

Charting New (Old) Paths: Unraveling India-Kazakhstan Ties in Eurasian Geopolitics

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Abstract

This paper revolves around the significance and impact of the strategic cooperation between India and Kazakhstan on regional stability and power dynamics in the backdrop of the dynamically evolving geopolitical situation in the Eurasian continent. This article presents a thorough and in-depth analysis in order to identify subtle aspects and delve into the essence of the issue, which covers strategic ties, economic cooperation and geopolitical interests of India and Kazakhstan in the broader framework of Central Asian politics. The research aims to assess the state and potential of the cooperation between the two countries, analyzing its significance and the factors influencing the development of this partnership between them. In this regard, India and Kazakhstan are poised to undergo a challenging path for further strengthening their partnership. This will require not only political will but also a significant amount of time; however, the prospects of cooperation between the two regional leaders undoubtedly justify the effort. The methods employed in conducting this research include historical analysis, comparative analysis, and content analysis. The structure of the paper includes an analysis of the historical context and evolution of relations, as well as an assessment of the current state of the partnership, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

Keywords: India, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, strategic partnership, regional dynamics, economic cooperation, geopolitics, bilateral relations.

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent “parade of sovereignties”, India has shifted its focus towards the newly independent states of Central Asia. This keen attention was driven by the intention to cultivate partnership relations with the energy-rich countries and strengthen its energy security. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, aims to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, fostering positive and pragmatic relations with both regional and

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global actors. Over three decades, researchers have explored various directions of Kazakhstan's interactions with the external powers, often placing significant emphasis on major global players such as Russia and China due to their geographical proximity, as well as Turkey due to its cultural affinity with Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and India have managed to develop constructive relations based on mutual respect and benefit, reflecting deep historical ties between the two nations. However, these evolving relations between Kazakhstan and India remain insufficiently covered in contemporary science. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that these relations do not follow a conventional pattern but instead exhibit dynamic and active development in all spheres.

In the third decade of the current century, a complex geopolitical situation is unfolding in Central Asia; on one hand, there is political dominance by Russia, while on the other hand, China's economic supremacy is becoming increasingly noticeable. In such a dynamically evolving environment, India also seeks to enhance its strategic role not only in Kazakhstan but in the entire region in three domains: as a neighbor, a regional power, and a global player (Dave, 2016). Central Asia holds key importance for Eurasian geopolitics, influencing global decisions and development vectors, further solidifying the region's strategic role as an integral part of the global political order. Amid the dynamically changing conditions of modern geopolitical shifts and challenges, Kazakhstan's role becomes increasingly crucial, as it is the economic leader of its region.

The historical exchanges between these two great civilizations have left an indelible mark on Eurasia's development, shaping the region's dynamics from the earliest encounters between Central Asian nomads and the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. In the modern era, these unique relations between the largest states of Central Asia and South Asia, while not characterized by great depth and enormous scales, have always been warm. Currently, the situation is changing for the better as India, in its quest to strengthen its status as a regional and global power, intensifies its efforts to enhance its presence and role in the Central Asian vector. The importance of Kazakhstan and the entire Central Asia cannot be overstated, as they have the potential to emerge as key players influencing international relations and power balances. It is the strategic partnership between India and Kazakhstan that will play a decisive role in shaping the Eurasian geopolitical arena, contributing to the strengthening not only of economic development but also security across the continent and beyond.

In this regard, this study directs its focus on the strategic ties, economic cooperation, and geopolitical interests of India in its relations with Kazakhstan within the broader

framework of Central Asian politics and their impact on regional stability and power dynamics. Thus, the research question of this study is: What role does the cooperation between India and Kazakhstan play in the context of regional geopolitics in Central Asia, and what factors influence its development and stability? The structure of this study is as follows: the section “The Evolution of Bilateral Relations” will examine the historical background and evolution of interactions between the two nations, followed by an analysis of the current state of the cooperation between the countries in the “Current Bilateral Dynamics: Politics, Strategy, and Economic Interplay” section, and finally, conclusions and recommendations will be provided at the end of the study.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method, which aids in achieving a profound understanding of the strategic cooperation between India and Kazakhstan and its prospects within the context of regional geopolitics. The choice of this method is also justified by its ability to facilitate immersion into the details and nuances of the interaction between the two countries, considering multiple aspects and the regional context. Additionally, various methods were utilized to achieve the objectives of this study:

