

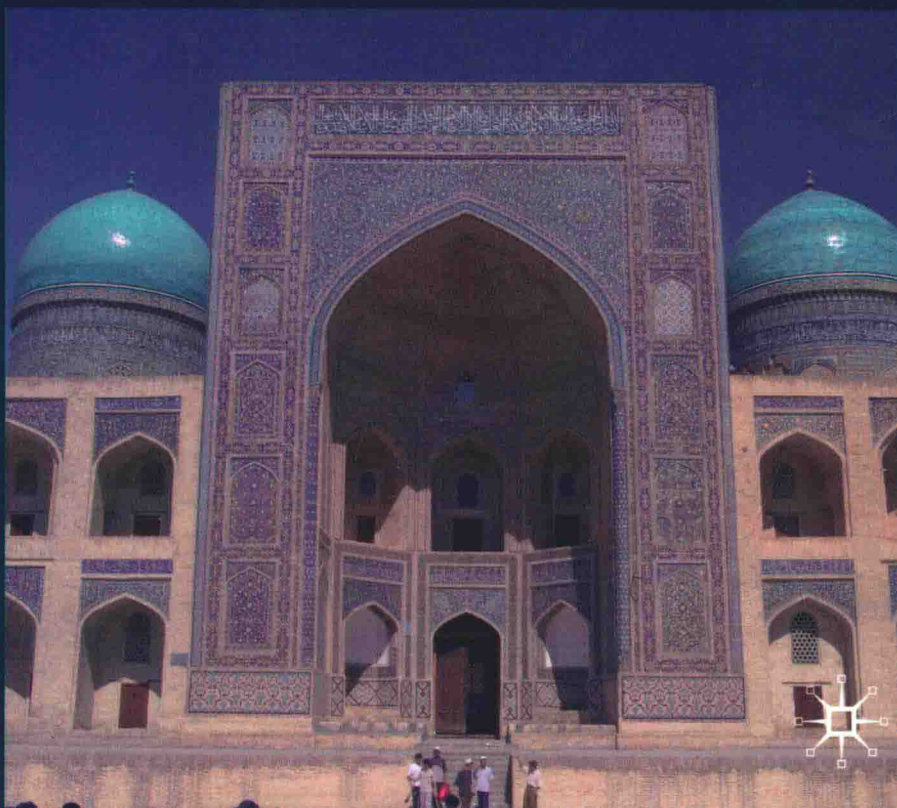
SERIES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

# CHINA AND INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

A New "Great Game"?

EDITED BY

MARLÈNE LARUELLE,  
JEAN-FRANÇOIS HUCHET,  
SÉBASTIEN PEYROUSE, AND  
BAYRAM BALCI



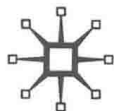
# **China and India in Central Asia**

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CHINA AND INDIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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## CHAPTER 1

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# *Why Central Asia? The Strategic Rationale of Indian and Chinese Involvement in the Region*

### THE EDITORS

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the rediscovery of Central Asia by the international community has placed this region in a specific intellectual context, one marked by a return of geopolitical theories and debates around the “end of history” and the “clash of civilizations.” The revival of geopolitical theory, especially Sir Halford Mackinder’s idea that one who controls the *Heartland* controls the world, has profoundly shaped the new frameworks applied to the post-Soviet states of Central Asia and to Afghanistan. In contrast to the geographical and economic isolation of the region, theories about the revival of the Silk Road flourished in the West and in Asia. The United States and the European Union have used them to promote the release of Central Asia from the Russian sphere of influence by opening toward the south. Turkey, Iran, Japan, South Korea, China, India, and Pakistan have made references to their historical ties with the region, beyond the years of the Iron Curtain.

Although the fall of the Soviet Union took the entire international community by surprise, it has drastically changed the geopolitical situation in China and India. The former saw the collapse of its main enemy from the 1960s and 1970s and discovered a new area of potential instability on its north and northwestern borders. The Chinese authorities, unprepared and worried about the possible repercussions of this historic event on their political system and territorial unity, implemented an active “good neighborhood” policy with Russia and Central Asia. Less than two decades later, Moscow and Beijing have signed a strategic partnership, as have Astana and Beijing. China has become an indispensable diplomatic and economic ally of the post-Soviet states, multilateral cooperation mechanisms have been developed, new

cultural interactions have emerged, and popular concerns have taken shape in Russia and in Central Asia about the future of the Chinese presence. For India too, the situation has changed, but in a different way. The loss of the Soviet ally has undermined the political and economic choices of the Indian regime since the departure of Britain, forcing a complex international reorientation marked by a fear of the growing Sino-Pakistani alliance and the development of a new dialogue with the United States.

Direct Indian-Central Asian links were limited during the Soviet period, but the context of Indian-Soviet friendship made Delhi relatively present in the everyday lives of Central Asians via television, movies, music, and cultural exchanges. China has inevitably, albeit clumsily, passed from the status of historic enemy to that of partner. Meanwhile India has lost relative visibility since the disappearance of the Soviet Union and is now trying to gain in the strategic sector what it has lost in its cultural presence. In post-Soviet Central Asia as in Afghanistan, people have a positive vision of the Indian presence, whether through historical memory, a sense of cultural proximity, or political sympathy. The relation to China is much more complex, dotted with Sinophobic clichés linked to the myth of the “yellow peril” or denunciations of the implementation methods of Chinese companies. This dissociation is nothing specific to Central Asia. In the West too, India elicits less concern than China, not only because of a view based on cultural and political arguments, but also and especially because an Indian superpower seems remote, while the rising power of China has already largely materialized. These local perceptions, too often forgotten by analysts due to the lack of sociological information on post-Soviet Central Asian and Afghan societies, are significant. They tap into the self-images that have an impact not only on public opinion but also, one way or another, on the long-term choices of political leaders.

