

# CENTRAL ASIA IN THE FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY OF INDIA

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**Abstract.** In the early 1990s, India's foreign policy strategy faced the challenge of reevaluating the country's position and role in the emerging new international order. This prompted India to change its approach to foreign policy. The dominance of the United States in global politics actually led to a temporary autonomy of India's foreign policy within the frameworks of the emerging opportunity for New Delhi to possess nuclear weapons (intensive interactions with the United States, Israel and countries of the Association of South-East Asian Nations). However, starting from the 2000s, India began to perceive itself as a country capable of exerting a balancing influence in the world (nuclear deal between India and the United States, solidarity with China on climate change and trade issues, and broadening of ties with Russia and other major regional countries). This trend in Indian foreign policy continues to this day. India has become more sensitive to its capabilities and understands the expectations that the world has for it. Thanks to the expanded neighborhood policy (the concepts of "Act East", "Think West", "Northern Policy", "Connect Central Asia"), India has managed to form an almost new foreign policy course aimed at promoting partnership for development far beyond South Asia, including the Central Asian countries.

**Keywords:** *India, Central Asia, foreign policy strategy, trade and economic cooperation, security.*

## ҮНДІСТАННЫҢ СЫРТҚЫ САЯСИ СТРАТЕГИЯСЫНДАҒЫ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ

**Мұхит Асанбаев**

**Аңдатпа.** 1990 жылдардың басында орын алған жаңа халықаралық тәртіптің ықпалы Үндістанның сыртқы саясат стратегиясының қайта қарастырылуына

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әкеліп, бұл елдің сыртқы саясатқа деген көзқарасының өзгеруіне түрткі болды. Америка Құрама Штаттарының жаһандық саясаттағы сол кездегі үстемдігі тіпті Үндістанның сыртқы саясатының қысқа мерзімді автономиясына әкеліп соқты десек қателеспейміз (Үндістанның ядролық қаруды қолдану мүмкіндігіне ие болуы, оның АҚШ, Израиль және Оңтүстік-Шығыс Азия елдері қауымдастығына мүше елдермен қарқынды өзара іс-қимыл әрекеттері шеңберінде). Бірақ 2000-шы жылдардан кейін Үндістан өзін әлемде теңдестіруші ықпал жасауға қабілетті ел ретінде қарастыра бастайды (Үндістан мен Америка Құрама Штаттары арасындағы ядролық келісім, климаттың өзгеруі және сауда бойынша Қытаймен ынтымақтастық, Ресей және басқа да ірі аймақтық елдермен байланыстардың күшеюі). Үндістанның сыртқы саясатындағы бұл үрдіс күні бүгінге дейін жалғасуда. Бұған Үндістанның өз мүмкіндіктеріне дұрыс баға беріп, әлем елдері оған қандай үміт артып отырғандарын жіті түсіне бастауы түрткі болды.

Кеңейтілген көршілестік қағидасы саясатын жүргізу арқылы Үндістан Оңтүстік Азия шеңберінен тыс жатқан аймақтармен, оның ішінде Орталық Азиямен маңызды серіктестікті дамытуға бағытталған жаңа сыртқы саясатын қалыптастыра алды («Шығыс елдері саясаты», «Батысты ойла», «Солтүстік саясат», «Орталық Азияға барар жол» тұжырымдамалары).

***Түйінді сөздер:** Үндістан, Орталық Азия, сыртқы саясат стратегиясы, сауда-экономикалық ынтымақтастық, қауіпсіздік.*

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## ЦЕНТРАЛЬНАЯ АЗИЯ ВО ВНЕШНЕПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ СТРАТЕГИИ ИНДИИ