- a) *Historical analysis* was employed to delve into the evolution of the interaction between the two countries over time, enabling the identification of causes and consequences of various changes;
- b) *Comparative analysis* was utilized for a comprehensive examination of the similarities and differences in the approaches of the two countries and their interactions with each other during different historical periods, revealing common trends and unique characteristics of each party;
- c) *Content analysis* was employed for systematic examination of the content of texts and reports, enabling the identification of key themes, trends, and patterns in the strategic partnership between these countries.

All the aforementioned methods allowed us to scrutinize the research question from different perspectives, thereby obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the situation, upon which conclusions and recommendations were formulated.

The Evolution of Bilateral Relations

In her study, Vaishali Krishna (2020) observes that democracy and Buddhism are two key elements that bind modern India and Mongolia together. However, when considering India

and Kazakhstan, such “binding elements” are difficult to enumerate due to the centuries-old connections between the nations. For about 3000 years, two regions have been in close interaction, enriching each other's cultures through ancient trade routes. It has become common knowledge that Buddhism spread to Central Asia during the early medieval period from the Kushan Empire (Foltz, 1998), while Sufi traditions of Islam reached the Indian subcontinent from the territory of Kazakhstan (India - Kazakhstan Relations: Bilateral Brief, 2023). During this period, the region served as a “gateway to the outside world” for India (Sikri, 2007). Key moments in the history of bilateral interactions of these nations include periods of cultural and ideological exchange that influenced mutual perceptions. These two nations inhabiting different sides of Eurasian continent share a sense of interconnectedness, stemming from this cultural and ideological exchange (Gaur, Tripathi, & Ray, 2021). By complementing this with similar historical periods, such as colonial pasts, it can be concluded that these factors contributed to the establishment of a solid foundation for modern relations between India and Kazakhstan. In their endeavor to deepen cooperation in the modern era, the two countries face various challenges, and to provide a correct assessment of these events, it is important to analyze the historical legacy of these relations.

Indo-Kazakh historical relations reflect close interconnections that stimulated cultural progress and diversity in both regions. The initial contacts between these civilizations occurred during the dominance of the Scythians in the steppes of Central Asia and have since persisted despite various stages of fluctuations in the frequency and volume of these connections (Pradhan, 2020). A significant imprint was also left by the great migrations, beginning with the movement of Hunnic tribes westward, which caused fundamental changes in the geopolitics of Eurasia. Under the influence of these historical circumstances, the Central Asian influence emerged in the history of India, in the form of historical state formations such as the Indo-Scythian Kingdom, the Kushan Empire, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Mughal Empire, thereby making a significant contribution to strengthening the political and economic ties between the two regions.

The onset of the British period in Indian history influenced the rupture of these close relations, which were then only resumed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Gaur, Tripathi, & Ray, 2021). During the period of colonial dependence of Kazakhstan on Tsarist Russia and India on the British Empire, there was a noticeable stagnation in the relations due to the unfolding “Great Game”. During these periods of history, both nations pursued their path and struggle for independence. After gaining independence, India, although not actively

engaging in Central Asian affairs, nonetheless had a presence in the region. Indian films and music were highly popular in Central Asia during the Soviet period (Joshi, 2009). Thus, relations between the countries during this period were limited to cultural ties. Additionally, in 1955, the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Indira Gandhi visited the Kazakh SSR. During the visit, Prime Minister Nehru met with the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Leonid Brezhnev, and the creative intelligentsia of the Kazakh SSR at that time.

