

# India-Kazakhstan Relations: Geopolitical Dynamics, Strategic Material Interests, and Soft Power in the New Great Game

**Dr. Tanim Kayal**

Research Scholar, Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the multifaceted factors shaping India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan in the post-Cold War era. Drawing on geopolitical theory, constructivist analysis, and empirical evidence, it analyses how the interplay of the New Great Game, strategic material interests, regional security concerns involving Afghanistan and Pakistan, connectivity infrastructure (Chabahar Port and the International North–South Transport Corridor), and India's soft power deployment shape bilateral ties. The research finds that while strategic material interests-particularly energy resources and market access-remain central drivers of engagement, India's approach is increasingly distinguished by soft power tools including cultural diplomacy, the Indian diaspora, Bollywood, yoga, and technical cooperation. The paper further argues that geopolitical competition from China and the United States has paradoxically deepened India–Russia convergence in Central Asia, while Kazakhstan actively leverages Indian engagement as a counterbalance to Chinese hegemony. The study contributes to the growing literature on India's 'extended neighbourhood' strategy and the evolving architecture of Central Asian geopolitics.

**Keywords:** India-Kazakhstan Relations; New Great Game; Central Asia; Geopolitics; Soft Power; Chabahar Port; INSTC; Energy Security; SCO; Extended Neighbourhood

## 1. Introduction

The bilateral relationship between India and Kazakhstan is rooted in civilisational antiquity. The ancient Silk Road, traversing Turkestan-the southernmost region of Kazakhstan-formed one of the earliest corridors of interaction between the two civilisations, facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and the spread of Buddhism from the Indian subcontinent to Central Asia and China (Abuseitova, 2007; Mackinder, 2004). These historical bonds, discernible even today in shared culinary, linguistic, and cultural elements, provide the civilisational substratum for a modern diplomatic partnership that has grown considerably since Kazakhstan's independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Embassy of India, Astana Kazakhstan, n.d.).

India's post-Cold War foreign policy identified Central Asia as a strategic priority, and improving ties with Kazakhstan emerged as a central pillar of this 'Look North' and, subsequently, 'Connect Central Asia' approach. However, this relationship operates within a complex geopolitical environment shaped by the competing interests of major powers-Russia, China, and the United States-and constrained by regional instabilities in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This paper systematically examines the principal

factors that influence India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan, employing a constructivist lens to analyse the intersection of geopolitical, economic, security, and cultural variables that together define the contours of this critical bilateral relationship.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Geopolitics of the Heartland**

Any analysis of India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan must begin with the geopolitical context that assigns the region its strategic significance. Mackinder's (2004) Heartland Theory remains a foundational reference point. Mackinder argued that domination of the Eurasian 'pivot area'-delineated by the Caspian Sea and encompassing Russia and the five former Soviet Central Asian republics-would confer global supremacy: 'Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the World' (p. 298).

This framework retains analytical purchase in contemporary international politics. The energy deposits of the Caspian Basin rank among the world's most economically significant, making control over Central Asian resources a key determinant of global power (Rumer, 2006). For India, the Heartland paradigm informs a geo-political and geo-economic approach that seeks to increase energy availability while preventing any single state from monopolising supply (Mohapatra, 2008).

## **3. The New Great Game: Geopolitical Competition in Central Asia**

The post-1991 period witnessed the emergence of what analysts have termed the 'New Great Game'-a renewed competition for influence over Central Asia's energy resources and strategic corridors, now involving the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, Japan, Iran, Pakistan, and India (Weitz, 2006). Unlike the nineteenth-century rivalry between Britain and Russia, this new contest centres primarily on oil, natural gas, and pipeline geopolitics.

### **3.1 The United States Factor**

American policy toward Central Asia has been shaped by overlapping imperatives: democracy promotion, energy access, and counter-terrorism. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States intensified its presence in the region under Operation Enduring Freedom, seeking to eradicate Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and beyond (Levine, 2016). Kazakhstan attracted particular American attention owing to its strategic proximity to China and its vast hydrocarbon and uranium deposits; major American energy corporations including ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips have invested significantly in the country (Cohen, 2006).

