

China and India in Central Asia

A New “Great Game”?

Edited by

Marlène Laruelle, Jean-François Huchet,
Sébastien Peyrouse, and Bayram Balci

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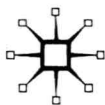
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CHAPTER 1

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 “crossroads of the world,” the moves of Chinese and Indian actors remain marked by hesitation and, above all, pragmatic choices.