**Мухит Асанбаев**

**Аннотация.** В начале 1990-х годов внешнеполитическая стратегия Индии столкнулась с проблемой переосмысления места и роли страны в условиях формирующегося нового международного порядка, побудившего страну изменить свой подход во внешней политике. Доминирование США в глобальной политике привело фактически к краткосрочной автономии индийской внешней политики в рамках появившегося у Нью-Дели возможности использования ядерного оружия (интенсивное взаимодействие с США, Израилем и странами, входящими в Ассоциации государств Юго-Восточной Азии). Но уже после 2000-х годов Индия начинает рассматривать себя как страну, способную оказывать уравновешивающее влияние в мире (ядерная сделка Индии и США, солидарность с Китаем в вопросах изменения климата и торговли, наращивание связей с Россией и другими крупными региональными странами). Этот тренд в индийской внешней политике сохраняется и поныне. Индия стала более тонко чувствовать свои возможности и понимать ожидания, которые мир возлагает на нее. Благодаря политике расширенного соседства (концепции «Действуй на Востоке», «Думай о Западе», «Северная политика», «Соединим Центральную

Азию»), Индии удалось сформировать практически новый внешнеполитический курс, направленный на продвижение партнерства в целях развития далеко за пределами Южной Азии, в том числе в отношении стран Центральной Азии.

*Ключевые слова:* Индия, Центральная Азия, внешнеполитическая стратегия, торгово-экономическое сотрудничество, безопасность.

## Introduction

Since gaining the political independence of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, India pursued a policy of expanding its trade and economic ties to establish the strong economic, political, and geopolitical influence. Historical narratives about cultural connections with Central Asia served as a good foundation for India's active involvement in the affairs of the region.

The initial steps in this direction were taken in the early 1990s when the then Prime Minister of India, Narasimha Rao, visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (1993), Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan (1995). In addition to the signed agreements aimed at expanding Indian trade, investments, and development assistance in the region, this visit emphasized shared secular values and drew attention to common threats such as religious fundamentalism, terrorism, violence, and drug-financed crime. These shared security interests were the driving force behind India's interaction with the region [1].

However, a series of events, including the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan (1996), the nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan (1998-1999), and the increasing influence of the United States and China in Central Asia, made some adjustments. India's promising advancement in the region narrowed down to military-technical cooperation with the Central Asian countries,

including assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.

Another activation of the Central Asian direction in India's foreign policy took place with the formulation of the "Connect Central Asia" policy in 2012. It placed special emphasis on the ongoing political and economic integration of Central Asia with the world and highlighted the region's position in extended neighborhood with India. The essence of this policy was to promote India's economic cooperation with Central Asia, with a focus on strategic collaboration in the areas of security and energy, including close consultations on Afghanistan [2].

Since 2014, India's foreign policy objectives have received a new impetus for development under Narendra Modi's "civilizational tasks," which prompted New Delhi to take more active steps towards shifting global dominance to the Asian direction [3]. The nationalistic, in its essence, vision of India's new role in the world, as Narendra Modi, who had just assumed the post of Prime Minister of the country, saw it and tried to convince his compatriots of it, turned out to be very useful, since narratives about India as the largest Asian democracy and a growing economic power had lost relevance by that time.

Thus, the aspiration of New Delhi to position itself as a major global player becomes an important component of the country's foreign policy strategy in the context of India's immediate and

extended Asian neighbors, whether it is the Indian Ocean region, Southeast Asia, East Africa, or Central Asia. While positioning itself as an influential Asian power center, India demonstrates flexibility and dynamism, which is clearly reflected in its foreign policy towards Central Asia. In this region, New Delhi balances its interests and contradictions with global powers present here while advancing its own agenda on various bilateral and multilateral cooperation issues. It is not coincidental that the current generation of Indian politicians and experts views Central Asia as a territory of growing economic potential and strategic importance for India. In this regard, let us analyze India's foreign policy strategy in this region at the contemporary stage, which has the potential for strengthening but also faces factors hindering its implementation.

