Article

JOURNAL OF EURASIAN STUDIES

Journal of Eurasian Studies
2026, Vol. 17(2) 334–348

A Comparative Study of the Opportunities and Threats of China and India's Economic Projects for Central Asian Countries

Mohammad Farhadi[1], Alireza Noori[1] and Heidar ali Masoudi[1]

Abstract

This study offers a comparative analysis of the opportunities and threats posed by China's and India's major economic initiatives—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the TAPI Transit-Economic Project, and the North–South Transport Corridor (NSTC)—for Central Asian countries. Using qualitative thematic analysis based on a thematic matrix framework and document-based indirect observation, data were collected through purposive sampling of academic and policy sources, and thematic coding was employed to extract and categorize significant patterns of strategic impact across the three initiatives. Findings reveal that both China's and India's projects present significant opportunities for Central Asia, including expanded connectivity, enhanced transit potential, increased foreign investment, and strengthened multilateral engagement. At the same time, distinct threats also emerged: China's BRI risks generating asymmetric dependence, regional imbalances, and intensified competition with Russia, while India's projects may exacerbate geopolitical fragmentation, limit inclusivity, and increase alignment with Western strategic agendas. The analysis further shows that Central Asian states actively leverage the emerging multipolar environment through multi-vector strategies: Kazakhstan combines BRI-backed rail and port investments with participation in the NSTC to consolidate its role as a Eurasian transit hub; Turkmenistan simultaneously commits gas supplies to TAPI while courting Chinese financing and markets through BRI-linked energy corridors; and Uzbekistan engages with both Chinese and Indian connectivity frameworks—alongside Russian arrangements—to diversify export routes and bargaining partners. In this context, the evolution toward a multipolar economic order provides Central Asian governments with greater leverage to balance external actors while asserting their regional agency. The reliability and credibility of the findings were ensured through expert auditing and focus group validation. This research contributes to the broader understanding of Eurasian geoeconomic competition and offers strategic insights for regional policymakers navigating overlapping development initiatives.

Keywords

economic projects, Central Asia, China, India, Iran, thematic matrix

Introduction

Central Asia has long occupied a pivotal position in the geopolitical strategies of both regional and extra-regional powers. Among these, China and India have emerged as key actors through targeted economic initiatives aimed at deepening their influence across the region. The region's vast natural resources, strategic geography, and emerging markets have made it a critical arena for economic competition and collaboration. China, in particular, views

[1]Department of Political Science, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Corresponding Author:
Mohammad Farhadi, Department of Political Science, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University, Shahid Shahriari Square, Tehran 19839-69411, Tehran Province, Iran.

Central Asia as a core component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to expand infrastructure, enhance trade connectivity, and secure energy flows from resource-rich neighbors. As one of the world's largest energy consumers, China has invested heavily in pipeline networks, mining, transportation infrastructure, and telecommunications across Central Asia (Li et al., 2022).

India, by contrast, sees Central Asia through a multifaceted strategic lens—geopolitical, economic, and cultural. The region offers India the potential to diversify its energy imports, extend its connectivity footprint through initiatives such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and bolster its influence in Eurasian politics. India's growing engagement encompasses diplomatic summits, economic partnerships, and cultural outreach, all within the broader context of a competition with China for regional influence.

In this context, the interaction between economic ambitions and geopolitical calculations has become a defining feature of both countries' policies. While China tends to focus on large-scale, state-driven investment and infrastructure projects, India often adopts a more nuanced approach to connectivity through multilateral forums, development aid, and joint ventures. These contrasting strategies have created new opportunities and potential threats for Central Asian countries, which must navigate major power competition while maximizing their national interests.

This article rests on two central hypotheses. First, the economic initiatives of China and India offer both shared and asymmetric opportunities for Central Asian states across infrastructure, energy, trade, and regional integration. Second, these initiatives also pose strategic and economic risks, including overdependence on external powers, erosion of economic sovereignty, and shifts in regional alliances.

A growing body of literature reflects these dual dynamics. Scholars have highlighted how Chinese investments under BRI can help modernize infrastructure, boost employment, and expand regional connectivity (Papageorgiou et al., 2023), while also raising concerns over debt sustainability, political leverage, and unequal benefits (Nedopil, 2023; Syroezhkin, 2016). Similarly, India's engagement is seen as a counterbalancing force offering diversified partnerships, yet its limited economic scale and connectivity challenges may restrict the depth of its influence (Abdurashitov & Gusseinov, 2024; Momeni & Chaharmahali Esfahani, 2024).

Therefore, this study seeks to compare the opportunities and threats posed by China's and India's economic projects to the Central Asian republics. It draws on recent empirical data and theoretical insights to identify the strategic implications of these initiatives for the region's development trajectories. In doing so, it contributes to a nuanced understanding of how Central Asian countries can manage external partnerships to promote national resilience, economic diversification, and geopolitical balance.

Ultimately, the study provides valuable insights for regional policymakers and international stakeholders, as the shifting balance of power in Central Asia will have lasting consequences for regional stability and economic integration, as well as for the broader Eurasian geopolitical landscape.

China's Economic Initiative: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) officially began in September 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping, during an official visit to Central Asian countries, proposed establishing a new Silk Road Economic Belt (Xi Jinping, 2014, pp. 313–318). Xi's proposal quickly gained traction and became known as the "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) project. According to Central Asian affairs experts, the Silk Road Economic Belt is a crucial component of China's new geopolitical strategy, with a focus on neighboring countries, particularly those in Central Asia.

It is noteworthy that representatives from over 110 countries attended the Belt and Road Forum held in May 2017 (Mayer, 2018, p.2), which enabled China to expand its global influence and emerge as one of the key players in the evolving global economic order (Papageorgiou et al., 2023, p.72). Under the BRI framework, China has aimed to forge stronger ties with developing countries through large-scale investments in infrastructure, natural resource development, and trade expansion. These efforts are particularly evident in Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Green Finance & Development Center, 2024, p. 45).

Nevertheless, China aims to enhance regional economic cooperation across Eurasia and establish a "new model of international cooperation and global governance" (Syroezhkin, 2016, pp. 104–109).

China's long-term strategy for Central Asia appears to focus on the following key areas:

(1) Deepening Security Cooperation: One of the primary elements of China's approach to Central Asia is further strengthening security collaboration with regional countries (Vangeli, 2018, p. 675).
(2) Optimizing Investment Structures: China continuously seeks to refine and optimize its regional investment framework.
(3) Exercising Soft Power: The country aims to expand its soft power by strengthening people-to-people connections and cultural ties (Klimes, 2017, p. 127).
(4) Constructive Engagement with Major Powers: China also emphasizes enhancing constructive cooperation with other major powers in Central Asia while respecting Russia's traditional interests and accounting for realistic regional geopolitical influences (Vangeli, 2018, p. 678).

