

# INDIAN DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA GETTING ECLIPSED UNDER CHINESE INFLUENCE AND POSSIBLE WAY OUT

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Till the Russian disintegration in 1991, India's connect with Central Asia was mainly historic and culture based. The disintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union timed well with India's acquaintance with, and growing adaptation to, the world economy through its New Economic Policy of 1991.<sup>1</sup> Coincidentally, by this time, Central Asia was emerging as a potent provider of energy resources which India was trying to secure in order to support its development campaign. India strategically focussed upon Central Asia through various policies e.g. *Extended Neighbourhood, Immediate and Strategic Neighbourhood* and *Look North Policy* followed by the most important *Connect Central Asia Policy* of 2012.<sup>2</sup> The Indian diplomatic efforts

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1. Shri Manmohan Singh, Budget Speech 1991-92, July 24, 1991, <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/bspeech/bs199192.pdf> . Accessed on February 26, 2024.
2. Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Keynote Address by MOS Shri E. Ahmed at First India-Central Asia Dialogue", June 12, 2012, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches->

picked up momentum since 2014 with a series of visits by Indian leaders, beginning with the maiden hectic visit of Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi to all the five Central Asian Republics (CARs) in July 2015.<sup>3</sup> This visit of the Indian PM was followed by a number of visits by other Indian leaders e.g. the President of India Smt Pratibha Patil, External Affairs Minister Smt Sushma Swaraj and many others, with the process continuing.

Central Asia has been an alluring entity which has, for long, been attracting the attention of various big powers. Notable among these are the USA, Russia, China, and India. All these countries, especially China, have been highly competitive in expanding their sway in Central Asia with the aim to foster their energy and other territorial interests. India as an emerging power has been focussing on Central Asia mainly for smooth energy logistics, considering it to be an arena, by exercising a diplomatic and economic grip on which, it can control cross-border terrorism and the illegal supply of narcotics into Indian territory.

China and Russia have been engaged in Central Asia for long, and India was a rather late entrant into the game.<sup>4</sup> The Russian dilemma post the Ukraine crisis inspired India to position itself at the centre-stage of the desired energy relationships with the CARs.<sup>5</sup> This apart, China had already been active in Central Asian politics but heightened its efforts with a sense of urgency, especially during 2022-23. This urgency has its roots in the fast changing multifaceted strategic, economic and geopolitical dynamics in the Central Asian region. With Russia getting involved in a war with Ukraine and India getting actively involved in Central Asia more actively since 2015 in pursuit of its energy interests, China seeks to further consolidate its position in the region to secure access to the region's abundant

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Statements.htm?dtl/19791/Keynote+address+by+MOS+Shri+E+Ahamed+at+First+IndiaCentral+Asia+Dialogue . Accessed on February 26, 2024.

3. Ministry of External Affairs of India, "Prime Minister's Upcoming Visit to Five Central Asian Nations and Russia", <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25427/Prime+Ministers+upcoming+visit+to+five+Central+Asian+nations+and+Russia>. Accessed on February 26, 2024.
4. P Stobdan, "The Modi Factor in Central Asia", *Issue Brief*, MP-IDSA, [https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/TheModifactorinCentralAsia\\_pstobdan\\_240714](https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/TheModifactorinCentralAsia_pstobdan_240714). Accessed on February 26, 2024.
5. *Ibid.*

natural resources, especially oil, gas and minerals, that are crucial for sustaining its rapidly growing economy. Additionally, Central Asia serves as a vital component of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), facilitating infrastructure development and connectivity projects to expand and diversify the transportation networks. Furthermore, with Russia's focus diverting to the war with Ukraine, China also aims to counter the Western influence in the region, amidst geopolitical tensions with the United States. By deepening its engagement in Central Asia, China hopes to extend its strategic footprint, foster economic partnerships and strengthen diplomatic ties, thereby reinforcing its status as a global power. This urgency reflects China's proactive approach to expanding its sphere of influence and consolidating strategic assets to navigate through the evolving geopolitical dynamics in the Eurasian region.

