

Russia's Eurasian Aspirations and its Strategic Reach towards South Asia: Implications for Regional Connectivity

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This study analyzes Russia's Eurasian aspirations and strategic reach toward South Asia. It focuses on the important implications that regional connectivity can bring. The research investigates how Russia engages with South Asia and how it shapes the geopolitical landscape that increases the opportunities for regional connectivity. The paper also examines the aim of Russia presented by its strategies and presents initiatives for strengthening its presence in the region. Considering both economic and security elements of infrastructure projects spanning the Eurasian landmass, with particular attention to their influence on Pakistan and India, it assesses the strategic relevance of regional connectivity in Russia's foreign policy. Finally, given the rise of China and the retraction of U.S. power following the departure of its troops from Afghanistan, this paper hypothesizes about Russia's future trajectory in respect. It explores how these worlds events might affect Russia's attitude to South Asia and its more general Eurasian policy, therefore changing the scenario of regional connectivity .

Keywords: Russia, South Asia, regional connectivity, US, China

Russia's geography stretches towards Europe and Asia, making it the world's largest state by area on Earth. Russia's economy is largely driven by its vast energy reserves, which generated \$338 billion in revenue in 2022 (RFE/RL, 2022). The graph below shows the substantial value of Russia's proven mineral and energy resources, further highlighting the country's importance in the worldwide energy market. According to the Valdai Club (2019), Russia has the largest proven reserves of natural gas worldwide, with 14.4 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves and 9.04 billion tons of oil reserves. The total value of its mineral and energy resources, including oil, gas, gold, diamonds, copper, iron, and coal, is estimated at 55.2 trillion rubles, cementing Russia's important role in the international energy and mineral market.

<https://valdaiclub.com/multimedia/infographics/mineral-and-energy-resources-of-russia/>



Furthermore, EFSAS (2019) argued it has a highly sophisticated defense industry and has become one of the most strategically important players in the global arms market. Russia is the second-largest exporter of high-tech military equipment after the US, with an annual turnout of around \$15 billion. Currently, its major and most loyal customers remain China and India, according to EFSAS (2019).

The geopolitical landscape of the South Asian region is undergoing significant transformation, driven by the strategic maneuvers of regional and global powers. In this context, Russia is increasing its position and strategic reach towards South Asia, which has attracted major attention. This paper aims to investigate the consequences of Russia's Eurasian ambitions for South Asia regarding regional connectivity. It is situated especially with a Eurasian identity, close to the distance between Europe and Asia. Its strategies and projects in this area show this identity and its goal of increasing its regional impact, with some countries observing Russia's actions as a threat to regional stability and others seeing them as a necessary step towards regional integration and shared prosperity, after Russia's military intervention in Ukraine.

Russia's past involvement in South Asia was complicated by geopolitical goals, strategic alliances, and regional disputes, among other elements. Knowing Russia's current policies and initiatives in that field requires a full awareness of this past knowledge. From Pro-Western Diplomacy (1991–1995) to Great Power Diplomacy (2014–present), Liu (2022) looked at in his studies how Russia has modified its foreign policy over the years.

Russia's main interest in South Asia, according to Kurlantzick (2022), was long-standing cooperation with India, first launched during the Soviet era. Employing solid defense cooperation, Russia and India have not only enhanced their mutual relations but also significantly changed the regional balance of power. Moreover, Kurlantzick (2022) observed that in the Soviet era, Russia's relations with Pakistan were more complex due to Pakistan-India historical conflicts. Yet, the last two decades witnessed its relations with Pakistan improving year by year. Russia is not focusing only on two-way relations with regional states and actively is using regional platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to enhance its regional power broker profile. Its regional connectivity initiatives, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor, which connects Russia to India, have strategically shaped its interests.

Nonetheless, Pakistan-India's adverse relations, such as the Kashmir conflict and both states' rivalry to increase influence in Afghanistan, were the main barriers to South Asia's regional connectivity and South-Central Asian regional connectivity. This kind of conflict formed a problem for Russia's regional connectivity initiatives and strategic interests.

This study has the following research questions.

1. How do Russia's Eurasian aspirations align with its initiatives and policies in the South Asian region?
2. What role does regional connectivity play in Russia's strategy to enhance its influence in South Asia?
3. How do Russia's relations with the South Asian region affect the geopolitical balance?
4. How can the US withdrawal of the forces from Afghanistan and the rise of China affect Russia's future strategic reach towards the South Asian region?

