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## Eurasian Connectivity: Interests of Regional and Great Powers


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**Abstract.** This article analyses the structure of trading networks in Eurasia and raises important questions on the relationship between these networks and the geopolitical contexts they navigate. Obviously, the geopolitical ambitions of multiple nation-states directly affect the lives and activities of the traders. Besides, nation-states also seek to instrumentally use the trading networks and communities that operate across their territories in order to expand their geopolitical reach and influence. The ultimate goal of these efforts is to dismantle trade barriers among regional players and invigorate intra-regional trade and investments in such a spirit that it would serve their interests. This leaves researchers and analysts wondering whether there is a need for connectivity in Eurasia and how it can be achieved. Which countries are participating in these projects, and what strategies have they adopted? In this article, the author answers the above questions with the help of the relevant maps reflecting the geopolitical interests of major powers and trade statistical reports. The author analyses the institutional arrangements and frameworks created by regional and great powers of Eurasia with special focus on the ambitions of Russia, the European Union, China, Central Asian states, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India. Neighboring states may take up an interest in developing overland and maritime trade routes. However, to unlock the potential of regional economic cooperation there are conditions to fulfill, such as favorable economic context and political circumstances or the decision by the governments striving to unlock the potential of their economies through cooperation with the neighbors. Naturally, the Eurasian space has room for most players to participate rather than be self-sufficient, with all of them standing to benefit from increased connectivity. Thus, this article offers a broad note on connectivity issues in Eurasia, which denotes physical and non-physical linkages between continental geographies, politics, economies, and populations. Despite the potential benefits of securing a higher level of connectivity in Eurasia, related initiatives have become a competitive factor. Eurasian powers, both great and regional, have made no secret of their goals to reshape regional and continental integration in accordance with their interests.

**Key words:** Eurasia, connectivity, Russia, Central Asia, China, European Union, Turkey, Iran, South Asia

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## Связанность Евразии: интересы региональных и великих держав

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**Аннотация.** Анализируется структура торговых сетей Евразии, и поднимаются важные вопросы в отношении взаимосвязи этих сетей и геополитического контекста, в котором они развиваются. Геополитические амбиции национальных государств напрямую воздействуют на международную торговлю. Кроме того, все государства стремятся к тому, чтобы использовать существующие торговые сети, проходящие

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через их территорию, в целях расширения своих геополитических возможностей и влияния. Конечной целью таких усилий является ликвидация торговых барьеров между странами региона и активизация внутрирегиональной торговли и инвестиционных потоков так, чтобы они соответствовали интересам стран-инициаторов. Исследователи и аналитики задаются вопросом, есть ли реальная необходимость в укреплении связанности Евразии и каким образом эта цель может быть достигнута? Какие страны участвуют в подобных проектах и какие стратегии применяют? В статье предпринимается попытка ответить на эти вопросы, используя картографический материал, отражающий геополитические интересы ключевых держав, а также статистические материалы по региональной торговле. В авторском анализе делается акцент на институциональные структуры, созданные ведущими региональными и великими державами континента при особом внимании к России, Европейскому союзу, Китаю, государствам Центральной Азии, Турции, Ирану, Пакистану и Индии. Соседние государства могут быть заинтересованы в развитии сухопутных и морских торговых путей. Однако для того чтобы раскрыть потенциал подобных инициатив, необходима совокупность условий, в частности благоприятный экономический и политический контекст, приверженность инициаторов раскрытию потенциала сотрудничества с соседями. Очевидно, на евразийском пространстве существует достаточно возможностей для развития сотрудничества всех заинтересованных держав, каждая из которых выиграет от увеличения связанности континента. Представлен широкий обзор проблем связанности Евразии, рассматриваются узлы связей географических, политических, экономических и демографических структур континента. Несмотря на потенциальные выгоды, существующие инициативы, призванные увеличить связанность Евразии, из-за различий в подходах инициаторов среди региональных и великих держав континента стали фактором конкуренции, поскольку державы континента стремятся перестроить в соответствии со своими интересами процессы региональной и континентальной интеграции на евразийском пространстве.

**Ключевые слова:** Евразия, связанность, Россия, Центральная Азия, Китай, Европейский союз, Турция, Иран, Южная Азия

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## Introduction

Modern international trade is an increasingly complex process. Better trade performance requires connectivity along not only land and railroads and sea routes, but also in telecommunications, financial markets, and information processing. Inefficiency in transportation, logistics, and trade-related infrastructure systems can heavily impede a country's ability to compete globally. These challenges are particularly acute in landlocked developing countries, as trade facilitation and connectivity initiatives are particularly important for them.

Connectivity as a concept encompasses physical facilities, services, and ways to facilitate the movement of goods and people within and across borders regardless of their relative position within a network. A country's economic connectivity is dependent on the connectivity of all its partners. Improved connectivity also requires access to information about trade costs and economic distance, which reflects the

average cost of market access as a buyer or supplier.<sup>1</sup>

It is generally agreed that all major economic powers in and around the Eurasian landmass have vital interests in strengthening connectivity. Each of the major continental economies is concerned with the logistics for bilateral trade flows.<sup>2</sup> The Eurasian states need to expand the operation of continental networks to enjoy network effects that may help improve their economic dynamism, along with the emergence of corporate and regional digital platforms and ecosystems (Walcott & Johnson, 2013). Out of all regions of the global economy, Eurasia would benefit the most from improved digital connectivity, given the prominence of

<sup>1</sup> Connectivity, Logistics & Trade Facilitation // The World Bank. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade-facilitation-and-logistics> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>2</sup> Emerson M., Vinokurov E. Optimisation of Central Asian and Eurasian Trans-Continental Land Transport Corridors. EUCAM Working Paper No. 7 // EU — Central Asia Monitoring. December 2009. URL: <http://aei.pitt.edu/13582/1/WP7-EN.pdf> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

distance as a factor that constrains the intensity of economic cooperation within the region. What is more, out of the 44 countries of Eurasia, 26 are landlocked countries.<sup>3</sup> For them, the gravity of distance is costly enough to pursue connectivity improving initiatives.

Among the major powers of Eurasia, China remains firmly set on pursuing the ambitious goal of connecting the country with Europe overland by implementing its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Russia and the European Union (EU) are indispensable stakeholders (Diesen, 2017; 2021). Without them, this continental connection is unlikely to materialize, so they must develop policy responses to China's initiative that reveal an unexpected willingness to cooperate. There is indeed a possibility of cooperation on connectivity between the EU, China, and Russia in Central Asia (Bossuyt & Bolgova, 2020).

