

India's Approach to Connectivity Projects in Eurasia: The Story of Many Roads

Aarif

Abstract

In light of the USA's waning influence, the emergence of India and China, and Russia's re-entry into international geopolitics, the Eurasian supercontinent has once more taken significance in world affairs. Meanwhile, as a result of China's vigorous promotion of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), "connectivity" has emerged as the slogan throughout the continent. This article discusses India's strategies for connectivity initiatives throughout Eurasia, especially those in its close vicinity. It makes the case that despite the financial benefits some of these projects provide, India's stance to connectivity-related cooperation concepts in the area like the BRI is not consistent. India is to see these initiatives mostly through the lens of geostrategic and security considerations. The article looks at how India's connectivity strategy would affect both India and the larger region.

Keywords: Geopolitical Implications, Infrastructure Diplomacy, Belt Road Initiative.

Introduction

Strategic thinkers have always understood the significance of Eurasia. British strategist Harold Mackinder stated in 1904 that "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; Who rules the World-Island commands the world" Recently, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski referred to Eurasia as a "chessboard" on which the battle for world dominance is played and asserted that "a power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions." Therefore, it seems that China, the nation that is challenging American hegemony, would want to increase its influence in Eurasia. Through loans, aid, and the construction of infrastructure

through large-scale initiatives like the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) and One Belt, One Road (OBOR), China has invested money and energy into enhancing its position in Eurasia. It has been using economic initiatives to further its geopolitical objectives. It lacks the USA's combination of physical force and soft power, which would allow it to accomplish its goals without resistance.

Major regional players like India and Russia do not want a hegemon to establish itself on this continent and will likely take action to prevent it. They are aware that the current problem cannot be met by the current structures of government. As a result, they are joining emerging institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) at the regional level as well as the Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) at the global level. The 'Connect Central Asia' policy has also increased its communication with the five Central Asian Republics. India wants to have a say in Afghanistan's destiny and sees the SCO as an organisation that can facilitate this. In fact, the SCO members are happy that India has joined because they believe that it would likely have a balancing effect on China's rise. As of now, the SCO has only had Communist China and the former Soviet Republics as members, so they believe adding the greatest democracy in the world will give it credibility. By elevating India to the status of a regional player and potentially a security actor, the SCO grants it access to Eurasia on more than simply an economic basis.

Through its "Act East" and "Act West" policies, India has expanded and deepened its connection with the nations of East Asia as well as with the Middle Eastern nations towards the west. India understands that it cannot watch in silence as China moves closer to a potential hegemony. India sees active engagement with the nations of Eurasia as a way to prevent a potential Chinese hegemony. Furthermore, India's aspirations have increased as its economy has risen. It sees itself as an ideological opponent to China's worldview and growth narrative.

The initial phase of connection projects has been one of the major changes in Eurasia, and it is one from which India has not been exempt. Many nations, including China, India, Japan, and the USA, have endorsed these. The OBOR, officially known as the Belt Road Initiative (BRI), is the most significant of these connectivity projects and the one that has attracted the most attention because to its sheer size.

Despite the economic benefits some of these projects provide, India's stance to the Chinese OBOR/BRI and other connectivity-related

cooperation proposals in the area is not consistent. Such initiatives appear to be heavily filtered via the geostrategic and security concerns of India. Economic factors can seem to be secondary considerations. Understanding India's position on such projects helps to explain why it opposes the BRI while supporting projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Mekong Ganga Initiative, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Connectivity and India

The most prevalent phrases in international relations right now are “connectivity” and “regional integration.” Leaders across Asia appear to be preoccupied with developing fresh strategies to improve interregional connectivity. This is an intriguing change from the past when conflicts and battles predominated in Asia. Globalization, reforms, and increased interconnectedness, which have brought wealth to many regions of the continent, are likely to be blamed for this transformation. As one of the least connected areas in the world, South Asia—where India dominates in terms of geography, culture, and economy—needs integration more than any other region.

At the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit in Dhaka in 2005, the former Indian prime minister Manmohan Singh outlined a vision for a more united South Asia: “We should take the first decision to reconnect the countries of the subcontinent on the one hand and then reconnect the subcontinent to the larger Asian neighbourhood on the other” He believed that this was the best way to create a cohesive zone of wealth and peace.

This was a response to China's expanding influence and presence in India's neighbourhood as well as recognition that India needed a stable neighbourhood for long-term economic success. The geoeconomic imperative was to make sure that instability in the neighbourhood did not have a detrimental impact on India's economic progress, and the geostrategic imperative was to make sure that China did not usurp India's historical sway in its own backyard. New Delhi acknowledges that ASEAN not only occupies a pivotal position in the Indo-Pacific region, but also contributes significantly to the changing regional security and economic structures. S. Jaishankar, a former foreign secretary, stated ;

From the Indian perspective, ASEAN occupies a central place in the

security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region. It is our view that precisely because ASEAN represents the cultural, commercial and physical crossroads of the region, it has a unique ability to reflect and harmonize larger interests of the world beyond it. This relationship actually reflects a profound shift in India's geopolitical outlook towards the world to its East. Growing contacts and expanding cooperation with South East Asia opened up to India the world beyond it. This was around the time when India also sought to engage Japan, South Korea and China more seriously. There is no question that ASEAN was a bridge—psychologically, politically and perhaps even physically.