In the post-1991 period, the newly formed “5 stans” faced challenges in restoring their national identity, as well as economic and political difficulties in the process of forming their sovereignty. During this same period, India began to take a leading role and pursue an active foreign policy, realizing that being a “reclusive porcupine” was no longer feasible (Mohan, 2004). Sharing a similar colonial experience, the two countries were able to develop diplomatic and trade relations based on the principles of mutual benefit and respect for each other's sovereignty. In this recent period of history, the first diplomatic contacts between Kazakhstan and India began in 1992, the same year the Embassy of India opened in the Republic of Kazakhstan in the then-capital city of Almaty. A year later, Kazakhstan opened its embassy in India in New Delhi, reflecting the aspirations of both countries to deepen their interaction in the modern period (India - Kazakhstan Relations, 2018).

The early years of independence for Kazakhstan proved to be a significant trial as the country's leadership was focused on addressing domestic issues and the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Similarly, in the early 1990s, India was preoccupied with other concerns, notably the onset of economic reforms (Krishna, 2020). Consequently, India at that time was not ready for an active deployment of political and economic ties with Kazakhstan. In light of the foregoing, it can be argued that political and economic instability in both countries created temporary obstacles to the development of bilateral cooperation. One of the main reasons for the low level of interaction between the two sides during this period may have been a lack of awareness of the potential benefits of cooperation and the absence of regional mechanisms for their discussion. Additionally, India's focus in the 1990s may have been on “supplementing the country's long-standing historical, cultural, and ideological ties with the region by engaging in more tangible areas of economic interdependence, as well as cooperation in politics and security” with countries in Southeast Asia (Bajpae, 2022). Nevertheless, after gaining independence, relations between India and Central Asia transitioned from a cultural context to an economic or strategic one (Kothari, 2018). Subsequently, Indian experts have repeatedly

noted that in India's strategic understanding, Central Asia is considered part of its “extended neighborhood”, despite having no direct borders with any of its states (Ghosh, 2022).

From the very start of diplomatic contacts until the mid-2000s, during the tenures of Prime Ministers Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Inder Kumar Gujral, and P. V. Narasimha Rao, India's political paradigm towards Central Asia was characterized by a "Look North" approach. Its main objective was to establish ties with the young republics of Central Asia and elevate these relations to a new level. The first steps in this direction were taken in 2012 during the visit of Foreign Minister E. Ahmed to Kyrgyzstan within the framework of the first India-Central Asia Dialogue when he announced the “Connect Central Asia” policy. This led to a series of high-level visits to Central Asia, the signing of new agreements, and the maintenance of dialogue at bilateral and multilateral levels. The latter was especially important for further strengthening Indo-Central Asian relations. The first step in such multilateral dialogue was the commencement of India's accession process to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2015. Starting from this moment, a completely different stage begins, with a key role assigned to the bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and India. Thus, in the modern period, India and Kazakhstan continue to develop close economic relations despite regional transformation and actively cooperate within international mechanisms to address common challenges. However, it is important to remember that the history of Indo-Kazakh relations not only reflects their past but also defines their present and future, creating opportunities for deepening cooperation and joint development.

Current Bilateral Dynamics: Politics, Strategy, and Economic Interplay

In 1991, an unprecedented shift occurred in the geopolitical landscape of Eurasia, which President Putin in 2005 referred to as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (“Putin: Soviet Collapse a ‘Genuine Tragedy,’” 2005). These geopolitical changes led to a shift in the foreign policy orientations of the newly formed Central Asian republics, most of which opted for a multi-vector diplomacy approach. The young republics preferred sharp maneuvers and diversification of influences from various regional powers, promoting the development of regional integration. In this endeavor, Kazakhstan, as a regional leader, played a leading role, with its dynamically growing economic potential and significant political image transforming it into an influential player on the regional stage. During the period of independent Kazakhstan, the history of relations between the two countries reflects intensive cooperation in various areas, including trade, education, science, and culture, reflecting the aspirations of both countries to deepen their interaction in the modern period (Gaur, Tripathi, & Ray, 2021). It can

