



## **“A STUDY ON INDIA AND ITS EXTENDED NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIA AND MONGOLIA”**

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### **Abstract**

India's attempts to connect comprehensively with its wider neighborhood have been greatly bolstered by "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2015 visit to Mongolia and Central Asia." These areas are important to India from a geopolitical, economic, and civilizational standpoint. India wants to respond to China's economic dominance and Russia's geopolitical ambitions by expanding its "strategic role" in Mongolia and the Central Asian area as a neighbor, regional force, and global player. In addition to effective diplomacy, the fundamental ties that unite India and Mongolia are democracy and Buddhism. Since assuming power in 2014, India's foreign policy has adopted new trajectories with regard to its neighbors and wider neighbourhood. In East Asia, India's "Look East" strategy has been effective since 1993, but it was only when the Modi administration adopted a firm stance to establish India's robust presence in this area that it began to function effectively. This led to the policy being renamed "Act East," emphasizing Northeast Asia and India becoming an important "third neighbourcountry in Mongolia's foreign policy." India's "Look North" strategy in Central Asia resulted in adopting the "Connect Central Asia" policy, which improved India's regional engagement and provided crucial support for its growing status as a regional and global force. With a focus on the shifts in India's policies towards these areas and vice versa, this paper examines India's interactions with Mongolia & Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

**Keywords:** *Central Asia, Mongolia, Look East, Regional Power, Geo-Political..*

### **Introduction**

The 2015 trip to Mongolia and Central Asia by "Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi" has been crucial in reviving New Delhi's attempts to connect comprehensively with its wider region. Being the first prime minister from India to visit Mongolia in June, Modi created history. His historic travel to all five Central Asian republics in July of the following month solidified his status as India's first prime minister to do so. The fact that Mongolia and Central Asia are critical to India today, not just from a civilizational standpoint but also from a geopolitical and economic one, makes Modi's visit to these regions all the more noteworthy. As "a neighbor, regional power, and a global actor," India seems to be trying to strengthen what academics see as its "strategic role" in Mongolia and the Central Asian area. This is a reaction to Russia's geopolitical goals and China's economic dominance.<sup>[1]</sup> But, it is crucial to keep in mind that, in addition to the fruitful diplomacy that both countries are pursuing with one another, democracy and Buddhism are the fundamental components that unite Mongolia and India. Since Modi took power in 2014, India's foreign policy has changed how it approaches its neighbors and the broader neighborhood. These new orientations have been implemented since Modi took power in 2014. Regarding East Asia, India's "Look East" strategy has been functioning well since 1993. Still, it was only when the Modi administration adopted a firm stance to establish India's robust presence in this area that it began to function effectively. As a direct consequence, the policy previously known as "Look East" was renamed "Act East." Additionally, India's foreign policy began to place a greater emphasis on Northeast Asia due to this new approach. Mongolia, located in Northeast Asia, became an essential nation in India's Act East strategy, while India became an important third neighbor country "in Mongolia's foreign policy." Both of these countries are located in



their respective regions. Regarding Central Asia, India's "Look North" strategy led to adoption of the "Connect Central Asia" policy to engage with this area thoroughly. This was done to enhance India's regional participation. The notion that it would assist India in gaining the essential backing for its rising regional/global power position, in addition to enhancing "India's attempts to play a more significant role in the regional dynamics of Asia, is the driving force for such an enthusiastic desire for New Delhi to interact with both Mongolia and Central Asia."

In this context, the purpose of this research is to examine the nature of India's interactions with Central Asia and Mongolia after the 1991 Soviet collapse. Because of these links, both regions had a rare opportunity to grow autonomously. It further emphasizes how India's stance toward Central Asia and Mongolia has shifted, and how the reverse is also true. That was especially the case when Indian Prime Minister Modi traveled there to learn more about the latest happenings in India's ties with Mongolia & Central Asia.

