



CONNECTIVITY AS INFLUENCE. INDIA'S POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE ERA OF THE 'NEW SILK ROAD'

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Abstract:

Central Asia has been identified as the emerging economic battleground between the United States, Russia and China. Although Central Asia is a significant part of the Belt and Road Plan India faces connectivity challenges regarding land routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia and is a relatively low-key power even after becoming a formal member of the SCO. It is in the backdrop of these complexities, both in terms of the emergence of transcontinental logistic spaces and numerous 'Silk Road' strategies that India would have to negotiate its own logistical space in Central Asia.

Key words: Belt and Road Initiative, China, Russia, Central Asia, Connectivity

Título en Castellano: La conectividad como influencia. La política de la India en Asia Central en la era de la "nueva ruta de la seda"

Resumen:

Asia Central se ha identificado como el campo de batalla económico emergente entre los Estados Unidos, Rusia y China. Aunque Asia Central es una parte importante del plan Belt and Road, India enfrenta desafíos de conectividad con respecto a las rutas terrestres hacia Afganistán y Asia Central, y es una potencia de bajo nivel relativamente, incluso después de convertirse en un miembro formal de la OCS. Es en el contexto de estas complejidades, tanto en lo que se refiere a la aparición de espacios logísticos transcontinentales como a numerosas estrategias de la "ruta de la seda" que la India tendría que negociar para tener su propio espacio logístico en Asia Central.

Palabras Clave: Iniciativa Belt and Road, China, Rusia, Asia Central, Conectividad.

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1. Introduction

A recent article in *The Statesman* identifies Central Asia as the emerging economic battleground in the wake of the predicted tariff war between the United States and China.² Central Asia's access to resources and trade routes is identified as critical in an era when there is on the one hand two parallel regional economic initiatives (the Eurasian Economic Union led by Russia and the Belt and Road Initiative led by China) and on the other a longstanding economic vision of South and Central Asian connectivity led by the United States. The authors argue that where they converge is in their ultimate motive to extract assets from the region which has led to domestic social discontent and loss of legitimacy. The article concludes with the prediction of the likelihood of the US strategy coming out victorious and foretells that the power that gains in Central Asia is likely to shape the nature of global capitalism as the world moves towards an economic and political crisis reminiscent of 2007-8. While these are perspectives shaped by the authors' own positions there remain two significant underlying perspectives that have remained unchanged, the understanding of Central Asia as the 'heartland' of global affairs and the absence of India as a player in the region. While the first seems to have reemerged principally in the light of the many 'New Silk Road' initiatives, the latter is conditioned by logistic disconnects that would intensify with India's posture on the Chinese led Belt and Road Initiative.

The popularly named "New Silk Road" initiatives refer to a variety of visions for formalizing transit flows across Asia. Among them is the Chinese led One Belt One Road (OBOR) the American 'New Silk Roads' and the Russian led efforts to reconnect through the Eurasian Economic Community. These logistic developments are now supported by financial institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) that was set up with 57 Asian, European, South American and African states including China and India. AIIB supports China's logistic vision of the One Belt One Road (OBOR) with the aim to bring South Asian economies closer to China, Central Asia and West Asia. The various 'New Silk Road' Initiatives also provide opportunities for exploring the multifaceted impact of trans-state corridors of human/resource and ideational transit and are contingent on the assumed acquiescence of the participating states to varied modes of overland transit in the interest of collective gain. Within the metaphorical frame of the New Silk Roads there were a number of strategies. The New Silk Road strategies planned by the United States and the European Union were premised on prospects for overland connection between China, India, the Middle East, Europe and Russia resulting in revenue for the Central Asian states and particularly sustainable development of Afghanistan after US withdrawal.³ From the US perspective a South Asia-Central Asia transit corridor had been foreshadowed by the Northern and Southern Distribution Networks for provision of supplies for Afghanistan's military operations and included a number of infrastructural projects to facilitate the transport of resources.