India's Projects

TAPI Economic-Energy Project

The TAPI project was first proposed in the 1990s to facilitate natural gas exports from Turkmenistan to neighboring countries, particularly India and Pakistan. The designed pipeline is approximately 1,800 km long and passes through Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan before reaching India. This project is of significant importance to India and Pakistan, which are seeking new energy sources to meet their growing energy demands (Huda & Ali, 2017). However, between 2022 and 2025, the TAPI project faced numerous challenges and opportunities. Security and political obstacles have been the most critical. On the security front, ongoing conflict and instability in Afghanistan have created considerable difficulties in implementing and progressing the project. Politically, persistent disputes between India and Pakistan over borders and other issues have complicated cooperation, delaying the timely realization of the pipeline and the delivery of energy to the intended countries (Huda & Ali, 2017).

Despite these challenges, the TAPI project presents several promising opportunities. First, it facilitates the provision of stable energy resources to developing countries like Pakistan and India, which face acute energy shortages. Second, it offers one of the most cost-effective ways to supply natural gas to these nations. Third, gas transportation through Afghanistan can contribute to the country's reconstruction efforts by creating infrastructure and employment opportunities (Foster, 2010). Fourth, the TAPI project can potentially enhance economic and trade relations among South Asian countries. It could foster regional cooperation and create a shared energy network among Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (Yıldırım, 2023), strengthening political and economic ties and contributing to the region's overall stability and security (Figures 1–3).

The North–South International Transport Corridor Economic Project

The North–South International Transport Corridor is a multilateral initiative to establish an integrated transport network for moving goods from northern countries, such as Russia and India, to southern nations, such as Iran and the Gulf states. This project involves rail, road, and maritime routes, with Iran serving as a vital hub for the transfer of goods. The corridor begins in India, enters Iran, and extends to Russia and other Northern European countries (Chalikyan & Tashjian, 2021; Yıldırım, 2023).

The primary objective of establishing this corridor is to reduce dependence on traditional, longer trade routes, such as the Suez Canal, and to lower transportation costs for various countries. This project can significantly facilitate trade among the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union, and other regional countries (Foster, 2010). Therefore, the project has the potential to generate significant economic benefits for the participating countries.

First and foremost, the corridor will reduce transportation costs for member states, leading to lower goods prices and increased trade between different countries. Additionally, the corridor can strengthen economic and political relations among various nations by serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe. Moreover, it can facilitate trade, thereby contributing to the economic growth of member countries and creating job opportunities in the transportation and logistics sectors (Chalikyan & Tashjian, 2021; Yıldırım, 2023).

Iran is a pivotal country in this project. Due to its advantageous geographical location, the corridor can establish Iran as a key transportation hub. This, in turn, could create significant economic and employment opportunities in Iran's ports and transportation networks. Furthermore, the project can attract foreign investment and promote international cooperation across various fields, such as infrastructure development, technology, and logistics services (Foster, 2010).

Nevertheless, despite its promising prospects, the corridor faces several challenges. One of the major obstacles is the political and security instability in certain regions, particularly Afghanistan and Iran. Political instability in these areas may cause delays or disruptions in the transportation flow of goods. In addition, infrastructural deficiencies persist in some segments of the corridor, particularly in the railway and port sectors, requiring further investment and development efforts to address them adequately (Chalikyan & Tashjian, 2021; Yıldırım, 2023).

A Review of Theoretical Background

The five Central Asian republics—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan—occupy a region of increasing strategic value, not only because of their abundant reserves of oil, gas, and minerals, but also because of their geographic position as a bridge between East and West. In recent years, both regional powers (such as China, Russia, and Iran) and extra-regional actors (like India, the United States, and the European Union) have intensified their economic and political engagement in Central Asia. Understanding the theoretical foundations of this surge in interest requires a multidisciplinary perspective encompassing neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and geoeconomics.

According to neorealist theory, as articulated by Gilpin (1981), international relations are fundamentally driven by power-seeking behavior among states. Power is not merely military; economic capacity, especially access to strategic resources like energy, is a critical pillar of state influence.

Figure 1. China's Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Engagement in Central Asia. Source: (https://www.irna.ir/news/85030740/).

Neorealists argue that control over energy corridors and transit infrastructures is central to a state's ability to secure its position in the international system. The presence of major pipeline projects and transit routes in Central Asia—such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's North–South Transport Corridor (NSTC), and the TAPI pipeline—illustrates how powerful states pursue regional dominance not through confrontation but through economic penetration, using trade, infrastructure, and energy diplomacy as instruments of hegemonic influence (Sadeghi, 2012). These projects serve not only to supply energy but also to anchor foreign influence, legitimize bilateral relations, and shift the regional balance of power.

At the same time, neoliberal institutionalism offers an alternative but complementary perspective. It argues that states are rational actors who prefer cooperation over conflict when pursuing economic goals. Institutions—whether formal intergovernmental organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) or informal networks such as multilateral development banks and trade corridors—help reduce transaction costs, increase trust, and establish rules that facilitate mutually beneficial exchanges (Daneshnia, 2011; Laursen, 2008). In this view, China's BRI and India's NSTC are not just tools of dominance but also platforms for integration, enabling states such as the Central Asian republics to align with more powerful partners to access capital, markets, and technology. Although power asymmetries exist, the focus is on absolute gains rather than zero-sum competition, making these frameworks attractive for states seeking development and stability.

The concept of geoeconomics adds further depth to this analysis by emphasizing the interplay of geography, economy, and political strategy. As Valigholizadeh and Zaki (2009) argue, geoeconomics has increasingly displaced traditional military geopolitics in the post-Cold War era. In this framework, economic space becomes strategic space. Nations use economic instruments—such as trade routes, port development, and infrastructure investment—to project power, secure influence, and shape global hierarchies. The BRI is emblematic of this shift, as it connects China not only to Central Asia but also to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa through a sprawling network of infrastructure and soft power initiatives (Li, 2022; Mayer, 2018). India, too, through projects like the NSTC and TAPI, seeks to counterbalance China's growing presence, extend its connectivity to Eurasia, and establish itself as a pivotal node in regional logistics and energy flows (Chalikyan & Tashjian, 2021; Grigoryan et al., 2024; Yıldırım, 2023).

What emerges from this multi-theoretical analysis is a layered understanding of Central Asia as a theater where economic initiatives are deeply entangled with strategic calculations. Neorealism explains the competitive motives and power asymmetries, while neoliberal institutionalism highlights the cooperative mechanisms and the role of institutions. Geoeconomics illustrates how economic projects are repurposed as geopolitical tools. This theoretical

Figure 2. India's TAPI Project: Energy Security and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia. Source: Authors' schematic adaptation based on route and city alignments reported in *Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India pipeline* (Wikipedia), Asian Development Bank TAPI project documents, and other publicly available project summaries.