be said that India and Kazakhstan share common interests in the region. According to Pradhan (2020), three factors make Kazakhstan a priority direction of Indian foreign policy in the region: a) geostrategic location, b) energy resources, and c) economic potential. It is noteworthy that India's strategic interests in Central Asia are multifaceted and include stability and security in the region (Joshi, 2010), as any instability and chaos in the region can lead to a “domino effect” and pose a serious threat to India. The basis for the strategic cooperation between the two countries has evidently become the geographical and historical similarity of these states. Both countries are territorial giants and economic flagships of their regions. Additionally, their colonial pasts have undoubtedly contributed to the developing relations between these countries. In this regard, the established historical affinity between the two countries seems to be caused by these factors.

In the post-9/11 period, when the USA turned its attention to Central Asia due to its proximity to Afghanistan, the “New Great Game” began between global powers such as Russia, China, Europe, and the USA, and regional players such as Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan (Kaushiki, 2013). This process was accompanied by an increase in their presence and influence in the region, leading to processes of regional transformation and the growing role of the region in global politics. Among these states, India stood out prominently, as it was one of the first to recognize Kazakhstan's independence and took steps towards deepening bilateral contacts. Despite high interest, it must be acknowledged that trade opportunities between these countries have not been fully exploited (Kothari, 2018). This is primarily due to geographical remoteness, the absence of a direct land corridor, low levels of transportation connectivity, and the high cost of transportation, which undoubtedly constitute the main inhibiting factor. Nevertheless, the modest level of economic and trade relations is not an accurate indicator of India's position in the region (Dave, 2016), as political interaction between India and Kazakhstan has always been regular (Roy, 2002). These factors have long hindered the development of bilateral relations between the two countries. However, in recent years, the situation has begun to change, which has become particularly noticeable during the tenures of the two successive Indian prime ministers, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi.

India's growing energy needs necessary to support its expanding economy have drawn its attention to the emergence of the recently established republics of Central Asia (Azhar, 2016). According to the World Energy Outlook (2014), India is expected to become, alongside China, the largest energy consumer in the world by 2030. Therefore, expanding energy partnerships with countries in the region is a high priority for India (Kothari, 2018). Until

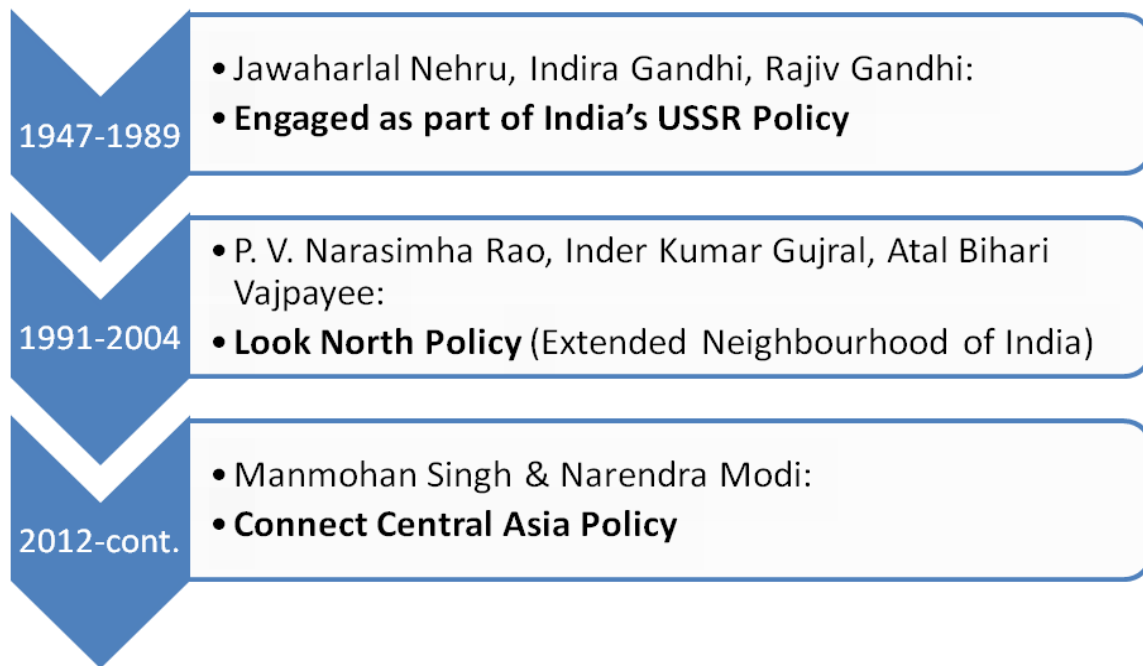
recently, the primary suppliers of energy resources to India have been countries in the Persian Gulf. In light of this, the high significance of Central Asia, and Kazakhstan in particular, as a resource-rich country, can be noted. It is in this direction that there is great potential for expanding energy diplomacy between Kazakhstan and India.