²Sangera, Baliyar and Satybaldieva, Elmira: "Central Asia is the new economic battleground", *The Statesman*, 4 July 2018, at <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/central-asia-new-economic-battleground-1502656987.html>

³ The US Department of State in the section Diplomacy in Action underlines four key areas of support. (a) Regional Energy Markets: which include support for CASA -1000 regional electricity grid/support for energy transmission lines, hydropower plants and 1000 megawatts to Pakistan's power grid (b) Trade and transport: 3000km of roads built or rehabilitated in Afghanistan/support for Kazakh and Afghan accession to WTO/technical assistance to Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement and Cross Border Transport Agreement between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan (c) Customs and Border Operations: increasing trade/reducing cost of crossing regional borders/streamlining customs procedures at seven Afghan border crossing points (d) Business and People to people: funding of university studies for Afghan students in Central Asia/sponsor Central Asia-Afghanistan Women's Economic Symposium and South Asia Women's Entrepreneurship Symposium/organised trade delegations. For details see "U.S. Support for the New Silk Road", U.S. Department of State, 20 January 2017, at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/index.htm>



The Chinese alternative vector of trade and transit, though in place ever since the independence of the Central Asian states, was articulated in terms of a consolidated ‘Silk Road’ during President Xi’s multistate tour of the states. The explicit use of the term was presaged by years of intense economic engagement where trade grew from \$527 million in 1992 to \$40 billion in 2012.⁴ Since this trade required infrastructural development it also offered a vector of mobility. This infrastructure took the form of rail lines, roads, airports and pipelines, one of the most significant of which are Kazakhstan-China pipeline, which is China’s first direct import pipeline and the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. OBOR or BRI has a transcontinental (Silk Road Economic Belt) and maritime (Maritime Silk Route) component. Much of the transcontinental route passes through areas of traditional Russian influence and regions where Russia is attempting to recreate a common economic zone in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

While global logistic visions that span entire continents and beyond is one part of the contemporary logistic story, the other part of logistics are the significant geo-political and geo-economic challenges to connectivity in areas that are the operating environments for these infrastructural projects and the Indian neighbourhood is no exception. It is in the backdrop of these complexities, both in terms of the emergence of transcontinental logistic spaces and numerous ‘Silk Road’ strategies that India would have to negotiate its own logistical space in Central Asia. Here, there has been constant negotiation between its spaces to the East and South East and its alternative connects in the West and North West based on its ‘pivotal’ geographical position allowing access to both its east and west on the one hand and to maritime and continental routes on the other. It is within this context that one needs to examine India’s ability to connect with broader and sometimes competing logistic visions --- the China Pakistan Economic Corridor for instance, that provides an alternative north south connect to the International North South Transport Corridor that India supports. Given the global reality of a China centered trade network overlapping with a Russian led economic community engulfing both Asian overland and maritime routes on the one hand and the emerging rules and regulations that would govern global trade on the other, either the development of an logistic alternative or connecting with the existing frameworks would be an essential enabler for India’s agenda of connecting with the Central Asian region.

2. Connecting with the ‘heartland’

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev in his geopolitical analysis of Eurasia writes that if we look at a geographical map then it is easy to notice that there is a consecutive vertical row of countries of Eurasia from Russia in the north to India in the south (Central Asian countries, Iran, Pakistan) that does not yet link either with the east or with the west. I would call this continuous belt of countries situated along the meridian of the center of Eurasia the ‘belt of anticipation’. Despite all the differences among these countries they constitute a relatively solid group from the point of view of potential resources and possibilities of influencing not only the balance of power in Asia or Eurasia but even the geopolitical balance of the world.⁵

Nazarbaev further argues that since Russia will never be admitted as an equal member into either the European or the East Asian sphere its only viable choice is to unite the countries of the “belt of anticipation” into a new security system.

⁴ Cited from Diener, Alexander: “Parsing Mobilities in Central Eurasia: Border Management and New Silk Roads”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 56, nº 4 (December 2015), pp. 387.

⁵Nazarbaev, Nursultan.A.: “Sniat’s Evrazii ‘poliasvyzhidaniia’ ”, Interview, *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda*, Almaty, 21 October 1995; cited from Vinkovetsky, Ilya: “Eurasia and its Uses: the History of An Idea and the Mental Geography of Post Soviet Space”, Paper Presented at the 2007 Annual Soyuz Symposium on Locating Eurasia in Postsocialist Studies: The Geopolitics of Naming, 27-29 April, 2007, Princeton University.