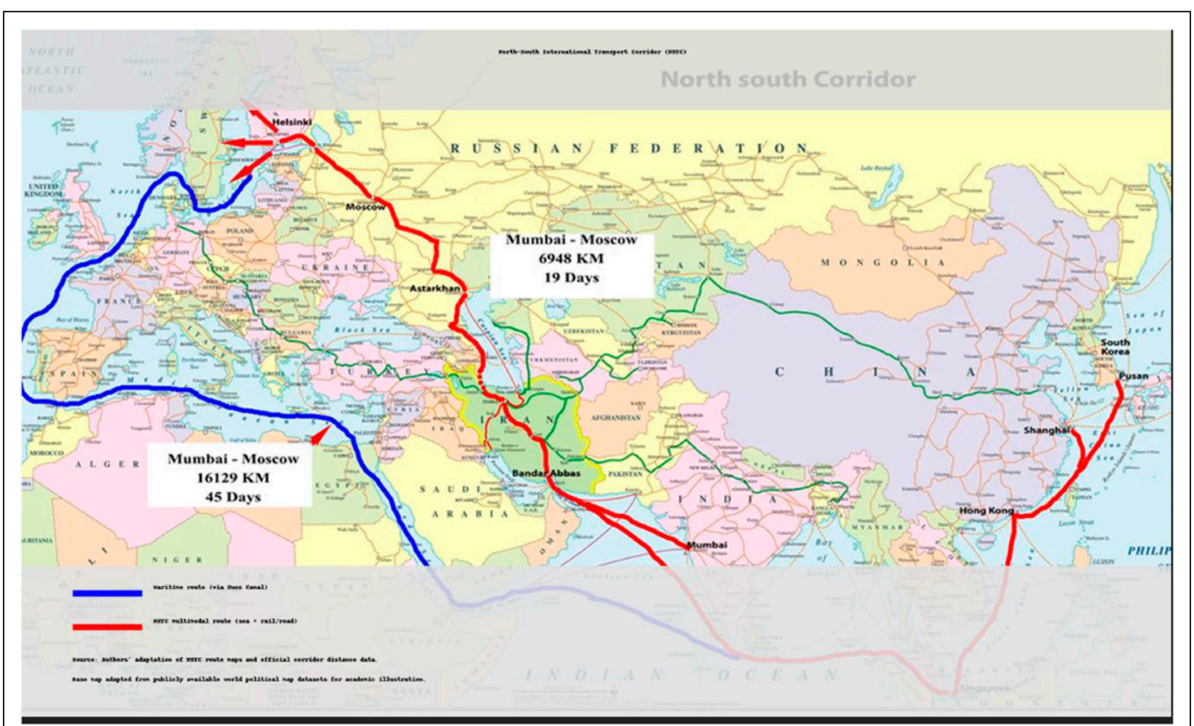

Figure 3. The North-South International Transport Corridor: Enhancing Trade Connectivity Between Asia and Europe. Source: Authors' adaptation based on route and distance data for the international north–south.

triangulation is crucial for understanding why both China and India have positioned Central Asia at the center of their regional strategies, and how smaller states in the region can capitalize on these engagements to enhance their development and autonomy.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design and uses thematic analysis as its primary method to examine the opportunities and threats posed by China's and India's economic projects in Central Asia. Thematic analysis enables researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns and themes within qualitative data, transforming scattered information into structured, coherent findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To facilitate a structured comparison, the study adopts a thematic matrix approach, which systematically organizes and categorizes key patterns emerging from the data. The focus is on identifying recurring themes related to opportunities and threats for Central Asian countries in the context of China's and India's economic engagements.

Data were collected through document analysis as a form of indirect observation. Using purposive sampling, the researcher reviewed a diverse range of materials, including scholarly books, academic journal articles, government and organizational reports, policy documents, and credible online publications. These sources were selected based on their relevance to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's regional economic strategies, and Central Asian development contexts.

After collecting the data, a coding process was applied to extract foundational, organizing, and overarching themes. The thematic matrix allowed for a comparative analysis of China- and India-related opportunities and threats across various dimensions—economic, political, strategic, infrastructural, and environmental—highlighting both converging and diverging patterns in how these powers engage with the region.

To ensure the analysis's trustworthiness and credibility, an audit technique was employed. A focus group of 18 experts in Central Asian studies, international relations, and political economy was consulted to review and validate the emerging findings. Their feedback contributed to refining the themes and ensuring that the interpretations were grounded in regional realities and scholarly rigor.

This methodological framework enables a comprehensive and comparative understanding of how China's and India's economic initiatives are shaping Central Asia's strategic landscape, providing insight into current dynamics and future implications for the region (Table 1).

India's Economic Initiatives

North–South Transit-Economic Project

India's North–South Corridor initiative offers notable strategic and economic opportunities for Central Asian countries, particularly by enhancing trade diversification, reducing dependence on Chinese infrastructure, and promoting multipolar regional engagement. The corridor opens vital access to Indian Ocean trade routes and fosters linkages with the Eurasian Economic Union, enabling Central Asia to assert greater autonomy in connectivity. However, these benefits are tempered by serious implementation challenges. Infrastructure gaps, fragmented customs coordination, and geopolitical risks—especially the corridor's dependence on Iran and the balancing act with China—introduce uncertainty. While India's presence offers a counterbalance to China's BRI, its relative underinvestment and reliance on volatile geopolitical partners could limit its long-term regional impact. The threats and opportunities of India's North–South Corridor project in Central Asia for Iran are presented in Table 2.

TAPI Transit-Economic Project

The TAPI Transit-Economic Project, which links Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India through a strategic natural gas pipeline, has far-reaching implications for Central Asian countries, both in terms of economic opportunities and geopolitical risks. As Table 3 shows, the initiative is not solely an energy infrastructure project; it also serves as a vehicle for broader regional transformation.

To begin with, TAPI's most immediate opportunity for Central Asia lies in its potential to promote regional economic stabilization, especially by supporting growth in neighboring Afghanistan. Improved economic conditions and security in Afghanistan can have direct spillover effects on Central Asian border states, particularly Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, by reducing cross-border tensions and curbing forced migration. In this sense, TAPI plays a dual role—as both an energy corridor and a mechanism for regional humanitarian and security relief.

Equally important is the project's role in promoting balanced geopolitical engagement. Historically, Central Asian states have been situated between competing spheres of influence, namely, Russia and China. The involvement of India and the United States in TAPI introduces an alternative set of partnerships that can help diversify regional alliances. This diversification is crucial for smaller states seeking to avoid overdependence on any single actor and aiming to enhance their strategic autonomy.

Another key advantage offered by the project is the diversification of gas supply chains. While Turkmenistan is the primary supplier in TAPI, its limited capacity raises the possibility of involving other suppliers in the future. This scenario would foster greater energy cooperation within Central Asia, enabling new roles in production, transit, or storage, particularly for countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. In turn, this could lead to the development of a more integrated and resilient regional energy network.