In 2017, Prime Minister Modi stated at the second Raisina Dialogue that India has chosen a course of foreign engagement that was centred on “rebuilding connectivity, restoring bridges, and re-joining India with our immediate and extended geographies.” The BIMSTEC, which was founded in 1997 and consists of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, is another significant connectivity project. It merges Thailand's Look West strategy with India's Act East strategy in order to link South and Southeast Asia. The organization's objectives are to encourage members to cooperate economically and technically. India benefits greatly from BIMSTEC's inclusion of all SAARC nations, with the exception of Pakistan and the Maldives. In contrast to SAARC, where the competition between India and Pakistan stymies economic cooperation, notably connectivity, India may take the lead in the majority of projects when Pakistan is not present.

Belt and Road Initiative

Before Xi Jinping introduced the BRI at a speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana in September 2013, India's worries about China's connectivity initiatives surfaced. The Go West policy adopted by China in the 1990s is where the BRI got its start. Bringing its neighbours' economies inside its area of influence and fostering the growth of its western regions were the goals. This might also aid in using some of the idle capacity in China.

The Go West initiatives were intended to address some of China's domestic turmoil, notably in Xinjiang, by promoting economic growth. By fostering regional stability and boosting China's geopolitical power in the area, Beijing felt that integration and growth would result in a win-win situation for China and its Western neighbours. This strategy aids in the consolidation and sanitization of the periphery in Central Asia. The Go West strategy would also broaden Beijing's geopolitical

zone of influence in the area, giving it an alternative to American hegemony. China's goal to maintain and strengthen its position as a continental power was also reflected in the policy. More crucially, the energy crisis facing China's Malacca Straits (which transport 85% of imports and 80% of oil imports) is partially resolved by energy from Central Asia and Russia. Integration with the area would also aid in securing raw resources from the Middle East and Central Asia.

This policy was incorporated into the OBOR policy or the BRI. Although the Go West initiative at the time only intended to link China to Central Asia and maybe to West Asia and not to Europe or Africa, India had reservations about it. India, which views Central Asia as its "extended strategic neighbourhood," thought even then that the programme was intended to expand China's geopolitical dominance over this region. India was not persuaded that China's Go West programme was for a kind distribution of wealth to neighbours. India believed that China was attempting to integrate them into its environment while also unloading its excess industrial, financial, and labour capacity, resulting in long-term dependence that were difficult to remove.

India's stance is primarily motivated by three factors: (a) the fact that the CPEC passes through disputed territory; (b) uncertainty about the project's true goal and consequent concern that it may be a geopolitical ploy; and (c) China's general attitude towards India over the BRI.

In light of this, China announced in 2017 that it will host a large two-day summit on the BRI on May 14 to which it had invited, among other nations, India. The Ministry of External Affairs' (MEA) official spokesman provided a detailed explanation of India's absence on May 13 while also subtly critiquing the initiative:

Connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of fiscal responsibility to avoid projects that would create an unsustainable debt burden for communities. Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity. No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Discussions on this announcement in Indian strategic circles were rather heated. One group of academics and officials argued that India should join the BRI in order to gain advantages from an integrated Asian economic environment. They believed that bringing infrastructure financing into India would help expand its infrastructure, spur growth,

and increase employment—all of which are top government goals. India has little prospect of thwarting the BRI and could as well gain by participating rather than suffer isolation. The majority of responses, however, were unfavourable and echoed the MEA spokesperson's criticisms.

Alternatives to the BRI: The INSTC

India is actively advertising its possible BRI alternatives while at the same time having a number of them. The most notable of them is the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which long-term aims to improve connections between India and Iran, Russia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Northern Europe.

Figure 1 Map of International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC)



The INSTC is the result of an agreement that was signed in 2000 in St. Petersburg by Russia, India, and Iran, and later expanded to include 11 additional nations. It was conceived long before the BRI was announced. The INSTC is envisioned as a 7,200-km multimodal commerce corridor connecting the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and the Caspian Sea. It will extend from India to Russia and Europe. The INSTC will convey commodities using ships, railways, and roads. When the development of Chabahar is finished, goods will also likely go by ship from Jawaharlal Nehru and Kandla ports in Western India to Bandar Abbas port in Iran. From there, they will proceed by road and train

through Baku (Azerbaijan) to Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as farther into Europe. Once fully operational, the INSTC will speed up and lower the cost of shipping commodities from India to Central Asia, Europe, and Russia. According to test runs finished in 2014, the INSTC route was 30% less expensive and 40% less time and distance.

