence of bilateral tension between the two powers the discursive arguments for India-China's rivalry in Central Asia seem overstated. Perhaps, it overshadows the current trends of the aspiration of strengthen India-China's bilateral cooperation and their share common views in Central Asia.

### **India-China's Converging views in Central Asia**

Over a period of time, India and China have developed shared views and aspirations for deepening bilateral cooperation. These developments marked the new trajectory of the post-1962 India-China relationship. The era underscores the emergence of new perspectives and collaborative thinking among Indian and Chinese leaders, despite the existence of border clashes. Within decades both India-China came to explore a common denominator of their cooperation. In this respect, the two sides continue to conduct a series of high-level official meetings and exchanges. For example, The Declaration of India-China's Comprehensive Cooperation in 2003, India-China's Joint Statements in 2005, India-China's Declaration in 2006, A Share Vision for The 21st Century of India-China, in 2008. The commemoration of the Joint Communiqué and 60th Anniversary of the Establishment of India-China's Diplomatic Ties in 2010. The celebration of India-China's Exchange Year in 2011 and the Year of India and China's Friendship and Cooperation in 2012.

"The core emphasizes of these meetings and exchanges were to extend India-China friendship and to build a functional cooperation between two countries" in various domains (IDSA, 2008), these include border resolution, maintaining peace and tranquillity, strengthening bilateral trade and economic relations, extending India-China collaboration in developing Asian regions and jointly contributing for building peace and prosperity.

On 14th January 2008 during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's meeting in Beijing, both agreed to develop a "strategic and cooperative partnership" for peace and prosperity between the two countries" (IDSA, 2008). Two sides pledged to build India- China's friendship basis on mutual trust and equality and develop comprehensive measures to resolve border issues and re-emphasise Panchsheel as a guiding principle for building good relationships (IDSA, 2008). Meanwhile, the two leaders also exchanged visions of promoting a harmonious, peaceful and prosperous world, jointly. China expressed its firm support for India's aspiration in attaining full membership in the U.N Security Council (IDSA, 2008).

Both "India-China appreciated each other's regional engagements and activities" (IDSA, 2008). Above that "two countries also agreed to strengthen their mutual coordination by exploring new architecture for enhancing regional cooperation in the Asian region" (IDSA, 2008). Similarly, India and China also decided to advance Asia's regional integration and improve Asia and Europe's comprehensive partnership co-jointly" (IDSA, 2008). In most of their high-level official exchanges, these shared interests were often reiterated and which provides a foundation for a fresh outlook for engagement and regional cooperation. Thereby, it underscores the evolvement of India-China's new friendship and partnership, where both sides share converging views of building a new architecture for enhancing regional security and development.

In Central Asia, both India and China's engagements are moving towards cooperation, mainly in the security sector and energy to the least extent (Zhao, 2010). Both countries share common concerns about increasing security threats emanated by extremist groups and converging views of the importance of maintaining a stable regional security condition. These common interests and concerns are effectively communicated through a multilateral forum such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

In 2006, India achieved an observer member of the SCO and enjoyed its indirect engagements and participation (Wishnick, 2009). Later in 2017 India then attained full membership. This evolution evaded the barriers that limit India's engagement and allow full participation and equal footing with China and Russia, in Central Asia. The SCO, facilitated India a means to deepen its engagements and extend common interest, particularly in the social-economic sphere with Central Asian Members (Mukerji, 2020). Also, it channeled India's engagements with China in that part of the world. For decades, both India and China had actively engaged in promoting regional security under the SCO and regional anti-terrorist RAT framework. Under the SCO's "Peaceful missions" programs, two countries regularly conducted and participated in joint military drills and Anti-terrorist exercises along with other SCO members (Mukerji, 2020).

Meanwhile, in May 2018, China-Pakistan-Afghanistan trilaterally held a summit to discuss the plan to extend China-Pakistan economic corridor CPEC, which reflects China's growing interest in Afghanistan. India's engagement and development in Afghanistan impressed China and Beijing shares a view of India-China's collaboration in Afghanistan. Further, during the 2018 Wuhan Summit, Prime Minister Modi and President Xi Jinping then held an informal meeting. In their discussion, the two leaders agreed to look forward to joint economic ventures and development projects in Afghanistan.