### **The Post-1991 Period between India and Mongolia**

India is keen on deepening its longstanding diplomatic relations with the small nation of Mongolia, which has a population of barely three million. This is because of Mongolia's geostrategic position, its welcoming foreign policy, and its adherence to the core principles of the NAM. In contrast, the post-1991 era, the period after the conclusion of the Cold War and the beginning of the globalization of the notion of foreign policy, has been a more favorable time for consolidating their partnership. As a result, it is impossible for any nation, regardless of its size, to live in isolation. This is because one nation's actions will affect the other, and strong connections between countries make it impossible for them to operate independently. As a result, the conclusion of the Cold War made it possible for several countries, notably those in Asia, to undergo a total shift in the established order of the international community. Because of this, countries were provided with sufficient latitude to analyze "the ideological and structural components of their policies in politics, society, economics, and culture. As a result, Mongolia's foreign policy concerns were brought up for discussions or debates among academics and policy makers, which ultimately led to the formulation of a well-defined concept adopted in 1994."<sup>[2]</sup> Mongolia also experienced such a change after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which gave her a rare opportunity to come out of Soviet command and become a part of the new international order. "Mongolia will pursue an autonomous, non-aligned, multi-pillar, and open foreign policy directed by its national interest. This is the core of the philosophy that underpins Mongolia's foreign policy. A declaration was made that Mongolia will pursue a balanced relationship with China and Russia."<sup>[3]</sup> However, "the uniqueness of the foreign policy concept can be understood in terms of the "third neighbor" policy, which implies that Mongolia will no longer depend on a single neighbor but rather on as many countries and international institutions as possible. This is because the geographical location has significantly impacted the entire spectrum of foreign policy. With this declaration, relations with immediate neighbors were given a high priority."<sup>[4]</sup>

The alliance between Mongolia & India is now changing according to the third neighbor strategy since India was prominently named as Mongolia's third neighbor in its revised foreign policy concept in 2011. This is the viewpoint that Mongolia holds at present. On the other hand, one may discover that both nations have had an intimate historical and cultural connection from ancient times. Their bilateral relationships have recently been strengthened to the point that they are now called "spiritual neighbors." Their traditional relations are founded on a shared Asian background and Buddhist culture, which has served to solidify their bilateral ties. "The Mongols used Buddhism as a primary basis of shared identity and as an effective vehicle for building Mongol nationalism against China's



Qing dynasty throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.”<sup>[5]</sup> Buddhism served the Mongols as a critical foundation of shared identity. India is not only the place where Buddha was born, “but it is also a country where the Mongolian people ascribe all of the things that have been believed to be the finest attainments of knowledge and learning.”<sup>[6]</sup> The Ven is the one name that both the Mongols and the Indians look up to and revere. KushokBakulaRimpoche played a significant role not only in the post-Soviet revival of Buddhism in Mongolia but also in the deepening of cultural ties between the two countries through the practice of Buddhism.<sup>[7]</sup> Buddhism accelerated the process of spreading Indian culture in Mongolia, and one can discover that the Mongols have a long tradition of having Sanskrit names.<sup>[8]</sup> Over time, the two countries have become more similar in their way. During his visit to Mongolia, Prime Minister Modi said, India is privileged to be considered as Mongolia's spiritual neighbor. This spiritual connection between the two countries encourages them to work together on issues of mutual interest and in the regional integration drive.”<sup>[9]</sup>

The two countries foreign policy shifted after 1991 to reflect the reality of a globalized world, although diplomatic contacts between Mongolia and India had existed since December 24, 1955. This shift brought a new dimension to the two countries' relations. Unsurprisingly, “the two nations signed a Treaty of Friendly ties and collaboration in 1994. This document established a solid basis for the further growth of their bilateral ties and regional and global collaboration. President N. Bagabandi of Mongolia visited India in January 2001 to sign new bilateral defenseman’s in information technology, defence, and law. 2005 was a watershed year as the two countries decided to collaborate on a new project to build a satellite-based e-network in Mongolia for tele-education and telemedicine. Not only was it decided that Mongolian educational institutions would be associated with Indian educational institutions through a dedicated satellite, but it was also decided that one or two Mongolian hospitals would be associated with Indian medical institutions to enable Mongolia to have direct communication with quality education and medical services through the use of modern technology.”<sup>[10]</sup> A memorandum of understanding was also signed to establish an “India-Mongolia friendship Agropark in the Darkhan Uul province of Mongolia. India would provide agricultural equipment, tractors, and trucks, among other things, to be utilized in this Agropark. Additionally, India agreed to waive the payment for the plot of land that was allotted to Mongolia at Bodh Gaya for the construction of a Mongolian monastery, in addition to agreeing to digitalize cherished Buddha.”