Nazarbaev's "belt of anticipation" is interesting particularly because it indicates a vertical definition of the Eurasian space that is generally visualized as a horizontal expanse. It is also significant in terms of the actual states that are included, Russia, India and the countries in between, that is the Central Asian republics, Iran and Pakistan. The silences are of course more than important. The definition excludes Afghanistan, a state that is now sought to be identified as a link within the Eurasian space. There is another dimension to Nazarbaev's Eurasia. It is also conceived of as a Union intended to promote a common economic space across the territory of the former Soviet Union. Nazarbaev was clear in pointing out that this was not meant as a restoration of the Soviet Union but as a post-Soviet construct that loosely resembled the European Union. In a sense, of course this vertical definition has precedence in a vision where a North-South linkage was conceptualized as an alternative transport route that would link Russia, Iran and India. The corridor was conceived as stretching from ports in India across the Arabian Sea to the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas where goods would then transit Iran and the Caspian Sea ports in the Russian sector of the Caspian. From there the route stretches along the Volga river via Moscow to northern Europe. Along with Russia, India and Iran this project was subsequently joined by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan.

This suggests that Indian initiatives in the region cannot be visualized in isolation. An understanding of developments within the region and the geopolitical positioning of other states both assume importance. Rather than examine these individually it would be interesting to do so in terms of the viability of a proposal for a strategic partnership that had been proposed by E.M. Primakov in the 1990's and remains relevant for the Central Asian region, i.e., the Russia-China-India triangle or the 'Primakov's triangle' in Russian journalism. While it is true that this initiative has been a non-starter in a number of ways, it is also true that one of the issues that it was meant to address was that of stability in the areas bordering the three states, i.e., the Central Asian region and Afghanistan. This means that the reason why the 'Eurasian triangle' failed to take off remains significant and this brings into focus the importance of taking a closer look at the region as the determining factor in the evolution of future relations between the states, whether it be between Russia and China or China and India or Russia and the US. In other words whether the Sino-Indian 'rivalry' would be redeployed in the Central Asian region requires critical examination. In any case it is important to emphasize that simply focusing on the Sino-Indian interaction presents a truncated story that fails to take note of the varied and multi-dimensional interests of other powers and of course of the five states themselves.⁶

While a India-Russia-China axis is yet to emerge there is realization that a common multilateral approach is the only viable option in terms of looking towards solutions in a number of areas. For instance, all three states have significant stakes in the working of multilateral institutions in the Central Asian region. How far they remain significant parts of the process is yet to be seen. What is important is that there now seems to be recognition about the need for a multiplicity of institutions dealing with issues that involve more than two states particularly in regions where the possibility of conflict is high. The unfolding international context, including the fallout of the recent events in Ukraine and western reactions to Russian involvement in the events, would provide the impetus to develop a new stage in the partnership. The SCO is one arena of co-operation and BRICS is another. While a formal coalition remains unlikely in the short term, all three are unsatisfied with the current global order to some degree and this could provide an impetus for further cooperation. It has been suggested that Indian economic and security goals dictate that its Central Asian policy should look at a larger regional complex that includes other regional powers like Russia, China and Iran. A cooperative framework of inclusive engagement would be

⁶For a detailed discussion see Sengupta, Anita: "Situating Indian Studies on Central Asia: Narratives, Discourses and Perceptions", in Sengupta, Anita and Rakhimov, Mirzokhid (ed.) (2015): *Insights and Commentaries, South and Central Asia*, New Delhi, Knowledge World, pp 3-41



the optimal solution. It suggests that India's geopolitical interests should be defined in broader Eurasian terms. Unfortunately, while an inclusive cooperative framework remains the optimal solution; in reality, bilateral engagements often restrict their effectiveness. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to ignore these larger conceptualizations since this often influences economic prioritization. An effective solution seems to lie in keeping these conceptualizations in mind while negotiating for options that would serve Indian interests. Yet, one needs to take note of the fact that often these conceptualizations themselves prove to be ephemeral in terms of reflecting long term priorities.