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) is used in this study to analyze Russia's Eurasian aspirations and strategic reach towards South Asia. This theory was first written in the book titled "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security" by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003). According to Buzan and Waiver (2003), regional security has three elements: regional major powers' existence, power distribution, and security interdependence among states. Against the context of Russia's Eurasian goals towards South Asia, this theory proposes a constructive background to comprehend the complex regional security dynamics. Rezvani (2020) highlighted that the main objectives of Russia's Eurasianism were to counterweight the Western domination in the Eurasian region and restore its century-old hegemony in ex-USSR states. Diesen (2019) analyzed that Russia wanted to increase regional cooperation and economic integration and to decrease reliance on Western political and economic systems. The RSCT theory effectively

resonates with Russia's Eurasian aspiration in South Asia. It perfectly reverberates the limitations and opportunities presented to Moscow's strategic calculus.

Russia's Role as Probable Regional Security Actor:

South Asia is a convoluted region with vested interests from multiple stakeholders. Russia, as a probable and primary regional security actor, may influence the region with the instrumentalization of energy diplomacy and SCO. Russia's involvement via SCO enhances its credibility in the region with the utmost promise of regional stability and collaboration. Moscow's involvement in the region counterbalances Western influence along with the promotion of mutual economic and security interests (Batoool & Muzaffar, 2024).

Power Distribution with Uneven Interdependence:

The South Asian region endures an uneven distribution of power and presents some possible limitations along with opportunities. Russia is leveraging the SCO platform for shielded penetration into the region. However, the grievances between China and India cause some disputed cracks that Russia must perceive and navigate deliberately. This dynamic situation in the region emphasizes RSCT's notion of power asymmetry as a vital calculation of regional security architecture (Walyat, 2025).

Security and Threat Perception:

A critical aspect of RSCT underscores the region's complexity with interdependent security concerns. Unusual chaos and turmoil can reverberate across the border. Bakare's research (2021), highlighted that Russia's Eurasian goals regarding regional connectivity focused on the South Asian states such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Afghanistan's border is attached to Russia's ex-Soviet Central Asian states. Russia is strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, making them key to its efforts to promote economic integration and cooperation in the region. However, Russia's goals to design a regional security complex in other regional powers' existence, such as India and China, are challenging because both powers have their own regional interests. The South Asian region was facing a high-level rivalry between Pakistan and India, India and China, which caused integration challenges.

This research has adopted a qualitative research design to carry out an in-depth analysis of Russia's Eurasia Aspiration and regional connectivity in South Asia. Within the contextual setting, the approaches used in the research allow for the nuanced exploration of Russia's Eurasian aspirations projection into the South Asian region. This research has shed light on different critical aspects of Russia's strategic decisions, including the narratives, foreign policy and discourses that shape Russia's Eurasian identity and its aspirations' credibility.

Data Collection and Sources:

The data collection consists of both primary and secondary sources. This two-way approach ensures analytical depth and credibility. As primary sources, data was gathered from official documents, policy statements, speeches, policy documents, and intergovernmental materials. To contextualize the official material, a wide range of scholarly and analytical literature was examined and used. Peer-reviewed journal articles, books by regional connectivity experts, and analytical pieces from reputable think tanks have also been used.

Data Collection and Criteria:

To ensure reliability and credibility, sources were selected based on a rigorous criterion. All sources directly resonate with the research questions. Efforts were made to include sources from diverse geopolitical viewpoints. Conscious efforts were made to mitigate bias and provide a balanced analysis. Credible publications were prioritized. A two-pronged analytical approach has been applied in this research with thematic analysis and process-tracing. This research aims to examine a comprehensive knowledge of Russia's Eurasian aspirations, collecting thoughts from various experts, and it also acknowledges the complexities and controversies surrounding this critical issue in international relations.

Russia's Eurasian Goals

Katzenstein and Weygandt (2017) examine that Russia has a profound self-image as a Eurasian power, implications for its foreign policy, shaping its geopolitical strategies, economic engagements, and cultural narratives. Russia's policies were based on a state-centric approach and anti-Western views, and it portrays its position as a central player in its regional sphere of influence. But, in an international context, Russia's approach is neglected, which results in a significant cost, while its domination in Eurasia is opposed by global perspectives. Amilakhvari and Baghaturia (2024) say that Russia's diplomatic relations have been limited after the invasion of Ukraine, and it selected to follow its policy mainly using hard power/neo-imperial strategies only.

