

# Indian Perspectives on Eurasia

Professor Nirmala Joshi<sup>®</sup>

## Abstract

*This article examines the renewed strategic significance of Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, in the evolving global order. It revisits Halford Mackinder's classical geopolitical thesis that the Eurasian 'Heartland' constitutes the pivot of global power and argues that contemporary geopolitical competition has revived the relevance of this perspective. The study analyses the geostrategic and geoeconomic importance of the Central Asian States (CAS)—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—rich in energy resources and critical minerals, and increasingly contested by major powers. It further explores India's historical connections with Central Asia through trade, cultural exchanges, and the Silk Route, and assesses how these ties are being revived in the post-Soviet era. Attention is given to India's policies, including the Connect Central Asia Policy, defence cooperation, connectivity initiatives such as the International North–South Transport Corridor and Chabahar Port, and engagement through multilateral forums like Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The article evaluates opportunities, constraints, and the strategic implications for India's Eurasian engagement. It argues that while India enjoys considerable historical goodwill and growing diplomatic convergence with the CAS, its Eurasian*

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<sup>®</sup>Professor Nirmala Joshi is a distinguished scholar of International Relations and Central Asian Studies. She has taught for many years at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and has made significant contributions to research on Eurasian geopolitics, India–Central Asia relations, and regional security. Her work focuses on the historical, political, and strategic dynamics of Central Asia and its linkages with South Asia. Professor Joshi has authored and edited several books and research publications and is widely recognised for her expertise on the geopolitical transformation of Eurasia.

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*outreach continues to face structural constraints of geography, limited trade access, and competition from entrenched external powers, especially China and Russia.*

## **Introduction**

In the evolving dynamics of the global order, international politics has witnessed a gradual shift of strategic and economic attention from the Euro-Atlantic region towards Asia, particularly the wider Eurasian landmass. The shift in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was from Europe to Asia, especially to the huge landmass of Eurasia. Many experts and analysts opine that the shift can be characterised as a reinvention of British geographer Halford Mackinder's theory of geopolitics propounded in early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In the contemporary global order, Mackinder's theory has regained relevance. According to Mackinder, Central Asia is the 'Pivot of History' and the vast swathe of landmass is the 'Heartlands of Eurasia'. In Mackinder's view, "Who controls the heartlands of Eurasia controls the world".<sup>1</sup> The Central Asian region is strategically located at the centre of Eurasia and forms the core of the Eurasian landmass. It serves as a vital transit hub, providing land connectivity and access to the north, south, east, and west. The region comprises five independent states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Eurasia is a vast storehouse of natural resources and rare minerals. The Central Asian States (CAS) are particularly well endowed with energy resources and critical minerals, including uranium, gold, and silver. In the past, there was an intense competition among the great powers of the day, and, even today, the CAS remain highly sought after by both developed and developing countries. The competition is motivated both by geostrategic and geoeconomic factors. A prominent feature of the evolving Eurasian landscape is the strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, both of which were former rivals.

India's interaction with Central Asia dates to centuries. The essence of this interaction was trade and land routes, in which India was a significant player. It was with the breakup of the Soviet Union that Central Asia, along with the broader Eurasian region, regained its independence. Today, Eurasia attracts world

attention, and a competition among major powers has already set in. The renewed importance of Eurasia is not merely geographical; it is also strategic, economic, and political. The region has emerged as a theatre where energy routes, connectivity corridors, security competition, and competing regional institutions intersect. For India, therefore, Eurasia is not only a zone of historical memory but also a contemporary arena of strategic opportunity and constraint.