Besides that, both leaders stressed re-emphasize cooperation in encountering terrorists and maintaining regional stability co-jointly. According to some observers, the summit was also marked as an exchange of leaders' strategic guides to the respective military to build mutual trust and understanding, "calling for prudent management of differences with mutual sensitivity" (Mukerji, 2020) and eliminating border security tensions. Both Prime Minister Modi and Xi Jinping endorsed eliminating mutual distrust through bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

Hence, one can also observe that the Central Asia region has potential to become a venue where reconciliation for India-China's disputes and negotiate mutual cooperation. Alongside, China seems to have no adverse attitude towards India's alignment with Central Asia. With accordance to Zhao Huasheng, he said, Beijing does not hold envy towards India's alignment with the Central Asian states. He stated China holds a rather positive view towards India's presence and its alliance with five Central Asian member states (Zhao, 2010).

### **India-China's Possible Energy Cooperation**

As noted above, India and China are two major net energy importers in the world. According to a 2010 report, India and China accounted for nearly fifty per cent of Africa's energy exports to Asia. Also, in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region, India and China are the major energy competitors. Nevertheless, "two countries mostly relied on market mechanisms and resisted any temptation to pursue a strategy hinge on excessive energy supplies (David & Mukherjee, 2010). So far, India-China has had no standoff over the energy issues. There is incremental energy cooperation between state-owned companies (China's National Petrochemical Company CNPC and India's Oil and Gas Corporation ONGC Videsh LTD or OVL) since the mid-2000s (Jayaswal, 2010).

To give an instance, in 2005 OVL and CNPC jointly bought 38 per cent of a Stake in Syria Al-furat petroleum company that owned thirty-nine oil and gas fields. OVL also owned a gas and oil field in Columbia, which is integrated with Chinese energy petrochemical company firm Sinopec corps (Jayaswal, 2010)

In 2006, ONGC and CNPC then signed an agreement for energy cooperation pacts. Similarly, Gas Authority of India Limited, GAIL Ltd and China National Offshore Oil Corporation CNOOC International Ltd, signed a memorandum understanding MoU of exploration, development and Production of oil and gas resources (Jayaswal, 2010)

In 2010, the Chinese CNPC exchanged its keen interest in aligning with ONGC and acquiring access to India's energy assets. CNPC proposed cooperation with ONGC in exploring joint ventures and cautiously, New Delhi considered the proposal. Then in 2012, ONGC and CNPC joint venture and an exploring deal were renewed. Some experts see the ONGC and CNPC collaboration will eventually reduce aggressive energy competition from China. Furthermore, in 2017 India's GAIL ltd signed a pact with three Chinese companies including Sinopec, CNOOC ltd and Beijing Gas Group Co. Under the MoU and agreement between GAIL and Sinopec two companies were assigned to cooperate in the field of oil-gas exploration, development and production in China, India and other regions (Jayaswal, 2010)

In Central Asia, there is no fierce energy competition between India and China, so far. But "in 2005, India's ONGC had lost out to Chinese CNPC in the race to acquire the Kazakhstan oil field". India's energy engagement with Central Asia is limited as compared to that of China. China had built the two largest energy pipelines connecting directly with oil and gas fields in Central Asia. If the CNPC and ONGC extend their corporations in Central Asia it would help deepen India's energy engagement in Central Asia.

### **Strengthening India-China's Cooperation and U.S factor**

To discuss the India and China's cooperation in Central Asia, it is important to highlight the present India-U.S. relationship. From Barack Obama and Donald Trump's administrations, the diplomatic ties and their strategic partnership between India and U.S. have grown significantly and these have increased cautiousness among Chinese strategic thinkers and leaders. U.S. allies with East-Asia and Asia pacific countries are often conceived as an approach to containing China. The recent, China-U.S trade war exacerbated their adverse relationship further. According to David and Mukherjee, the growing India and U.S. partnership often compelled China to re-considerate its cooperation with India (David and Mukherjee, 2010).

In the existent literature, some commentator also underscores Russia's factor in determine India's policy strategy choice. Central Asia is considered a sphere of Russian influence but growing Chinese influence in the region caused a major concern. Some observers see India's presence in Central Asia as containing China's

influence or saving Russia. Perhaps, it is not the case, since India wanted to pursue an independent foreign policy and seek equal participation (Wani, 2019). New Delhi might prefer to engage with other players through its comprehensive policy strategy and resist alignment with other powers in Central Asia. But, at the same time maintains its close friendship with Russia. Hence, India is likely to continue to cooperate with China and perhaps establish more meaningful cooperation since both countries share their converging views in Central Asia.