Additionally, in 2009, when the President of Mongolia, Ts. N. After Elbegdorj's “state visit to India, the two countries published a joint statement on comprehensive partnership. This was made evident when a significant civil nuclear deal was signed between Mongolia and India to supply uranium to India for use in benign purposes. In addition, the Mongolian Minister of Defence, L. Bold, was one of the special invitees at the Aero India exhibition in 2009, and he was also a member of the joint working group meeting in India.”<sup>[11]</sup> In July 2011, when “Indian President Pratibha Devi Singh Patil” visited Mongolia, a twenty-million-dollar credit was announced to establish a “Centre of Excellence for IT, Communication, and Outsourcing in Ulaanbaatar.” In May 2015, “this Centre was named after Atal Bihari Vajpayee, well known as the former Prime Minister of India. The Rajiv Gandhi Polytechnic College for Production and Art, as well as the Centre for Excellence in Information and Communication Technology Education, were both refurbished by India.” Following this visit, the two nations started moving toward becoming excellent trade partners because their relationship is market-oriented and based on the Internet. Regarding customs tariffs and “any other taxes imposed on imports and exports, the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation” enabled both parties to have the status of an MFN about the other. Pharmaceutical supplies, veterinary



medications, autos, and automotive components have been among the items India has sent to Mongolia.

Concerning scientific and technological cooperation, in 2012, India decided to buy “a mine in Mongolia, which led to the country's first steel plant.” This move was made to lessen India's reliance on expensive coal from Australia. Mongolia has enormous coal, gold, copper, and uranium reserves, which bode well for India's mining ambitions. Due to these projects, the country's infrastructure, including its power plants, water treatment facilities, and rail networks, will be in high demand. Because India intends to increase its steel output from “80 MT to 200 MT by 2020, the country is striving to acquire coking coal securitization.” This is because India owns no quality coking coal mines inside its borders. Mongolia has top-grade “coking coal, which will prove advantageous for India.” Both nations reached an agreement at the beginning of 2010 to ‘operationalizetheir civil nuclear cooperation, and ever since that time, they have been working towards’ the possibility of forming a joint venture in Mongolia's uranium mining sector. This would give India the much-needed boost to cover at least some of its local energy demands, if not all. “India is the sixth country to reach such an agreement, after the United States of America, Russia, France, Kazakhstan, and Namibia. The agreement with Mongolia pertains to the peaceful use of radioactive minerals and nuclear energy.”<sup>[12]</sup>

### **Improving Relationships Through the Use of "Strategic Partnership":**

Even though more indications of strengthening bilateral ties were brought to light when India was promoted to the position of “third neighbor in Mongolia's updated foreign policy in 2011, it was the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Mongolia in 2015” that brought about a significant transformation in the overall relationship. It is worth noting that China has been attempting to expand its influence in its neighborhood, “be it in South Asia or East Asia,” for some time now through its so-called “periphery policy” or “good neighborly policy.” As a result, India has also been cultivating cordial relations with China's immediate neighbors, and Prime Minister “Modi's trip to Mongolia” can be seen as an impetus in this manner. Over the last several years, strengthening India's relations with China's neighboring nations has become a significant component of India's foreign policy. In conclusion, a few key factors played a role in Modi's visit. These factors include “India's 'Act East' Policy, the China factor, and the relevance of Buddhism to promote diplomatic ties between the two countries.”<sup>[13]</sup> As a result, experts referred to “Modi's visit as a strategic step to ensure India's strong presence in China's neighboring region in the north, where Mongolia has already been acknowledged as an integral part of New Delhi's 'Act East' policy towards China. This provided a compelling argument for elevating India and Mongolia's relations to a strategic partnership. To develop the strategic partnership, more than ten agreements were reached between the two countries to collaborate in various fields of mutual concern, including economic cooperation, which was visible.”

Since “Mongolia decided to adopt a market economy and made the private sector the primary foundation for the growth of its national economy, the government has placed a significant amount of weight on establishing comprehensive economic and commercial cooperation with India.” When it comes to doing business, their physical locations constrain both tons, but they possess the political will and the knowledge necessary to work together. Mongolia is a nation that is rich in minerals, including “coking coal, copper, rare earths, and uranium. India knows the potential” relationship between the two countries in the resource sector. In the course of his tour to Mongolia, Prime Minister Modi showed a great deal of enthusiasm for promoting commerce. He even declared that Mongolia would get a credit line of one billion dollars for infrastructure development. This credit line is now being invested to construct an “oil refinery.”