From the Indian point of view the last decade of the 20th century presented a major strategic challenge as far the Central Asian region was concerned. With the collapse of the former USSR and subsequent Russian retreat from the region, the regional balance was altered and India's favoured position in a region that was identified by its strategic thinkers as "India's extended strategic neighbourhood" was reduced. The emergence of a number of regional players and the potential for local conflicts also significantly changed the strategic environment for India. Along with this was the fact that much of the Central Asian borders are fluid having been demarcated out of political considerations rather than any ethnic contiguity. The possibilities of demographic changes and the proliferation of non-state actors was also a distinct possibility. The fact that Afghanistan and parts of the Central Asian region were emerging as significant opium producers also made India vulnerable to opium trade. The consequent proliferation of small arms is also a destabilizing factor. As far as India is concerned Afghanistan, terrorism, illicit drug trade and extremism have been identified as significant areas where there could be collaboration.⁷

However, one also needs to take note of the fact that the Indian engagement with the Eurasian region extends beyond recent conceptualizations to periods when connectivity was defined not just in strategic terms but also cultural terms. It is undeniable that India views the Central Asian region as a crucial partner in the prevention of resurgence of terrorism in the region, which would prove problematic to both regions. Or that 'uranium diplomacy' is becoming increasingly important in terms of supply of fuel for nuclear reactors. However, these immediate concerns should not overshadow the broader issues that have always been important to both the regions. Multilateral engagement on various fronts would thus prove to be an effective means of reconnecting with the region. Here, recent geopolitical imaginations or even 'area' based divisions are of less significance. The identification of common developmental frameworks and the legacy of connectivity on various levels would prove to be more useful. Of the more formal levels of engagement the inclusion of India (and Pakistan) with the SCO has received attention in recent times and the article now moves on to a more detailed discussion of the much debated and delayed entry of India into the organization. On the one hand this inclusion impacts on Indian engagement with the Central Asian states and on the other brings back into focus the fact that the Indian engagement in the region would be contingent on the engagement of other actors, particularly Russia and China.

3. India's engagements with the 'heartland'

The 16th SCO Summit held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan on June 23-24, 2016 concluded the process of inclusion of India and Pakistan as permanent members in the SCO. However, even before the beginning of the Summit, reports tended to argue that the process of inclusion may not be the foregone conclusion that it is being assumed to be and that in any case the level of engagement that India would be offered within the organization would be determined by existing members. At the Summit in Ufa (Russia) on July 10, 2015, Putin announced that the

⁷Komissina, Irina: "India: Cooperation with the Central Asian Countries in Regional Security", *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, vol. 24, nº 6 (2003), pp. 16-24.



organization was turning a “new page as the process of including Pakistan and India is being launched.”⁸ More significantly the members reiterated their willingness to create a Development Bank and Development Fund and supported China’s proposal to create a Silk Road Economic Belt across the SCO member states. The SCO Summit which followed the BRICS Summit underlined the importance of stability in Afghanistan with the withdrawal of international forces.⁹ Post Ufa, a debate initiated among strategic experts on Russia, China, India and the Central Asian states on the implications of inclusion of India and Pakistan’s in the SCO indicated that the acceptance of the two South Asian states within the SCO was far from resolved.¹⁰ Sanat Kushkumbayev, Deputy Director of the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan was quoted as saying, “The start of India and Pakistan’s accession to the SCO was top of the agenda, but de jure the process has yet to be fully clarified. It is quite possible that an existing SCO member could block their entry”. Uzbek President Islam Karimov noted that the entry of India and Pakistan could change the balance of power inside the organization and internationally. Uzbek analyst Farkhad Tolipov expressed concern about a number of unresolved issues between India and Pakistan and how these would affect the SCO. There were other unresolved issues including disagreements on the level of involvement in Afghanistan. Russian President Putin supported increased involvement of the SCO in Afghanistan whereas Uzbek President Karimov defined Afghanistan as a “smouldering war with no end in sight” and argued that the SCO needs to focus on long term interests, principally economic issues and increasing bilateral trade and investment.¹¹