Smith's study (1999) discussed that Russia's Eurasianism concept had emerged in the early 1990s. It marked a change in its foreign policy that joined the regions into Russia's Eurasian identity, such as the Near Abroad, Europe, and Asia. Skuratov (2021) argued that this ideological foundation is reinforced by classical Eurasian doctrines that balance Russia's Western and Eastern foreign policy vectors, emphasizing its unique civilizational community. Bazavluk's study (2021) examined that Russia's main agendas under Eurasianism are the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and developing a multipolar world. The crisis and weaknesses of Western liberal democracy have presented opportunities for Russia, which seeks to exploit its Eurasian identity as a unique political and cultural offering and attract like-minded nations to its integration projects (A Review of Research on Russia's Strategic Adjustment to the West under the Background of Russia-Ukraine Conflict, 2024).

Rieber (2018) viewed that, historically, Russia's relationship with Asia has been intricate and multifaceted. Although a sizable portion of Russian territory is in Asia, Russia's cultural and political focus has often been inclined towards Europe, especially since Peter the Great's efforts to modernize Russia through Western European practices and ideologies. However, the expansion of the Russian Empire in the 19th century revived its interest in Asia as the empire enlarged and reached this region.

Sarkisyanz (1954) demonstrated that Russia has struggled to develop a coherent ideology regarding its role in Asia. Unlike Western colonial powers, Russia did not create an elaborate ideological framework to justify its expansion into Asia, remaining oriented towards the West, even when interacting with Asian countries.

Trenin (2006), demonstrated that after the fall of the USSR, progressively Russia has accepted the significance of the Asian region. The rise of China and other emerging Asian states economically has increased Russia's interests and attracted its policymakers. In the last two decades, Russia has portrayed its position as a 'Euro-Pacific' nation and is balancing its interests between Europe and Asia to avoid over-dependence on either region, leveraging its unique transcontinental position.

Rozman (2018), highlighted that economically, Asia offers substantial opportunities for Russia, particularly in energy exports. This region's dynamic economies, like China, India, Japan, and Korea, offer a beneficial market for Russian energy resources. Russia is focusing on converting its Far Eastern and Eastern Siberian regions into booming industrial centers and upgrading transport systems to increase economic ties with the Asian region, and further deeper integration with the regional market.

Russia's Phases of Foreign Policy

After the Soviet dissolution, Russia had profound significant changes in its foreign policies that were determined by insightful changes in the global world order, domestic politics and economics, and the diplomatic vision of the leadership. Liu (2022), argued in his study that this transformation of foreign policy can be outlined through six different phases.

1. **Pro-Western Diplomacy (1991–1995):** Russia's attempt to closely connect with Western nations, hence pursuing integration into Western political and economic systems.

2. **Multipolar Diplomacy (1996–2000):** Opposition to NATO's growth, which underlined the need for a multipolar world in which Russia might play a major independent power.
3. **The Great Power Pragmatism (2001–2004)** aimed at building a favorable international environment that promoted Russia's economic development, social improvement, and rebirth as a major world power, hence expanding its global influence and prestige.
4. **Neo-Slavism (2005–2008)** pushed back against the flood of 'color revolutions' spreading over the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and responded to what Russia regarded as intervention by the U.S. and Europe in her domestic affairs.
5. **Stability and Cooperation Diplomacy (2009–2013):** Diplomacy concentrated on enhancing the CIS integration which, preserves pragmatic alliances and collaboration with the EU, restoring rapport with the United States and strengthening strategic coordination with China.
6. **Great Power Diplomacy (2014–present):** Great Power Diplomacy was marked by confronting the West because of its action in Ukraine, which was widely criticized by Western states.

These six different phases of Russia's foreign policy evolution since 1991 have been marked by a pivot away from the west. This evolution led Russia to increase its engagement with Asia, especially in deeper proximity with the South Asian countries, i.e., India, Pakistan.

Greater Eurasian Idea

According to Skriba and Drozdova, 2021 research shows that Russia's Eurasian vision was to become a central force in a multipolar international order, preserving its influence over the huge Eurasian territory. The idea of "Greater Eurasia" captures this goal since it exposes Russia's desire to boost political, economic, and security cooperation across the territory. By establishing Russia as a major actor in Eurasia and questioning the current international order, this alliance seeks to change the scene created following the ColdWar.