### **Historical Ties and Cultural Legacy**

India's engagement with the CAS dates back over a millennium, when flourishing trade and land routes contributed to the prosperity of the region. With the emergence of the Silk Route, a trans-continental corridor (06<sup>th</sup>-07<sup>th</sup> Century), trading activities received a powerful stimulus. With trade, came goods, people, and contact, as the adage goes, 'Culture Follows Trade'. It enriched contacts and strengthening historical ties in the process. In the words of renowned Tajik academician Babajon Gafurov, "It was not a mechanical transmission of cultural values from one people to another. It was a creative process in which cultural achievements were further read refined before they were passed on".<sup>2</sup>

One of the ancient trade route that connected the Indian subcontinent and Central Asia was from Takshashila and Purushapura (Peshawar), located on the other side of the Sindhu River, which connected trade routes with the Central Asian routes.<sup>3</sup> The items exported from the Indian subcontinent were sugar, clothes, shawls, namda woolen carpets, and dyes, while major items imported were horses, sheep, gold, silver, and precious stones. In 1832, Alexander Burnes observed that there were about 300 Hindus living in Bukhara. These Hindus were chiefly from Shikhapur, Sind (now in Pakistan), and that this number was increasing. Besides, Indians were also engaged in money lending and exchange.

With the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, sea commerce began to gain greater prominence. A massive bulk of goods could be transported at a time. The caravan trade, camel transport, and the Silk Road could not compete with transportation by sea. The beginning of trade by sea route also provided an equally powerful stimulus to formation of empires, leading to the beginning of colonialism, which led to the frantic search for markets.

After the consolidation of their hold on the Indian subcontinent, the British begin to re-orient trade towards the sea and gave importance to building of ports. Importantly, they also begin to focus on flourishing trade that had existed earlier with the Eurasian landmass. In fact, the genesis of the Anglo-Russian rivalry lies in trade and the ambition to capture the prosperous markets of Central Asia, particularly those of the Uzbek Khanates. However, geopolitical concerns became more dominant in the British policy after the incorporation of Central Asia into the Tsarist Empire in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The World War I (1914-1918), the Russian Revolution (1917), and the formation of the Soviet Union (1922) were the developments that adversely affected the trade links between South Asia and Central Asia. After the formation of the Soviet Union, all trading activities came to a complete halt. Even the Indian merchants in Central Asia were asked to leave.

### **Cultural Interaction**

Central Asia's favourable location at the crossroads of Indian, Persian, Chinese, and other civilisational spheres, along with its centrality to trans-continental trade routes such as the Silk Road, kept the region closely connected with its neighbouring areas.

One of the most important phases of this interaction was the spread of Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent through Afghanistan into Central Asia and onward to China. Buddhism spread to China around 271 BC. It was the indefatigable efforts of king Kanishka of the Kushan Empire that the message of Buddhism reached everywhere.

Another historic milestone in the cultural interaction was the spread of Sufism, a strand within Islam, from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent. Sufi ideology stresses benevolence and tolerance. Many Sufi saints, along with their disciples, came to India from Bukhara, Samarkand, and other cities. One of the most significant saints among them was Sayyid Ali Hamdani, who came to Kashmir from the Kulyab region in Tajikistan in the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century along with his 500 disciples. Even today, the shrines of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi and Hazrat Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer attract devotees from South Asia.

Another important period in the historical ties began in the medieval era. In 1526, Babur laid the foundation of the Mughal Empire in the Indian subcontinent. Later, it was Bairam Khan from

Turkmenistan who helped Humayun, son of Babur, to regain his lost empire. Bairam Khan is also known as the tutor or mentor of Akbar.

At another level, scholarly exchanges were a notable feature during the Muslim period. Al-Biruni came to India along with Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandi of Khorazm, now in Uzbekistan, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. It was their quest for knowledge that brought the two scholars to India. Al-Biruni stayed in India for 14 years and studied Sanskrit, and importantly translated valuable treatise on mathematics and astronomy into Arabic. The Tajik poet Mirza Abdul-Qâdir Bedil and Turkmen poet Magtymguly Pyragy wrote endearingly about India. Bedil's final resting place is in Delhi.

Akbar's court had two poets from Central Asia, Maulana Qasim Kahi and Khwaja Hasan Nizami. In the field of literature, the Kyrgyz legendary epic *Manas* (a legendary hero of the Kyrgyz national epic) refers to elephants, while the music and musical instruments of the region show striking similarities to those of India.