Moreover, TAPI reinforces southward economic connectivity, especially with India. For Central Asian states,

Table 1. Focus Group Comprising Eighteen Scholars in Regional Studies and International Relations

No.	Country	Number of Participants	Approximate Age	Occupation	Academic Discipline
1	Iran	8 (men and women)	42–60	University professors and senior experts	Regional studies and international relations
2	Kazakhstan	2 (men)	49–58	University professors	
3	Uzbekistan	2 (men)	60–70	Expert and senior expert in regional studies	Central Asian issues and international relations
4	Kyrgyzstan	2 (men)	58–76	Senior expert in regional studies and university professor	
5	China	2 (men)	49–58	University professor and senior expert in regional studies	
6	India	2 (men and women)	65–67	Both university professors	Regional studies
Total	18				

traditionally focused on East–West trade routes (e.g., China and Russia), TAPI opens up a viable North–South trade axis. This could enable countries like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to expand their commercial relationships with South Asia, improving access to Indian markets and potentially attracting Indian investment in infrastructure, transport, and trade hubs.

Additionally, the strategic backing of the United States provides a stabilizing effect. By deterring sabotage or political manipulation—especially from countries like Pakistan, where pipeline security has historically been uncertain—U.S. involvement can help ensure the integrity of energy flows. Reliable energy transit is a cornerstone of regional economic planning and investor confidence, particularly for landlocked economies in Central Asia that rely heavily on cross-border infrastructure.

Despite these considerable opportunities, TAPI is also accompanied by several serious threats. One primary concern is the potential for increased great power competition in the region. With U.S. involvement in TAPI, and the likelihood of security infrastructure accompanying the project, there is a risk that Central Asia could become a platform for extended American presence—something that could provoke strategic friction with both Russia and China, and possibly alienate domestic political constituencies.

Further complicating the landscape is the threat of marginalizing alternative regional initiatives, such as Russia-backed or Iran-involved pipelines. By bypassing existing or planned routes, TAPI may unintentionally narrow the range of options available to Central Asian states, limiting their flexibility in managing their energy diplomacy and reducing bargaining power in regional energy markets.

A related danger is the instrumentalization of TAPI as a containment strategy. If the project is used to explicitly or implicitly exclude China and Russia from Central Asia's energy grid, then the region risks being drawn into the broader rivalry between global powers. In such a scenario, Central Asia could lose its emerging agency and be reduced once again to a geopolitical buffer zone rather than an autonomous economic actor.

Lastly, the project may trigger a soft power shift in the region. India's increased presence—via investment, diplomacy, and shared cultural heritage—may gradually reposition it as a preferred economic and strategic partner for many Central Asian states. While this could diversify

Table 2. Threats and Opportunities of India's North–South Corridor Project in Central Asia

Theme	Category	Organized Coding	Representative Statements
Expansion of southward trade access	Opportunity	India's investment in the north-south corridor: Access to the Indian Ocean	Corridor gives landlocked states access to maritime trade, reducing reliance on Russia and China
Multipolar engagement via India		India as a counterweight to China, multi-vector diplomacy	India's presence ensures Central Asia does not rely solely on BRI
Trade route diversification		Linking with the Eurasian Economic Union and reducing dependence	Corridor enables linkage to EAEU and SCO transport networks
Infrastructure and bureaucratic inefficiencies	Threat	Incomplete sections, poor coordination, and low awareness	Fragmented infrastructure and customs policies hinder the flow
Strategic exposure to Iran's political instability		Corridor's reliance on Iran and exposure to sanctions	Iran's instability and sanctions reduce the reliability of the corridor
The geopolitical tightrope between India and China		Risk of alienating China and regional strategic complexity	Using Indian routes may complicate relations with China

Table 3. Opportunities and Threats of the TAPI Transit-Economic Project for Central Asia

Theme	Category	Organized Coding	Representative Statements
Regional economic stabilization and reduced migration pressure	Opportunity	Enhanced economic growth and security in Afghanistan and border regions	The TAPI project could stabilize Afghanistan, reduce refugee flows, and promote greater regional security for Central Asia
Balanced geopolitical engagement		Inclusion of India and the U.S. offers new diplomatic balancing options	Central Asian countries can diversify partnerships beyond China and Russia by engaging with U.S.- and India-backed projects
Strategic gas supply diversification		Possibility of new gas suppliers joining TAPI	With Turkmenistan's limited supply capacity, other partners may participate, enhancing energy security in Central Asia
Enhanced Indo–Central Asian trade routes		Strengthening of southward trade and energy corridors	Central Asia may benefit from India's growing economic outreach and regional infrastructure investment through TAPI.
Reduced pipeline disruption and political leverage		U.S. involvement may deter sabotage and political manipulation	Political backing reduces the likelihood of pipeline disruption, improving energy transit reliability in the region
Emergence of new regional energy players		Project may expand to include additional regional actors	Expansion of TAPI's framework could foster broader cooperation among Central Asian republics and external stakeholders
Increased external power competition	Threat	U.S. presence reinforced by TAPI-related infrastructure in Afghanistan	A more permanent U.S. footprint may disrupt regional balance and provoke resistance from China, Russia, or domestic groups
Marginalization of alternative regional initiatives		Bypassing traditional energy corridors weakens existing projects	TAPI may reduce attention to or investment in alternative pipelines, limiting Central Asia's diversification options
Geopolitical instrumentalization		TAPI as a tool for containing China and Russia	The pipeline risks turning Central Asia into a proxy arena for major power rivalry if used to isolate other regional powers
Cultural soft power shift		India's increased influence through shared heritage and diplomacy	India's economic and cultural engagement may reshape regional preferences and reduce local autonomy over identity

regional alliances, it may also erode traditional ties with other actors and reconfigure the region's cultural and political alignment in ways that reduce domestic identity cohesion or provoke internal pushback.

In conclusion, the TAPI project embodies both promise and peril for Central Asia. On one hand, it enhances energy connectivity, supports regional stability, and offers new diplomatic alignments. On the other hand, it introduces risks of dependency, exclusion, and geopolitical entanglement. For Central Asian governments, the path forward lies in calibrated engagement—participating in TAPI where national interests align, while simultaneously working to preserve strategic balance, institutional pluralism, and regional cohesion. As the region continues to define its post-Soviet identity and economic direction, initiatives like TAPI will serve as both testing grounds and turning points.

China's "Belt and Road Initiative" in Central Asia

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) present a multifaceted set of opportunities and threats for Central Asian countries (Table 4), reflecting the growing intersection of economic development and geopolitical strategy in the region. At the core of BRI's appeal is its potential to transform Central Asia into a strategic trade and energy corridor, linking China to Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East. By reducing transportation costs and time, and by upgrading rail, road, and pipeline infrastructure, BRI enables Central Asia to evolve from a historically landlocked and peripheral region into a pivotal bridge in global trade routes. This geographic repositioning not only enhances the region's logistical importance but also opens avenues for increased transit revenue, market access, and regional integration.

Beyond physical connectivity, the initiative promotes multilateral cooperation through institutional platforms, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Central Asian states, as active members of the SCO, benefit from China's push for regional convergence on both economic and security fronts. Through this platform, countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan can enhance coordination, participate in joint development projects, and ensure collective security against transnational threats. These dynamics align with the broader goals of regional stability, shared development, and political legitimacy.

