

UNLOCKING INDIA'S STRATEGIC POTENTIAL IN CENTRAL ASIA

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As a region with abundant resources and rapidly growing transit potential surrounded by nuclear-armed powers, Central Asia is increasingly drawing the attention of global players. Russia is actively seeking to rebuild its economic influence via the newly created Eurasian Economic Union. China is expanding its reach through a recently launched Silk Road Economic Belt. Other actors are jockeying for their share of the region's pie, as well. But the United States and India are enjoying only very limited presence in what is increasingly becoming a critical part of the world.

In this comprehensive and insightful account, the author of a book and several monographs on global trends, great power politics, grand strategy, and connectivity issues explains why India lags behind other actors in the region and what needs to be done to unlock its potential as a rising great power and shore up its strategic presence in Central Asia. He argues that the region is of growing importance for India's expansion as an emerging continental power, and failure to enhance its footprint risks delaying India's global rise and undermining the U.S. global agenda of upholding the global order amid accelerating power shifts.

A number of select elements of India's strategic culture and geopolitical constraints have prevented Delhi from pursuing a more active and effective regional policy. India's legacy of nonalignment, lost orientation, and inward focus following the collapse of the Soviet Union, among other factors, are, in part, responsible for the country's lack of clear direction, absence of a widely appealing model, and somewhat passive foreign policy that still draws heavily on the outdated framework of India's nonalignment legacy as its baseline.

India also confronts major geopolitical constraints, such as a disconnected Central-South Asian region, instability and volatility in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and tensions and border disputes with Beijing and Islamabad. China's head start in undertaking economic reforms and its perceived strategy of encirclement of India have added further strains on India's ambitions to enhance its strategic profile in Central Asia. The author approaches each of these issues with a critical eye and through the prism of India's relations with individual Central Asian republics and great powers, highlighting deficiencies of India's overall approach to the region and challenges and opportunities of its "Connect Central Asia" policy. He argues that India needs not only to compete but also cooperate with its perceived rivals in the broader region, first and foremost, China and Pakistan. Most importantly, however, he calls for an explicit partnership between the United States and India in the region, pointing to their overlapping agendas as part of the U.S. New Silk Road Strategy and India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, which, in many ways, confront similar constraints.

The author treats the prospects of such partnership with caution, pointing to India's disinterest in power balancing schemes and proclivity for pursuing a strictly independent course. He also highlights the potential of this partnership to undermine U.S.-Russian and U.S.-Chinese relations, which may lead to escalation of external rivalries in a region that is barely able to cope with internal ones. But the author also provides compelling reasons for why such partnership is a must if Delhi and Washington want to advance their interests in and out of Central-South Asia. Neither of these powers enjoys a substantial presence

in the region, and each is poorly positioned to take advantage of regional trends and opportunities to shape Russia's, China's, and Iran's advances. Both, however, are English-speaking democracies concerned about the future of Central-South Asia, given regional threats, Russia's resurgence, and China's expansion. Both are also seeking to reverse decades of separation between Central and South Asia as part of their strategies.

The parties are already aligning their positions on select issues and see a growing cooperation on strategic matters, including nuclear issues and privatization and investment into the Indian economy. The author makes an important caveat when discussing the prospects of such partnership in Central Asia, stating that the United States and India can already start pursuing a number of objectives, either in concert or separately, to unlock each other's strategic potential in the region and beyond. Specifically, they should mitigate Afghanistan-Pakistan security challenges; shape Iran's geopolitical role; foster Sino-Indian cooperation; and exploit grand strategies and regional connectivity initiatives of other players in Central-South Asia and the Greater Middle East. But the author's advice stands: Delhi and Washington should partner to remain relevant in the region.

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