The Russian incorporation of Central Asia into the Tsarist Empire, the subsequent reorientation of Central Asia towards the north, and the British focus on sea trade adversely impacted adversely the centuries-old connectedness. While the British introduced English, the Tsarist Empire promoted education in Russian. As a perspective observer noted, "More importantly, the fundamental change that they managed to mould into the minds of the people as a whole".<sup>4</sup>

After the formation of the Soviet Union, most historical ties and people-to-people contacts were effectively severed. It was only after India gained independence in 1947 that a modicum of contacts was restored. A small window of opportunity was opened after the normalisation of India–Soviet relationships. It was the collapse of the Soviet Union that led Eurasia regained its earlier openness. By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, India and Eurasia, especially Central Asia, began to pick up the threads of their relationship.

### **Indian Perspectives and Policies on Eurasia**

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Eurasia emerged as a region of renewed strategic and economic significance. A new phenomenon that arose was the rise of non-traditional threats to security and societies. The spread of political Islam added to the complexity of the region. Another issue was the competition among major powers for strategic and geopolitical space. Russia and China, former rivals, had now formed a strategic partnership. Both these powers flanked the CAS and aspired to achieve the global status. For the United States (US) and its allies, Eurasia was important to check the rise of Russia and China. On the other hand, the Russian and Chinese partnership was interested in keeping a check on the activities of the US and its allies in Eurasia.

Central Asia is equally well endowed with natural and mineral resources. For India, this opening created an opportunity to reconnect with what it regards as an 'Extended Strategic Neighbourhood'. The opening of Eurasia opened the prospect for India to reconnect with its historical ties and cultural legacy. At the same time, this development coincided with the broadening of its foreign policy. It aspired to play a significant role beyond South Asia; a role significantly in Central Asia, its extended strategic neighbourhood. Given the emerging geopolitical scenario in Central Asia, where major powers have well established presence, can India increase its engagement in a region that is part of its geopolitical space? The article now examines and analyses Indian perspectives on, and policy towards, Central Asia.

India's outreach in Central Asia has remained constrained by geography and geopolitics. The absence of direct land access due to Pakistan, instability in Afghanistan, limited overland transit options, and the expanding economic footprint of China have all narrowed India's room for manoeuvre. As a result, India's Eurasian policy has had to rely heavily on diplomacy, capacity building, and alternative connectivity initiatives routed through Iran and multilateral platforms.

The most significant factor working in India's favour is the reservoir of goodwill it enjoys among the CAS. India is perceived as a friendly neighbour with no hidden agenda, and that it is not seeking space or leverage in their region. India's prime concern is the security and stability of the Central Asian region. New Delhi

established Joint Working Groups (JWG) on counterterrorism with Uzbekistan (2003), Kazakhstan (2004), and Tajikistan (2012). The aim of each JWG was to review and analyse the regional security scenario, co-ordinate information, and share experience. The JWG also envisaged the training of paramilitary personnel, and regular meetings of the group were held. In addition, military-technical cooperation agreements have been signed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In the field of defence cooperation, there have long been reports of Indian involvement in refurbishing the Ayni airbase near Dushanbe. However, India's actual operational status there has remained limited and often contested, suggesting that New Delhi's military footprint in Central Asia is modest rather than transformative. India's former Defence Minister Shri AK Antony declared that the airbase would only provide training to the Tajik pilots.

In 2009, India raised its interaction with the CAS to a higher level. President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan was the 'Guest of Honour' at India's Republic Day parade. During the visit, a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) was signed. A similar SPA has been signed with Afghanistan in 2011 and with Tajikistan in 2012. Afterwards, the issue of land connectivity began to figure prominently in India's policy.

A hallmark development in India's effort to give strategic direction to its regional outreach came in 2012 with the articulation of the Connect Central Asia Policy (CCAP). The CCAP sought to combine India's historical and cultural linkages with Central Asia, with a forward-looking agenda of political engagement, security cooperation, connectivity, trade, education, and people-to-people exchanges. The policy was enunciated by E Ahamed, former Minister of State for External Affairs, at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue in Bishkek in Jun 2012. In his words, "India is now looking intently at the region through the framework of CCAP, which is based on proactive political, economic, and people-to-people engagement with the Central Asian countries, both individually and collectively".<sup>5</sup> The CAS welcomed the enunciation of the CCAP as there was a wide area of commonality of interest on issues of regional security and stability.

