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INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT CORRIDORS IN SOUTH ASIA: GEOPOLITICAL PROBLEMS

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The difficulties and geopolitical constraints for international transport corridors in South Asia are studied. The present barriers to their operation and expansion, such as infrastructural deficits, political instability, and geopolitical restraint are discovered. The impact of geopolitics on regional trade and economic development is also discussed, along with the contribution of regional and global players to the resolution of security and stability issues. A review of the intricate geopolitical dynamics of the transit corridors revealed significant issues and conflicts amongst the states in the region. Opportunities are identified for the Eurasian Economic Union to reroute its cargo flows in response to Western sanctions presented by the International North – South transport corridor, Indian projects “Act East” and “Neighbourhood first”, and the China – Pakistan economic corridor.

Keywords: South Asia; Pakistan; India; international relations; geopolitics.

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЕ ТРАНСПОРТНЫЕ КОРИДОРЫ В ЮЖНОЙ АЗИИ: ПРОБЛЕМЫ ГЕОПОЛИТИКИ

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Рассмотрены проблемы, связанные с международными транспортными коридорами в Южной Азии. Выявлены факторы, препятствующие развитию и эффективному функционированию транспортных маршрутов, такие как различия в инфраструктуре, политическая нестабильность и геополитические вызовы. Кроме того, оценено влияние геополитических проблем на региональную торговлю и потенциал экономического роста. Определена роль региональных и международных участников в решении вопросов безопасности и стабильности в регионе. Проведен углубленный анализ сложной геополитической динамики вокруг международных транспортных коридоров в Южной Азии, который позволил обозначить проблемы и противоречия между государствами. Особое внимание уделено Международному транспортному коридору “Север – Юг”, индийским проектам “Действуй на Востоке” и “Соседи прежде всего”, а также геополитическому значению строительства китайско-пакистанского экономического коридора. Обозначены направления и преимущества в сотрудничестве со странами Южной Азии как альтернативный вариант перенаправления грузопотоков из-за введенных Западом санкций для государств Евразийского экономического союза.

Ключевые слова: Южная Азия; Пакистан; Индия; международные отношения; геополитика.

Introduction

Trade, political, and economic links between the North, South, West, and East of Eurasia were enhanced as a result of South Asia’s rising stature and economic might. This development has drawn scholars’ attention to the function, importance, and role of international

transport corridors (ITC) as tools of globalisation and integration in South Asia.

Consideration of the intricate link between integration, which promotes international links, and the quality of the transport infrastructure contributes to

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our understanding of the importance of ITCs in world politics. In Europe, integration led to a supranational transport policy, and consequently the formation of a common transport area. Transport corridors connect countries to international transport systems and logistic chains, amid fierce competition among global actors [1].

Theoretically, ITCs are a primary tool for expanding trade and economic links among states. International transport corridors have been shown to enhance the flow of freight traffic, improve the legal framework, harmonise border procedures, attract investment in infrastructure and make government-business interactions more effective¹.

Transport corridors are especially important for landlocked countries. Following up on the High-level midterm review of the implementation of the Vienna programme of action for land-locked developing countries for the decade 2014–2024, the UN General Assembly Resolution 74/15, adopted on 5 December 2019, put forth a “corridor approach”, by which transit and landlocked developing states can improve trade and transport links².

Geopolitical studies have mainly addressed the following three transport corridors in South Asia:

1) International North – South transport corridor (INSTC);

2) corridors covered by the “Act East” policy of the Indian government, regarding the main directions, aspects and objectives of this policy;

3) China – Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC).

According to G. Sakhdeva, professor at the Centre for European Studies at the School of International Studies at J. Nehru University, each integration endeavour in Eurasia advances in two dimensions: geopolitical and economic. He observes: “Geopolitics may come to the fore and inhibit interaction by erecting formidable barriers to international transport corridors in South Asia” [2].

India has a strong interest in developing its transport system since doing so would diversify its commerce and energy supplies. However, geopolitics has made building a stable and friendly neighbourhood a challenging task and thus prevented India from acting on this desire. As an example, the proposed gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to India via Afghanistan and Pakistan, otherwise extremely beneficial economically for all parties, is being held up by domestic upheaval in Afghanistan and the India – Pakistan dispute over Kashmir.

However, South Asian nations are being urged to think about taking alternate political and economic paths by China’s increased presence, as demonstrated by its Belt and Road initiative. N. Modi, Indian prime minister, has unveiled a development strategy for the distant yet crucially located Northeastern parts of his

nation. As a component of Indian basic initiatives, “Act East” and “Neighbourhood first”, these objectives are directly tied to the development of Indian networks of international transport corridors and are expected to strengthen its geopolitical influence. The INSTC is pertinent to this article because it will allow India broad access to the markets of Central Asia and Europe.