India has broadly supported American counter-terrorism efforts in Central Asia (Rudenko, 2019), yet Indian foreign policy elites express frustration at Washington's role in limiting Indian access to the Kazakh hydrocarbon market-where American firms, rather than Russian or Chinese ones, frequently impede Indian entry (Rudenko, 2019). Furthermore, American attempts to enlist Central Asian states against Iran sit uncomfortably with India's strategic interest in the Chabahar Port and the broader Iran-centric connectivity architecture.

### **3.2 The Russian Factor**

Russia remains Kazakhstan's most important trading partner and retains significant energy infrastructure interests in the country, with Russian firms operating the majority of Kazakhstan's oil, gas, and electricity infrastructure (Rousseau, 2011). More than sixty bilateral agreements coordinate defence and military-technical cooperation, and both nations cooperate under the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO; Rousseau, 2011).

India's relationship with Russia constitutes an essential variable in its Kazakhstan policy. Several Indian analysts observe that Moscow functions as an indispensable intermediary between New Delhi and Central Asia, particularly in the domains of security and energy (Rudenko, 2019). Crucially, Russia has welcomed India's growing engagement in Kazakhstan as a counterweight to China's expanding influence. As Jiang (2020) notes, Russia's strategy in Central Asia explicitly involves inviting India to balance China. This convergence of interests explains Russia's advocacy for India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

### 3.3 The China Factor

China represents the most consequential external variable in India's Kazakhstan policy. Beijing controls approximately 20% of Kazakhstan's oil supply and has invested over \$14 billion in the country's energy sector (Pradhan, 2020; Donnellon-May, 2022). Kazakhstan is China's most significant energy partner in Central Asia and the largest global supplier of uranium to China—a relationship reinforced by joint ventures through Kazatomprom (Donnellon-May, 2022).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aggressively advanced since 2013, seeks to integrate Central Asia into a new transit system connecting Chinese markets to European ones (Rudenko, 2019). The BRI's strategic objectives—resource distribution, market connectivity, and the institutionalisation of Chinese economic dominance—directly challenge India's own regional ambitions (Vakulchuk et al., 2019). India views China's expanding footprint in Kazakhstan with considerable alarm, not only because it obstructs Indian commercial access but also because it threatens to erode Kazakhstan's strategic autonomy. Anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan, including protests over proposed land reforms in 2016 (Mikheyev, 2019), has generated political space for Indian engagement: Kazakhstan has openly discussed its interest in utilising India as a counterbalance to China (Wani, 2020).

Indian researchers identify India and China as the two principal competitors in Central Asia's New Great Game (Wani, 2020). The SCO, while providing a common multilateral platform, has not resolved the fundamental divergence of Indian and Chinese interests in the region (Pradhan, 2020).

### 4. Strategic Material Interests

Beyond geopolitics, India's engagement with Kazakhstan is driven by concrete strategic material interests: energy security, market access, and economic connectivity. Since the liberalisation of India's economy in the 1990s, development has been identified as a paramount national goal, and foreign policy has been increasingly instrumentalised to serve this objective (Scott, 2009).

India's growing energy ties with SCO members and Kazakhstan reflect the urgent necessity of diversifying energy supplies. Central Asia has historically been India's preferred trade corridor and continues to form part of India's 'extended neighbourhood'—a conceptual framework that legitimises power projection beyond South Asia (Scott, 2009). The Silk Road, which connected India to Central Asia from the third century BCE to the fifteenth century CE, is now being revived through modern infrastructure projects (Joshi, 2010).

India's engagement with Kazakhstan through the SCO has provided multilateral legitimacy to bilateral energy and trade relationships. The SCO offers the only international forum where India can conduct relations with China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan in close proximity, serving both commercial and security functions (Mohapatra, 2008).