China presented the 'One Belt and One Road' to connect the continent through new "silk-roads on land and sea" while also launching the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) as a financial institution to implement the initiative. Driven by the commodity booms, Russia enjoyed economic growth and visualized development policy for the Far East and pursued the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) to strengthen its economic links with Central Asia (Arase, 2015). The ultimate goal of these efforts is to remove trade barriers between the region's countries and invigorate intra-regional trade and investments.

It has been argued that economic integration does not necessarily lead to a higher level of welfare unless it is not one of the natural trading partners.<sup>4</sup> The analysis of the development of intra-state links in Eurasia reveals that its origins were market-driven. Improved connectivity is

consistently mentioned in major foreign economic policy announcements by the Chinese President, the Belt and Road official documents, and the European Commission "The Connecting Europe and Asia" report.<sup>5</sup> In any bilateral political debacle, there are chances for the survival of achieved connectivity if the economic foundation is strong (Pomfret, 2021).

Another region of interest is the Eastern European countries' belt that stretches from the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova. Situated between the European and Asian cores of Eurasia, these regions are geographically located directly where the Eurasian continent is divided into two parts. This region has witnessed both competition and confrontation between the Eurasian states interspersed with periods of cooperation of varying intensity (Libman & Vinokurov, 2021). Politically, Eastern Europe is far from being homogeneous today.<sup>6</sup>

The analysis of the trading networks and their structure should raise important questions on the relationship between them and the geopolitical contexts they navigate. The lives and activities of the traders, on the one hand, are being directly affected by the geopolitical ambitions of the multiple nation-states. They also seek to instrumentally use the trading networks and communities operating across their territories as a means of expanding their reach and influence geopolitically. The actions of such great Eurasian powers and the dynamics of various geopolitical projects can have significant implications for the foreign policies of weaker countries squeezed between more powerful neighbors (Marsden, 2021). Therefore, this article proceeds with an analysis of the interests of great and regional powers in promoting increased connectivity in Eurasia.

<sup>3</sup> Lissovnikov Y. A Digital Platform for Eurasia Could Help Overcome Region's Distance and Fragmentation // World Economic Forum. June 28, 2021. URL: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/06/a-digital-platform-for-eurasia/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>4</sup> Kang G. S., Won Y. Eurasian Economic Integration and Regional Connectivity // Researchgate.com. February 2016. URL: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311707061\\_Eurasian\\_Economic\\_Integration\\_and\\_Regional\\_Connectivity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311707061_Eurasian_Economic_Integration_and_Regional_Connectivity) (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>5</sup> Connecting Europe & Asia: The EU Strategy // European Union External Action Service. September 26, 2019. URL: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50699/connecting-europe-asia-eu-strategy\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50699/connecting-europe-asia-eu-strategy_en) (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>6</sup> Preiherman Y. Infrastructure Connectivity and Political Stability in Eurasia // Valdai Discussion Club. May 8, 2018. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-85-infrastructure-connectivity/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

## Russia's Eurasian Connectivity Strategy

Economically emboldened Russia seeks to restore its place on the international stage with clear ambitions to re-establish the influence in its close neighborhood. Russia needs to occupy an influential position internationally that best fits Russian interests as one of the global centers. At the same time, it should also establish favorable external conditions for the modernization of the Russian economy.<sup>7</sup>

To further enhancement of regional integration, there were already Russian-led organizations that functioned as a launchpad for Putin's Eurasian Union project. First, most Eurasian states maintained historical ties as members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The current members are Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Ukraine is *de jure* a participant but not a member, and Georgia withdrew in 2009, after its brief war with Russia (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014, p. 168; Trenin, 2009, p. 7). The CIS was formed upon the disintegration of the Soviet Union, aiming at preserving ties amongst former Soviet Union republics (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014, p. 164; Trenin, 2009, p. 7). The CIS remains a loose association of states with the stated goal of coordinating their economic and foreign policy, although the member states failed to fully institutionalize these ambitions. The CIS, however, still plays a vital role in Eurasia (Gvosdev & Marsh, 2014, p. 165).

External powers such as the US, European Union, and Turkey are also engaged with the post-Soviet countries (Erixon & Srinivasan, 2015; Erşen & Köstem, 2019). They face fierce competition with Russia that traditionally maintains a presence there and the newly entered China.<sup>8</sup> Russia, being the most significant

economic player in the Eurasian Economic Union, is yet to emerge as a strong economic actor in Asia. Its ties are still mostly focused on the EU, which led to significant damage to its economy due to the Western sanctions.

The focus of Russian policy on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and RIC triangle (Russia, India, China), aimed at actualizing the Greater Eurasian vision, has increased manifold, as China-India competition intensifies alongside heightening US-China rivalry.<sup>9</sup>

Initially Russia's aim as the leader of the post-Soviet space was to assure more close integration with Europe. The Greater Europe in Moscow's conceptualization stretched from Lisbon to Vladivostok (Diesen, 2017; Vasilyeva & Lagutina, 2016), which is reflected by the orientation of its road network, as shown in Fig. 1. In the aftermath of the 2008—2009 global financial crisis, the primary goal was to attract investments to Siberia and the Russian Far East and promote its opening to China and the Asia-Pacific states.<sup>10</sup>

In joint Russian and Chinese efforts, the driving forces behind which are the Central Eurasian Movement led by Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus and the Belt and Road Initiative, are expected to transform Central Eurasia.<sup>11</sup> As emphasized by the report on the changing role of the Eurasian integration for the Russian economy, the EAEU is expected to establish conditions for sustainable development and uplift

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for International Peace. September 16, 2020. URL: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/16/there-goes-neighborhood-limits-of-russian-integration-in-eurasia-pub-82693> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>9</sup> Kapoor N. The Elusive Character of Eurasia — Will Russia's Plans for Its Integration Finally Materialise? // Observer Research Foundation. December 28, 2020. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/elusive-character-eurasia-will-russias-plans-integration-finally-materialise/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>10</sup> Trenin D. Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will It Work? // Carnegie Moscow Center. July 20, 2017. URL: <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2017/07/20/russia-s-evolving-grand-eurasia-strategy-will-it-work-pub-71588> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>11</sup> Report: Toward the Great Ocean — 3: Creating Central Eurasia // Valdai Discussion Club. June 4, 2015. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/files/17658/> (accessed: 30.11.2021). See also: (Maçães, 2018).