In less than two decades, the geopolitical readings of Central Asia have multiplied: the southern margins of the former Russian Empire, the eastern pole of Washington’s “Greater Middle East,” the new “Far West” of China, the Caspian Sea as a historical place of conflict between Russia and Iran, a “Central Eurasia” where Slavic, Turkic, Persian, and Chinese cultures meet. These familiar interpretations invite neighboring and more distant states to project power in the region. However, power projection and mechanisms of leverage and implementation are two different things. Although the image of Central Asia as a land of new global confrontation between rising powers such as India and China may capture the imagination, sobriety should drive the analysis; Russia, the United States, and the European Union are all equally important there. And far from the glorifications of the geopolitical “cross-roads of the world,” the moves of Chinese and Indian actors remain marked by hesitation and, above all, pragmatic choices.

The revival of the so-called Great Game must be nuanced. First of all, the Central Asian states are not mere pawns, subject to competition between powers. They are independent actors that have a narrow margin to maneuver against their Russian, Chinese, and Indian neighbors but are still independent in their foreign policy decisions. Each of them has a very specific identity and divergent visions of its geopolitical environment. One does not regard China in the same way as Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, and India as Kazakhstan or Tajikistan. Then, there is no binary opposition between major powers in Central Asia. Russia and the United States have not only conflicting economic interests, but also complementary ones in security. Russia and China appear to share control over the Central Asian regimes but will likely compete in the coming decades. China and India have common visions for the stabilization of Afghanistan, but mostly growing differences in the analysis of their interests in the post-Soviet Central Asia. In addition, other international players are present, mainly the European Union, Turkey, and Iran, but also Japan, South Korea, and the United Arab Emirates, among others.

One cannot think of Central Asia merely as a region of conflict between great powers, because it is also a space of complements and negotiation. In addition, despite its growing importance, Central Asia remains a peripheral place in many ways and has proved central only in security terms. For Russia, any destabilization of the area would have immediate impact on its own domestic security. For China, the implications aim directly at the stability in Xinjiang, and for India, in Kashmir. However, economically, Russia looks primarily to Europe and possibly the Far East, Beijing will continue to direct its gaze toward its economic partnership with the United States and the assertion of power in Asia, and Delhi will focus on its complex relationship with its neighbor Pakistan and on its growing economic relations with the United States and the European Union. The overvaluation of security in Central Asia contrasts with its economic role, which is more modest.

As for all the neighbors of the former Soviet Union, the disintegration of the country, the change of regime, and the introduction of a market economy have brought both benefits and risks: benefits via political partnerships and economic ventures, risks in terms of new geopolitical tensions and competition for the control of wealth. Since 9/11, the global "war against terrorism" launched by Washington has intensified security-driven views of Central Asia. The region is indeed subject to destabilization from Afghanistan, mainly through drug trafficking, which fuels the criminalization of the economy and state structures and finances clandestine groups claiming allegiance to Islamism. However, the long-term issues may be primarily economic. Indeed, Central Asia will be resistant to possible destabilization by betting on development, and this cannot be achieved without the involvement of neighboring powers. In Afghanistan too, the legitimacy of the central government will



only be built on evidence of economic performance that will change the lives of its citizens. In this area of aid to Kabul, New Delhi is well positioned vis-à-vis Beijing, which has not had the humanitarian experience of India and is interested in Afghanistan because of its commodity market. Conversely, in aid to post-Soviet Central Asia, China heavily dominates India.

For China, the primary objective of its relations with independent Central Asia was to secure its borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—which it did by obtaining treaties demarcating borders, thus ending decades of conflict with the Soviet Union—and to prevent the region from becoming a rear base for Uyghur independence movements. Both objectives were achieved, although the latter can always shift in coming years. The security component is important in the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, even if Beijing cannot eliminate Russian strategic supremacy there and has refocused on economic issues. For India, the establishment of relations with Central Asia did not have to go through a phase of border dispute settlements. New Delhi first analyzed its relation to the new states through the prism of its conflict with Pakistan: it has sought to halt Islamabad and to prevent Central Asia from offering Pakistan the famous “strategic depth” it lacks. Although post-Soviet Central Asia is not linked to the Kashmiri conflict, this is not the case with Afghanistan, which directly affects domestic Indian interests. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 may have been linked to the progress of the Pakistani army in the Taliban-controlled areas of northern Pakistan. Al-Qaeda losing power in the Af-Pak region correlates with new attempts to destabilize Kashmir. For India, the Afghan lens focused on Central Asia is thus central, whereas it is less important for Beijing. It was necessary to wait until around 2005 before China sought to involve itself in Afghanistan and coordinate its policies in Central Asia, particularly in Tajikistan, with those established in Kabul.

Although both countries want the settlement of the Afghan issue and stability in Central Asia, they differ on many levels in their reading of the global geopolitical environment. On one side, China is deeply concerned about U.S. presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan because it could reduce its room to maneuver in the region over the long term and even more in its settlement of the Uyghur and Tibetan issues. For its part, Delhi did not see any major disadvantages in U.S. presence in the middle of the continent and sought instead strategic rapprochement with Washington. On the other side, China has developed a *modus vivendi* with Russia in Central Asia, leaving Moscow with the impression of control in the region, while India has lost status with the Kremlin and is hardly close to regaining it. China sees Central Asia as a means to access the Iranian-Turkish Middle East, while Delhi frames the situation primarily in terms of Sino-Pakistani encirclement. Finally, China benefits from a multilateral instrument, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,