## 5. The Afghanistan–Pakistan Factor

The strategic geography of South Asia means that India's connectivity to Central Asia is critically mediated by the political conditions in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan and Pakistan's persistent support for militant groups—through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)—have constituted the most significant structural obstacles to Indian ambitions in Kazakhstan (Waldman, 2010).

Pakistan's denial of transit rights for Indian goods bound for Afghanistan has compelled India to seek alternative connectivity routes. Similarly, China's political hostility forecloses direct land access to Central Asia through Xinjiang, while the route through Ladakh remains contingent on Chinese political will (Warikoo, 2020). The instability in Afghanistan therefore directly undermines India's primary strategic interests in Kazakhstan by threatening economic integration, energy transit projects, and regional security architecture (Bajpai, 2022).

Several pipeline projects illustrate this constraint. The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline traverses some of the most volatile territory in the region (Pradhan, 2020, pp. 141–142). The Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI) pipeline, despite its economic attractiveness, remains stalled due to India–Pakistan disputes over transit fees, U.S. sanctions on Iran, and security challenges (Pradhan, 2020).

## 6. The Chabahar Port Factor

India's strategic response to the Pakistan blockade and Afghan instability has centred on the Iranian port of Chabahar, located on the Gulf of Oman. Chabahar serves as India's primary 'gateway' to Afghanistan and the landlocked republics of Central Asia, bypassing Pakistani territory entirely (Dave, 2016). The port has earned the sobriquet 'The Golden Gate' owing to its proximity to Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics.

India has committed \$500 million to the construction and development of Chabahar port (Pant & Mehta, 2018) and has already completed the Zaranj–Delaram highway in Afghanistan, linking Zaranj to the country's Garland highway and opening access to Kandahar, Kabul, and Mazar-e-Sharif—and, by extension, to Central Asia. A trilateral memorandum of understanding between India, Iran, and Afghanistan formalises this connectivity architecture (Pant & Mehta, 2018).

Strategically, Chabahar also serves as a counterpoint to China's Gwadar Port project in Pakistan, located only 70 kilometres away (Pattnaik & Pradhan, 2016). The Chabahar investment thus serves simultaneously as a trade corridor and a strategic hedge against Chinese naval expansion in the Indian Ocean region.

## 7. The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

Complementing the Chabahar Port strategy is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multimodal trade route connecting India to Central Asia, Russia, and Northern Europe through Iran. The INSTC was first proposed through a trilateral agreement between India, Iran, and Russia at St. Petersburg in September 2000 and now encompasses twelve signatory states (Singh Roy, 2012).

The proposed 7,200-kilometre corridor running north through Iran and Afghanistan will provide India with access to the five Central Asian Republics, Russia, and onward to Europe (Bhat, 2017). The INSTC's economic rationale is compelling: it covers 6,245 kilometres compared to the existing maritime

route's 16,129 kilometres through the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and is expected to reduce the cost of India's trade by approximately 30% (Tanchum, 2014).

Together, the Chabahar Port and INSTC represent India's strategic answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative for transnational connectivity (Sajjanhar, 2017). Prime Minister Modi has also proposed that the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran Rail Link function as a connected corridor to the INSTC, indicating the corridor's significance to India–Kazakhstan connectivity specifically (Pradhan, 2020).

### **8. India's Soft Power in Kazakhstan**

Given the constraints on India's hard power projection in Central Asia-limited military presence, geographic barriers, and great-power competition-soft power has emerged as a crucial instrument of Indian foreign policy toward Kazakhstan. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce-a capacity India has cultivated through culture, education, and values (pp. 5–6).

India's soft power matrix in Kazakhstan encompasses several overlapping domains. Bollywood films and music achieved widespread popularity in Kazakhstan during the Soviet era and retain cultural salience today (Kumar, 2007). Younger Kazakhs remain familiar with Raj Kapoor, Mithun Chakraborty, and Aishwarya Rai-testaments to India's enduring cultural reach. India's former Ambassador to Kazakhstan, Ashok Sajjanhar, has identified Bollywood as among India's most significant cultural exports to the country (Embassy of India, Astana Kazakhstan, n.d.).