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<sup>7</sup> See: A Conversation with Sergey Lavrov // Council on Foreign Relations. September 24, 2008. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/event/conversation-sergey-lavrov> (accessed: 30.11.2021); Reynolds P. New Russian World Order: The Five Principles // BBC. September 1, 2008. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>8</sup> Stronski P. There Goes the Neighborhood: The Limits of Russian Integration in Eurasia // Carnegie Endowment



**Fig. 1. Russian Rail Transportation Network**

Source: Mauldin J. 10 Maps That Explain Russia's Strategy // Forbes. February 26, 2016.

URL: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnmauldin/2016/02/26/10-maps-that-explain-russias-strategy/?sh=3ca2007f23ec> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

the living standards of its member states.<sup>12</sup> Efforts to improve connectivity with global markets and modernization continue under Western sanctions, which still pose a challenge for the Russian economy. The Belt and Road Initiative and the Silk Road Fund facilitate investments in infrastructure attractive to Russia. It is argued that the BRI and the EAEU together address the connectivity problem for Central Asia's landlocked economies.<sup>13</sup> The EAEU, for instance, plays a crucial role in improving the accessibility of its members, with 4 out of 5 being landlocked.<sup>14</sup> The Moscow — Beijing cooperation, as argued, is an opportunity to turn Central Asia into a zone of joint development, no

less intensive than the one that exists today amongst the EU member-states.<sup>15</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative are arguably complementary. The conjugation of these initiatives may lay the foundation for an economic cooperation space as envisioned in the idea of the Greater Eurasian Partnership that is as free as possible from all barriers.<sup>16</sup>

### **The EU Approach to Connectivity Projects in Eurasia**

In October 2018, The European Council adopted the EU connectivity strategy for Eurasia, which is the Union's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its increasing

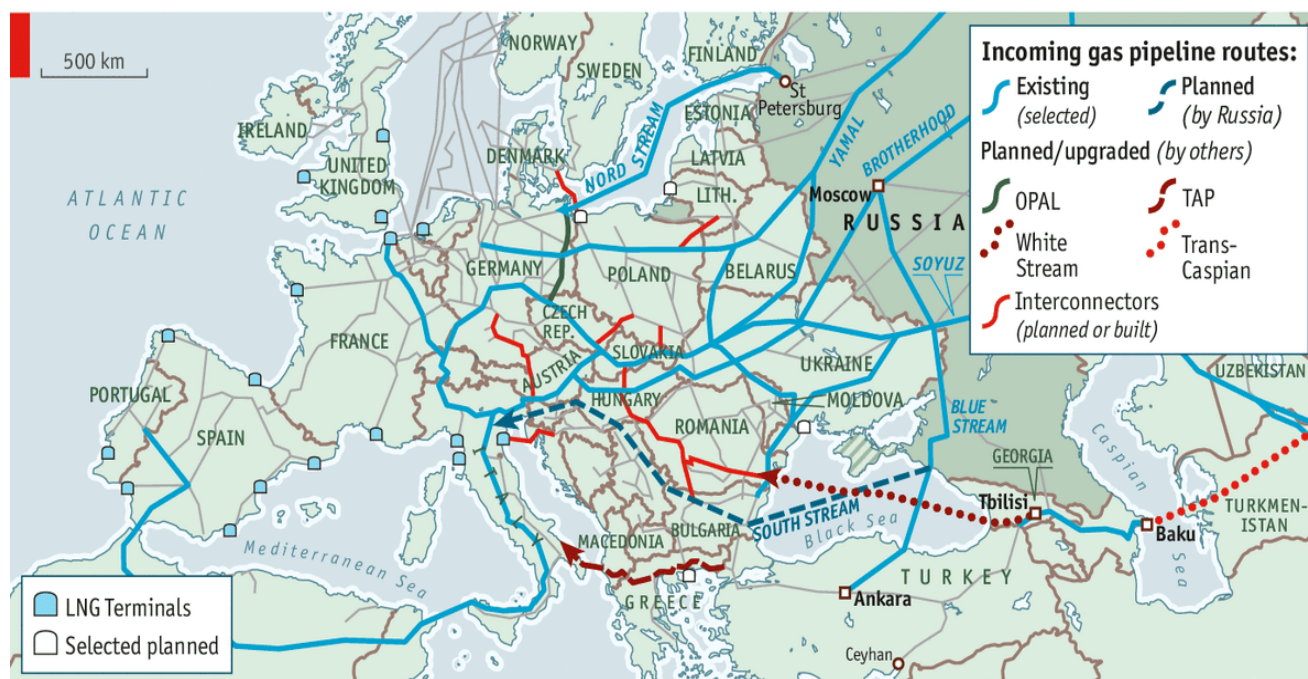
<sup>12</sup> Report: Toward the Great Ocean — 3: Creating Central Eurasia // Valdai Discussion Club. June 4, 2015. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/files/17658/> (accessed: 30.11.2021). See also: (Vinokurov, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Lissovnikov Y. A Geographical Case for the 'One Belt, One Road' and the Eurasian Economic Union // Valdai Discussion Club. May 29, 2017. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/a-geographical-case-for-the-one-belt-one-road/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Köstem S. Kennan Cable No. 40: Russia's Search for a Greater Eurasia: Origins, Promises, and Prospects // Wilson Centre. February, 2019. URL: [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan\\_cable\\_no\\_40.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/kennan_cable_no_40.pdf) (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>16</sup> Meeting of Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives of Russia // President of Russia. July 19, 2018. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58037> (accessed: 30.11.2021).



**Fig. 2. Existing and Planned Russian Pipelines**

Source: European Energy Security: Conscious Uncoupling // *The Economist*. April 5, 2014.