Lewis (2018) claims that the idea of Greater Eurasia first emerged in Moscow's think tanks and academic circles, most famously among the Valdai Discussion Club and the Faculty of World Economics and International Affairs of the Higher School of Economics. Renowned Russian Sinologist Lukin (2015) proposed extending Russia's Eurasian integration program to include China and other regional states in 2015. The Greater Eurasia idea thereafter became well-liked within Moscow's elite circles, according to Krickovic, and Pellicciari (2021), who also mentioned it as a regular topic of official speeches and foreign policy debates.

President Vladimir Putin has announced Russia's intention for wider Eurasian cooperation during the St. Petersburg Economic Forum was held in June 2016 in Russia. In his statement, he declared that more than 40 states and international organizations have expressed curiosity about creating a free trade zone with the EAEU. This will help merge the EAEU into China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), putting Russia at the heart of a much larger area of integration. In 2023, Alberque and Fraioli indicated that, in the 2023 updated Russian foreign policy conception, Russia represents "a large Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power" at the heart of a fresh global order characterized by being anti-west. The purpose is rather not to act-react against Western influence alone but to form an exclusive Russian-led cluster able to make decisions and participate in global politics without leaning over someone's shoulder.

"Greater Eurasia" is a grandiose geo-economic vision exceeding regional economic integration in a bid to refashion the global economic landscape. According to Glenn Diesen (2021), the aim is to change the epicenter of the global economy from the Western-dominated Atlantic and Pacific regions to the Eurasian "heartland" between Russia and China. Advocates of Greater Eurasia sometimes connect their vision to more general geopolitical developments, like the fall of US and Western hegemony, the creation of new regional blocs, and the rise of non-Western pole in the new Cold War, Karaganov (2015) noted.

Lewis (2018) said that the realization of Greater Eurasia would allow the international system to transcend American unipolar dominance, promoting a more fair, just, and representative global order anchored in principles of sovereignty, non-interference, and the right of each society to decide its own social

system and development path. Nonetheless, Walt et al., (2020) examined that the consolidation of Greater Eurasia presents major challenges and that it is still unclear whether Russia may effectively realize its ambition. Based on the work done by Krickovic and Pellicciari (2021), these conditions may either be detrimental to Russia's efforts to make Greater Eurasia a reality or present Russia with new opportunities to enhance its positioning. Furthermore, Javaid (2024), highlighted that these kinds of ideas of regional connectivity showed that Russia preserved its influence in the region, but realistically, due to geopolitical considerations and limited resources, they would not be implemented.

Russia's Regional Connectivity with South Asia

In 2022, Khan conducted a study that showed complex networks and reliance on smooth connections among different means of transportation, communication, finance, and information sharing, to be the features of contemporary international trade (Khan, 2022). Inefficiencies such as those related to logistics, transport systems, and trade infrastructural facilities, can severely affect how competitive countries are at the global scale (Khan, 2022). Landlocked developing countries face unique obstacles in accessing global markets and require specialized trade facilitation and connectivity initiatives to overcome their plight and enhance economic growth.

Russia has a strategy to promote its influence in South Asia through regional connections. Russia wants to bring South Asia closer to its greater Eurasian design by supporting transport, commercial, and energy connections with the region as well as encouraging economic growth and strengthening cooperation in the geopolitical sphere (Ryazantseva & Yakushova, 2024). According to Javaid (2024), its main aim is to manage regional integration between South Asia and Central Asia, which is also Pakistan's wish to develop a Southern Corridor for landlocked states due to its geostrategic location and could create connectivity between Central and South Asian and the Middle East.

Historical Context and Evolving Policies

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union, which Russia was part of had a strategic partnership with India, characterized by substantial military cooperation and arms sales (EFSAS, 2019). Such ties were meant to give a proper response to the US influence in the broader Asian region. In 1991, after the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's foreign policy changed; despite a marked bias towards India, Moscow established friendlier contact with Islamabad as well.

There are clear economic implications in Malysheva (2022) study concerning Russia's involvement in the countries found in South Asia due to geopolitical policies, energy requirements, and commercial ties. It includes India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan as its main targets, where reference is made by Malysheva concerning the nature of Russia's engagement in the region, underscoring intensified global integration alongside the establishment of some substantial alliances.