Subsequently, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi visited all the five CAS. In Uzbekistan, the first one on his itinerary, he highlighted the geopolitical significance of Central Asia for India.

In his words, “Our relationship with the region has ancient roots and has left strong imprint on both. It now occupies a significant place in India’s future”.<sup>6</sup> Further, the PM pointedly brought out the significance of his address at the Nazarbayev University in Astana on 07 Jul 2015. He stated, “Central Asia is at the crossroads of Eurasia. It has been caught in the current of history, and it has also shaped it”.<sup>7</sup>

Since then, high-level visits to and from the CAS have gathered momentum. For instance, the former Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev visited India in Dec 2016. Similarly, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan paid a visit to India from 14 to 18 Dec 2016. The latest dialogue at the diplomatic level was held in New Delhi on 06 Jun 2025. The strength of India’s ties can be gauged from the fact that during the meeting, the Foreign Ministers of the five CAS expressed their solidarity with India on the terrorist attack at Pahalgam. They also expressed backing for India’s response under ‘Operation Sindoor’. In the joint statement issued at the end of the meeting, it was stated that “The countries condemned the Pahalgam attack and re-affirmed their firm commitment to fight against terrorism in all its form and manifestation”.<sup>8</sup> Further, it was stressed that the perpetrators, organisers, financiers, and sponsors of this terrorist act must be held accountable and brought to justice. Importantly, during their visit, the Foreign Ministers expressed interest in the joint exploration of rare earth and critical minerals.

Despite political goodwill, the economic dimension of India–Central Asia relations remain underdeveloped. Trade volumes remain modest, connectivity costs are high, and the lack of seamless transit continues to impede the translation of strategic intent into commercial outcomes.

### **Economic Engagement**

An essential component of the CCAP is to enhance the economic engagement with the CAS and Afghanistan, connecting Central Asia with South Asia through the latter. Such a connection will give a vigorous push to its CCAP. In this regard, India has accorded a greater emphasis to a multilateral approach, as the region is landlocked.

### **Bilateral Interaction**

Agriculture is a key area of cooperation and remains a mainstay of the Central Asian economies. In all the CAS, cotton is the chief crop and a major source of revenue. Exports of cotton have suffered primarily because the CAS are landlocked. Moreover, cotton cultivation requires plenty of water, but the two life-giving rivers of Central Asia—the Amu Darya and Syr Darya—are rapidly shrinking due to climate change. It is required to introduce innovative technology such as drip irrigation and water management schemes. Indian experience in these areas could be of immense benefit to conserve water. The CAS have also reached a stage in their economies and human development where they can absorb high technology, which is needed for extraction sector.

India's Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) can play a useful role in their economy. For instance, the areas of promise are with increased focus on transportation, rural housing, food, and light industry, especially in the countryside. Another area is the concept of 'Home-based Labour' connected with production that can be extended to women. However, a major hindrance in the promotion of MSMEs is the language. To overcome this hurdle, India has proposed to set up an e-network with its hub in the National Capital Region, Bengaluru, and Mumbai to deliver tele-education and tele-medicine in all the CAS. Besides, India is offering scholarships to Central Asian students to study in India. The Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme of the Government of India imparts skill and knowledge to people who would like to further improve their expertise.

### **The Regional Context**

From the Indian perspective, the regional dimension is of crucial importance. At present, trade and connectivity issues have moved to the centre stage of international politics. The Eurasian landmass is witnessing a competition among major and regional powers for space and leverage.

The opening of Eurasia provided an opportunity for India to connect with its strategic neighbourhood. Fortunately, the Indian approach coincided with the aspiration and development issues. The CAS would like to diversify their economies away from raw materials exporting countries to trade in finished goods. They are

in search of outlets for markets in the southern direction. At the political level, India is a full member of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa (BRICS) grouping. Membership of these regional organisations has given India presence and opportunity to engage with other members. Today, the SCO and BRICS have expanded by inviting other countries. However, the question arises as to what options remain with India to connect with the region, both economically and politically. The following discussion examines the connectivity options available to the CAS.