The CPEC, which connects China to the Pakistani port Gwadar, is a flagship project of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative. The Belt and Road includes the CPEC prominently. It is seen as the symbol of a new era of connectedness and integration in Pakistan and is projected to alter the pattern of economic growth and increase the standards of living for both its citizens and those in the surrounding countries. For China, it is the shortest way to reach the Indian Ocean. The CPEC is not just a turning point in the history of the ties between China and Pakistan; it also stands out among the other six major Belt and Road routes. If the sea route across the Malacca Strait is compromised, the CPEC offers China a geopolitical and economic alternative.

The INSTC is a multi-modal transportation network that connects India, Iran, and Russia via sea, rail, and road routes. It was established at the beginning of the 21st century as a joint initiative to promote trade and economic cooperation among the countries involved and the wider region. The corridor aims to reduce transportation costs and time, increase trade volumes, and act as an alternative to the existing transport corridors.

In light of the above observations, this paper examines the geopolitical significance and issues relating to the INSTC, Indian “Act East” and “Neighbourhood First” policies and CPEC.

Several studies on the state of the Russian transport infrastructure have explored its role in regional and global connectivity and presented a detailed analysis of the INSTC’s potential and challenges, including transregional cooperation and integration. Some examples are [1–5]. P. Migulin describes the evolution of the Russian railway system in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, contributing insights into the role of railway policy in shaping Russia’s economic and social development [6].

G. Pierre [7] and A. Sajjanhar [8] cover India’s “Act East” policy, and N. Rogozhina [9] and D. Baruah [10] write on India’s regional diplomacy and strategic partnership. E. Bragina [11] explores the trade relations and potential for further economic cooperation among South Asian countries.

Several studies on China’s Belt and Road initiative present relevant findings on China’s strategic interests in the Indian Ocean [12–14]. Research on the CPEC addresses questions such as transportation cost, investment in infrastructure, benefits and challenges, and the economic and geopolitical interests of the

¹Performance of transport corridors in Central and South Asia [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://doi.org/10.1596/27797> (date of access: 15.12.2022).

²United Nations General Assembly 74th session resolution’s political declaration of the high-level midterm review on the implementation of the Vienna programme of action for landlocked developing countries for the decade 2014–2024 [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3831653> (date of access: 07.01.2023).

third counties are analysed. Some leading studies in this theme are [15–22]. Several writers [23–25] examine the corridor's significance for Pakistan as a transit country, underlining its strategic location, resource potential, role in regional connectivity, new opportunities opened by this project. Several papers consider the agreement on the INSTC, the

long term plan for CPEC and the long-term impact of CPEC³ [26].

However, there has been relatively limited discussion in recent years of the role and significance of the international transport corridors in South Asia and their geopolitical impact. This text contributes new insights on this subject.

The geopolitical aspects of the INSTC

A transport connection between India and Europe via Russia was first proposed at the end of the 19th century. The Russian Empire met the idea with interest, hoping to secure railway access to India's coastline via Afghanistan and Persia [6].

Today, the corridor is a multimodal network of sea, rail and road routes linking Northwest Europe with Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The agreement on the corridor was signed by India, Iran and Russia on 27 September 2000, during the 2nd Eurasian transport conference in Saint Petersburg. The agreement became effective on 16 May 2002, after ratification by all the parties⁴ [26].

Since then, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Sultanate of Oman, Tajikistan, and the Syrian Arab Republic have joined as members, and Bulgaria as an observer. Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, while not being parties, are interested in using the corridor. Pakistan may participate as part of the international transportation route that runs from Islamabad to Tehran and Istanbul.

The above corridor may divert some cargo away from the Mediterranean Sea and towards Eurasia, bypassing the Gibraltar Strait and Suez Canal. This would increase the importance and influence of South Asia in world affairs.

Due in part to the sanctions against Iran and the different railway gauges, the INSTC has drawn substantially less freight than the existing Eurasian corridors: Transsib (the Trans-Siberian route) and TRACECA (Transport corridor Europe – Caucasus – Asia). However, the importance of the INSTC has increased recently as a result of closer ties between India and Iran and the member countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, particularly Armenia, Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, as well as more favourable legal and regulatory regimes around the Caspian Sea.

The expansion of transport routes across Eurasia makes it possible to export, localise industrial output,

employ the nations' transit capacity more effectively, and connect landlocked nations and areas⁵.