It is this understanding that was reflected in the decision on inclusion with clear indications that geo-economics rather than traditional political rivalries had been the decisive factor in the acceptance of their membership. For China the SCO as a geo-political platform was no longer crucial as the question of disputed borders has either been resolved or is no longer significant as they have become shared Special Economic Zones (SEZs) that can be easily navigated by Chinese trucks carrying products for the Central Asian markets. It is the One Belt One Road, an infrastructural project with its own funding agency, the AIIB that has assumed importance and SCO meetings reiterate commitment to both as an integral part of the organization. And it was the need for combined material and political commitment in infrastructural development that became the motivating factor for the acceptance of the expanded membership among the states.

India’s own decision for entry into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was through a much-debated process where the advantages and disadvantages of membership into a multilateral forum that would include not just Russia and China but also Pakistan has been subject to intense scrutiny not just by commentators from within India but also globally. A recent rather positive editorial begins with the argument that entry into the SCO opens up opportunities for India to its North.¹² A refreshing change from many others that have argued that ‘look north/northwest’ would never be a viable policy option for India given the intractable

⁸“After BRICS Putin holds Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Ufa”, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 10 July 2015, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-shanghai-cooperation-organization-summit-brics-ufa/27120442.html>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰Ibragimov, Galiya: “What are the implications of India’s and Pakistan’s accession to the SCO?”, *Russia Direct*, 13 July 2015, at <http://www.russia-direct.org/debates/what-are-implications-indias-and-pakistans-accession-sco>.

¹¹Putz, Catherine: “Uzbekistan’s Karimov out Talks Putin in Moscow”, *The Diplomatist*, 28 April 2016.

¹²“Take the plunge: Entry to SCO opens up opportunities for India to look North”, *Times of India*, 12 June 2017, at <http://blogs.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/toi-editorials/take-the-plunge-entry-to-sco-opens-up-opportunities-for-india-to-look-north/>



position of Pakistan and the continuing conflicts in Afghanistan that make 'Look/Act East' the only available Indian alternative, the editorial goes on to argue that entry into the SCO would provide opportunities in three key areas. First the SCO would become a forum where Pakistan could be held accountable for its terrorism; secondly it could be a forum for negotiation of India's relations with China and finally it would resolve the issue of non-contiguity with the Central Asian region by opening up lines of communication through Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Connectivity therefore played a large part in the Indian decision to apply for membership with the general agreement that for India joining the SCO was about "raising its stakes in Central Asia", of greater connectivity to a wider resource rich region and an opportunity to work on common issues of concern. This in conjunction with Iran's SCO membership would ensure that India would be able to move towards developing a platform for trade and transit through Bandar Abbas and Chabahar eventually linking with the North South Corridor. There also remains the possibility of the SCO acting as guarantor for projects like Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) and the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline (IPI) which have been in the pipeline for a number of years. This would also provide a useful interface for interaction with Afghanistan and its neighbourhood. However, there is also the counter argument that SCO engagement need not be over emphasized as bilateral engagement with the Central Asian states work just as well as illustrated by the uranium supply deal with Kazakhstan during Prime Minister Modi's visit. The Indian alternative through 'Connect Central Asia' that was projected as the policy initiative on the west that would complement its Look/Act East Policy with emphasis on the four "Cs" commerce, connectivity, consular and culture, however, could not match the Chinese engagement either economically or in political terms.

The 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit held in Qingdao (China) on June 9-10, 2018 with India and Pakistan as full members was attended, among others, by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistan President Mamnoon Hussain. A euphoric Chinese media hailed it as a commitment to multilateralism by more than half of the global community and a reiteration of the 'Shanghai spirit' based on mutual benefit, equal consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and pursuit of common development. Reflecting this positive note the global media highlighted the sharp contrast between two iconic images, one from the G7 (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) meeting in Charlevoix (Canada) of a defiant US President confronting a combative Angela Merkel juxtaposed against the smiling SCO group led by Chinese President Xi and Russian President Putin. While the US President instructed US representatives not to endorse the G7 final statement the SCO was reported to have managed an 'almost' unanimous one with India opting out of extending support to the Belt and Road Initiative and non-signatories opting out of support for non-proliferation. A 'breaking apart of the West' and a 'consolidating East' dominated headlines and was identified as the marker of the emerging global scenario.