According to Naqvi and Abbas (2022), Russia's stance on South Asia has changed several times due to internal factors as well as external constraints:

1. **Estrangement (1947–1953):** Lack of participation in South Asia characterized Russia's strategy over the period. This was largely because the Cold War was still in its early stage and Europe as well as East Asia were more important.
2. **Engagement (1954–1971):** This era had more interaction with India, it was different from US power in the area.
3. **Indo-centrality (1971–1991):** The Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation signified a period of close relations with India from 1971 to 1991 due to common strategic aims and ideological similarity.
4. **Pragmatism (1991–2022):** In this era, Russia had a special attachment with India, it maintained a cordial relationship between India and Pakistan through dealing with trade and defense cooperation rather than ideology.

Russia's Regional Connectivity Initiatives

Russia has begun significant projects and initiatives that aim to strengthen its economic linkages and influence in South Asia.

1. **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC):** This 7,200-km-long network, which is a combination of land and coastal routes, is made of rail, road and water systems which lower costs as well as travel time for freight carriage, thus facilitating trade between the Russian Federation, Iran, Central Asia, India, and Europe. Products are transported from Western India to Iran's Bandar Abbas, and they are shipped by land and rail via Baku to Moscow and St. Petersburg (Mallik & Singh, 2022). ("Watch Out, China: India Is Building A 'New Silk Road' Of Its Own - Forbes"). This pathway costs 30% less and is shorter by 40% than pathways already in place (Chatterjee & Sing, 2015). Pakistan has not joined the initiative so far. However, the country has received an invitation from Russian President Vladimir Putin to join the INSTC, upon which the membership process has been started, according to Ambassador to Russia Muhammad Khalid Jamali on June 19, 2024, during the International IT-Forum in Khanty-Mansiysk, Russia (Sharif, 2024).
2. **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):** It involves China, Russia, and countries from Central Asia, with a focus on advancing regional security, economic cooperation, and connectivity. South Asian nations such as Pakistan and India are also part of this. This also offers an opportunity for Russia to engage through the above-related platforms on the questions concerning economy and connectivity (Somerville, & Crawford, 2023). Akhtar and Javaid (2024) have examined that regional peace and stability are significant for the members of SCO to enhance regional connectivity. They shared interests in energy security and economic cooperation. China and Russia seek to. Nevertheless, the inclusion of India and China in SCO offers a strategic opportunity for Russia. The fault lines between the two can make Russia a balancer to play a neutral role. Russia can drive its interests on both sides by maintaining strong energy and defense ties with India and strong strategic alignment with the with China. Russia can act as stabilizer by preventing bilateral rivalries within the SCO framework. This act could allow Russia to preserve its relevance in the Eurasian region.
3. **BRICS+ (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa):** Acts as a further means of endorsing economic integration in addition to connectivity. In terms of managing China's strategic partnership with it and building relationships with India and Pakistan, Russia is expected to overcome tough geopolitical dynamics. Pakistan is not part of this forum; it has already given a signal to apply for full membership in November 2023.
4. **CPEC Expansion:** The Chinese and Pakistani Economic Corridor provides the most effective way to link Eurasia with South Asia, thereby increasing regional connectivity. They must understand this while considering it (Serenko, 2021). Russia is strategically interested in increasing its economic and geopolitical ties with China and Pakistan. Its attempt to integrate this commonality in terms of its economy would mean its Eurasian Economic Project aligns with CPEC. In so doing, CPEC itself could be used as leverage for closer economic and geostrategic relations between Russia, China, and Pakistan by creating partnerships that will help develop the area along the oceanic route up to the Indian Ocean and shape a strong trade triangle among Russia, Pakistan, and China. (Chaliha, 2021).
5. **Trans-Afghan Railway Line:** The region of Central Asia has a lot of promising opportunities for the development of Russia-Pakistan relations. There exists no other overland route to Pakistan which would be shorter than the one passing through this region because Afghanistan is situated here. An agreement on the Trans-Afghan railway line (573 km) connecting Uzbekistan with the seaports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan, passing through Afghanistan, was signed by Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. It would enable Islamabad to have rail transport access to both Central Asia and Russia (Vorobyov, 2020).

Geopolitical Dynamics and Strategic Hedging

According to research by EFSAS (2019), Russia's conduct towards South Asia is essentially hedging its bets strategically by promoting friendly ties with India as well as with Pakistan, even with all the odds stacked against one another. Hence, this stratagem steers through the intricate intricacies of South Asian geopolitics, where it plays the role of go-between and peace promulgator. Moreover, this is considered an opportunistic aim to occupy the gap of power left after the US vacated Afghanistan.