### **India-China's Collective Outlooks and Diverging Interest in Central Asia**

As noted above, in post-1962, India-China bilateral relations featured both conflicts and cooperation. Despite the existing border disputes, the two countries attempted to extend bilateral ties and cooperation in various domains. In Central Asia, both India and China have been observed engaging in security cooperation. Along with that India and China also shared concerns the issues such as instability in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Thus, both countries had reinforced strengthened cooperation in combating “three evils”, within the SCO framework. However, there is no direct engagement between the two. India's engagement and interactions with China are mainly through the multilateral forum.

According to Zhao, he said to build deeper cooperation and mutual trust between the two requires a greater understanding of each other's differences in policy preferences and strategies (Zhao, 2010). Though, since the 2000s India-China's relationship is developing towards this direction, not enough progress has been made. Zhang stated India-China bilateral cooperation lacked an explicit interest. Therefore, having no specific content, active bilateral cooperation between the two is limited (Zhao, 2010). Thus, despite the series of high-level exchanges and MoU signed between the two no major progress had been made so far. Thereby, in general, India-China cooperation is merely defined by official exchange and bilateral agreement. Therefore, assurances for greater cooperation have not commenced yet.

In addition to that, clashes over different strategic preferences between India and China are also observed in the region. India's Connect Central Asia policy is aimed to subside Pakistan's strategic hold and plots against India's interests. Nevertheless in Central Asia, in any cooperation between China and India, Beijing wants the Pakistan factor to be taken into account (Zhao, 2010). China's firm support and ties with Pakistan exacerbated India-China's trust deficiency. Furthermore, China's Central Asia policy entails ambitious geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Beijing emphasized building Eurasian economic integration by turning Central Asia into a hub for its energy and trade transit road. In that vein, China employs its economic muscles and assertive policy to build an economic monopoly and influence in the region. According to Ayjazi Wani, “China's Central Asia policy is described as guided by a self-controlled status quo that is driven by hegemony” (Wani, 2020). “It is motivated by China's policy goals of ensuring national security and economic advancement, which resemble 19th-century Dutch style hegemonic strategy,” he stated (Wani 2020). This is evidenced by the influx of large Chinese investments and infrastructure development projects in Central Asia. China has employed its BRI as a spearhead strategy in attempts to integrate the Central Asian region by enhancing its economic muscles and influence (Wani 2020).

Conversely, India practices a more constructive approach and implements a balanced and independent policy approach. India stressed collaboration and equal footing with other players and evaded the Chinese monopoly that hinders India's policy interest in Central Asia. Several times, India had boycotted joining the BRI development projects. Recently, during the 2020 SCO summit and heads of government meeting, India took a withdrawal stance against participating in BRI projects. India's major concern is to ensure and maintain its sovereignty and territorial rights over parts of the Kashmir region (Mukerji, 2020). Hence, in the 2020 SCO convention, India proposed to build a community of common destiny for mankind and install a “reformed multilateralism”(Mukerji, 2020). India encouraged evading superpower monopoly and improving equal participation of all the member states in multilateral decision-making. India also called on its members to continue with SCO's core policy vision i.e. building a “multipolar world order” (Mukerji, 2020). It reflects the concerns about China's dominance and power polarisation between U.S. Russia and China (Mukerji, 2020). This illustrated the key distinction between India-China's policy and strategy interests. Thus, one could argue that despite the shared common interests between the two powers India-China's active bilateral cooperation in Central Asia perhaps would not be soon.

## **II. Discussion**

In the 21st Century Central Asia has become a new spotlight of the Great Game. With a significant rich hydrocarbon resources and its strategic location, the Central Asia region has attracted large number of external players than ever before. The presence of India and China in Central Asia draws a large attention among Central Asian scholars, who speculate on a possible scenario of power rivalry between the two Asian powers. Despite the growing discourse of India-China rivalry and competition in Central Asia, the paper examined India and China's shared common views and goals, as well as aspects of their different policy interests. The key essence of this paper is to look into the areas that may promote India-China's greater cooperation in Central Asia.