Additionally, “the growth of economic sectors is connected to a great deal of other changes. India is in a position to capitalize on the opportunity to investigate Mongolia's industrial sector. In addition, a memorandum of understanding has been made between the Tata Memorial Centre of India and the National Cancer Centre of Mongolia about giving a Bhabhaton II Telecobalt unit and a radiotherapy simulator. In some fields, such as information and space technology,” as well as biotechnology, where there is absolutely no doubt about the possibility of future growth, there is a great deal of room for collaboration that would benefit both parties. India may also investigate the prospects of “using digital technology” to broaden its commercial contacts with “Mongolia.”

A more recent event occurred in “September 2019 when the President of Mongolia, Kh. Battulga's visit to India, both nations recognized the unrealized potential for further expansion of bilateral commerce and investment, particularly in agricultural commodities, dairy products, animal husbandry, mining, information technology, medicines, and tourism, among other areas. The Indian Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry, and Dairy agreed with the Mongolian Ministry of Agriculture about the cooperation of the two countries in animal husbandry and dairy products.” As a result of the agreement, Mongolia can now sell animal raw materials to India in exchange for affordable, high-quality animal pharmaceuticals. This could encourage investment and boost trade turnover. In 2018, trade between the two countries reached \$52.6 million, up from \$37.5 million in 2017. Although there was a dip in 2019, total bilateral trade was still better than 2017's figure of \$38.3 million. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the visit that the Mongolian President made to India “was that the two countries, for the first time, discussed the prospect of working together in space research and renewable energy.” An Indian ambassador said, "Solar energy is abundant, and cooperation is solicited, especially as India has emerged as the leader by way of the International Solar Alliance and her ambitious alternative and renewable energy projects."<sup>[14]</sup> This statement about India's emergence as the leader in these areas was made.

India has granted Mongolia's request to extend its “investment of US \$236 million for the oil refinery being built in Mongolia, bringing India's total commitment for this project to US\$ 1.236 billion. Once construction is completed in 2022, the oil refinery plant will help Mongolia reduce some of its reliance on Russian fuel, as it can refine 1.5 million metric tonnes of its crude oil annually, ensuring 70% of the country's total oil consumption.”<sup>[15]</sup> At the moment, Mongolia is “vulnerable to supply shocks and price” increases due to its reliance on Russia for essential energy and fuel, especially since Russia has a history of manipulating its energy supplies. According to a statement by Mongol Refinery, "By establishing this strategically important oil refinery, the national economy [of Mongolia] will become independent from energy imports, and fuel and commodity prices will be stabilized." This statement pertains to the importance of the refinery in terms of its strategic importance.

Another reason for the growth of the “India-Mongolia relationship” in security and defense cooperation is that "Mongolia perceives its proximity with India as not only a window to the outside world but also as a factor to balance China."<sup>[16]</sup> It is undeniable “that Mongolia has gained advantages from working with India on defense and other military matters.” Mongolia has been consistently working to transform its armed forces into an efficient peacekeeping force that can contribute to the United Nations mission across the globe. Mongolia is fortunate to have India as a partner in its preparation for such a mission since India is the third most significant contributor of troops to the United Nations. An annual India-Mongolia military exercise known as "Nomad Elephant" is one of the many combined military training and war simulations that Mongolia and India have begun to perform together lately. It is important to note that these exercises have been conducted recently. Training



facilities have been provided by India to Mongolian military operations, peacekeeping operations, and defense units. Ring “Indian President Patil's visit to Mongolia in July 2011;” the two nations inked a bilateral agreement to cooperate on defense matters. During that period, In that particular moment in time, India was eager to strengthen its “defence ties with Mongolia.”

The reason for such a strong desire is straightforward: “New Delhi believes it will be able to compete more effectively in Mongolia's lucrative mining and trade sectors if it shifts its engagement from that of an investor to that of a strategic partner. The National Security Councils of India and Mongolia meet regularly to discuss matters of mutual interest in regional and multilateral affairs, including terrorism. In recent years, especially following Modi's visit to Mongolia, the renewal of the defense cooperation agreement has been considered highly essential.” This is because it can subtly boost India's concealed strategy of interacting with China's neighbouring countries.