Menon and Rumer (2022) studied that Russia has revived its policies in South Asia. Witnessing its recent efforts to strengthen ties with Pakistan may be seen as an indication of their historical alliance during the 1960s or as a strategic response to the evolving geopolitical landscape and potentially signaling to New Delhi that Moscow is diversifying its partnerships in the region.

Pakistan became the most important after the U.S. departure from Afghanistan because of its historical involvement in Afghanistan and its strong relations with the Taliban. By cultivating a closer relationship with Islamabad, Moscow may be seeking to mitigate the potential spillover of instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia, thereby safeguarding its regional interests and maintaining a balance of power in the area. Javaid (2024), discussed in his research that no regional state or power can alone maintain peace in Afghanistan. So, cooperation between all regional powers such as China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and along with Central Asian states, is significant to maintaining peace and regional connectivity initiatives.

Korybko (2022) showed in December 2019, a 64-member delegation led by Russian Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov visited Pakistan to explore investment opportunities worth several billion dollars. Foreign Minister Lavrov also expressed interest in Russian investments in Central Asia-South Asia connectivity. These developments demonstrated Russia's growing interest in Pakistan as a significant investment partner. Chia and Haiqi (2021), and Javed (2022) highlighted that Russia and Pakistan have signed a US\$ 2.5 billion agreement to build the Pakistan Stream gas pipeline project, which was part of a larger US\$ 14 billion Russian investment package in the energy sector of Pakistan. Although Russia has strong strategic interests in the South Asian region, it is also facing some challenges in cooperation with regional states, such as a balanced relationship with India and Pakistan, managing reliance on China, and navigating geopolitical changes following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Impact of China's Rise and U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Opportunities for Russia

The Eurasian geopolitical landscape has undergone significant change due to the rise of China and its influence, including the refraction of the U.S., particularly the withdrawal from Afghanistan. These imperative shifts have impacted the strategic aspirations of Russia in the region.

As stated by Korybko and Morozov (2020), India has been viewed as a vital strategic partner by Russia, due to its economic potential, regional influence, and a key role player as a counterbalancing element to China and U.S. domination in Asia. The Russia and India relationship had roots in the Soviet era. Both nations shared a strong defense partnership, similar economic ideologies centered around state-owned enterprises, and significant Soviet assistance to India. Malik and Jambhulkar (2018), found that their geopolitical alliance during the Cold War era was placed in opposition to the US, Pakistan, and China, establishing a solid bond between Moscow and New Delhi.

Menon and Rumer (2022) elaborated that the basis of Russo-Indo relations has gone through a substantial shift in recent years. Soon after the USSR's temptation, the rapid Indian growth, the U.S.-China's escalating tensions, the spontaneous strengthening of U.S.-India relations, and the estrangement from the West on Russia due to the conflict in Ukraine, all of these had an extreme impact. While India remained a key arms supplier from Russia, it now faces tough competition in the Indian market as India pursues to expand its defense suppliers and develop its domestic capabilities.

Yongquan (2018), reviewed that China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) present Russia with an opportunity to balance Western influence and align with China's expansion strategy. The Sino-Russian cooperation aims to promote deeper integration in Eurasia through the alignment of Russia's Greater Eurasian

Partnership (GEP) and BRI, reshaping the global order. Rolland (2019) narrates that the partnership equally divides the responsibilities between China and Russia. Russia focuses on security and political aspects, while China mostly on economic ones. Besides that, Mallik and Singh (2022) examined the future of the potential challenges due to the huge gap in power between Russia and China. Both GEP and BRI have recently resonated to promote the integration of Eurasia via transport and trade corridors due to economic restrictions. However, BRI's unwavering prominence might surpass the Russian-led initiatives in the region. The risk of becoming a junior partner in the region is looming on the horizon. Russia will be in the position to find ways for economic leverage and to defy the strategic alienation in the South Asian region.