This consensus on the building of a global community of shared interests, at least as far as the SCO is concerned is mainly determined by China and Russia which while differing over the exact purpose and scope of the organization have shared positions that was echoed in both Xi and Putin's statements. It was also reflected in the fact that despite the expanded presence the SCO has adopted both the Russian and the Chinese as official languages of the organization. The SCO and the emerging confluence of the Eurasian Economic Community with the BRI is also the effect of the emerging trade war between China and the United States on the one hand and the fact that Moscow has been at odds with Washington particularly since the Ukrainian crisis when diplomatic and economic sanctions were imposed against Russia by the West led by US. Moscow's tensions with Washington have also intensified in the Middle East. In this background Sino Russia relations have taken a positive spin. And this in turn is echoed in the



absolute unity behind Chinese endeavours by declarations supporting the Belt and Road Initiative in recent SCO summits.

Fresh initiatives in Sino Indian ties were seen as another positive aspect in the backdrop of China's trade war with the US. BRICS and SCO have been identified as the two multilateral institutions through which Sino-Indian relationship would progress. The June 9, 2018, meeting between Modi and Xi on the sidelines of the SCO summit was noted to have covered key aspects of the bilateral engagement reflecting the resolve of the two countries to reset their relations and bring 'trust' back to their ties. The meeting was said to have been held in a cordial atmosphere with the promise of high-level exchanges, new trade goals and people to people exchanges led by the two foreign ministries. A new trade target, an agreement on continuing to share hydrological data on the Brahmaputra, enhancing agricultural exports including non-Basmati rice, was some of the official takeaways from the summit. Critics however commented on the fact that China has already constructed three dams on the Brahmaputra, making the sharing of hydrological data a formality and that a market for non-Basmati rice will first have to be created in China before there is scope for export.¹³

There is reason to critically assess the role that the SCO is being assigned as a negotiator for bilateral issues. And here one needs to take note not just of the intent of the original founders of Shanghai Five but also how the Organization itself has responded to various situations within the ambit of its core space and its immediate neighbourhood. A myriad of bilateral military and economic links within the SCO has often prevented it from developing a multilateral response in critical situations. While its lack of reaction to the 'war on terror' in its initial years was justified with the argument that Afghanistan was not a part of the organization, this continued in the case of conflicts emerging out of domestic power politics or even critical moments within the region like Andijan (2005) or Osh (2010) that involved member states and led to ethnic clashes and movements of people across borders. Member states have remained deadlocked over appropriate action in case of issues that have been identified as internal to states, security action in case of cross border issues and most importantly expansion through introduction of new members. Greater attention has been paid by both Russia and China to developing bilateral relations with the member Central Asian states and alternative economic forums like the Eurasian Economic Community have emerged within the same space with the SCO failing to provide a collective economic potential. Diverging internal and foreign economic policies, varying commitments to institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) or even Russia led Customs Union, the absence of a free trade zone and under-developed infrastructure has impeded intra-SCO economic potential. Issues where there has been general agreement among SCO members include preventing bilateral issues from clouding the overall SCO agenda and non-interference in bilateral or domestic matters. The lack of SCO involvement in Osh in 2010, was not just a reflection on the SCO's crisis management capabilities but also one of non-interference and has been matched by the lack of involvement during the Uzbek-Tajik feud over regional hydropower resources which led to Uzbekistan's blockade of rail shipments of equipment that Tajikistan needed to construct the Rogun Dam. Non-interference has extended to 'colour revolutions' with a broad definition of 'security threats' and contending definitions of 'political change' and 'regional autonomy' encouraging inaction.