India has been utilising its soft power in the CARs in many ways, most importantly in terms of cultural exchanges, infrastructure creation, trade and commerce, and creating improved medical facilities in order to establish and sustain its impact in Central Asian affairs. China, by virtue of being a technological and economic heavyweigh, has lately been attempting to make inroads into Central Asian politics. Its success in this regard may not be favourable to India as far as its strategic interests in the region are concerned. The most significant efforts being attempted by China in the CARs are visible based on certain recent country-wise developments, and are briefly summarised below.

**Uzbekistan:** China is seen using its soft power in Uzbekistan mainly through initiatives to strengthen cooperation with certain professional institutions of Uzbekistan. This was signified by an Uzbek delegation on April 20, 2023, carrying out a tour of China and holding talks with leading Chinese research institutions, significant among them being the Academy of International Affairs, Peking University and Academy of Social Sciences. During this visit, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was inked which outlined the prospects of enhancing cooperation in research, and fortifying the interactions between the national security think-tanks of China and Uzbekistan. The structure of such collaboration also included projects of joint research and exchange of professionals, fully utilising the expertise

of China. During this visit, both sides agreed to cooperate in the spheres of land reforms, area development and urbanisation plans, employment and social security development besides management of food and strategic reserves.<sup>6</sup>

Uzbekistan's ADM Jizzakh plant also inked a deal to start an assembly line for Haval branded vehicles, the scope of which includes M6 compacts and H6 SUVs, designed by Great Wall Motors, the well-known Chinese automobile manufacturer. Vehicles designed by the Russian automaker AvtoVAZ will be replaced by the Haval assembly, the manufacturing of which presently stands suspended. This partnership eventually aims at launching the production of hybrid and electric cars.<sup>7</sup>

**Kyrgyzstan:** Chinese Culture Minister Hu Heping met Kyrgyzstan's Ambassador to the People's Republic of China (PRC), Aktilek Musayeva in July 2023. The agenda was to ascertain the possibility of starting cultural centres, besides strengthening collaborations in the fields of art and cinema. Thereafter, it was announced by the Kyrgyz government that a Chinese tourism expert, Peng Xiaolan, would commence work as a "voluntary" consultant to support mutual cultural and humanitarian cooperation, and that his initial assignments would include opening a Kyrgyz cultural centre in China.<sup>8</sup>

**Kazakhstan:** As a mark of augmenting the China-Central Asia ties, Kazakhstan was seen as having imported 16,333 Chinese-made vehicles during the first five months of 2023, as per a report.<sup>9</sup> In

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6. "Uzbekistan Delegation Meets with Representatives of Chinese Government in Beijing", KUN.UZ, April 20, 2023, <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/04/20/uzbekistan-delegation-meets-with-representatives-of-chinese-government-in-beijing>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.
  7. Lei Kang, "Great Wall Plans to Start Production of its Haval Brand Models in Uzbekistan this Year", Industry News, *CnEVPost*, July 14, 2023, <https://cnevpost.com/2023/07/14/great-wall-to-start-production-haval-models-uzbekistan-2023/>. Accessed on February 29, 2024.
  8. "China Looks to Expand Soft-Power Presence in Central Asia", *China-Central Asia Monitor*, July 21, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/china-looks-to-expand-soft-power-presence-in-central-asia>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.
  9. "China's Soft Power Strategy in Central Asia", *EurasiaNet*, July 25, 2023, <https://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/International/Chinas-Soft-Power-Strategy-In-Central-Asia.html>. Accessed on July 25, 2023.

monetary terms, the Kazakh imports ex China in June 2023 amounted to \$1,399.790 million against \$1,000.739 million in November 2022.<sup>10</sup>

Kazakh Agriculture Minister Yerbol Karashukeyev met the top officials of the Chinese agri industry leader China Oil and Foodstuffs Corporation (COFCO), the largest importer of Kazakh wheat to China, and discussed the prospects of enhancing the annual supply of wheat to China up to approximately 1 million tons amidst the two countries haggling over the wheat prices. Kazakhstan assumed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) chair in early July 2023<sup>11</sup> following the SCO Summit hosted by the outgoing chair, the Republic of India. As current president of the SCO, Kazakhstan seems to have found an opportunity to promote the reforms and utilise the SCO as an effective platform for expanding trade and security cooperation.