URL: <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2014/04/03/conscious-uncoupling> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

penetration into Europe and adjacent regions. As stated in May 2019, the cooperation priority for Central Asia is to establish partnerships on sustainable connectivity.<sup>17</sup>

Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the EU saw the need to prevent chaos and perceived the imperative to influence developments in the region (Erixon & Srinivasan, 2015). The challenge now comes from the rise of a new competitor — China. Therefore, the EU now faces a different situation and has to deal not with a post-Soviet power vacuum but with the new rising power. Compared to Russia in the early 1990s, a country to reckon with but otherwise in overall decline, China projected the image of a successful socialist modernizer, which may serve as an inspiration for Central Asian states.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> EU — China Trade and Investment Relations in Challenging Times // European Parliament. May, 2020. URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/603492/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)603492\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/603492/EXPO_STU(2020)603492_EN.pdf) (accessed: 30.11.2021). See also: (Libman & Vinokurov, 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Kassenova N. Central Asia and the EU Connectivity Strategy: Rising to the Good Governance Challenge // PONARS Eurasia. October 9, 2019. URL: <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/central-asia-and-the-eu->

In recent years the vast space of Eurasia, stretching from Eastern Europe to Central and East Asia and from the Baltic Sea to the Indian Ocean, has become a geoeconomic chessboard of the 21st century. The EU can use the opportunities depending on how the circumstances affect China and Russia to adapt its 2018 connectivity strategy for the upcoming era (Diesen, 2021). Currently, Europe gets approximately 40% of its gas from Russia, and part of that (80 bcm a year) passes through Ukraine through the network of Russian pipelines (see Fig. 2). In this problematic triangular relationship, the EU must get more space for action and develop a new Eurasian dimension for its foreign and trade policy based on a geostrategic approach.<sup>19</sup>

The 2019 EU Central Asian strategy and related events and declarations, particularly the 2019 Foreign Ministerial Summit and the European Council Conclusions, shed light on the EU approach towards this region. Central Asia

connectivity-strategy-rising-to-the-good-governance-challenge/ (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>19</sup> Pepe J. M. Connectivity in Post-Covid-19 Eurasia: Chances for the EU // *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*. September, 2020. URL: <https://dgap.org/de/node/34219> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

has always been a critical region for the EU connectivity strategy, as acknowledged by the European Commission in 2019.<sup>20</sup> These claims are made even though the scholars on the EU's external relations typically devote little attention to Central Asia (Fawn, 2021). There is room for numerous opportunities in the region; big players have repeatedly become interested in Central Asia and pursue their geopolitical agendas. To diversify their options in international cooperation, the Central Asian states would fancy an opportunity to request, for example, Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with the EU as a balancing factor in the relations with other great powers. Central Asia views the EU as a business market with soft power instruments such as innovative technologies, infrastructure, and investment. This does not necessarily mean that the EU does not have interests of its own.<sup>21</sup>

European perceptions of the “New Silk Roads” passing through Central Asia have evolved gradually since the official launch of the Silk Road Economic Belt project and Maritime Silk Road. The challenges are involved if China fully succeeds in implementing the BRI in the long run. It would have the total capacity to significantly alter economic and social relationships across the whole of Eurasia and even reshape global trading patterns and dynamics.<sup>22</sup>

### The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

Through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), Connecting Europe and Asia strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the EU

<sup>20</sup> Central Asia: Council Adopts a New EU Strategy for the Region // Council of the EU. June 17, 2019. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/06/17/central-asia-council-adopts-a-new-eu-strategy-for-the-region/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>21</sup> Briefing: The EU's New Central Asia Strategy // European Parliament. January, 2019. URL: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)633162\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf) (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>22</sup> Chatzky A., McBride J. China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative // Council for Foreign Relations. January 28, 2020. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

and China aim to reshape and integrate landscapes at home and abroad. This is where deeper cooperation through government-level consultation, industrial or sectoral joint efforts, and greater societal and interpersonal exchanges could enhance bilateral policy coordination.<sup>23</sup>

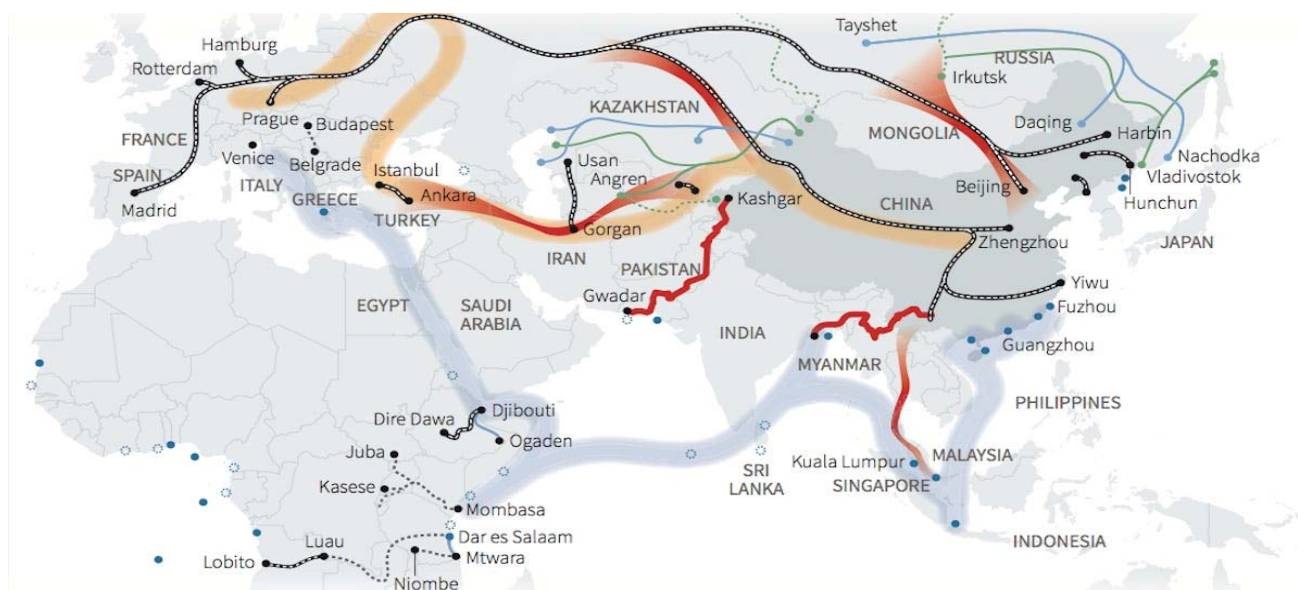
Holding some of the major Eurasian frontier regions, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, is a great concern for China. To expand its reach, Beijing has placed a bet on strategic opportunities in Central Asia. The economic development of these frontier regions of China needs to be accelerated with a view to achieving their deeper integration into the modern Chinese economy (Sahakyan & Gärtner, 2021). Thus, the geopolitics and domestic state-building imperatives are interwoven in Beijing's Eurasian pivot.<sup>24</sup>