Another important element of Kazakhstan's growing role for India has been the intentions of the Indian government to expand its presence and influence on the global stage and strengthen its position as a powerful state (Kakimzhanov, Akhmedyanova, & Vedi, 2023). Thus, to achieve these objectives, India needs to ensure energy security primarily by considering alternative routes for importing energy resources. Consequently, the question of diversifying import sources becomes particularly important, as it would allow India to reduce its energy dependence on specific producers.

India's presence, influence, investment volumes, and trade turnover with Kazakhstan have remained insignificant until today, playing a restraining role by not allowing India to compete at a high level with other interested states in the region. However, India still has a significant advantage in the form of a high level of mutual understanding with Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan, with its thriving economy and close partnership relations with various countries, is the largest and most reliable economic and strategic partner of India in Central Asia (Sandybaev, 2015).

The new Indian approach towards Central Asia, called “Connect Central Asia”, was initiated during the tenures of the two Indian prime ministers, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi (see Figure 1). It aimed to stimulate trade, investment, and relations between India and the region (Roy, 2013). Since 2012, it can be noted that Indo-Kazakh relations have reached an entirely new level of trust. Stability and dynamism characterize the status of these bilateral relations in the new century. Undoubtedly, Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy and India's “Connect Central Asia” initiative contribute to deepening economic, political, and cultural ties between these countries.

Figure 1. Approach of Different Indian Prime Ministers Engaged with Central Asia

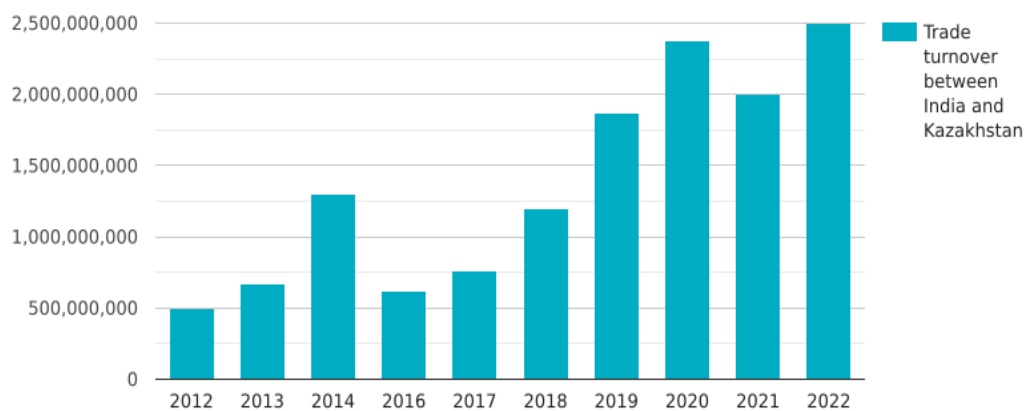


Source: (Singh, 2020)