Moreover, BRI has significantly expanded diplomatic and economic engagement between China and the Central Asian republics. Through bilateral agreements and high-level summits, these countries have secured substantial investment in transport, energy, and industrial zones. For example, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have leveraged BRI to modernize pipelines and port systems, thereby improving their export capabilities and diversifying their trading partners. This infrastructure-led development model, primarily financed by China, has provided immediate and tangible benefits to local economies through job creation, technology transfer, and logistical efficiency.

However, these opportunities come with important caveats. A growing concern among policymakers and scholars is the risk of overdependence on Chinese infrastructure and capital. Many BRI projects are structured through debt-financed models, which—while enabling rapid development—may lead to unsustainable financial obligations or loss of strategic assets in the event of repayment failure. Additionally, the prioritization of Chinese industrial goals often results in unequal benefit distribution, with local industries remaining underdeveloped and Chinese firms dominating project execution and long-term management.

Central Asian countries also face geopolitical dilemmas stemming from competition between the BRI and Russian influence. Historically, Russia has maintained strong political, cultural, and economic ties with the region. The rapid rise of China as a dominant investor and political actor has sparked concern in Moscow, which sees BRI as encroaching on its traditional sphere of influence. This tension could complicate trilateral cooperation and force Central Asian states into delicate balancing acts between their two powerful neighbors.

In addition to Russian concerns, BRI is entangled in broader great power rivalries, particularly between the U.S., China, and Russia. As the initiative grows, it risks turning Central Asia into a site of zero-sum strategic competition, potentially undermining the region's autonomy and stability.

Table 4. Opportunities and Threats of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia

Theme	Category	Organized Coding	Representative Statements
Strategic trade and energy corridor development	Opportunity	Central Asia is a key land bridge between China and Eurasia	New BRI corridors reduce the time and cost of trade between China and Europe, positioning Central Asia as a core hub
Strengthened multilateral cooperation via the SCO		China promotes regional convergence in security and economic policy	Central Asian states benefit from their active participation in the SCO, which facilitates joint security efforts and promotes economic growth
Increased transit revenue and regional integration		Central Asia's involvement in East–West connectivity enhances regional trade	Integration into BRI rail and road projects increases regional transit revenue and reduces the isolation of landlocked areas
Shared infrastructure and economic development		BRI investment expands logistics and energy infrastructure	Countries like Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are improving their pipelines, railways, and ports through alignment with the BRI.
Deepened China–Central Asia diplomatic ties		BRI strengthens bilateral and multilateral diplomacy with regional states	BRI serves as a long-term framework for deeper China–Central Asia political and economic cooperation
Competition with Russian influence	Threat	Russia is wary of China's expanding footprint in the region	Moscow perceives China's economic outreach as a threat to its traditional sphere of influence in Central Asia
Overdependence on Chinese infrastructure		Risk of structural reliance on Chinese capital and technical systems	BRI projects may prioritize China's industrial goals, limiting local agency in infrastructure and trade decisions
Geopolitical rivalry in energy and influence		BRI may marginalize regional powers in energy transit	China's control over energy transport corridors may reduce the Central Asian states' negotiating power with others
Security overreach and potential interventionism		Economic engagement may lead to political and security entanglements	China's growing role in security provision raises concerns among Central Asian elites about sovereignty
BRI's limited integrative inclusivity		Unequal benefit distribution across participating countries	The initiative may disproportionately benefit China while sidelining the local industrial needs of Central Asia
Great power competition and regional instability		U.S.–China–Russia rivalry may intensify on Central Asian soil	The region risks becoming a site of strategic contestation between competing global visions and power blocs

This is compounded by China's increasing involvement in regional security affairs, which, while ostensibly intended to protect BRI investments, may raise fears of political interference or reduced national sovereignty among local populations and elites.

As shown in Table 4, BRI's limited integrative character remains a critical concern. While the initiative is presented as mutually beneficial, it often prioritizes China's western development strategy, focusing on infrastructure that serves Chinese export and energy security needs. As a result, some Central Asian countries fear being locked into roles as passive transit corridors or raw material suppliers, without meaningful inclusion in higher-value segments of global trade and industry.

Comparison of the Commonalities and Differences Between the Opportunities and Threats of India's and China's Economic Initiatives in Central Asia

The comparative analysis of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), India's North–South Transport Corridor (NSTC), and the TAPI pipeline project reveals complex, multi-layered impacts on Central Asian countries. As reflected in Table 5, a range of commonalities and differences emerge in how these initiatives present both opportunities and threats to the region. Through this lens, it becomes evident that Central Asia is not merely a passive recipient of external projects but an active strategic space where global powers intersect and regional agency is increasingly exercised.

To begin with, geopolitical competition stands as a key area of overlap. Both China and India have significantly expanded their presence in Central Asia, thereby heightening the influence of regional and trans-regional powers. While this expansion introduces risks—such as great power rivalry and dependency—it also creates opportunities. Central Asian states can potentially benefit from a multipolar geopolitical environment, which offers them greater flexibility to align with different partners and negotiate favorable terms, rather than being bound to a unipolar order dominated by a single actor.

Closely tied to geopolitical dynamics is the issue of regional power balance. Both initiatives have contributed to shifting alignments, often causing friction among stakeholders. For instance, China's expanding role through the BRI occasionally strains its relations with Russia. At the same time, India's alignment with the United States in projects like TAPI may create tensions with countries that favor a non-aligned or Sino-Russian axis. Despite these challenges, this disruption of traditional power structures has a silver lining: Central Asian countries can exploit these rivalries to assert greater diplomatic and strategic agency, ensuring that no single power monopolizes influence in the region.

The initiatives also underscore the strategic importance of Central Asia itself. Previously perceived as a peripheral zone, the region has increasingly been viewed as a critical energy and transit corridor. This elevation enhances Central Asia's geostrategic visibility and bargaining position. Nonetheless, there remains the risk that individual countries could be bypassed or overshadowed in significant projects, especially if their political or infrastructural readiness lags behind that of their neighbors. Therefore, the region must remain vigilant to ensure that its enhanced strategic value translates into tangible, equitable benefits for all member states.

From the perspective of economic diplomacy and trade, both China and India have expanded their commercial ties with Central Asian states. This growing economic engagement presents opportunities for infrastructure development, market access, and foreign direct investment. However, there is a notable caveat: asymmetric power dynamics may reduce the bargaining leverage of smaller states, especially in bilateral negotiations. Nevertheless, by adopting multilateral strategies and engaging in regional blocs, these states can counterbalance these asymmetries and maximize long-term economic gains.

Concerning commercial and transit roles, both initiatives promise to integrate Central Asian countries into broader transcontinental trade systems. Whether through the East–West corridors of the BRI or the North–South routes of the NSTC, enhanced connectivity can bring substantial benefits, including increased revenue, employment opportunities, and modernization. However, the uneven distribution of infrastructure investments may result in internal disparities, favoring specific corridors or countries. As such, Central Asian governments must coordinate their efforts to harmonize development and avoid regional fragmentation.