The “One Belt, One Road” Initiative is comprised of the Silk Road Economic Belt (see Fig. 3), a trans-continental passage that links China with South East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe by land, and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, a sea route connecting China's coastal regions with South East and South Asia, the South Pacific, the Middle East, and Eastern Africa, all the way up to Europe.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is a formation of six major economic corridors that are supposed to serve as the new land bridge of Eurasia, and the corridors connecting China, Mongolia and Russia, China, Central Asia and Western Asia, the Indo-China Peninsula, China and Pakistan,

<sup>23</sup> See: President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries // Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in San Francisco. September 7, 2013. URL: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgsf/eng/zgxw/t1076334.htm> (accessed: 31.11.2021); The Connecting Europe Facility: Five Years Supporting European Infrastructure // European Commission. July, 2019. URL: [https://ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/default/files/cefpub/cef\\_implementation\\_brochure\\_web\\_final.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/inea/sites/default/files/cefpub/cef_implementation_brochure_web_final.pdf) (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>24</sup> Clarke M. Understanding China's Eurasian Pivot // The Diplomat. September 10, 2015. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/09/understanding-chinas-eurasian-pivot/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>25</sup> Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) // European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. URL: <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html> (accessed: 31.11.2021).



**Fig. 3. Rail, Land, and Sea Route of the Belt and Road Initiative**

Source: Ma A. Inside 'Belt and Road,' China's mega-project that is linking 70 countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa // *Business Insider*. January 31, 2018. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.in/inside-belt-and-road-chinas-mega-project-that-is-linking-70-countries-across-asia-europe-and-africa/articleshow/62729644.cms> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

and Bangladesh — China — India — Myanmar. The initiative has two tiers — an international and an interior — relating to infrastructure projects undertaken with neighboring countries and those undertaken within China's interior regions.<sup>26</sup>

China is almost certain to remain the largest investor in Central Asia through the BRI. It is the only country that can mobilize huge investments for the region, far above what Western countries and Russia can offer (Sahakyan & Gärtner, 2021). There are, however, hurdles for this project to attain higher economic impact, which could translate into more local jobs and transfer of knowledge. Regardless, increasing Chinese involvement in Central Asia is likely to be a long-term phenomenon and is a turning point in Central Asia's post-Soviet history and economic development (Laruelle, 2018). The initiative offers an opportunity to enhance local and regional connectivity of the Central Asian countries by constructing infrastructural facilities and when combined with attempts at local

industrialization. The scope of trade coupled with Chinese finance would offer the best chance for lifting the local populations out of isolation, poverty, and marginalization (Chan, 2018).

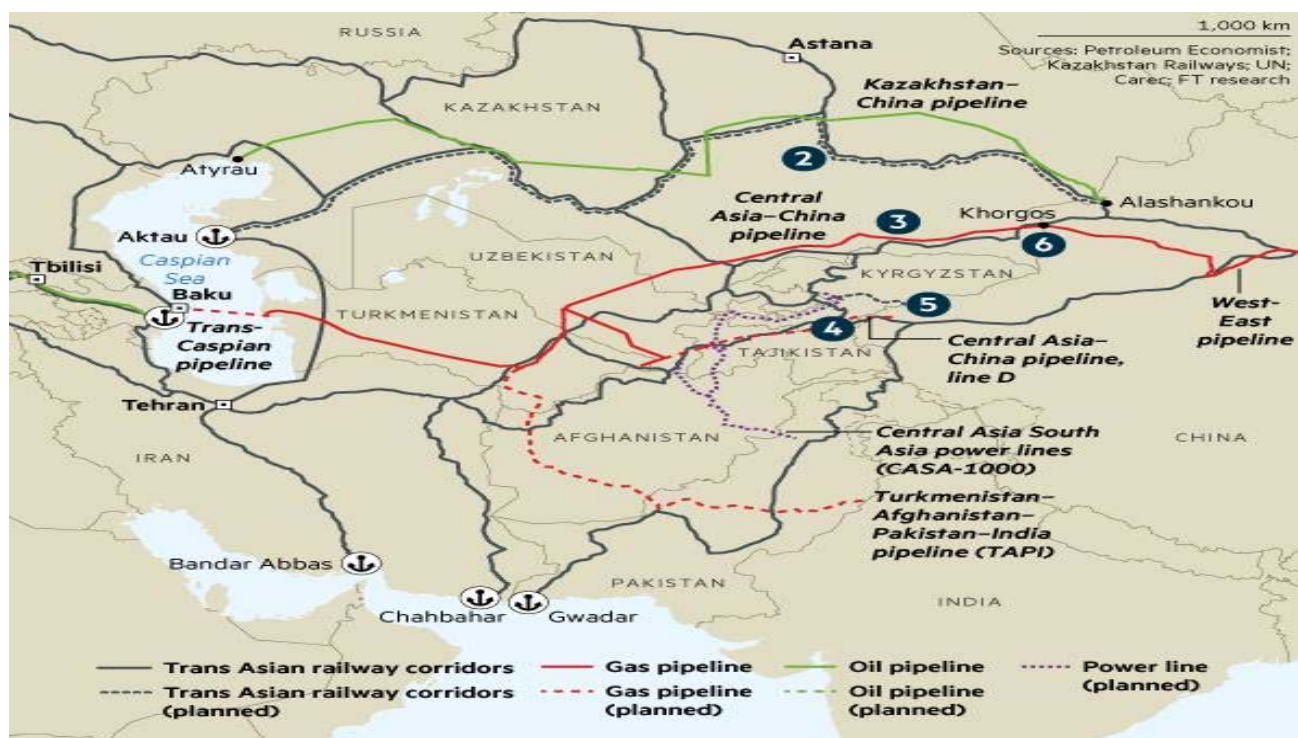
### Central Asia and Its Importance for Eurasian Connectivity

The Belt and Road Initiative now encompasses over 70 partner countries and has expanded to six overland belts and one maritime road. Although Chinese exports have long been transported by rail to reach Europe via the Trans-Siberian railway in limited quantity, following infrastructure investments by China and transit countries, the journey time has been reduced to less than two weeks, three times faster than by sea. Consequently, the road infrastructure has come into much more frequent use.

However, connectivity issues in Central Asia are not limited to interaction with China. For instance, Tashkent is tied to Iran's railroad, and Bandar-Abbas port currently provides the shortest sea access route (less than seven days) for double landlocked Uzbekistan. Also, the trans-Afghan railroad is attractive for a variety of reasons. However, if completed, most crucially, it would provide a shorter route to the sea for Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan.