In recent years, particularly following “Modi's visit to Mongolia, the strategic cooperation between the two nations has been boosted to develop their bilateral connection. This relationship has further been enhanced with the visit of the Mongolian President Battulga to India.” There is no question that this has been the case. This affirms that both parties place appropriate significance on one another “in their respective foreign policies. What is significant, however, is that Mongolia's commitment to continue with democracy has grown from various geostrategic concerns.” One of these worries is China's sustained military dominance, which presents a possible danger to Ulaanbaatar. Because of this, it is very evident that Mongolia has to broaden “its outreach to other powers in Asia,” particularly India, which plays a significant role.

On the other hand, India envisions Mongolia playing a constructive role in the area's affairs, notably in Central and Northeast Asia. Because New Delhi has been working towards re-establishing connections and becoming a significant role in these areas, these two regions are crucial for India. “In this regard, Mongolia's involvement might be significant for India, considering that Mongolia serves as a kind between Central and Northeast Asian areas. Building trust and mutual understanding on interregional cooperation between India and Mongolia would be significantly facilitated by close collaboration at regional security institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue Initiative on Northeast Asian Security (UBD).”

### **India and Central Asia in the Post-1991 Period**

Central Asia is an area that spans from “the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east and from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north.” It is situated in the central portion of the Asian continent. A new geopolitical structure has emerged since the country gained its independence with the fall of “the Soviet Union, which left the whole Central Asian area with problems in terms of both economics and security. At the same time, however, these obstacles also presented Central Asia” with the possibility of developing into a significant strategic area that attracts world powers not only in the immediate neighbourhood but also in the neighbouring neighbourhood considered to be “extended.” As a consequence of this, India also took the initiative. It started renewing its long-standing connections with Central Asia on a fresh foundation, considering the circumstances that existed after 1991.

India fell behind other regional players in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 when the Central Asian Republics acquired their freedom. This was even though India was geographically close to other Central Asian countries, had economic potential, and had a rising geopolitical interest.



This was because India had only begun a strategy of economic reforms in the early 1990s. As a result, it needed to take advantage of chances for “trade and investment with these new republics. Since 1993, India has focused its economic and diplomatic resources” on its "Look East" strategy, now known as the "Act East" policy. This policy is centered on expanding India's connections with Southeast and East Asian countries. On the other hand, other factors must not be addressed in establishing meaningful connections between the two parties, so, “India needs to be more active in pursuing its aggressive foreign policy goals in Central Asia.”

**These factors may be broken down into the following categories:<sup>[17]</sup>**

1. Because India did not have many opportunities for direct connection with the various Soviet Central Asian Republics during the time of the Soviet Union, it was necessary for India to begin over from scratch.
2. Due to the beginning of economic reforms in the early 1990s, India was preoccupied with fixing its internal “economy rather than seeking opportunities for trade and investment in Central Asia. This was particularly true when Central Asia lacked the resources to cast its economic nets overseas.”
3. The significant political and physical obstacles between India and Central Asia made it challenging to establish transport infrastructure that might facilitate commerce and other forms of contact between the two regions.
4. Besides “Russia, China, and the United States,” other nations in the area, such as Pakistan, have been actively involved in attempting to create their foothold in Central Asia. Some of these countries have even been attempting “to outmanoeuvre India.”
5. The ongoing wars “with Pakistan have made it very difficult for India to get access to Central Asia in terms of geographical connectivity, which is essential for the construction of sustainable energy, trade, and economic relations,” and
6. The increasing “cross-border terrorism” that is a result of Islamic fundamentalism caused significant security issues “for both India and Central Asia,” therefore posing a danger to the peace and security of the area, which would otherwise be beneficial to the development of meaningful links between the two regions.