The current bilateral relations are characterized by intensive trade and economic cooperation, active cultural exchange, and strategic diplomatic relations. Sharing common strategic interests, security concerns, and economic interests, a new impetus for growth in trade between the countries has become inevitable. Indeed, under these conditions, signs of revival are evident in the trade and economic sphere, which is attributed to the coordinated efforts of the governments of both countries seeking to eliminate various existing obstacles between them. For example, in 2012, the volume of trade between India and Kazakhstan amounted to \$500 million, in 2013 - \$670 million, and by 2014, this figure had reached \$1.3 billion (Akorda.kz, 2015). According to data from the Embassy of India in the Republic of Kazakhstan, in 2016, the trade turnover between the countries amounted to \$618 million, in 2017 - \$758 million, in 2018 - \$1.1 billion, in 2019 - \$1.8 billion, and in 2020 - \$2.3 billion. While in 2021, the trade turnover between two countries decreased to \$2 billion, by 2022, bilateral trade between the countries reached a record level of \$2.5 billion (Ministry of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024) (see Figure 2). The observed growth in the volume of trade between the two countries indicates enormous potential for further development and expansion of trade relations between them. The Kazakhstani-Indian intergovernmental commission is actively working, with the Ministry of Trade and Investment representing Kazakhstan and the Ministry of Oil and Natural Gas representing India. The

process of creating investment projects with Indian capital is underway, albeit slower than desired. In this regard, it is necessary to note that Kazakhstan is India's main partner in this region, and in 2020, Kazakhstan accounted for 80.7% of all of India's trade with Central Asia (Ministry of Trade and Integration of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022), while in 2017-2018, this figure was at the level of 70% (Kaulgud, 2022). Although India and Kazakhstan are not among each other's main trading partners, the economies of these two countries complement rather than compete with each other, indicating significant potential for the development of bilateral cooperation in various economic spheres.

Figure 2. Trade turnover between India and Kazakhstan



Source: Ministry of Trade and integration of the RK, Official website of the President of the RK & Embassy of India, Astana, Kazakhstan.

The level of India's trade and economic ties with the countries of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, lags behind the level of political relations (although comparing these two different but interrelated spheres of contact is difficult). In its pursuit of deepening strategic ties with the countries of the region, along with Pakistan, India became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2017, having been an observer since 2005. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization possesses immense military, energy, and economic potential, as it includes four major energy producers (Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) and two major energy consumers (China and India). India's accession to the SCO provides the necessary diplomatic impetus for establishing strong contacts with the Central Asian countries (Kharina, 2017). In addition to the SCO, India is also an active member of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), which was first proposed by the First

President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, from the podium of the United Nations General Assembly in 1992. Viewing Central Asia as part of its extended neighborhood, India seeks to pursue pragmatic and multifaceted relations with Kazakhstan, emphasizing the development of strong political contacts in the long term.

Among the factors that have contributed to India's growing role and involvement in political interaction with Central Asia within the frameworks of the SCO and CICA, security issues have played a leading role due to the region's high conflict potential. In most countries of the region, as in India, the threat of terrorism and extremism is particularly acute. The countries of the region, particularly Kazakhstan, are of great importance to India's national security, as they share common security challenges. It is precisely for this reason that India finds it advantageous to be within an organization whose goal is to counter terrorism (Stopdan, 2014). Thus, India seeks to increase its presence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in all spheres to play a more active role in the security system of these countries (Campbell, 2013).

India's foreign policy in the Central Asian direction noticeably intensified after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister (Krishna, 2020). Prime Minister Modi has repeatedly emphasized the importance of mutual cooperation between India and Central Asia, noting the crucial significance of this cooperation for regional prosperity. During his tenure, India continues its political paradigm of extended neighborhood towards the countries of Central Asia, thereby highlighting Central Asia's central place in this vision. Additionally, under his leadership, the two countries signed various agreements, including those on strengthening cooperation in sectors such as oil and gas exploration, uranium, pharmaceuticals, and information technology (Stopdan, 2020). A significant shift in India's diplomatic and foreign policy relations towards Central Asia and Kazakhstan can also be observed from Modi's visits to the region and Kazakhstan. Since Modi's election as Prime Minister of India in 2014, he visited Kazakhstan twice, first in July 2015 and then in June 2017, during which various agreements were signed in various sectors.

