

Preface

Eurasia means the geographical region which comprises both Europe and Asia. In fact, Eurasian region is the convergence of Eastern Europe and North western Asia. The term “Eurasia” carries significant nationalist connotations in two countries at the border between the two continents; Turkey and Russia where a Eurasianist current has existed since 1920 and was rekindled in the 1990s with the dissolution of the USSR. In China, leaders prefer to refer to the “Silk Roads” in order to project the development of exchanges in a global space that includes Asia, Europe, and a large part of Africa.

The term “Eurasia” was coined in 1844 by the colonial government of India as an administrative category to designate individuals with both Indian and European ascendants. The French language borrowed the term “Eurasia” from English in 1865, along with a number of other languages. ¹ In German and Russian, the geographic meaning refers to the two main continents of the end of the 19th century. Geologists, bio-geographers, and geographers since Edouard Suess (1883) used it to designate all of Europe and Asia in their entirety. Later, in 1919-1920, Halford J. Mackinder and several other Russian authors, including Nokolaevitch Savickij, who defended the Eurasianist movement, adopted the term to designate a territory situated between Asia and Europe that included a bit of both. H.J. Mackinder defined the notion of “heartland” as a “geographical pivot of history”, akin to a strategic centre that was the key to ruling all of the old World, and thus the world, meaning most of Central Asia and a zone that lay across Russia and Siberia.² Mackinder opined that whoever controlled Eastern Europe –the Heartland—would control the world. The idea was that whoever gained control of Eastern Europe, controlled the Heartland –also known as the Pivot Area—and whoever controlled the Heartland, could easily gain control of the World Island (Africa and Eurasia).

For the Eurasianist Russians, the term defines all of the Russian Empire and after, the USSR. For the Turkish, the definition is even more vague. It includes a large part of the Russian definition and based on Turcophony, “the Islamo-Turkish synthesis”; it encompasses the legacy of the Ottoman Empire that stretched across both continents. ³

Russia, Turkey and Iran are important regional countries within the geographical notion of ‘Eurasia’. China is eager to utilise its newly earned

economic might in this strategic domain. The Eurasian region became one of the major regions, for this emerging Chinese project. This region is significant for the Chinese connectivity to western Europe.

The Dawn of Eurasia by Bruno Macaes, a former Minister for Europe in the Portuguese government, is an interesting geopolitical work.⁴ In it he makes a strong case for Europe and Asia, joined at the hip by geography and history, to accept that they are not separate continents but parts of a Eurasian super-continent.

The book's title clearly refers to the emerging economic forces that are drawing the Europe and Asia together today, 'creating the world's longest economic corridor, linking the Asia Pacific economic pole at the eastern end of Eurasia and the European pole at its western end.'

In his book, Macaes wonders if the authoritarian nature of the Chinese system can last and he seems to hesitantly conclude that it, after all, will. *The Economist* as well as many experts in the West who read China so wrongly in the past, are also now reluctantly coming around to this point of view. One of the earliest to do so was Mark Leonard in his book, *What Does China Think?*

For Indians, *The Dawn of Eurasia* is a disappointing read. For long, there has been a nagging feeling that we do not count in Asia and Macaes's book only reinforces this view by barely acknowledging our existence. This of course is a grave mistake, that the West is making. The world is in urgent need of a countervailing force to China, and in India it has one in the Eurasian space that enchants Macaes. India has begun to realise the importance of Eurasia for both of its economic and strategic calculations.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of independent republics in Central Asia, India redesigned its ties with the region through diplomatic initiatives and visits, financial aid, and capacity building (training programmes, study tours, and technology transfers under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme). In 2021, India launched the 'Connect Central Asia' policy to enhance the political, economic, cultural, and historical relations with the region.⁵ However, connectivity between the two regions is still in bad shape. This is often cited as the primary hindrance to regional development and the cause of the trade deficit between India and Central Asia. Given its critical role in regional development and social prosperity, there is a need to achieve maximum connectivity for socioeconomic development. Consequently, agreements between India and Central

Asian countries at the bilateral and trilateral levels and legal and administrative frameworks have aimed at easing procedures for the movement of people and goods across the region and beyond.

Perhaps under China's influence, Pakistan has continued to create roadblocks for India in establishing strong trade and economic relations with the Central Asian/Eurasian countries. Hostility between India and Pakistan benefits China's hegemonic pursuits in Eurasia through its much-hyped Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Indeed, Beijing has sought to expand its commercial footprints in Central Asia, strategically located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe. While inaugurating the BRI in Kazakhstan in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that all Central Asian countries should take an innovative approach and collaborate with China in setting up "an economic belt along the Silk Road".⁶ Additionally, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship BRI programme with US\$62 billion-worth of investments in energy and infrastructure projects in Pakistan, has added to India's geostrategic, geoeconomic, and security concerns. CPEC spans through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and violates India's sovereignty, resulting in strong opposition from New Delhi.⁷