India-China's bilateral relationship had entered a new era. Since the mid-2000s, the two sides continued to open new diplomatic channels to rejuvenate their bilateral relationship. Subsequently, a series of high-level official exchanges and visits of both sides had reassured improving bilateral cooperation and engagements through a partnership in developing Asia region and sub-region. It is often observed; whenever intensification of border tension occurred, the leaders of the two side exchanges views and aspiration for deepen cooperation. The presence of India and China in Central Asia thus signifies the possibility of realizing deeper engagement and cooperation, between the two. Nonetheless, the available literature highlighted India-China's overlapping geo- political and energy interests. Hence, some scholars concluded the increase of India-China rivalry in Central Asia.

In this context, the study evaluated the nature of India-China's engagements and cooperation in Central Asia. To continue with the study, it analyzed the perspective and views of India-China's presence in Central Asia. Furthermore, it examined India-China's shared common views in Central Asia as well as the divergent aspect of their policy preferences and interests.

Though the increasing critical literature indicated growing India-China rivalry in Central Asia, India was considered not a part of big competition. Given the lack of geographical contact, India's foothold in Central Asia remains minimal. As compared to China, India's engagements with other Central Asia states are far behind and which dismissed India as a strong competitor. In this context, Gulshan Sachdev and Zhao Hueng contended India does not stand to compete against China in Central Asia. Hence, India-China rivalry in Central Asia is far from its inception.

In the meantime, China holds rather a positive attitude towards India's engagement and presence in Central Asia. From the Chinese perspective, India was often pictured as a benign state, not a threat. It is noteworthy to emphasize the post-1990s development; where the two countries continue to put earnest efforts to extend the scope for bilateral collaboration in various areas and regions. Observing the trends of a series of high-level exchanges, meetings and agreements between the two it suggested that there is growing interest in strengthening India-China's cooperation from both sides. In this regard, leaders from both sides share their converging views of working together in promoting prosperity and stability in Asian regions. With this background, it presents a somewhat positive outlook and plausible greater cooperation between the two. In Central Asia, at present, both India and China maintain their engagements mainly through the SCO forum. There is no direct engagement between the two, so far. Most of their interaction and cooperation is primarily concentrated in the security sector, wherein both actively participate in joint military and combating terrorism exercises along with other SCO member states.

Afghanistan is an important neighbour, and for both strategic and security reasons India since the 1990s continue its diplomatic engagements.

During Prime Minister Modi and Xi Jumping's meeting in Wuhan, in 2018, the two leaders then exchanged views on establishing a joint venture in Afghanistan, but no further step has been initiated yet. Hence, even though New Delhi and Beijing often expressed common notions and converging views of deepening cooperation, in Central Asia however no such initiation was observed yet. In the meantime, another facet of India-China's presence in Central Asia underscores the divergence of policy and strategic interest. China emphasized strengthening its position through its economic influence and monopoly. India on the other hand called for equal participation and eradicates the practice of monopoly. Further, India firmly protests against Chinese hegemony as well as ripping off Central Asia between the poles; China, Russia and U.S (Wani, 2020).

It is also observe that Beijing stressed to deepen its cooperation with New Delhi and seemly China is anticipating India's active involvement in BRI. BRI is a vital part of China's Eurasian integration strategy, which India continues to boycott. This might disconcert China to some degree. Nevertheless, the lack of transparency in China's BRI has increased India's skepticism over the underlying motivations behind the initiative. Thus, the trust deficit between India and China persist.

If emphasized Zhang's argument, he said, the mutual distrust between the two continues and thus any form of meaningful cooperation is less likely. He also stated India and China faced a lack of specific policy interest, which impeded the entire process of reinforcing India- China's cooperation. Therefore, further engagement and collaboration will not be possible until both parties agree on clear policy objectives and shared interests. The notion of increasing India-China rivalry also underestimated India's vulnerable position and challenges in Central Asia. To overcome India's challenges in Central Asia, cooperation thus became of utmost need at every level and area.

Despite the fact that China and India emphasized strengthening their cooperation, the development remains slow. In Central Asia, there is no active engagement between the two and lack of transparency and trust deficit remains an issue. However, there is still room for India to maximize its engagement with all the locals and major players to pursue its interest, especially with China. As far as India-China cooperation is concerned, both countries can explore the areas of their cooperation. India and China could strengthen their partnership by jointly assisting in the development of economic and health infrastructure in post-COVID-19 Central Asia.

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