**Tajikistan:** In November 2020, the Tajik customs officials confiscated approximately 90 kg of gold (nearly 200 pounds) from a Dushanbe-Dubai flight. Apart from this, five men were convicted for smuggling approximately 1.4 tons of gold bars and \$100 million cash between September-November 2020.<sup>12</sup> However, the quantum of the confiscated items may appear paltry, compared to the large volume of smuggling going on between the two countries based on the customs data pertaining to China and Tajikistan in 2022 which showed a discrepancy of \$1.4 billion in the total trade turnover.<sup>13</sup> Apart from smuggling, Tajikistan is one of the most cyber vulnerable countries in the world, infested with crypto hackers despite the slow internet speed, and exposure of only around one-third of the country's population. Tajikistan's economy is also suffering due to online financial frauds through mass marketing malpractices. It is also said that there is a direct as well as indirect nexus among the state embedded actors i.e. government functionaries and political personalities in promoting criminal practices like drug trafficking, etc

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10. "Kazakhstan Total Imports from China", CEIC Report, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/kazakhstan/total-imports-from-china>. Accessed on July 25, 2023.

11. "Kazakhstan Sets Reform Agenda for Shanghai Cooperation Organization", *China Central Asia Monitor*, July 14, 2023, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-sets-reform-agenda-for-shanghai-cooperation-organization>. Accessed on July 23, 2023.

12. Catherine Putz, "What Tajik Gold Smuggling Bust Tells Us About Afghanistan", *The Diplomat*, April 27, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/what-tajik-gold-smuggling-bust-tells-us-about-afghanistan/>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

13. n. 11.

besides the alliances among the organised crime syndicates, political parties and high ranking government officials.<sup>14</sup>

**Turkmenistan:** Chinese President Xi Jinping met the President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov on May 18, 2023, in Xi'an in China, during the recent China-Central Asia Summit.<sup>15</sup> It was decided to convert the China-Turkmenistan connection into a strategic partnership with the sharing of a collaborative future. It would be based on the philosophy that China's advancement and rejuvenation on all fronts needs to match with Turkmenistan's march towards the "revival of a new era of a powerful state".<sup>16</sup>

Going by the deliberations in the summit, China appears eager to cooperate with Turkmenistan to take the relationship forward for the greater benefit of the two nations. It was also observed that both parties need to ensure full utilisation of their reciprocal strengths, prospective cooperation and ultimately upgrading the bilateral cooperation to a much higher level. China is ready to cooperate with Turkmenistan in the spheres of economy and trade, natural gas and connectivity, expansion of high-tech cooperation in communication and aerospace science, besides assisting the Chinese ventures through ease of carrying out trade. Turkmenistan also hinted at its readiness to establish collaborations with the Chinese side to boost the sync between the strategy of "reviving the ancient Silk Road" and the BRI.

## PROPOSED INDIAN DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Indo-China relationship has been tumultuous since its beginning and especially since 2020. The main discord between the two nations has been the border dispute which actually arose due

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14. "Tajikistan, Global Organised Crime Index", 2023, <https://ocindex.net/country/tajikistan>. Accessed on February 26, 2024.

15. "Central Asia in China's Foreign Policy", Eurasian Research Institute, <https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/central-asia-in-chinas-foreign-policy-xian-summit/>. Accessed on July 15, 2023.