Over the years various contending interests have, however, been inserted into the relationship the most recent being the much-publicized Chinese initiative the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. On the day India joined the SCO as a member S. Akbar Zaidi, noted

¹³See comments of Anil Wadhwa in Bhuyan, Aroonim: "India Keeps Its Interests Safe at SCO Summit", *The Economic Times*, IANS, 12 June 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-keeps-its-interests-safe-at-sco-summit/articleshow/64557875.cms>



political economist from Pakistan, argued in the course of a lecture in Kolkata¹⁴ that the most dangerous implication of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is that it would prevent any rapprochement between India and Pakistan unless the Chinese themselves initiate such a process and that they would do only if that fits into their grand design in the region. This begs the question whether the Indian entry into the SCO part of this grand design where the 'Shanghai Spirit' would encourage overlook on issues of sovereignty. It also reflects Chinese aspirations to be the 'conscience keeper' in the region. Following the 18th summit, comments in the *Global Times* that the SCO provides "multilateral guarantee" for India's connectivity with Central Asia via Pakistan is a reflection of China's involvement in global affairs, with the aim of building a global community of shared interests and responsibility through transport and trade corridors.¹⁵

It is also reflected in the position taken by the Chinese leadership that the entry of India and Pakistan as full members hails a new era, not only for multilateralism but also in terms of their bilateral relations. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang in the weekend following the summit remarked:

We know there are existing and historical, unresolved issues and conflicts between Pakistan and India. But I think after their joining of the SCO, maybe we can say that their relationship might be better as the grouping provides a better platform and opportunities for building the relations between them. Because, when joining the SCO, a series of agreements had to be signed and pledges had to be made. One of the key pillars (of joining the SCO) is to keep good and friendly relations and they should not see each other as opponents, much less enemies. Because they have signed these agreements, they shoulder a responsibility for implementing them.¹⁶

The reference is to the series of multilateral meetings on various issues attended by India and Pakistan that preceded the summit. Whether this proclaims a new era of informal diplomacy, to deal with contentious bilateral issues that reflect deep national concerns and interests, remain to be seen. Reports from China indicate that through the 'Shanghai Spirit' that transcends concepts of the clash of civilizations, a 'new world order' is in the making. In fact China's growing engagement in the global economy, its import-export markets and investments that exceed that of both the US and Japan means that its domestic decisions on fiscal, wage and monetary policies have global impact. And because of this role in the global economy China is today a global 'neighbour'. For instance as China's investment and trade along the new Silk Road continues to grow other competitors will eventually be eliminated as few states would be able to match the benefits offered by the Chinese.¹⁷ And this would increasingly be true of other regions as China moves towards what it considers to be a 'reform' of the international monetary system and its agencies- International Monetary Fund (IMF), Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Trade Organization (WTO) and is able to include growing number of states within an alternative system which would include the AIIB, New Development Bank and other 'Asian' developmental funds.

4. Conclusion

¹⁴Zaidi, S. Akbar: "Has China Take Over Pakistan", Lecture organized by Calcutta Research Group and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Kolkata, 9 June 2017, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiUEOfI03EU&t=184s>

¹⁵Xingchun, Long: "SCO Nurtures Sino Indian Relations", *Global Times*, 11 June 2018, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1106446.shtml>

¹⁶"SCO Could be Great Vehicle to Improve India-China Ties: China", *The Economic Times*, PTI, 11 June 2018, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sco-could-be-a-great-vehicle-to-improve-india-pakistan-ties-china/articleshow/64544924.cms>

¹⁷Ooi, Su-Mei and Trinkle, Kate: "China's New Silk Road and Its Impact on Xinjinag", *The Diplomat*, 5 March 2015, at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/chinas-new-silk-road-and-its-impact-on-xinjiang/>