<sup>26</sup> Lu H., Rohr C., Hafner M., Knack A. China Belt and Road Initiative: Measuring the Impact of Improving Transportation Connectivity on Trade in the Region // Rand Corporation. 2018. URL: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2625.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2625.html) (accessed: 31.11.2021).





**Fig. 4. Central Asia — China Gas Pipeline Network Prior to the Announcement of New Silk Road initiative**

Source: Farchy J., Kyngé J. Map: Connecting Central Asia // Financial Times. May 10, 2016. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/ee5cf40a-15e5-11e6-9d98-00386a18e39d> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

The construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif — Kabul section of the trans-Afghan railroad was initially scheduled for September 2021 but was postponed allegedly due to security concerns.<sup>27</sup> There are existing rails already connecting Uzbekistan to Mazar-i-Sharif (Afghanistan). Tashkent's level of engagement concerning the trans-Afghan railroad, notably collaboration with Afghanistan and Pakistan, indicates heightened interest and readiness for investment from Tashkent.<sup>28</sup>

Central Asia finds itself at a critical juncture when the geopolitical hotspots are dominating the political and media headlines. Central Asia has been quietly taking advantage of the numerous connectivity initiatives and corridors

<sup>27</sup> Uzbekistan Holds Talks with Afghanistan, Other Partners on Trans-Afghan Railway Project // The Tribune. December 14, 2021. URL: <https://www.tribune.com/russia-says-ready-to-offer-technical-advice-for-the-trans-afghan-railway-project-promoted-by-uzbekistan-2-2/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>28</sup> Hashimova U. Uzbekistan Pushing to Realize the Trans-Afghan Railroad // The Diplomat. April 19, 2021. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/uzbekistan-pushing-to-realize-the-trans-afghan-railroad/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

traversing Eurasia (Walcott & Johnson, 2013; Libman & Vinokurov, 2021), China's Belt and Road Initiative being a primary example thereof. As shown in Fig. 4, the Central Asia — China gas pipeline forms the backbone of the infrastructural connections. It can be implied that certain dynamism is emerging in the region in view that Central Asia "counts."<sup>29</sup> The region is becoming a new hub of global integration<sup>30</sup>; a new era of cooperation begins in Central Asia<sup>31</sup> as foreign investors' confidence has been renewed. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) returned to

<sup>29</sup> Starr F. S. Why Central Asia Counts // Central Asia — Caucasus Institute. November 6, 2017. URL: <http://silkroadstudies.org/publications/joint-center-publications/item/13265-why-central-asia-counts.html> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>30</sup> Linn J. F. Central Asia: A New Hub of Global Integration // Brookings. November 29, 2007. URL: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/central-asia-a-new-hub-of-global-integration/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>31</sup> Nakao T. A New Era of cooperation in Central Asia // Asian Development Bank. October 27, 2017. URL: <https://www.adb.org/news/op-ed/new-era-cooperation-central-asia> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

Uzbekistan last year after a decade-long absence.<sup>32</sup> Uzbekistan is also on its way to obtaining membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), which will further increase trade facilitation and harmonization.<sup>33</sup>

Through its Central Asia Regional Economic Programme (CAREC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and other international organizations have also actively developed multimodal corridor networks.<sup>34</sup>

### **Turkish Participation in Eurasian Connectivity Projects**

The existing transportation routes connecting Asia with Europe can be examined in groups. The “Northern Route” comprises those running across China, Kazakhstan, and Russia and connecting the countries with the EU. There is also the Middle Corridor, which includes Turkey’s bearing the same name; this group of routes connects China to Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Southern Caucasus, and Turkey. There is also the “Southern Route”, which runs from China through Kazakhstan and Iran. These routes are directly related to the economic progress of the countries in question, and therefore, there is high demand for them.<sup>35</sup>

The Turkish transport plan aims to increase the share of railway transportation both inside the country and internationally and reduce the dependence on land routes. The share of land roads in cargo freight transportation within the country is planned to be reduced from 80.6 to 60% by 2023 under the Turkish Transportation

Plan. The share of railways would increase from 4.8 to 15%, whereas the share of maritime routes from 2.7 to 10%.<sup>36</sup>

Turkey’s Eurasian policy has been mainly guided by a rational approach to relations with prominent Eurasian actors. Turkey also seeks to reap the benefits of such a pragmatic approach. Turkey expects to gain the economic benefits of partnering with the Eurasian powers, such as Russia and China, as well as the regional organizations they lead, such as the SCO, to sustain Turkey’s rapid economic development strategy centered on export promotion (Lewis & Wigen, 1997).

Ankara considers Central Asia and the Caspian region as a strategic hub for energy and transportation projects connecting the Eurasian region (Atlı, 2018). Ankara’s pivot towards the region seems to be in line with the changing geopolitical environment of the Eurasian continent. Geostrategic, economic, and energy interests have gained greater importance as drivers of Ankara’s external action, including towards Eurasia (Talbot, 2018).

Turkey took advantage of the new geopolitical landscape at the closing stages of the Cold War that presented the country with many risks and opportunities to take control of its fate in its surrounding region and the broader context. While deepening its outreach, Turkey is now more sensitive to the conflicts surrounding its neighborhood and is propelled to play an active role in their resolution.<sup>37</sup> Since the beginning of the 1990s, Central Asia and the Caucasus have emerged as a significant focal point of Turkish policy. The opening of Central Asia and the Caucasus has been deemed as a means to offset Turkey’s difficulties with Europe.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Putz C. EBRD Approves the First New Projects for Uzbekistan since 2007 // *The Diplomat*. October 20, 2017. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/ebrd-approves-first-new-projects-for-uzbekistan-since-2007/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>33</sup> Uzbekistan and IFIs Discuss Country’s Accession to the WTO // *UzDaily*. March 14, 2018. URL: <https://www.uzdaily.uz/en/post/43112> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>34</sup> Aliyeva K. Turkmenistan Studies the Possibility of WTO Membership // *Azernews*. February 27, 2017. URL: <https://www.azernews.az/region/109221.html> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>35</sup> Report: Toward the Great Ocean — 3: Creating Central Eurasia // *Valdai Discussion Club*. June 4, 2015. P. 14—16. URL: <https://valdaiclub.com/files/17658/> (accessed: 30.11.2021).

<sup>36</sup> Turkey Infrastructure Report Q4 // *BMI Foundation Research*. 2016. P. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Orphanides A. Turkey’s Regional Perspectives on Eurasia and East Asia // *Wilson Center*. March 1, 2011. URL: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/turkeys-regional-perspectives-eurasia-and-east-asia> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>38</sup> Larrabee S.F., Lesser I.O. *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty* // *Rand Corporation*. 2003. URL: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1612.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1612.html) (accessed: 31.11.2021).