India's first major connectivity initiative aimed at enhancing energy security was the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline, which is intended to transport Turkmen gas to India through Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project is backed by the Asian Development Bank.

Interlinked with the issue of transporting energy in the southern direction is also the problem of surface transport connecting to the region. In the prevailing scenario, there are two best options for India to connect with the Central Asian region through Iran: One, is the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the second, via the Iranian port of Chabahar.

The INSTC is a multimodal corridor combining sea, rail, and road transport. It connects Mumbai with St Petersburg, which is 7,200 kms long. Though the INSTC is operational, it has not yet functioned at its desired capacity. The difficulties are largely because of poor coordination and bureaucratic delays. Greater institutional coordination is required to harmonise rules, regulations, customs procedures, and logistics systems so that delays can be reduced. The physical infrastructure that would occur in the process could act as a tool for strengthening cooperation in other areas.

The Chabahar Port project received a major thrust forward during PM Modi's visit to Iran in May 2016. During the visit, he said, "It could alter the course of history in the region". President Hassan Rouhani spoke about the Chabahar Port as a 'Defining Partnership' which has the potential of connecting the entire region. The crux of the agreement is the development, upgradation, and operationalisation of the port, which is of immense strategic significance to both the countries. Chabahar also offers India immense advantages in terms of cutting costs and land connectivity

to the Caucasus, Russia, and Europe. In his acceptance speech on India's membership of the SCO (2017), PM Modi stressed, ".....Our involvement with the INSTC and the Chabahar Agreement and our decision to join the Ashkhabad Agreement will bring India closer to the region".<sup>9</sup>

In the early years after independence, the CAS devoted considerable time and resources to establishing direct connections with their respective regions. India's membership of the SCO provided it with a presence in Eurasia, particularly in Central Asia. Through this regional platform, India can engage in initiatives related to regional connectivity, including infrastructure development, the modernisation of existing roads, and the improvement of facilities and services along major transport corridors. The following statement by Nurlan Sulaimanov, Minister for Transport and Communication of Kyrgyzstan, reveals the state of infrastructure in his country. In his words, "The quality of roads has dropped to a critical level". According to the latest survey, out of 2,242 kms, 1,357 kms are poor and extremely poor.

Besides, there is air corridor connectivity between Mumbai and Navoi, an international city located in Western Uzbekistan. The air corridor is mostly transporting cargo from Southeast Asia.

India's membership of the SCO has also given it an opportunity to engage with leaders in an informal manner, meeting on the side lines of the summit meetings. Such interaction provides a better understanding of issues of common concern. Moreover, the regional presence will enable India to observe trends in security, energy, connectivity, etc. Undoubtedly, the membership of the SCO will provide a stimulus to the CCAP. In this sphere of economic development, India has offered to foster socio-economic development of the SCO region as well as share its experience in skill development, capacity building, and human resource development.

However, the SCO has faced limitations in emerging as an effective vehicle for deep regional integration. One of them is the absence of a multilateral decision-making mechanism. Decisions are arrived at by consensus. At the best, the SCO can initiate a positive discourse on regional cooperation in the light of widespread expansion of non-traditional threats.

In 2009, Russian leadership institutionalised the idea of forming a group comprising of four emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Later, South Africa was added, and the grouping came to be known as BRICS. The aim was to promote economic growth and cooperation among its member countries, strengthen political and security cooperation, and reform the global political and financial system to better reflect the interest of emerging economies.

Between 2023 and 2024, the grouping expanded to include Egypt, Ethiopia, United Arab Emirates, and Iran. A new category, 'Partner Countries', was created, allowing such countries to attend only the summit meetings. Among the 16 partner countries are Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The meetings are held regularly, and declarations are issued at the end of the summit. However, in the absence of decision-making mechanism and its implementation, decisions are arrived at by consensus. The declaration reflects the perspectives of non-Western countries, highlighting key issues and concerns to articulate their collective viewpoints. Some of the declarations are noteworthy, including calls for reform of the United Nations (UN) and the expansion of the UN Security Council to reflect contemporary realities, reform of international financial institutions, and a reduction in reliance on the US Dollar. In broad terms, the BRICS reflects the desire of major non-Western powers to advocate reforms in global governance; however, its effectiveness remains constrained by internal divergences and the absence of a robust implementation mechanism.