Yoga has also emerged as an important cultural bridge. By 2013, approximately 8% of Astana's residents practised yoga (Zhumabayeva, 2015), and Kazakhstan's participation in the International Day of Yoga-inaugurated by the UN General Assembly at India's initiative-has deepened this cultural connection.

The Indian diaspora in Kazakhstan, currently numbering approximately 7,800 individuals primarily engaged in medicine, business, and technology (Embassy of India, Astana Kazakhstan, n.d.), constitutes an important soft power asset. The historical Indian merchant diaspora in Central Asia, active from the mid-sixteenth century through to the early twentieth century, provides a deep historical basis for modern community ties (Levi, 2002).

Institutionally, India deploys soft power through the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Astana, and the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme, which has provided training to over 3,000 students from the region, including nearly 1,290 from Kazakhstan specifically (Embassy of India, Astana Kazakhstan, n.d.). These instruments collectively operationalise India's 'Connect Central Asia' policy, which has been characterised as more 'soft' than 'hard' in its emphasis on communication, healthcare, academia, and tourism (Kavalski, 2012).

### **9. Discussion: India's Foreign Policy Synthesis**

The foregoing analysis reveals that India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan cannot be reduced to a single causal logic. It is neither purely realpolitik-driven exclusively by energy and commercial interests-nor idealist soft power diplomacy. Rather, India's approach represents a layered synthesis: geopolitical imperatives provide the strategic context; energy and trade interests define the material stakes; regional security challenges shape the tactical responses; and soft power instruments build the relational capital necessary for durable engagement.

The New Great Game framework illuminates the competitive dynamics within which India operates, but obscures the cooperative dimensions. India and Russia maintain convergent interests vis-à-vis China in Central Asia (Jiang, 2020; Rinna, 2015), while India and China share certain policy preferences—anti-terrorism, anti-narcotics—even as they compete for resources and influence (Pradhan, 2020). Kazakhstan's deliberate strategy of engaging India as a counterweight to China (Wani, 2020) creates structural demand for Indian presence, providing New Delhi with leverage it would otherwise lack.

India's principal constraint remains connectivity. Without reliable land access through Afghanistan and Pakistan, and without the completion of the INSTC and Chabahar corridor, India's commercial and energy engagement with Kazakhstan will remain sub-optimal. Geopolitical instability—particularly Taliban-controlled Afghanistan—continues to impede the pipeline and transit projects on which India's energy security strategy depends.

The SCO provides India's most important institutional vehicle for engagement. As a normative leader within the SCO, India can advance regional integration agendas, promote its democratic credentials, and maintain proximity to both China and Pakistan within a multilateral framework that constrains unilateral aggression (Mohapatra, 2008).

## 10. Conclusion

This paper has examined the principal factors shaping India's foreign policy toward Kazakhstan: the geopolitics of the Heartland and the New Great Game; the roles of the United States, Russia, and China; strategic material interests in energy and trade; the Afghanistan-Pakistan constraint; the Chabahar Port and INSTC connectivity architecture; and India's soft power deployment.

The research demonstrates that India's engagement with Kazakhstan reflects a sophisticated, multi-vector strategy that balances realpolitik with normative projection. India's success in Kazakhstan—and in Central Asia more broadly—has been modest relative to its ambitions, constrained above all by geography, regional instability, and great-power competition. However, the bilateral relationship is structurally significant for both nations: Kazakhstan seeks Indian engagement to diversify its external partnerships, while India requires Kazakhstani energy, uranium, and strategic depth.

Going forward, the operationalisation of the Chabahar–INSTC corridor and the deepening of SCO-mediated multilateralism represent the most consequential variables. If India can overcome the connectivity deficit, the strategic material and soft power foundations of the relationship suggest considerable potential for an elevated partnership. India's soft power, in particular, provides a durable competitive advantage that neither China's economic might nor Russia's security guarantee can easily replicate.

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