**Fig. 5. Turkey's Position in the Belt and Road Initiative**

*Source:* Devonshire-Ellis C. Turkey's Pivotal Role in China's Belt and Road Initiative with Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East // Silk Road Briefing. June 22, 2018. URL: <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2018/06/19/turkeys-pivotal-role-chinas-belt-road-initiative-europe-central-asia-middle-east/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

To this extent, Eurasia remains critical for Turkey's energy security, given its dependence on the energy suppliers in the region. It is not only strategic interests driven by trade-offs as per the arguments. A cognitive bias is partly driven by the worldview of the current political leadership and primarily by the national identity conception of the ruling elite that matters to understand and explain Turkey's energy security in Eurasia (Erşen & Köstem, 2019).

### Iran and Its Connectivity Interests

As economic integration helps achieving higher economic growth rates in Europe and Asia, it is no longer sufficient to see Iran as just a Middle Eastern nation. In Beijing's Eurasian initiatives, Iran does have a vital role. This fits well with the outlook of Iranian strategic thinkers who have long argued that in a new context of Eurasia, Iran belongs not to the Middle East but West Asia — a space between Europe and Asia.<sup>39</sup>

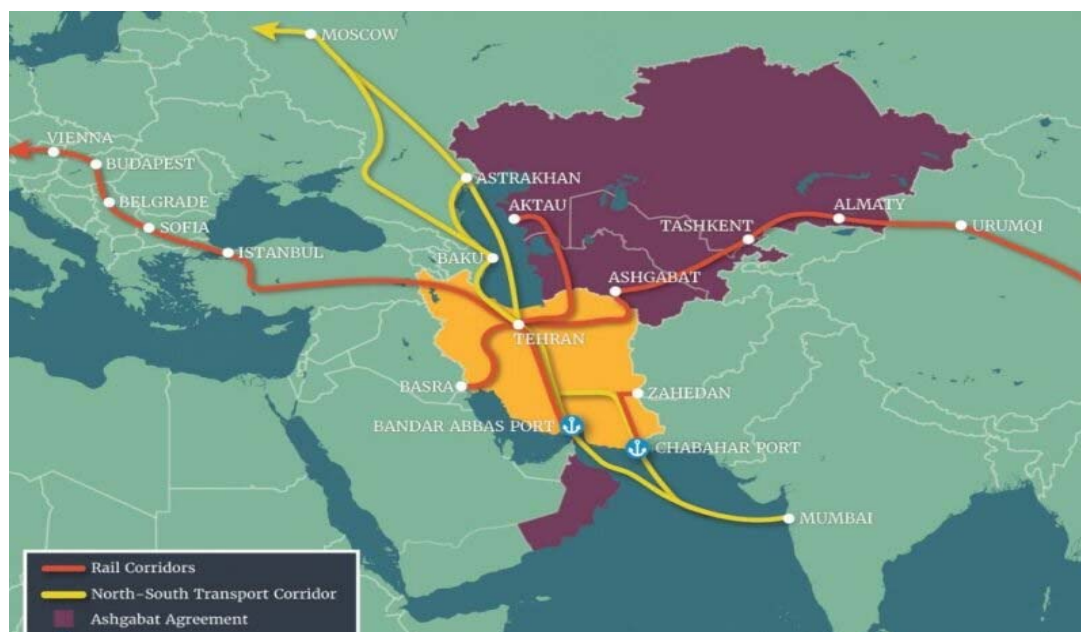
<sup>39</sup> Batmanghelidj E. Insights: Iran's Bilateral Relations in the New Eurasian Context // Middle East Institute. July, 2020. URL: [https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/INSIGHTS\\_July-2020.pdf](https://mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/INSIGHTS_July-2020.pdf) (accessed: 31.11.2021).

The China — Central Asia — West Asia Economic Corridor, where Iran is the central hub, forms the web of overland links in the New Silk Road. The West Asia Economic Corridor has high strategic significance since it allows China to reach the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea, avoiding Russia.<sup>40</sup>

China will achieve a stronger regional position with the inclusion of Iran in the emerging Eurasian order while promoting its alternative, more complex, comprehensive view of global affairs. Such an option appears highly productive for an actor shaping its leadership position in the region and building a westward strategy that has Eurasia at its center.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, Iranian leadership emphasizes deepening relations with Asian countries. Such policy stems from their vision of the

<sup>40</sup> Erdbrink T. For China's Global Ambitions. Iran is at the Center of Everything // The New York Times. July 25, 2017. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/middleeast/iran-china-business-ties.html> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>41</sup> Full Text of Xi's Signed Article on Iranian Newspaper // China Daily. January 21, 2016. URL: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/21/content\\_23189585.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/21/content_23189585.htm) (accessed: 31.11.2021).



**Fig. 6. Iran and the INSTC Route**

*Source:* Cyril M., Kotova M., Devonshire-Ellis C. INSTC to Improve India — Russia Connectivity with Cheaper Multi-Modal Transit Routes // Russia Briefing. June 30, 2021. URL: <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/instc-to-improve-india-russia-connectivity-with-cheaper-multi-modal-transit-routes.html/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

international system as undergoing an era of transition, wherein the pole of economic and political power is gradually shifting from the West to the East towards Asia. In their view, the transition allows rising powers and regional players more space to shape the international order. The incumbent administration in Tehran is looking to step up contacts with Asian countries under the East Policy 2.0 and aims to shift the focus of engagement from oil exports to investment projects.<sup>42</sup>

Geopolitical and geo-economics realities also give way to strategic cooperation with Russia. After Russia completed Iran's first nuclear power plant in 2014 in the southern port city of Bushehr, the countries signed a contract to build eight more nuclear power plants.<sup>43</sup> Iran is also an important player in Russia's

(International North South Transport Corridor) INSTC connectivity initiative (see Fig. 6). The strategic realities in the region are influenced by the cooperation between Russia and Iran on both military and economic fronts. The non-presence in the Caspian Sea of armed forces not belonging to the parties lay to rest their fears of NATO's military presence in the Caspian region. This is an achievement from the Russian and Iranian perspectives.<sup>44</sup>

### South Asia on the Path to Connectivity

South Asia has long been one of Asia's least economically connected sub-regions. Recently both India and Pakistan have begun to increasingly look north and west, taking into account increased trade flows between India and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the progress of economic integration in Southeast Asia.