16. "Xi Jinping Meets With President Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan", *China News*, May 18, 2023, [http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230521\\_11080867.htm#:~:text=Xi%20Jinping%20Meets%20with%20President%20Serdar%20Berdimuhamedov%20of%20Turkmenistan&text=On%20the%20afternoon%20of%20May,the%20China%2DCentral%20Asia%20Summit](http://in.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/zgxw/202305/t20230521_11080867.htm#:~:text=Xi%20Jinping%20Meets%20with%20President%20Serdar%20Berdimuhamedov%20of%20Turkmenistan&text=On%20the%20afternoon%20of%20May,the%20China%2DCentral%20Asia%20Summit). Accessed on July 20, 2023.

to the conventionally expansionist approach of China, while India maintained a defensive stance.

The Chinese economic activity seems to have witnessed a slow-down consequent to the loss of China's international credibility due to its inapt handling of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020.<sup>17</sup> However, the trade activity again picked up and gradually started moving towards normalcy during late 2021. The Chinese economy was expected to expand at 5.2 per cent in 2023 compared to 3 per cent during 2022.<sup>18</sup>

With China's expanding engagement in Central Asia, the energy interests of India therein seem to be affected. India is likely to have challenges in the SCO, as the SCO is primarily a Chinese initiative, and includes Pakistan. However, India is a growing global power with an underlying philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*. This makes India stand on a relatively higher pedestal in relation to various countries in the world, and more so among the republics of Central Asia. The nations of Central Asia, though rich in minerals and energy resources, are dependent on the support of external economies for sustenance and to meet their most elementary survival needs. Therefore, though China has been calling the shots in the SCO, as noticed on some occasions in the recent past, there is every possibility for India to register a positive impact through its powerful diplomacy.<sup>19</sup> With its proactive diplomacy and playing on the front foot, India is already emerging as a regional power with significant global influence, particularly in South Asia as well as the CARs. India's present engagement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), ongoing presidency of the G-20 and membership of G-7, all taken together, place it strongly in a dominant position in international

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17. Helge Berger and Kenneth Kang, "Blunting the Impact and Hard Choices: Early Lessons from China", International Monetary Fund Blog, March 20, 2020, <https://www.imf.org/en/Blogs/Articles/2020/03/20/blog032020-early-lessons-from-china>. Accessed on June 25, 2023.

18. Diego A. Cerdeiro and Sonali Jain-Chandra, "China's Economy is Rebounding, But Reforms Are Still Needed", International Monetary Fund, February 3, 2023, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2023/02/02/cf-chinas-economy-is-rebounding-but-reforms-are-still-needed>. Accessed on February 26, 2024.

19. Rajneesh Kumar, "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and India's Strategic Options in Central Asia", *Expert View*, CAPS, May 22, 2023, <https://capsindia.org/shanghai-cooperation-organisation-and-indias-strategic-options-in-central-asia/>. Accessed on June 25, 2023.

politics with bright prospects of playing a more prominent role in influencing and shaping the global order.<sup>20</sup>

It is felt that India's investments in Central Asia, especially with regards to the creation of basic facilities like healthcare, education and infant and old age care, etc, will stand India in good stead and enable it to look after its interests in the CARs. The Indian initiatives and investments in the developmental activity in and around the Chabahar port region are highly ambitious enterprises that will allow India to not only pursue its national interests but also impel the other nationalities involved in the process to reap returns on their investments. The development and operationalisation of Chabahar port would go a long way not only in facilitating the smooth logistics and trade activity, especially between India and the Central Asian nations, but would also benefit all the trade partner countries in terms of employment generation and returns on their investment in the creation of infrastructure.

The Indian strategy based on the principles of a mutual win-win game is expected to be effective in countering the rising Chinese *modus operandi* which is mainly based on the system of first lending, followed by burdening the loanee country, and eventually rendering it ruthlessly debt ridden—the current example being Pakistan. Sooner or later, the countries of the region are expected to realise the differences between the intents and models of the Indian and Chinese economic aid mechanisms.