Therefore, due to the factors above, India was first forced to abandon its “course in Central Asia. Meanwhile, other global powers, notably Western multinational corporations, were able to uncover the Central Asian markets and made significant attempts to exploit the energy resources of the area. The stability of Central Asian Republics has always been of primary importance for India, taking into consideration India's strategic interests in the area,” even though India cannot establish a dynamic presence in Central Asia in terms of its economy. Nevertheless, the "Look North" policy has been in place since the beginning of the twenty-first century to protect “India's national interests in Central Asia. The goals of this policy that India intended to pursue in the Central Asian region included the following: the maintenance of peace and stability; the prevention of terrorism; the assurance of energy security; the incorporation of the region into the expanded trade network; the establishment of mutually beneficial economic ties; the promotion of greater regional cooperation; and the monitoring of drug trafficking. These goals and objectives of India's Central Asia policy have remained almost unchanged since the end of the 1990s. Since then, India's policy has become more consistent and focused on its opportunities, concerns, and challenges in Central Asia.”

The "Connect Central Asia" program of India was initiated when “Central Asia was seen as a part of India's extended neighborhood” and as a region in which India had fundamental geostrategic interests,



including economic and security concerns. As a result of India's successful economic liberalization and the subsequent growth of its “economic profile, it needed to seek access to the Central Asian market. This market is also strategically significant in terms of trade routes and connection with the Eurasian area. The rapidly expanding Indian economy, driven by India's energy requirements,” necessitated the expansion and diversification of India's existing sources of supply. From this angle, China's energy supply from Central Asia, which is abundant in oil and gas, becomes very important for India. Because of this, there is a significant opportunity “for upstream Indian oil and gas companies to invest in exploration and production in the Central Asian region and to develop it as an alternative to indigenous resources. These concerns contributed significantly to the renewed thinking of Indian policymakers concerning Central Asia. The culmination of India's Central Asia policy reformulation was introduction of the new Connect Central Asia strategy in June 2012. This achievement occurred even though India's economic footprint in Central Asia was relatively modest. This strategy is built on proactive involvement with all five Central Asian nations, individually and collectively, in politics, economics, culture, and people-to-people interactions.”<sup>[18]</sup>

It all began with the inaugural “India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative held on June 12-13, 2012, in Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan. The purpose of the dialogue was to take further measures towards establishing a long-term engagement with the Eurasian area.” During this regional meeting, India presented its "Connect Central Asia" Policy to the public for the first time. The result was that India started along the route that would lead to a profound, significant, and long-lasting connection with “Central Asia.” The term "connect" is the focal point of this discussion, namely the connectedness between “India and Central Asia,” which includes physical and technological connections. “The proposal to connect the five republics of Central Asia and India electronically is one of the most innovative efforts that India has undertaken. This plan is modeled after the Pan-African e-network that India has established for the states that make up the African Union. In addition, the most valuable resource accessible in Central Asia is energy, regardless of whether it is generated by hydroelectric power, oil, or gas. Tajikistan is the second biggest producer of hydroelectricity in the Commonwealth of Independent States after Russia.” As a result, India's energy requirements may be significantly satisfied by economic cooperation with Tajikistan, which can be very beneficial. On the other hand, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have far more abundant energy supplies. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which is around 1800 km long and sometimes referred to as the "peace pipeline," is one of the projects with the most promise. Over thirty years, the TAPI pipeline will potentially transport “33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas to South Asia,” which is now experiencing an energy shortage. The construction of TAPI was supposed to be finished and put into service by 2018. However, those plans were pushed back for various reasons.

At this juncture, “it is essential to point out that there has been a significant change in the way that Indian foreign policy has been conducted in the period following the year 1991.” This change is characterized by transitioning from the unilateralism prevalent in earlier “eras to a multilateral approach, leading to India adopting a proactive approach towards Central Asia. This flexibility has enabled India to strengthen its foothold in all Central Asian Republics following 1991. This has been reflected in an increased profile of bilateral exchanges between India and the Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Over time, high-profile leaders from the five Republics were invited to India for state visits, and similar invitations were extended to India.” During these trips, a broad range of bilateral agreements and memorandums of understanding (MOUs) were signed on various topics, including political, economic, commercial, educational, and





security-related matters. The Indian government has initiated several bilateral projects to foster defense cooperation and provide training for Central Asian military personnel. In addition, the Inter-Governmental Commissions that are established “between India and the various Central Asian” nations have frequent meetings with the purpose of strengthening both bilateral and multilateral connections.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **Relations between India and Central Asia and the Modi Factor**