The eastward expansion of America and NATO is viewed as a significant means by Russia for its national security, as carried out by its military interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and then Syria (2015). As per the research of EFSAS (2019), these demonstration acts reveal the determination of Russia to secure its interest and influence in the region in contrast to the advancement of the U.S. and NATO as a prime threat to its sovereignty and security. The withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan has left a power vacuum that Russia asserts to fill and wants to boost its influence in the region. In the post-withdrawal scenarios, Russia has the utmost opportunity to become a stabilizer in the century-old chaotic region of Afghanistan within the framework of the SCO. Nevertheless, without a sustainable and robust strategy, it will be a short-lived dream. Without concrete incentives and enduring commitment, other regional stakeholders with increasing assertiveness may limit Russia's potential.

Eslami and Papageorgiou, (2023) noted that China's rise has led to greater economic interdependence, particularly through the BRI, fostering more integrated regional economies connected to China's economic network. Many regions where the influence of the U.S. is restricted may relook to modify their partnerships, diversifying especially towards China for development and continued economic growth. This diversification may spur infrastructure development and new connectivity projects. Additionally, it is highlighted by Grosse, Gamso, and Nelson (2021) that the U.S. retraction and the rise of China may lead to disruption in conflicts regarding regional connectivity. They spur various forms of cooperation because of the new international order as the global communities may tilt their interests. On the contrary, Russia can position itself as an alternative partner in the region through energy cooperation and counterterrorism initiatives. While the success of its positioning as an alternative partner entirely depends upon its reliability and stability.

Krickovic, and Pellicciari (2021) viewed in their research that (the EAEU) Eurasian Economic Union would not boost the global standing of Russia. On the other hand, Moscow seeks to enhance its integration efforts in the EAEU, by drawing in China along with other rising powers like Turkey, India, and Iran. Russia's status has been significantly bolstered by this strategic move as the partnership between both countries one way and another has catered their vulnerabilities. Besides that, the dependence of the Russian projects' success solely relies upon the participation of the reputed States of the International Community. Due to the Western disregard for the EAEU filing, the initial signatories from Greater Eurasia are not that promising, on the side. Besides that, the major non-western players like India, Iran, China, and Turkey have revealed limited stakes and interest in this project.

Conclusion

To conclude, Russia's strategic aspirations for reaching South Asia depict its ongoing quest for influence in the Eurasian landscape. Russia's geopolitical maneuvering along with complexities Post Ukraine crisis realities have made Russia to reconsider its strategies and foster deeper ties with contemporary regional players and renewed focus on access to warm water ports. By analyzing the Regional Security theory, the study has carried out a comprehensive evaluation to elaborate on how, in the complex interplay of geopolitics, Russia is seeking a balanced relationship for regional stability amidst the plethora of challenges posed by the China-US fluctuating rift. Russia's commitment to a multipolar world is vigorously reflected by its key initiatives for regional connectivity, i.e., the International North-South Transport Corridor and cooperation within frameworks like the SCO and BRICS, etc. Moreover, Russia has also staged a calculated approach in its defense collaboration with India and, simultaneously, its engagement with Pakistan. Despite the ongoing hostility between India and Pakistan, Russia's evolving policies aim to create a consolidated Eurasian connectivity.

Recommendations

Russia should use Eurasian spirit to improve regional connections across South Asia by:

1. The regional trade and economic development cooperation among (ECO) **Economic Cooperation Organization** Member States should be enhanced. Russia needs to work more effectively with the **Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation** (CAREC). This forum should be utilized to advance regional trade, transportation, and economic growth.
2. To improve Eurasian connectivity, lowering transit time and regional trade (TIR) **Transports Internationaux Routiers** Network ought to be channelized. This platform offers a perfect chance to implement the aim of regional connectedness. The first Pakistani truck landed in Moscow via Iran and Azerbaijan under this project in just seven days, therefore lowering transportation time by almost 76% in 2021 (IRU, 2021).
3. **The Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement** (QTTA) has signatories including Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China. Russian relations are already fostered with all three countries except Pakistan, which can further be enhanced by utilizing this agreement to boost the influence and regional connectivity by accessing its ports to expand economic and trade horizons. To connect and enhance regional connectivity and trade of Central Asia with South Asia investment should be done for a **Trans-Afghan Railway line**.
4. Initiatives should be supported to connect and create an electricity market, of Central Asia's energy surplus with South Asia's energy deficit via the (CASAREM) **Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Market**.

Hence, by investing in the projects of regional connectivity and initiatives, Russia can foster and strengthen the Eurasian Project, which can enhance geopolitical stability and can enhance regional economic integration in South Asia. Russian can pragmatically contribute to Eurasian integration by consolidating its presence in the South and Central Asian region.

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