India's contemporary connect to the wider region has been visualized through the Connect Central Asia Policy launched in 2012 as an alternative infrastructure and transport connectivity plan that seeks to enhance trade and educational rights as also encourages more joint commercial and security initiatives with Central Asia. It is also part of the North South Transport Corridor on which there was emphasis in the Foreign Trade Policy 2015-20. The aim is to involve wider Central Asia wherever possible and with this in mind expand land routes to include Armenia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Although Central Asia is a significant part of the Belt and Road Plan India faces connectivity challenges regarding land routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This limits direct communications and as part of the effort to relieve these connectivity bottlenecks there is today greater emphasis on participation in multilateral regional organizations, the SCO being an example. Quite apart from the concerns about connectivity adding to regional tensions rather than diffusing them¹⁸ there remain concerns about the practical delivery of enhanced connectivity. There also needs to be broader discussions on the interaction and harmonization of tariff systems (such as those of the WTO, the Eurasian Economic Union and The European Union) and about the kinds of goods that will be transported. For freight to be cost effective it would have to focus on high value goods. There also remains the rationale behind the soft loans given by China for infrastructural developments. Given the fact that these are not necessarily based on commercial logic it could ultimately have an effect on common funding agencies like the AIIB.¹⁹

Given the global reality of a China centered trade network overlapping with a Russian led economic community engulfing both Asian overland and maritime routes on the one hand and the emergence of preferential trade agreements representing the rules and regulations that could govern global trade on the other either the development of an logistic alternative or connecting with the existing frameworks would be an essential enabler for India's agenda of connectivity. However, one needs to take note of the fact that neither is a foregone conclusion and a great deal of uncertainty surrounds their future. Serious concerns about the ecological and social impact of connectivity seem to be clouding the future of the China centred trade network and the Russian led economic community. Similarly, India's Act East policy in a newly created Indo Pacific space is another work in progress that awaits conceptual clarity but also policy consensus among a large number of stake holders including sub regions, cities, ports, civil society actors and nodal agencies.

In a recent article, Samir Saran however, argues that efforts to shift global centrality to the 'Indo-Pacific' remain an insufficient response to China's spectacular measures to connect Europe and Asia.²⁰ Reiterating Macindere's position he contends that Eurasia continues to be the 'supercontinent' and the new world order will be defined by who manages it and how it is managed. It is in this supercontinent that the future of democracy, of free markets and global security arrangements will be decided. He argues that having assessed that the divide between Europe and Asia as artificial, China has moved towards the creation of a network of connectivity projects that have diluted the significance of sub-regions and upset power arrangements. He notes that an open Indo-Pacific vision is an insufficient response to China's relentless pursuit of building infrastructure, facilitating trade and creating alternative global institutions across Eurasia.

¹⁸Foreign Secretary Subramanyam Jaishankar raised this issue when he argued that OBOR was a "national initiative" at the Raisina Dialogue in March 2015; see "Speech by Foreign Secretary at Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi", Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2 March 2015, at [http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26433/Speech by Foreign Secretary at Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi March 2 2015](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/26433/Speech+by+Foreign+Secretary+at+Raisina+Dialogue+in+New+Delhi+March+2+2015)

¹⁹For a detailed discussion see Pantucci, Raffaello and Lain, Sarah (2016): *China's Belt and Road: A View from Delhi*, Workshop Report, June 2016, London, Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, at https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20160629_chinas_belt_and_road_final.pdf

²⁰Saran, Samir: "Eurasia: Larger than Indo-Pacific – Liberal world must stand up and be counted, or step aside and watch PaxSinica unfold", *Times of India*, 4 June 2018.



While this is undeniable, the fact that the Indian cultural connect has always been significant in the region is equally undisputed. Central Asian affinity to Indian music, art and movies is well known as is the Indian curiosity about the land of ‘Babur’. And here a proposed policy initiative could prove to be meaningful. The Ministry of External Affairs has recently proposed extending leave travel concession of government employees to include the five Central Asian states.²¹ While this is yet to be implemented it has the potential to expand Indian tourism in the region and impact positively on India’s ‘soft power’. While generally couched in terms of increasing people to people contact tourism also impacts on the development of infrastructure related to the industry and has the potential for contributing to greater engagement. It is through initiatives like this that the potential for ‘connecting’ could be realized in the face of multiple global connectivity initiatives that now seek to engage with the region.

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²¹Dhingra, Sanya: “Ministry of External Affairs Mulls Extending Leave Travel Privilege to Central Asia”, *The Print*, 22 July 2018, at <https://theprint.in/governance/ministry-of-external-affairs-mulls-extending-leave-travel-privilege-to-central-asia/86539/>



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