In the third decade of the current century, India and Kazakhstan interact at various levels: a) bilaterally; b) within the framework of multilateral cooperation such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the United Nations (UN), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA); c) as well as in a multi-level format within the framework of the India-Central Asia dialogue (Barari Reykandeh & Mozaffari Falarti, 2023). The strategic partnership between India and Kazakhstan has all the prerequisites to become a “win-win” situation for both sides. Firstly, partnership with India would allow

Kazakhstan to balance its relations with other regional powers such as Russia, China, and Turkey. Secondly, Kazakhstan can serve as a gateway to Central Asian region for India, thereby opening up new opportunities for mutual cooperation for all parties involved. Thus, India finds it advantageous to have not only economic or energy ties but also political contacts with Kazakhstan.

Overall, it can be said that a characteristic feature of India-Kazakhstan relations in the third decade of the twenty-first century is that they increasingly become part of India's cooperation with Central Asia and make a significant contribution to the development of interregional dialogue. This applies to all components of the bilateral relations between these countries. However, it is also necessary to consider that after the start of hostilities in Ukraine, Russia is rapidly losing its influence in Central Asia. Thus, the line of Central Asian states towards greater autonomy in regional and global political matters is linked to this decrease in Russia's political influence and the reduction of its share in foreign trade due to Western economic sanctions and the growth of Chinese investments. It appears logical for Central Asian countries to pursue a policy aimed at balancing the influence of all states present in the region. In this regard, the role of India in the region and particularly in Kazakhstan is growing, as India's pragmatic and balanced approach finds resonance among the countries of Central Asia.

Conclusion

Summarily, it can be argued that in the third decade of the 21st century, a comprehensive system of Indo-Kazakh relations has been established. Its key features are as follows: 1) a shared perspective on interregional dialogue within the framework of the India-Central Asia Summit; 2) both sides' inclination toward cooperation not only in a bilateral format but also within regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); 3) a high level of mutual understanding between the countries underpinned by a similar historical past; 4) the absence of critical divergences in bilateral relations and regional development issues; 5) the emergence of new forms of cooperation, such as the Kazakhstan-India Intergovernmental Commission; 6) common regional challenges and problems, such as terrorism and extremism; 7) efforts to deepen and expand trade ties between the countries.

However, the potential of bilateral relations between the countries has not been fully realized. Neither Kazakhstan nor India are each other's major economic partners. Therefore, the leadership of both countries must exert maximum effort to eliminate existing barriers and divisive lines between them to promote and strengthen a robust partnership. Considering all

this, it is necessary, first and foremost, to expand cooperation in the energy sphere, as Kazakhstan possesses rich energy resources, including oil, natural gas, and uranium. India's energy needs are growing, and there is potential for cooperation in exploration, production, and energy transportation. Strengthening energy cooperation can diversify India's energy sources and contribute to Kazakhstan's economic development.

Moreover, it is imperative to consider the political vacuum that has emerged in Central Asia due to Russia's military actions in Ukraine. Various interested states seek to fill this vacuum by deepening and increasing interactions with the countries of the region. In this regard, Kazakhstan, as a regional leader, can serve as a conduit for Indian initiatives in Central Asia, as the visions of both countries positively correlate. Through a strategic partnership with India, Kazakhstan can diversify and balance Russia and China's influence in the region, while India gains access to the vast consumer market of Central Asia and energy resources. Thus, in the context of dynamically changing geopolitical and economic realities in Central Asia, it is recommended to increase the use of soft power to leverage the longstanding cultural ties between the countries. Emphasizing the use of soft power and strengthening people-to-people ties will bring significant dividends to India, noticeably setting it apart from all other forces, thereby increasing India's involvement in the region. India and Kazakhstan face a challenging path to further strengthen and achieve truly partnership relations. This will require not only political will but also a significant amount of time; however, the prospects for cooperation between the two leaders of their respective regions undoubtedly merit such efforts.

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