As a result, India has explored other options to establish connectivity with the hydrocarbons-rich Central Asia. It has invested in the Chabahar Port in the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan and signed an intergovernmental agreement for the 7,200-km International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) between Iran, Russia, and India. Such proactive and well-meaning pursuits for connectivity paved the way for India's admission to the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018. Subsequently, the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the imposition of stricter sanctions on Iran, created problems for India's infrastructure projects. These problems appeared in the form of investment crunch, bureaucratic delays, and inter-regional disputes. Despite these numerous setbacks, the Chabahar Port and the INSTC are progressing, albeit slowly. In July 2022, the first shipment through the INSTC arrived at Mumbai's Jawaharlal Nehru Port from Russia's Astrakhan Port.⁸

In 2003, India announced plans for investment in the Chabahar Port in Iran's Sistan-Balochistan province to gain access to Central Asia,⁹ signing a memorandum of understanding with Iran in 2015. The project gained traction in 2016 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India would invest US\$500 million in

developing the Chabahar Port.¹⁰ In 2018, India Ports Global Limited operationalised the port's Shahid Beheshti terminal with equipment worth US\$25 million, including six mobile harbour cranes—two with 140-tonne capacities and four with 100-tonne capacities.¹¹ Between 2019 and 2021, 123 vessels and 1.8 million tonnes of bulk and general cargo passed through Chabahar.¹² By August 2022, the terminal had handled over 4.8 million tonnes of bulk cargo, including transshipments from Bangladesh, Brazil, Australia, Germany, UAE, and Russia.¹³ India also shipped 75,000 tonnes of wheat to Kabul in 2020 as part of a humanitarian aid programme via this strategic port.

India also boosted connectivity with war-torn Afghanistan via the Chabahar Port. It invested an estimated US\$3 billion in civic infrastructure, including the 218 km-long Zalranj-Delaram Highway that connects Afghanistan to the Chabahar Port via Milak in Iran. The Zalrang-Delaram strategic highway connects 2,000 km of the Afghanistan Ring Road, linking 16 provinces (including Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Ghazni, and Kandahar) to Tajikistan.¹⁴

The 7,200-km INSTC was first conceived under a September 2000 agreement between Iran, Russia, and India.¹⁵ Since then, the INSTC agreement has been ratified by 13 countries, including Russia, India, Iran, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Oman, Tajikistan, and Ukraine. However, the INSTC corridor remained stalled due to the United Nations sanctions on Iran. In July 2015, Iran and several world powers, including the US concluded a nuclear agreement (the JCPOA). After the sanctions were eased, the INSTC gained momentum, and by 2018, around 11 million tonnes of goods were transported through the corridor.

During the first India-Central Asia summit, held virtually in January 2022, all countries stressed the inclusion of the Chabahar Port into the INSTC. They also noted Turkmenistan's proposal to include the Turkmenbashi Port within the INSTC's framework. Located on the Caspian Sea, the port handles ships moving freight from one train to another on both sides. A multimodal service that operated straight between Russia and Iran across the same landlocked "sea" was already operational. The INSTC will acquire more route options by adding Turkmenistan to the project. Given their preference to use the Chabahar Port to facilitate trade with India, the CARs have welcomed New Delhi's proposal to establish a joint working group on services and the hurdle-free movement of goods between the two regions; through this port.¹⁶

New Delhi has invested in the Chabahar Port to expand its influence into the Eurasian heartland by bypassing Pakistan. These investments support India's more assertive and projective foreign policy attitude, especially after the pandemic and the Ukraine war created many obstacles in global supply chains.¹⁷ During the 22nd meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in September 2022, PM Modi urged the member countries "to make efforts to develop reliable, resilient and diversified supply chains in our region".¹⁸ Accordingly, he stressed better connectivity and full rights to transit within the SCO countries. At a meeting on the sidelines of the SCO summit, PM Modi and Iranian President Ebrahim Rais emphasised the value of bilateral collaboration in regional connectivity while reviewing the development of the Shahid-Beheshti terminal and Chabahar Port.¹⁹

The Chabahar Port and INSTC can harness the trade potential between India, Eurasian Economic Union and Eurasia. The projects will fortify New Delhi's geostrategic and geoeconomic engagement within the region and curtail Beijing's hegemonic plans. Due to this factor, India received a waiver from the US sanctions on its connectivity projects within Iran. This waiver was perceived as a strategy to tame China's growing hegemonic influence in Greater Eurasia.²⁰ However, this particular waiver has not helped investor confidence in these India-led connectivity projects. The railway line between Chabahar-Zahedan is in dire need of investments. India must also seek to prioritise investments in the Zahedan-Mashad corridor, an ideal route to connect to Sarakhs (Turkmen border). The total distance from Chabahar to Sarakhs is 1,827 km, and this railway line can bridge the gap between INSTC, Chabahar, and Ashgabat Agreement.

The India-led Eurasian connectivity projects have faced many economic and geostrategic challenges over the years that have slowed their progress. But these projects remain critical to the region, especially the CARs, to diversify their markets for imports and exports. These projects can also bring much-needed geostrategic cohesion and geoeconomic dynamism to the rest of the continent. India must expedite these projects, and policymakers must view investments in them as strategic, especially to counter China's growing influence in the region. New Delhi must also jointly develop and strengthen cooperation in these projects with the CARs and Iran. Furthermore, India must leverage its ties with these countries through existing bilateral and multilateral agreements to prioritise

the connectivity projects, in order to promote regional stability and enhance its role in the greater Eurasia.

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Editor

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