The increasing Chinese presence in the CARs might also bring the Russian and Chinese strategic interests into a clash which, might also disturb the security equilibrium in the Central Asian region.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the recent gradual rise in China's influence in the Central Asian politics, coupled with its recent efforts towards empowerment of the SCO, rising involvement in the South China Sea, and accelerated efforts towards militarily equipping the Gwadar port have led to a lopsided balance of power in the CARs, indicating the subtly changing diplomatic scenario in the Eurasian region. Terrorism by Uyghur

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20. Ibid.

21. "Central Asia's Economic Evolution from Russia to China", *Stratfor*, April 5, 2018. <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/central-asia-china-russia-trade-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.



militants has been China's main safety concern for its investments in Central Asia and for peace in Xinjiang province that shares its border with Central Asia. China's security cooperation with the Central Asian states has been mainly in the form of intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, training and supply of military equipment to the Central Asian states, besides building of its military bases in the region and the increase in its export of military hardware to Central Asia by 1.5 per cent between 2010-14. This apart, the dominant role played by China in the SCO also accentuates its clout in the region. While China's relationship with the Central Asian states has been based upon security cooperation, the Chinese soft power in the form of economic alliances further solidifies its position in the Central Asian region. On the other hand, Russia has bigger stakes in Central Asia by virtue of having given birth to these states and treating them as its organs. Therefore, the approaches followed by both these countries are contrasting while the aims of both remain the same i.e. expanding influence in Central Asia. This implies that in this process, the emotional hold and strategic advantage of Russia in Central Asia is likely to come into conflict with the expanding economic dominance and security cooperation of China in the region.<sup>22</sup>

Another angle is that while it is a fact that China is actively involved in Central Asia, it has also played an active role in building the infrastructure in Gwadar port by investing its capital and technological resources. Pakistan came forward to share its knowledge on handling Afghanistan once China began focussing on Afghanistan. This increased the trust between the two.<sup>23</sup> With a history of continually stressed relations, India has reasons to safeguard its interests in Central Asia by intelligently navigating through Pakistan's growing friendship with China, thereby effectively controlling the

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22. "Implications of China's Increasing Security Footprint in Central Asia", *Hindustan Times*, May 23, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/international-affairs/implications-of-china-s-increasing-security-footprint-in-central-asia-101684822130641.html>. Accessed on February 28, 2024.

23. Vinay Kaura, "The Pakistan Factor in China's Afghanistan Policy: Emerging Regional Fault Lines Amid US Withdrawal", *The Middle East Institute*, July 2021, p. 11, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-07/The%20Pakistan%20Factor%20in%20China%E2%80%99s%20Afghanistan%20Policy%20-%20Emerging%20Regional%20Faultlines%20amid%20US%20Withdrawal.pdf>. Accessed on July 20, 2022.

reappearance of Pakistan as a probable hazard in the region amidst the testing situations for the Indian enterprise in Central Asia.

The present high order contours of Indian diplomacy exhibit a rapidly forward moving approach which showcases a focussed action towards managing the strategic affairs with respect to Central Asia. Owing to the stability of the current government, India has earned enormous respect internationally. The deftness with which India has been handling the big powers like the USA, Russia and, to a great extent, China on one side, and other countries, including Japan and a few others in the subcontinent, on the other, brings to the fore a much deserved confidence and belief that the Chinese influence in the CARs can well be tackled by India.