### **Methods and results of the study**

The article is based on the theory of neoclassical realism, according to which India's foreign policy strategy is determined by a combination of domestic and foreign policy factors, with a decisive role played by domestic factors. This allowed for the identification of India's foreign policy concept regarding Central Asia, which involves rejecting the unilaterally conflictual understanding of the nature of international politics. Based on this understanding, the ruling circles of the country formulate the current security policy and ways for the state to respond to conflict threats in international relations.

The methodological basis of the study includes methods of historicism, systematic approach, comparative analysis, and content analysis. The method of historicism allowed for the identification of the main stages in

the formation of India's foreign policy strategy towards Central Asia in the short and medium term. Through a systematic and comparative analysis, similarities and differences between regional and global policies of India were identified. The content analysis was used to study excerpts from the speeches of top state officials, official documents, and various facts and trends reflected in them.

### **Perspective on India's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia through the prism of assessing the cooperation potential**

According to India's foreign policy strategy, Central Asia falls within the so-called "extended neighborhood" zone, where New Delhi aims to balance the influence of other states and prevent the infringement of its own interests. Along with Central Asia, this direction of Indian foreign policy also includes the Persian Gulf region, East Africa and Southeast Asia, indicating the secondary importance of the said group of countries for India's foreign policy. Moreover, the economic interaction with Central Asia remains on the fringes of India's economic policy. While the trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the Association of South-East Asian Nations) accounts for 12.7% and 11.5% of India's trade volume, respectively, the trade with the Central Asian countries represents only 0.2% of India's trade volume. In contrast, in 2019, India's trade volume with China and Russia exceeded this figure by 30 and 20 times, respectively.

At the same time, the trajectory of India's foreign policy towards Central Asia is shaped by the existing balance of powers and interests among Russia, China, the United States and the EU in

the region. The key phases of India's foreign policy strategy towards Central Asia, starting from the concept of the "North Policy" (in the early 1990s), the elevation of India's bilateral relations with regional countries to the status of "strategic partnership" (in the late 2000s), the "Connect Central Asia" policy (2012 to 2014), and culminating in the first India-Central Asia summit held on January 27, 2022, should be considered in this context.

However, there are several factors that can influence the activation of India's policy towards Kazakhstan in the short term.

Firstly, in the sphere of security and cooperation, the activation of Indian policy in this region is connected to its immediate proximity to Afghanistan and the security threats emanating from that country, including terrorism, religious extremism, and illegal drug trafficking. It should be noted that any potential increase in security threats to India originating from Afghanistan or supported by Pakistan is an important component of the country's foreign policy agenda. Moreover, India does not exclude the possibility of radicalization in other Central Asian countries. In this case, New Delhi will be forced to adjust its policy to address these problems. In Indian expert circles, it is believed that the intensification of religious extremism in Central Asia can influence the Muslim population in India. At the same time, the influence of domestic politics within India on its foreign policy priorities cannot be disregarded. Thus, if there is a hardening of the existing rhetoric or a change in government of India towards a more radically inclined Hindu political leadership, there is a possibility of altering approaches to security issues in

the region and, consequently, reducing the intensity of India's cooperation with Central Asian countries, not to mention the escalation of India and Pakistan, India and Afghanistan relations.

It is important to understand that India's political course towards the countries of the region will continue to be built to a large extent on the basis of India's historical narratives regarding its common cultural and civilizational heritage with the countries of Central Asia, which in the case of Kazakhstan looks much less convincing than in comparison with neighboring Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the continuation of India's policy of humanitarian cooperation with Kazakhstan, including organizing cultural events, student exchange programs, establishing Hindi study departments, and providing material assistance for disaster relief efforts.

Secondly, the significant change in the established balance of powers and interests between Russia, China and Western countries, as well as the intensification of their competition in Central Asia, compels India to actively engage in the region, particularly in the areas of security and military cooperation. In this context, one can expect India to intensify its policy in Central Asia to balance the increased influence of global powers and protect New Delhi's strategic and economic interests in the region. This is especially relevant considering the risk of certain countries in the region, including Kazakhstan, falling into economic dependence on China, which motivates India to pursue a more active presence in the region. The promotion of self-sufficiency and equi-spaced distancing of the region is an important link of India's foreign policy in



the Central Asian direction. India assigns the countries of the region, especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the role of an important transit point for Indian goods and services that are delivered to the region and beyond.