The second corridor that India intends to construct from Chabahar to Central Asia via Afghanistan is extremely important from a geopolitical standpoint. As the only Iranian port with direct access to the sea and one that is close to Afghanistan, India and Iran have an agreement to construct the Chabahar port. In 2016, India, Iran, and Afghanistan inked a tripartite agreement to connect Chabahar by rail with Zahedan, Iran, Zaranj, Afghanistan, and Delaram, Afghanistan. If Afghan commodities make it to Zahedan, they may be sent to India via a planned 1,380-km rail link to Chabahar, which India is expected to build.

Apart from the sanctions on Iran before the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), India's aim to build the INSTC has been thwarted by a lack of resources. The impasse between the USA and Iran, which saw the USA rescind the JCPOA and impose new sanctions on Russia and Iran, was believed to spell the end of the agreement. According to Section 1244(f) of the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act (IFCA) of 2012, the US has now declared that it will exempt the Chabahar port from the sanctions because it will aid in the "economic development" and reconstruction of Afghanistan. This means that the INSTC may soon become operational. The INSTC will be finished sooner if South Korea and Japan, which are similarly concerned about China's ascent, are included in the project as partners since they have the resources and know-how to create massive infrastructure projects swiftly. Although they might wish to invest, the US sanctions on Russia and Iran may make them less enthusiastic. Disagreements over the Caspian Sea's military and legal status might be another significant barrier to the INSTC's marine branch in that body of water. There are also worries that the route's Afghan branch may be utilised for smuggling illegal drugs and weapons. The current routes connect Russia and Europe with Afghanistan via Central Asia. INSTC's financial viability will also likely increase significantly if South East Asian nations adopt it.

Project Mausam

India's reaction to the maritime Silk Road is a marine programme in the Indian Ocean known as SAGAR—Security and Growth for All in

the Region. Other names for this initiative include “Project Mausam,” “Spice Route,” “Cotton Route,” “Sagar Mala,” and “Blue Revolution.” The effort depicts India as the epicentre of the ‘Indian Ocean world,’ which stretches from Southeast Asia in the east to Africa in the west. The project aims to strengthen regional commercial and cultural ties and restore India’s position as the hub of commerce in the Indian Ocean. The initiative has a three-pronged approach: first, it seeks to strengthen cultural ties, second, it works to secure marine security, and third, it seeks to increase economic ties with nations in the Indo-Pacific area.

Freedom Corridor

The India-Japan “freedom corridor,” which intends to establish several infrastructure projects across Africa, Iran, Sri Lanka, and South East Asia through maritime lanes and support the development of Africa, is also in the works. Along with partnerships in northeast India and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Japan’s Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (PQI) is one of this (Roy Chaudhury, 2017). The project will benefit from Japan’s cutting-edge technology and capacity to construct high-quality infrastructure, while India will contribute its experience working in Africa. The two nations anticipate that the freedom corridor will be more affordable, less harmful to the environment, and executed via a more collaborative approach than the BRI.

The “New Silk Road,” which connects Afghanistan with its neighbours, is another option that may be considered. It was first put up by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011, but neither India nor the USA were really interested in it. However, sources indicate that the concept is currently being revitalised with India playing a big role. Similar to this, the Trump Administration has suggested a South-Southeast Asia-to-Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor, in which India will play a crucial role.

The Eurasian Economic Union

To strengthen its ties with Eurasia, India is considering joining the Eurasian Economic Union. Through a single tariff, it will be able to sell its goods everywhere in the world. India could utilise and contribute to the internal rail and road networks that connect the EEU countries if it joined. As the route from Afghanistan to Central Asia can be extended into the area covered by the EEU, the Chabahar port becomes crucial

in this situation. Although Russia has not joined the BRI, the EEU has indicated interest in participating in some of the regional BRI initiatives.

Conclusion

India's strategy for connectivity appears to be more influenced by geostrategic concerns than economic ones. Each project is assessed for how much it may advance India's development while keeping in mind India's primary objectives. This explains why New Delhi opposes the BRI and supports initiatives like BIMSTEC, BCIM, INSTC, and others while opposing the BRI. The approach taken by India is tactical as well as strategic: India cannot afford to participate in initiatives that would reduce it to a minor regional player and acknowledge Chinese dominance in Asia. According to India, the BRI is a plan to expand China's geopolitical dominance. While it develops into a worldwide power and even an Asian hegemon, China wants India to remain a subregional power. India aspires to play a major role in the world. As a result, there is a fundamental conflict in how each nation views its place in the future of the world order. The primary cause of the ongoing issue between India and China is historical legacies.

India's viewpoint is also influenced by worries over Asia's lack of a security framework. The majority of Asian nations are young and still remember their colonial pasts, so pooling their sovereignty like the EU did is not an option. As seen by the ascent of nationalist leaders like Xi Jinping, Modi, Teyyep Erdogan, and Rodrigo Duterte, nationalism is strengthening throughout Asia. Six out of the nine nuclear-armed states are located in Asia, which is another factor. While India recognises the need of connectivity and will take steps to improve it, it will not participate in projects that will strengthen China's influence in its region or unilateral measures. India may become less resistant to such initiatives as it grows since it would also be able to provide alternatives.

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