India views the Central Asian Republics as a potential new market for its "agricultural, pharmaceutical, education, training, banking, healthcare, hotel, and small-scale industrial and commercial product" exports, as well as its investments and imports in other key industries. Through partnerships, India may become an important player in these domains. It is also exceptionally abundant in mineral resources, which must be extracted, exploited, and transformed into products with added value. Central Asia falls within this category. “The entire number for trade relations between India and Central Asia remained lower than US\$ 800 million in 2012-13 which is, in reality, below the potential that the two sides possessed in actuality. This occurred in the economic ties between India and Central Asia. The reason for this is that Pakistan refuses to allow Indian goods to pass through its territory, and India lacks a direct overland route to the Central Asian region.<sup>38</sup> Despite this, India maintains a positive trade balance with the region, with Kazakhstan accounting for the majority of trade (55 percent), followed by Uzbekistan (20 percent), Turkmenistan (10 percent), Kyrgyzstan (9 percent), and Tajikistan (6 percent).”<sup>[20]</sup>

In light of this, the trip that “Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to the five Central Asian Republics between July 6 and July 13, 2015, was regarded in very high regard.” This was especially true because India was making a concerted effort to align its foreign policy with its most important economic interests. He traveled to Ufa for the BRICS and SCO Summits, and then, on his way back, he stopped in Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Before that, he traveled to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Prime Minister Narendra “Modi's visit to Uzbekistan brought the two nations together to strengthen their connections in essential atomic energy, military, and commerce sectors.” This occurred when India was approved as a full Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) member at the Ufa summit. After that, he traveled to “Kazakhstan, where the two nations reached five significant agreements, including a defense pact to strengthen military cooperation and a contract to deliver uranium until 2019. During his discussions with the Turkmen leadership in Ashgabat, both parties were persuaded to go forward with the TAPI pipeline project at an earlier stage. India and Kyrgyzstan inked four agreements during his visit to Bishkek.” One of the agreements was to expand defense cooperation and perform yearly joint military exercises. There were also four other agreements. “Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, which has always been strategically vital for India” because it shares the longest border with Afghanistan, was the destination he visited on the last part of his journey.

The consequences of Modi's travel to Central Asia have been praised by analysts, who have reported good comments. “The bilateral agreements that were signed between India and the various Central Asian Republics point to the fact that Modi's visit was intended to accomplish the following goals: (a) securing India's energy needs; (b) covering all aspects of the Make in India initiative; (c) fostering cooperation in the field of agriculture; (d) securing support for India to have a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council; and (e) countering the influence of China in Central Asia.” Since several nuclear facilities in India are now offline owing to a shortage of fuel, this would make it possible for India to resume operations at those plants. In the joint statement between India and



Kazakhstan, it was mentioned that a feasibility study would be conducted to "explore the possibility of transportation of oil and gas either through pipeline or as LNG from Kazakhstan to India." Additionally, during Modi's visit, there was a discussion about increasing cooperation between India and Turkmenistan in oil exploration. Both countries expressed their satisfaction with the establishment of a representative.

To ensure the success of the "Make in India" initiative, Modi's primary objective was to enhance the connection of India's goods with Central Asian countries. In 2011, Uzbekistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, and Oman completed the Ashgabat Agreement, a transit accord. This agreement was reached between the four countries. Modi tried to get the backing of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to secure India's participation in the Ashgabat accord, which would result in enhanced connectivity with Central Asia. Through the use of the Iran route, it was thought that the amount of time required to carry products "between India and Central Asia would be significantly reduced. Recently, on May 23, 2016, India signed a historic agreement to develop the strategic port of Chabahar in Iran. Additionally, India agreed on a three-nation pact to build a transport and trade corridor through Afghanistan. This corridor could reduce the time and cost required to conduct business with Central Asia and Europe."<sup>[21]</sup> The development of the "Chabahar port was considered of utmost importance for India since it would enable New Delhi to circumvent Pakistan and gain access to domestic and international markets. While in Tajikistan, the Prime Minister of India and the leaders of Tajikistan were discussing the proposed Pakistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan Trilateral Transit Trade Agreement (PATTTTA). They concluded that including India in this agreement would be beneficial because it would encourage trade between Tajikistan and South Asia."