At the same time, India's attention to Afghanistan is incomparably greater than the issues of cooperation with the Central Asia countries [5], especially after the seizure of power by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, in 2021. India is well aware that the return of the Taliban has led to a continuous escalation of the situation in the neighboring countries bordering Afghanistan. New Delhi's concern in this regard is linked to the potential intensification of activities by certain radical organizations, which pose specific threats and risks to the security and stability of Central and South Asian countries. The danger for India in this case is that various terrorist organizations may exploit the Taliban's movement to build into power and use the territory of Afghanistan for planning and committing terrorist attacks in other countries, including on the territory of India.

At present, India has reestablished contacts with the Taliban movement and seriously considers the possibility of cooperating with the new Afghanistan authorities. This is because without security in Afghanistan and access to the country, India is unlikely to establish effective connectivity with Central Asian countries. In this regard, India intensively develops a transport corridor, the key link of which is Iran [5]. India is pushing forward transportation infrastructure projects aimed at connecting Afghanistan with Central and South Asia. One such project is the development of the North-South International Transport Corridor, which extends to Afghanistan and passes

through the territories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, potentially linking India with Europe and other countries.

The agreement on the North-South project provides for the transportation of goods from Indian ports to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, then from the Caspian port of Bandar-e Azali to Astrakhan city and then to St. Petersburg through Russian railways. As the idea of a transport corridor was implemented, Mumbai was chosen as the main port of India, and Chabahar was chosen for Iran [5].

India has high hopes for the implementation of projects on the North-South transport corridor through the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar. Despite the fact that currently the main used port remains the Iranian Bandar Abbas, the prospects for the delivery of goods from India to Iran through this port remains problematic due to the US sanctions imposed on Iran (Bandar Abbas is subject to sanctions). Another Iranian port, Chabahar, is considered a more promising crossing point for India as it is not subject to US sanctions. India's interest in developing the infrastructure of the Chabahar port in this regard is obvious. Its use for the organization of cargo flows in the North-South direction allows India to gain access to natural resources and commodity markets of Afghanistan and Central Asia, as well as supplies of goods to Eurasian markets through the territory of Kazakhstan.

In April 2023, Mumbai hosted the first meeting of the joint working group of India and Central Asian countries on the issues of Chabahar, which was also attended by the representatives of Iran and the UN World Food Program. One of the key issues discussed at the meeting

was the development of Shahid Beheshti terminal and the use of Chabahar port by the Central Asian countries [6].

The intensification of India's policy within the frameworks of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can be seen as part of measures aimed at expanding trade and investment ties and New Delhi's active engaging in the affairs of Central Asia in order to strengthen the mutual interaction in the fields of economy, security, and regional stability.

With its full membership in Shanghai Cooperation Organization since 2017, India has gained access to discussions on security, economic and cultural cooperation among the member states of this intergovernmental organization. In an effort to gain full access to the organization and its activities, India, as its membership in SCO has already shown, will promote its own agenda, despite contradictions from other participants. The results of the SCO's summit in Qingdao, in 2018, are noteworthy in this case, when all countries, with the exception of India, supported China's Belt and Road Initiative [7].

In addition to its economic interests in SCO, India has a foreign policy interest in joining the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which will most likely be based on the Indian-Russian free trade agreement. This will lead to a much larger free trade agreement involving Kazakhstan, India, Russia, Armenia, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan [4].