Furthermore, the impact on security and stability is another critical consideration. Both India and China promote regional stability through economic engagement—China through the SCO, and India through projects like TAPI, which is expected to contribute to Afghanistan's reconstruction. At the same time, however, imported rivalries (e.g., U.S.–China tensions or India–Pakistan conflicts) may spill over into Central Asia, threatening its delicate security environment. To mitigate this, regional leaders should prioritize cooperative security mechanisms and ensure that economic integration does not inadvertently exacerbate local vulnerabilities.

Finally, institutional inclusion offers both potential benefits and inherent risks. While participation in multilateral organizations, such as the SCO, can enhance the region's international profile and coordination capacity, overreliance on institutions dominated by a single power—such as China—may perpetuate unequal power relations. Therefore, Central Asian states must strive to diversify their institutional affiliations and proactively shape regional

Table 5. Commonalities and Differences in Opportunities and Threats of India's and China's Economic Initiatives in Central Asia

Criteria	Commonality	Threats	Opportunities	Initiative/ Country
Geopolitical competition	Rising influence of external powers in Central Asia	Risk of Central Asian states becoming arenas for great power rivalry	Multipolar engagement allows smaller states to diversify partnerships and avoid overdependence	India and China
Regional balance of power	Reconfiguration of regional alignments	Disrupted interests and increased competition among powers (China–Russia; India–U.S. alignments)	Central Asian states gain leverage to play powers against each other for greater autonomy	India and China
Strategic importance of Central Asia	Enhanced strategic value as a transit and energy corridor	Being bypassed or overshadowed in regional projects	Reinforced relevance of Central Asia in energy transport and trade architecture	China–BRI
Economic diplomacy and trade	Expansion of trade and economic ties with external powers	Potential loss of bargaining power in bilateral agreements with larger powers	Opportunities to access infrastructure, FDI, and export markets through diversified cooperation	India and China
Commercial and transit role	Strengthened logistical role in regional and intercontinental trade	Uneven infrastructure development may favor certain countries over others	Integration into north–south and east–west corridors improves regional connectivity and revenue potential	India–NSTC; China–BRI
Security and stability impact	Greater emphasis on security cooperation through economic engagement	Imported tensions (e.g., U.S.–China and India–Pakistan) may destabilize fragile border areas	Participation in SCO and stability projects (e.g., Afghanistan-focused investments) fosters regional peace	India–TAPI; China–BRI/SCO
Institutional inclusion	Opportunities for regional integration via multilateral platforms	Institutional asymmetries may reinforce power imbalances; reliance on China-led institutions	Membership in forums like the SCO strengthens regional cooperation and voice in multilateral economic governance	China–BRI/SCO

agendas, rather than merely accommodating the priorities of external stakeholders.

As illustrated in Table 5, the comparison between India's and China's economic strategies reveals that Central Asia occupies a pivotal role in the evolving landscape of Eurasian connectivity and competition. While both initiatives pose risks of dependency, exclusion, and rivalry, they also provide unprecedented opportunities for infrastructure development, geopolitical balancing, and economic modernization. The key challenge for Central Asian countries is navigating this duality with strategic foresight, institutional maturity, and a clear vision for inclusive, autonomous regional growth.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the economic initiatives of China and India in Central Asia—namely, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the TAPI Transit-Economic Project, and the North–South Transport Corridor (NSTC)—reflect a convergence of economic and geopolitical imperatives that reshapes the strategic environment of the region. These results are consistent with the neorealist perspective, which emphasizes the role of economic power in augmenting state influence. As Gilpin (1981) posits, powerful states seek to control strategic resources and trade corridors in order to consolidate their position in the international system. This logic underlies both China's BRI and India's NSTC and TAPI projects, which aim not only to secure energy access and economic integration but also to influence regional alignments in their favor (Grigoryan et al., 2024; Li, 2022).

In this perspective, Central Asia emerges as a contested space where regional and extra-regional powers seek to exert influence through economic means rather than direct military force. As the findings show, China's BRI is both a transformative opportunity and a potential source of dependency. It provides much-needed infrastructure and connectivity for landlocked Central Asian states, while also increasing their exposure to Chinese political and economic leverage (Nedopil, 2023; Papageorgiou et al., 2023). For Iran, the BRI presents both a platform to expand regional trade and a challenge to its traditional role as a regional transit hub, particularly as China consolidates alternative East–West corridors bypassing Iranian territory (Razapour & Eskandari, 2018).

Similarly, India's North–South Transport Corridor offers Central Asian states an alternative route to global markets, potentially less politically charged than China's BRI. However, its reliance on Iran for transit makes it vulnerable to geopolitical tensions, particularly under Western sanctions regimes (Huda & Ali, 2017). The corridor also suffers from logistical fragmentation and limited implementation, which undermines its potential to compete effectively with the BRI (Huda & Ali, 2017). Nevertheless, the NSTC still creates opportunities for strategic balancing and regional diversification, aligning with institutionalist views that emphasize the importance of multilateral cooperation and regional integration (Farhadi, 2020; Laursen, 2008).

The TAPI pipeline project further underscores the complexity of economic interdependence in the region. While it aims to enhance regional energy connectivity and economic stability—particularly by boosting Afghanistan's development and linking Central and South Asia—it also embodies geopolitical risk. As the findings show, U.S. support for TAPI is interpreted as part of a broader containment strategy aimed at limiting Iran's and China's influence in the energy sector (Shafiei, 2017). The exclusion of Iran from TAPI's core framework reinforces this interpretation. It exemplifies the asymmetric interdependence emphasized in neoliberal analysis, whereby weaker or isolated states must adapt to the institutional preferences and political agendas of dominant actors (Daneshnia, 2011; Papageorgiou et al., 2023).

Importantly, China and India's initiatives converge on several themes: they both promote multipolarity, offer infrastructural and economic incentives, and seek to expand their respective spheres of influence through soft power mechanisms. Nevertheless, key differences remain. China's BRI is more institutionalized and security-integrated via the SCO, while India's NSTC and TAPI emphasize bilateral and transit-oriented cooperation (Abdurashitov & Gusseinov, 2024; Mayer, 2018). India also aligns more closely with U.S. interests, as seen in its disengagement from the Iran-backed Peace Pipeline in favor of the U.S.-endorsed TAPI project (Moradi, 2008; Shafiei, 2017). China, in contrast, positions itself as a counter-hegemonic force working with Iran and Russia in a strategic triangle that balances U.S. influence (Papageorgiou et al., 2023; Syroezhkin, 2016).

Moreover, as geoeconomics increasingly replaces traditional military competition, states like Iran must navigate complex webs of economic and political interdependence. Iran's ability to benefit from these regional projects is constrained not only by international sanctions and geopolitical rivalries but also by internal capacity limitations. Nevertheless, Iran's strategic location—bordering the Persian Gulf, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia—continues to make it a pivotal player in regional trade and energy flows (Valigholizadeh & Zaki, 2009).