A significant deal for the "long-term procurement of urea from Turkmenistan" was struck between Turkmenhimiya, Rashtriya Chemicals, and Fertilisers Limited, a part of the Indian public sector. This arrangement was inked "during Modi's visit to Turkmenistan." Turkmenistan was the location of India's suggested location for the establishment of a factory for the manufacturing of urea. On the other hand, there were debates in Kyrgyzstan on the pooling of resources and the exchange of information regarding agricultural research partnerships. Additionally, "a plan of action was agreed upon between the Indian Council of Agricultural Research "and KazAgro Innovation to facilitate collaboration between the two organizations in agriculture. In addition, "Modi's trip to Central Asia was part of an attempt to garner support from as many nations as possible in support of India's bid to be granted a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). All the nations located in Central Asia have shown their support for India in this regard." On the other hand, considering the scale of China's economic and energy cooperation with Central Asia, it is still being determined how successful India has achieved in its efforts to counteract China's influence in Central Asia.

The expansion of the economy in "Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan," has fuelled a boom in the construction industry as well as the rise of industries such as information technology, pharmaceuticals, and tourism, all of which have a significant need for resources from India. "Even Prime Minister Modi emphasized the economic aspect of the connection between the two countries when he made the following statement in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan: We see an important place for Central Asia in India's future. We can contribute to each other's economic development."<sup>[22]</sup> "On the other hand, the five Central Asian Republics" have shown a strong desire to broaden their range of international ties. India's presence in the region may assist them in accomplishing their objectives. As a result of Prime Minister Modi's visit, India has capitalized on Central Asia's efforts to diversify its economy, which has significantly changed the



situation. On the other hand, to enhance “India's connectivity and energy cooperation with Central Asia, India will need to take the initiative to play a role either bilaterally or via regional cooperative frameworks. In this respect, India will need to take into consideration not just its collaboration with Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the United States but also with China and Pakistan.” It is necessary to have meaningful interaction with Iran and Russia to achieve connection and collaboration with Central Asia; however, the dynamics between Russia and China in the area will also play a significant role. On the other hand, “a strong stake in relations with India could reinforce Russia's reluctance (which persists) to be a junior partner of China. India's overland connectivity by utilizing the routes passing through the Chabahar Port in Iran would serve its strategic interest of finding routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan and Russia respectively if it were to be implemented.”<sup>[23]</sup>

On the other hand, analysts think the current method of “ensuring military security in Central Asia is based on multilateral mechanisms. Central Asian Republics are attempting to ensure their security by participating in several multilateral organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). India's participation in numerous regional forums, including the SCO, may not only help strengthen India's renewed ties with the region but also assist in ensuring that Central Asia's security concerns are addressed.” Since India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), it has been trying to fulfill its commitment “to play a more significant role. Given the current impasse between China and Pakistan, India must make the most of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to gain an edge.” This multilateral organization can serve as a venue for fostering trust among its member nations. The member nations of Central Asia, except Russia and Mongolia, have a significant understanding of India's significance in preserving the area's geopolitical equilibrium. Therefore, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has the potential “to play a crucial role in facilitating discussions between India and China to resolve the present situation and return to normality.”

### **Concluding remarks**

Contemporary political, economic, and military connections between India and Mongolia are rooted in the two countries' shared cultural and historical experiences. The fact that India is considered both a "spiritual neighbor" and a "third neighbor" by Mongolia makes it quite apparent that the two countries' similar history, democratic principles, and foreign policy priorities form the basis of their relationship. However, regarding bilateral and international relations, China plays a vital role in India and Mongolia. This is true for both nations. So, India has been trying to turn its friendship with Mongolia into an alliance to increase its sway in China's neighborhood. The relationship dynamics between the two countries changed drastically after Modi visited Mongolia. Their current relationship pursuits are fruitful since they are in keeping with a strategic collaboration. "My visit to all five countries in the region demonstrates the importance that we attach to a new level of relationship with Central Asia." So, Modi's trip to Central Asia was productive. Truthfully, it seems like Modi's journey paved the way for the five Central Asian nations to forge solid alliances. This would also facilitate the expansion of Indian companies in Central Asian nations and contribute to advancing India's strategic goals. Everything is about to happen since Uzbekistan has promised to make it easier for Indian businesses to invest. India and Kazakhstan have also decided to form a joint business council, while Kyrgyzstan and India have also agreed to start holding joint military exercises once a year. Concurrently, Tajikistan has extended an invitation to India for cooperation in hydroelectric power generation. Re-establishing the cultural and economic ties that once linked the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia has undeniably refocused India's strategy toward Central Asia.



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