The Indian interactions with the five CARs in the past decade or so have showcased a manifest resolve to strengthen the hitherto dormant diplomacy in the region, which was restricted to cultural exchanges. The Indian foreign policy began moving from the limited interactions of the past to the Connect Central Asia Policy 2012 which formed the basis of fostering fruitful relations with Central Asia. A series of visits were paid by Indian dignitaries that included the President of India Smt Pratibha Patil in 2009, Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi in 2015<sup>24</sup> and the President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind in April 2022, followed by reciprocal visits to India by Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 1991, 1994, 2000, 2005 and 2011, just to quote a few examples. Additionally, between August 2-5, 2018, the Indian Foreign Minister Smt Sushma Swaraj visited the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and conducted meetings with the ministers of these Central Asian nations, covering issues like strategic partnerships and multi-dimensional ties, also taking into account the Nuclear Security Summits. This was followed by discussions about multi-dimensional relations in the political, parliamentary, defence, science and technology, health, etc. sectors thereby boosting the thrust in the intensification of bilateral and bringing to the fore, the viability of various strategic engagements by India in the region.

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24. Extract from Doctoral Thesis, Dr Rajneesh Kumar, "India's Energy Security in Terms of Oil and Natural Gas Contextualizing Central Asia Since 2012", Submitted at the Amity University, September 2019.

Though China and Russia have been engaged in Central Asia for a long time, the growing Indian interest in the region and proactive Indian diplomacy seem to have impelled these two power to accelerate their efforts to strengthen their footprints in the region.<sup>25</sup> In effect, in the face of the Russian dilemma post the Ukraine crisis, the manifest resolve of Indian diplomacy has enabled India to grab the rightfully deserved centrestage in the relationships with the CARs.<sup>26</sup>

In the above backdrop, the Indian geopolitical strategy, therefore, needs to be guided by a multi-pronged diplomatic approach. Such an approach should ideally be capable of addressing multiple issues that may be directly as well as indirectly linked to the management of Indian foreign policy in Central Asia. It may be done concurrently while taking care also of the vital strategic interests of other smaller friendly nations in the region. The diplomatic approach of India, therefore, needs to be a judicious mix of conventionally hard core diplomatic as well as out of the box innovative soft power endeavours i.e. by addressing the entire set of affairs with cultural, medical, educational, economic, financial and other factors through Track-II diplomacy.<sup>27</sup>

It should be desirable for the Indian diplomacy to positively influence the Chinese economic ambitions and possibly turn the Chinese diplomacy in favour of India as an important precondition that needs to be looked into, considering the constantly growing Chinese influence in the region.

It needs to be guided primarily by the fact that China gradually rose and shot globally into economic prominence in the past few years.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, there are reasons to believe that, for the success of any enterprise in the region, it would be imperative to take China also into the boat. India seems to have realised this and, therefore, appears to have intelligently shifted the focus of its diplomacy towards China, which needs to be sustained in the future.

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25. Stobdan, n. 4.

26. Ibid.

27. n. 24.

28. Xiangmin Chen and Fakhmiddin Fazilov, "Re-centering Central Asia: 'China's New Great Game' in the Old Eurasian Heartland", June 19, 2018, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-018-0125-5>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

Central Asia's recently growing dependence on China seems to be gradually but surely tilting the balance of power in the Central Asian region. This becomes further important with China's constantly increasing military presence in the region.<sup>29</sup>

It is, therefore, important for Indian foreign policy to be capable of achieving and sustaining its hitherto practised forward looking diplomacy in the region, with India indirectly projecting itself as a regional big brother through its benevolent protective posture. This is an important imperative that the Indian diplomacy could aim at with regards to Central Asia. It would be equally relevant to mention here that the Indian foreign policy follows an effective Track-II diplomacy which, under the present scenario, seems to be a desirable option. It assumes significance also because the government of a nation needs to create an enabling environment to conduct activities for the public good.<sup>30</sup>

India has incredible strategic interests in Central Asia which need to be safeguarded. There are reasons to believe that India will be able to effectively tackle the rising Chinese influence in the region, despite the fact that China is fast grabbing the ground firmly in Central Asia.

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29. "Central Asia's Economic Evolution from Russia to China", *Stratfor*, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/central-asia-china-russia-trade-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan>. Accessed on July 24, 2023.

30. APJ Abdul Kalam and YS Rajan, *India 2020: A Vision for the New Millennium* (Penguin Books, 2014), p. 289.