In summary, the comparative analysis of these three major regional initiatives reveals that Central Asia is evolving into a complex geopolitical and economic arena, where the interplay among infrastructure, energy, trade, and security shapes the strategic options of regional states. Both opportunities and threats are deeply embedded in this transformation. Whether Iran is marginalized or integrated into the emerging regional order depends on its ability to adapt diplomatically, diversify economically, and align itself with shifting centers of global power.

Conclusions

This study examined the opportunities and challenges presented by China's and India's economic initiatives in Central Asia, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the TAPI Transit-Economic Project, and the North–South Transport Corridor (NSTC). Employing thematic content analysis through matrix-based document coding, the research examined how these initiatives shape the strategic, economic, and geopolitical landscape of Central Asia and impact regional actors, including Iran.

The findings reveal that China's Belt and Road Initiative offer substantial infrastructural and economic benefits to Central Asian countries, including enhanced connectivity, access to foreign investment, and the potential for deeper multilateral engagement via platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Li, 2022; Nedopil, 2023). However, the BRI also presents notable threats, including the risk of economic overdependence on China (Papageorgiou et al., 2023), unequal distribution of benefits, and rising tensions among regional stakeholders, such as Russia and Iran (Razapour & Eskandari, 2018). These concerns reflect broader critiques that the BRI prioritizes China's internal development over regional integration (Syroezhkin, 2016).

In contrast, India's North–South Transport Corridor presents an alternative vision for regional cooperation. It emphasizes trade diversification and promotes multipolarity, providing Central Asian states with greater autonomy in choosing economic partners. However, its underdeveloped infrastructure, dependence on sanctioned Iran, and limited institutional coordination have curbed its effectiveness (Grigoryan et al., 2024). Moreover, India's strategic alignment with the U.S. may shift regional balances and potentially provoke new rivalries, especially with China and Russia (Shafiei, 2017).

The TAPI pipeline project occupies a unique position among these initiatives. While it may help stabilize Afghanistan and facilitate energy integration between South Asia and Central Asia (European Parliament, 2016), it also reveals competitive undercurrents, particularly regarding Iran's exclusion. TAPI's U.S.-backed orientation appears strategically designed to marginalize alternative regional routes, including Iran's Peace Pipeline (Cohen et al., 2008; Sanati, 2013). This echoes concerns about American influence limiting economic inclusivity and redirecting investments away from traditional regional powers (Moradi, 2008).

The study's comparative findings demonstrate that both China and India are reshaping Central Asia's strategic landscape through economic geostrategy rather than confrontation. Both initiatives offer the region opportunities for infrastructure development, enhanced transit roles, and diversified partnerships. At the same time, each carries distinct threats. China's BRI may increase political leverage and create imbalances in regional autonomy, while India's initiatives—particularly when aligned with U.S. strategic objectives—may lead to geopolitical fragmentation and competitive exclusion of rivals (Mayer, 2018; Papageorgiou et al., 2023). Taken together, these patterns indicate that policy responses must be explicitly calibrated to the main risks identified in this analysis: asymmetric economic dependence, sanctions-induced bottlenecks, and security fragility along key corridors.

Significantly, this research offers an original insight by highlighting that the competition between China's integrative infrastructure model and India's connectivity-driven diplomacy need not force Central Asian countries into a binary choice. Instead, it provides a complex set of geopolitical tools that, if navigated wisely, can enhance regional agency, economic resilience, and strategic flexibility. These outcomes align with neorealist assumptions about power balancing (Gilpin, 1981), institutionalist arguments about regional integration (Laursen, 2008), and geoeconomic theory, which frames state power through control of trade, energy, and transit (Farhadi, 2020; Sadeghi, 2012).

From a policy perspective, Central Asian governments should adopt a multi-vector economic diplomacy approach, engaging with both China and India while maintaining strategic autonomy, but this engagement needs to be explicitly risk-sensitive. In practice, this means using BRI, NSTC, and TAPI not only as sources of infrastructure finance and market access but also as levers to reduce single-partner dependence, diversify transit routes, and avoid being locked into exclusive geopolitical blocs. For regional actors like Iran, which remain peripheral yet potentially pivotal, strategic engagement with both initiatives—rather than alignment with one—could enhance its transit, energy, and security roles, assuming sanctions and geopolitical barriers are addressed (Amirahmadian & Behboudinejad, 2017; Valigholizadeh & Zaki, 2009). Such engagement must be designed so that Iran complements, rather than merely competes with, existing Chinese and Indian connectivity projects.

Two strategic policy recommendations emerge from the findings:

(1) For Central Asia and Peripheral Stakeholders: Deepen Economic Diplomacy within a Multilateral Framework States should invest in infrastructure, institutional compatibility, and policy harmonization to fully leverage the benefits of the BRI, NSTC, and TAPI. This includes participating in cooperative legal regimes, aligning with platforms like the SCO, and avoiding overdependence on any single power. More concretely, governments should cap exposure to any one creditor or sponsor in large BRI projects, insist on transparent contract terms and local-content requirements, and negotiate dispute-settlement mechanisms that dilute the leverage of any single external actor identified in this study as a source of asymmetric dependence. Joint corridor-management bodies—bringing together BRI, NSTC, and TAPI stakeholders—could be tasked with monitoring debt sustainability, transit fees, and security externalities, thereby directly targeting the risks of unequal benefit distribution and geopolitical fragmentation highlighted in the analysis. As institutionalist theory suggests, aligning shared economic interests through stable institutions reduces asymmetries and increases resilience (Laursen, 2008).

(2) For Isolated Economies Like Iran: Remove Barriers to Regional Integration. Structural obstacles such as international sanctions must be addressed to enable economic participation in regional projects. Drawing from geopolitical development theory, lifting these barriers would enhance Iran's ability to engage as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf. This would increase its relevance in energy trade, transportation, and multilateral diplomacy, especially as great power competition intensifies (Daneshnia, 2011; Abdurashitov & Gusseinov, 2024). In operational terms, this implies prioritizing sector-specific sanctions relief or waiver diplomacy in transport and energy, upgrading ports and rail hubs that physically connect the BRI and NSTC segments, and designing pipeline and electricity-interconnection projects that are complementary to, rather than in competition with, TAPI and similar initiatives. By doing so, Iran can mitigate the exclusionary dynamics identified in this study and reposition itself as a necessary, rather than optional, corridor state.