<sup>42</sup> Russia — Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospect for the Future // Russian International Affairs Council. 2016. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-iran-partnership-an-overview-and-prospects-for-the-fu/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>43</sup> Bushehr Plants Construction Delayed for 'Technical Issues' // Mehr News. April 3, 2016. URL: <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/115518/Bushehr-plants-construction-delayed-for-technical-issues> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>44</sup> Caspian Sea Convention to Ban the Military Presence of Non-Littoral States in the Region // Sputnik. August 6, 2018. URL: <https://sputniknews.com/military/201808061066987252-caspian-sea-military-ban/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).



**Fig. 7. North — South Transport Corridor**

Source: Robotka B., Sehgal I. North — South Eurasian corridor // The Azb. November 14, 2021. URL: <https://theazb.com/north-south-eurasian-corridor/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

Until recently, Kabul increasingly courted for Indian trade. Enhancing connectivity has become a key development pillar for Islamabad and New Delhi. Both Pakistan and India increasingly seek corridors into Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and eventually Europe using the maritime and land infrastructure.<sup>45</sup> Promising areas for collaboration involve the development of new transportation corridors that give the countries of Central Asia access to southern seaports, cooperation in the energy sector, facilitation of mutual investment, and the growth and diversification of international trade.<sup>46</sup> The North — South Eurasian Transport Corridor (see Fig. 7) may help enhances South Asian connectivity with the Eurasian territory.

It is for Pakistan, that the Central Asian countries provide numerous opportunities for

trade in raw material and manufactured goods, securing a stable power supply, and opening up communications. The resource-rich Central Asia is seen as a promising energy source for Pakistan. Pakistan tried to enter the Central Asian landscape immediately after these countries gained independence, but policymakers were divided as to what Pakistan would gain out of Central Asia (Mahmood, 1996). While some wanted a radical religious revolution in Central Asia, others sought to open trade links through Afghanistan. These internal divisions revealed the limits of Pakistan's policy towards the region. As one of the technically advanced Muslim nations with a large labor force, Pakistan needs to adopt the connectivity policy if it wants to gain more from the region (Korybko & Morozov, 2020).

The INSTC International North — South Corridor connects India through Iran, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Northern Europe. This multimodal trade corridor of 7,200 km will run from India to Russia and Europe, linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea. Ships, trains, and road transport will be used in INSTC to transport goods. New Delhi attaches

<sup>45</sup> Reddy R. Delivering the Eurasian Century: South Asia Looks Northwest // Asian Development Blog. December 14, 2017. URL: <https://blogs.adb.org/blog/delivering-eurasian-century-south-asia-looks-northwest> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

<sup>46</sup> Interconnectivity of Central and South Asia // The Japan Times. June 24, 2021. URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/2021/06/24/special-supplements/interconnectivity-central-south-asia/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

great strategic importance to the corridor it plans to build from Chabahar in Iran to Central Asia via Afghanistan. However, there are concerns that the standoff between the USA and Iran following the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the risk of new sanctions on Russia and Iran could be a deal-breaker (Purushothaman & Unnikrishnan, 2019).

To address weak trade ties, efforts are being made by encouraging cooperation among businesses on both sides, as was evident in the launch of the India — Central Asia Business Council in 2020. India should make more direct investment in the region if it is to benefit from the strategic location of Central Asia that puts it at the crossroads of key trade and commercial routes. Sectors such as IT, pharmaceuticals, sericulture, construction, and tourism offer potential for collaboration.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

It is undeniable that the Eurasian Union turns into a competitive force as the main connecting line between Europe and Asia. In contrast, the advancement of the “One Belt, One Road” project further strengthens connectivity and integration with the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union. Landlocked developing countries of Eurasia can overcome geographical constraints and turn their limitations into strengths through establishing a regional economic union. This would allow Eurasian countries to be more competitive to intermediate the flow of investment and trade between the East and the West in such projects as the Eurasian Economic Union or the Belt and Road Initiative.

China advocates Eurasian connectivity through the BRI, which ultimately increases regional integration. This does not have exclusively positive connotations for the Central Asian states. China’s approach has been to strengthen bilateral economic ties and to

recognize that broader regional trade and economic cooperation initiatives must come from the partners themselves. To ensure that these initiatives have commercial ground and facilitate genuine connectivity, they should focus on Central Asian countries, China, and foreign investments.

As for Turkey, its economy is likely to remain focused on the West and the EU. However, the geopolitical influence of Turkey has increased in post-Soviet Central Asia, and Ankara has been able to develop and maintain beneficial economic relations with these countries. The role of Turkish investments is vital in developing infrastructure, which connects Central Asia to Turkey and allows them access to the international markets.

Iran’s best option is to mitigate the imbalance of power in bilateral relations with China to promote integration in the multilateral order of Eurasia. In the Persian Gulf, Chinese interests and the development of the BRI may create a new platform of economic opportunities, infrastructural integration, and the promotion of an alternative security architecture linking Iran and its neighbors through dialogue.

The importance of the Central Asian Republics to Islamabad is to be viewed in the context of the pipeline politics in the region. Nevertheless, given the instability in Afghanistan, the success of these pipelines, however, remains a “big question mark.” Pakistan wishes to engage the Central Asian states even with these uncertainties in the hope of opening a new transit route for their energy resources.

New Delhi’s approach towards connectivity is driven more by geostrategic sensitivities than economic considerations. India has a long way to go before it can be recognized as a consequential actor in Central Asia. Key players like China and Russia have already established a foothold in this region. In the 2020 virtual summits, the ideas discussed bear the potential to form the bedrock of a sustained, balanced, long-term strategy that will allow New Delhi to achieve its policy goals in the region.

Through physical and non-physical linkages, a broad concept of connectivity takes

<sup>47</sup> Bansal A. Continuity in India’s Ties with Central Asia // Observer Research Foundation. February 9, 2021. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/continuity-india-ties-central-asia/> (accessed: 31.11.2021).

shape between geographies, politics, economies, and people. Thus, connectivity has become an organizing economic and foreign policy concept across national capitals. It has been increasingly prevalent in the discourse of international and regional organizations and multilateral financing institutions over the last decade. The

connectivity-related initiatives in Eurasia may still be difficult; in addition to differences in purview and approaches of the initiators, they have also become a source of significant contestation, as various actors aim to reshape regional and global integration processes according to their interests.

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