Besides, the grouping suffers tensions among members and consequently, decisions are often diluted. At the recent 17<sup>th</sup> Summit meeting in Brazil, held on 06-07 Jul 2025, Russian and Chinese Presidents did not attend in-person. Despite its shortcomings, BRICS, through its declarations, brings current issues and concerns to international attention. It has put forward a positive view of global concerns. Summit meetings allow the leaders to meet on the sidelines and understand each other's point of view.

Regional cooperation among the CAS is emerging and can become a powerful instrument in putting forward its security and economic interests. The process of rapprochement began in 2019 by the Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev when the Heads of State met in Tashkent. A consultative meeting was formed, and

the leaders of the CAS regularly discuss their common issues and interest.

Another grouping in Eurasia is the Organisation of Turkic States, in which Tajikistan is not a member. The focus is primarily on bringing Turkic people under one umbrella.

Although the Central Asian region holds immense significance for India, its engagement is not as vigorous as it was in the past. After the initiation of the CCAP and CAS+5, Indian policy is active and robust. However, external and regional powers have already established a strong presence in the region. India is, therefore, actively strengthening its approach and policy towards Central Asia.

### **Challenges to India's Eurasian Engagement**

Notwithstanding the growth in political engagement, India's Eurasian outreach faces several structural constraints. First, the absence of direct land access through Pakistan remains a major impediment. Second, instability in Afghanistan has weakened the feasibility of overland connectivity linking South and Central Asia. Third, China's expansive economic presence through infrastructure financing, trade, and connectivity projects has created an asymmetry that India cannot easily match. Fourth, Russia's enduring strategic influence in the region limits the scope for any major realignment. Finally, India's own trade volumes, investment levels, and institutional presence in Central Asia remain relatively modest.

These constraints do not negate India's role, but they do suggest that New Delhi's strategy must be selective, patient, and niche-driven. Rather than competing symmetrically with larger external powers, India may achieve greater success by focusing on sectors where it enjoys comparative credibility, including education, digital governance, pharmaceuticals, skill development, counterterrorism cooperation, and culturally rooted diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

In the shifting dynamics of the global order, a new Eurasia is emerging. It has attracted the world's attention. In fact, a subtle competition among the powers was evident. Countries were vying with each other for space and leverage. From the geopolitical perspective, it was the competition for leadership at the global

level and power play among the US, Russia, and China. From the economic perspective, trade and connectivity was the prime motive. For India, its past historical ties and cultural legacy had earned it tremendous goodwill.

The SCO and BRICS have expanded, and that has led to the leaders and people crowding in Eurasia for meetings and discussion. A trend that is visible in Eurasia is 'Multi-alignment'.

A key factor to watch is whether the above-mentioned developments will impact the strong strategic partnership between Russia and China, the two leading powers in Eurasia. The future trajectory of the Russia–China partnership will remain a critical variable in Eurasian geopolitics, though any prediction regarding its weakening would require careful qualification. If Russia's war with Ukraine is resolved, the two countries may not need each other's support. The US and its allies have a presence in Eurasia for geopolitical purposes and to an extent, they control the natural resources and minerals.

Given the evolving situation, what role can India play? The present circumstances remain uncertain, and the future of Eurasia will depend on developments in the coming years.

For India, Eurasia is neither a peripheral theatre nor merely a historical memory; it is an increasingly important strategic space shaped by connectivity, energy, security, and geopolitical competition. India's future role in the region will depend less on rhetorical commitment and more on its ability to operationalise connectivity projects, deepen economic engagement, institutionalise high-level dialogue, and convert civilisational goodwill into sustained strategic presence.

### Endnotes

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