In conclusion, this study confirms that China and India's economic projects are not merely transactional developments but instruments of strategic influence. Their outcomes in Central Asia will depend on how regional states manage the delicate balance between cooperation, competition, and autonomy, ultimately shaping the trajectory of Eurasian geopolitics in the decades ahead. If policymakers explicitly link corridor participation to safeguards against overdependence, sanctions vulnerability, and security spillovers, the initiatives analyzed here can evolve from potential sources of imbalance into structured opportunities for shared regional resilience.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Shahid Beheshti University. The IRB verified that all procedures adhered to the institute's relevant institutional guidelines and regulations. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Abdurashitov, O., & Gusseinov, E. (2024). *India in the caucasus and Central Asia: The giant next door*. The Diplomat. https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/india-in-the-caucasus-and-central-asia-the-giant-next-door/

Amirahmadian, B., & Behboudinejad, S. (2017). Iran's gas market after the nuclear deal: Characteristics and opportunities. *Journal of Business*, *6*(2), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.31578/.v6i2.124

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Chalikyan, N., & Tashjian, Y. (2021). Geopolitics of the north-south transport corridor. *A Publication of the Stimson Center*. Retrieved from https://southasianvoices.org/geopolitics-of-the-north-south-transport-corridor/

Cohen, A., Curtis, L., & Graham, O. (2008). *The proposed Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline: An unacceptable risk to regional security (backgrounder no. 2139)*. The Heritage Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-proposed-iran-pakistan-india-gas-pipeline-unacceptable-risk-regional-security

Daneshnia, F. (2011). Applying game theory and neoliberal institutionalism to analyze OPEC gas behavior. *Political Science Research Journal*, *8*(1), 1–25. [In Persian]. https://www.magiran.com/p1127596

European Parliament. (2016). *TAPI natural gas pipeline project: Boosting trade and remedying instability?* European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI (2016) 593554.

Farhadi, M. (2020). Eurasian union and the role of Iran's free zones in the north-south corridor and silk road. In: International conference on the eurasian union and geopolitical role of free zones in regional development, Anzali, Iran, 17/11/2020. [In Persian].

Foster, J. (2010). Afghanistan, the TAPI pipeline, and energy geopolitics, *Journal of Energy Security*. https://www.ensec.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=233:afghanistan-the-tapi-pipeline-and-energy-geopolitics&cati

Gilpin, R. (1981). *War and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press.

Green Finance & Development Center. (2024). China belt and road initiative (BRI) investment report 2024. https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2024/

Grigoryan, K., Khachikyan, S., Avetisyan, A., & Egnatosyan, S. (2024). International north-south transport corridor: New economic and trade opportunities for India and Armenia. *E3S Web of Conferences*, *549*(06002), Article 06002. https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202454906002

Huda, M. S., & Ali, S. H. (2017). Energy diplomacy in south Asia: Beyond the security paradigm in accessing the TAPI pipeline project. *Energy Research & Social Science*, *34*(6), 202–213. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2017.07.013

Klimes, O. (2017). China's cultural soft power: The central concept in the early Xi Jinping era (2012–2017). *Acta Universitatis Carolinae Philologica*, *2017*(4), 127–150. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323965522

Laursen, F. (2008). *Theory and practice of regional integration (Jean Monnet/Robert schuman paper series, vol. 8 no. 3)*. University of Miami.

Li, J., Van Assche, A., Fu, X., Li, L., & Qian, G. (2022). The Belt and Road Initiative and international business policy: A kaleidoscopic perspective. *Journal of International Business Policy*, *5*(2), 135–151. https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-022-00136-x

Mayer, M. (Ed.) (2018). China's rise as Eurasian power: The revival of the silk road and its consequences. In: *Rethinking the silk road: China's belt and road initiative and emerging Eurasian relations* (pp. 1–28). Palgrave Macmillan.

Momeni, M. & Chaharmahali Esfahani, M. (2024). The place of Central Asia in India's new foreign policy: Implications for Iran. *Journal of Central Eurasia Studies*, *16*(2). https://jcep.ut.ac.ir/article_95913_9187be0bd33a54960e16880406755b39.pdf

Moradi, M. (2008). The role of India–Israel arms relations in regional geopolitics. *Political Science Quarterly*, *38*(4), 83–106. [In Persian]. https://jpq.ut.ac.ir/article_27713_1795a5b18e1deeac6144a96f87ae15ee.pdf

Nedopil, C. (2023). *China belt and road initiative (BRI) investment report 2023 H1*. Griffith University. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/372788122

Papageorgiou, M., Eslami, M., & Duarte, P. (2023). A 'soft' balancing ménage à trois? China, Iran, and Russia strategic triangle vis-à-vis U.S. hegemony. *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, *10*(1), 65–94. https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970231152008

Razapour, D., & Eskandari, S. (2018). Opportunities and threats of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Iran. In: *2nd International conference on political science, international relations, and transformation*, Tehran, Iran, 13/2/2019. [In Persian].

Sadeghi, S. S. (2012). Russia's energy strategy in Eurasia: Opportunities and obstacles. *Foreign Relations Quarterly*, *4*(1), 121–138. [In Persian]. https://frqjournal.csr.ir/article_123577_45b0554ebac52ac83d26ba55bee69362.pdf

Sanati, R. (2013). Pipeline politics. *The Cairo Review of Global Affairs*, *10*. Retrieved from https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/pipeline-politics/

Shafiei, N. (2017). U.S.–India cooperation in the great power game in Central Asia. *Central Eurasia Quarterly*, *10*(1), 45–68. [In Persian]. https://doi.org/10.22059/jcep.2017.62902

Syroezhkin, L. (2016). The 'Silk Road Economic Belt' project in the complex space of Central Asia. *Contours of Global Transformations*, *6*(9), 104–117. (Accessed: March 15, 2021). https://doi.org/10.23932/2542-0240-2016-9-6-104-122

Valigholizadeh, A., & Zaki, Y. (2009). Geopolitical and geo-economic significance of Iran for CIS countries. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, *4*(3), 21–56. [In Persian]. https://journal.iag.ir/article_57032_24630f8077ed79ae270d27e1e910c727.pdf?lang=en

Vangeli, A. (2018). Global China and symbolic power: The case of 16+1 cooperation. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *27*(113), 674–687. https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1458056

Xi Jinping. (2014). *The governance of China*. Foreign Languages Press. https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Governance_of_China.html?id=wpn5oQEACAAJ

Yıldırım, A. (2023). The idea of transmitting Central Asian energy through Afghanistan: TAPI natural gas pipeline project. *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, *24*(2), 362–380. https://doi.org/10.17494/ogusbd.1245451

Author Biographies

Dr. Mohammad Farhadi is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. He holds a Ph.D. in Regional Studies with a focus on Central Asia and Russia. His research interests include Regional Studies, particularly the political, economic, and security dynamics of Central Asia and Russia. Dr. Farhadi has authored several books and peer-reviewed articles, employing quantitative and mixed-methods approaches in these fields.

Alireza Noori is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. His research interests include Iran-Russia relations, Russian foreign policy, and Eurasian affairs. He has published research articles and papers focusing on geopolitical dynamics and strategic interactions in the Eurasian region.

Dr. Heidarali Masoudi is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Tehran, with research focused on representations of "the other" in Iranian foreign policy. His research interests include U.S.-Iran relations, American foreign policy, Iranian foreign policy, and the role of perceptions in international relations. He has published two books, numerous book chapters, and several articles in both Iranian and international journals, including notable publications in the European Journal of International Relations (2019) and chapters in Routledge and Springer volumes.