India is also one of the most active participants in CICMA, overseeing counter-terrorism issues and serving as a coordinator for implementing confidence-building measures in priority areas such as "Energy Security", "Development of Secure and Efficient Transport Corridors"

and "Human Dimension". Although the latter has become a contrast to the policy pursued by New Delhi regarding the religious minorities of the country, India, in general, shares the urgent tasks facing the CICMA to transform this dialogue platform into a full-fledged international organization in order to strengthen and unite the potential of Asian countries in the regional and international agenda [8].

Besides, in the short and medium term, a new impetus will be given to the policy of India's expanded participation in the economy and politics of Kazakhstan within the frameworks of the Delhi Declaration adopted in 2022, aimed at institutionalizing the cooperation between India and Central Asia at the regional level. The agreements adopted as a result of this declaration on holding the India and Central Asia's summit every two years, holding regular meetings of the Ministers of foreign affairs, trade and culture, as well as meetings of the secretaries of national security councils, demonstrate the prospect of strengthening the Indian policy [9] and its defense diplomacy in Central Asia [10].

Overall, India's future foreign policy initiatives regarding its participation in the activities of SCO and EAEU should be seen as a new trend chosen by India to counter the growing influence of China and Russia within these organizations. This trend aligns with India's interests in ensuring a more proportionate involvement of other participants, including India itself and the Central Asian countries in the activities of these organizations.

Thirdly, ensuring access to the latter's natural resources will remain one of the main priorities of India's foreign policy in Central Asia. For example, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are major producers

of energy resources. In this regard, India is committed to ensuring stable and reliable energy supplies from these countries to meet its growing energy needs, even though it lost its previous positions in these two countries earlier. It is no coincidence that India has invested in the development of oil and gas fields in Kazakhstan, having signed a number of agreements on the import of oil and gas. At the same time, purely economic factors, such as changes in the structure of trade, fluctuations in commodity prices and shifts in global economic conditions, can also contribute to changing India's policy towards Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. For example, an increase or decrease in energy demand will prompt India to adjust its policies accordingly to reflect this change.

At the same time, there are circumstances that prevent India from pursuing a more active policy in Central Asia. Among them, transport and logistics constraints should be noted primarily. The geographical location of Central Asia has predetermined India's limited access to the resources and markets of Central Asia. Such factors as distance, infrastructure and tariffs are the main obstacle to the expansion of trade and investment between India and the Central Asian countries. In addition, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan are the most vulnerable countries in the world from the point of transports and logistics, as they not only have no access to the sea, but also border solely with countries that also have no access to the seas and oceans. In addition, international sanctions imposed on Iran, security issues and border disputes with Pakistan, as well as ongoing instability in Afghanistan and the lack of international recognition

for the current Afghanistan government, along with unresolved relations between Kabul and Dushanbe, are among the main obstacles to India's active engagement in the Central Asian countries. These difficulties will hinder the establishment and maintenance of strong ties between India and the countries of the region, both in present and future.

### **Conclusion**

The issues of Central Asian integration anIn general, India's foreign policy strategy in Central Asia in the short and medium terms is determined by a variety of factors formed taking into account changes in regional and global conditions. Therefore, India's foreign policy will develop permanently in response to changing global and regional challenges and potential changes in its domestic and foreign policy, which will lead to a significant intensification of its policy in the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, India will continue to emphasize multilateralism in its foreign policy, as it seeks to play a more active role in shaping the global agenda and addressing regional and international security issues.

In this regard, the prospective main goals of India's foreign policy remain as follows: continuation of building the strong partnership relations with the Central Asian countries within the frameworks of SCO, EAEU and in "India and Central Asia" format; strengthening the trade and economic ties between India and the region (trade, investment, tourism, energy cooperation, technological collaboration, and infrastructure development); cooperation in the field of security and defense (training of the military personnel from the Central Asian countries in India,



conduction of joint military exercises, collaborative peacekeeping activities in conflict zones, and counter-terrorism efforts). It is expected that there will be an expansion of the contractual and legal frameworks for cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries, as well as an intensification of diplomatic dialogue to address regional and international issues.

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