The Covid-19 pandemic's interruptions to the supply chain heightened the demand for alternative logistical solutions. The incident involving a cargo ship flying the flag of Panama that grounded in the Suez Canal and stopped all trade between the Red Sea and Mediterranean Sea served to highlight the importance of INSTC. The incident led to widespread disruptions in global transport networks, a steep increase in freight costs, and significant doubt over the sustainability of supply chains between Europe and Asia. While the INSTC could not replace the Suez Canal, even a 5–10 % traffic diversion would improve its efficiency.

The Eurasian Economic Union needs transport routes since three of its five members lack access to the sea. Similarly, Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Nepal are three landlocked states in South Asia that rely on the infrastructure of their neighbours.

Eurasia has fewer international transport routes per square kilometre than either Europe or East Asia. Although there are several East-West routes, the INSTC is the only meridional corridor. Given that India's economy is expanding quickly, the INSTC might bring significant efficiency advantages for its commerce with Russia and Central Asia.

The southerly shift of the EAEU and the seamless operation of the INSTC have acquired particular significance given the major changes in global geopolitics and the inevitable rearrangement of supply chains in Eurasia following the Ukrainian crisis.

The EU has prohibited entrance for trucks registered in Russia and Belarus⁶ as part of its strict sanctions, which poses a significant obstacle to Eurasian commerce and political ties⁷.

Thus, the establishment of the INSTC is an important step for the EAEU and Central Asia in enhancing their commercial relations with Turkey, Iran, India, and other nations in South Asia and the Persian Gulf.

³Agreement on the International transport corridor "North – South" [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901828641> (date of access: 04.01.2023) ; Long-term plan for China – Pakistan economic corridor (2017–2030) [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/cpec/LTP.pdf> (date of access: 04.01.2023).

⁴Agreement on the International transport corridor "North – South" [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901828641> (date of access: 04.01.2023).

⁵Vinokurov E., Lobyrev V., Tikhomirov A., Tsukarev T. Silk road transport corridors: assessment of trans-EAEU freight traffic growth potential [Electronic resource]. URL: https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/0a8/EDB-Centre_2018_Report-49_Transport-Corridors_ENG.pdf (date of access: 11.12.2022).

⁶Potaeva K. The EU has restricted the entry of trucks with Russian and Belarusian numbers [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/business/articles/2022/04/10/917473-es-ogranichil-fur> (date of access: 02.01.2023) (in Russ.).

⁷Millar M. How the Ukraine crisis is disrupting global supply chains [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.brinknews.com/how-the-ukraine-crisis-is-disrupting-global-supply-chains/> (date of access: 15.12.2022).

The INSTC finally moved forward after years of delay when the Eurasian Economic Union was established and a free trade agreement was reached in 2015 under Russia's leadership. The trade potential of Eastern Europe, the Persian Gulf, and India started to be realised actively.

The INSTC is a crucial political and economic option for South Asia, particularly for India as a counterbalance to China's rise.

Given the Western efforts to isolate Russia economically and politically, South Asian states can strengthen their influence on a regional and international scale and use INSTC to diversify their export and import potential. Since the EAEU and Iran signed a free trade agreement in May 2018, nations along the North – South axis have looked for ways to step up their interaction⁸. The Interim free trade agreement with Iran was extended by a protocol agreed in March 2022 until 27 October 2025, or until the entrance into effect of a new agreement, whichever occurs first, to prevent the expiration of the preferential trading system with Iran. The EAEU and India are negotiating a similar FTA⁹.

India showed its interest in the corridor by investing 2.1 bln US dollars in the INSTC. This sum helped finance the 500-kilometre Chabahar – Zahedan railway route as well as the Chabahar port in Iran¹⁰. Now that Chabahar port can handle extra-large cargo ships, India may ship to Iran and Central Asia without going via Pakistan. Thus, the corridor will reach markets in wider Eurasia, including Afghanistan and Central Asia.

From New Delhi's perspective, the INSTC should strengthen its geopolitical influence in resource-rich Central Asian republics (CARs), acting as alternative supplier of energy resources and large markets for Indian goods. Already, India has deepened its collaboration with CARs in trade, energy, defence, counterterrorism, and also in technology and culture through "Connect Central Asia" and other modalities¹¹.

INSTC is superior to other alternatives, including the deep-water Suez Canal, because of significantly shorter delivery times. For example, it takes 20 to 45 days for cargo from Mumbai to reach inland destinations via Saint Petersburg or Novorossiisk through the usage of the Suez Canal (currently the most widely used option), and 15 to 24 days via the INSTC [4, p. 12]. Delivering via the Eastern Corridor route (through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) is even faster – 15–18 days. When the Astara-Rasht railway come into operation, travel times

will be reduced even more. Delivery time is critical for products such as food, textiles, home appliances and electronics. However, despite faster delivery, high cost remains a major disadvantage for the INSTC [5, p. 6–7].

The INSTC can contribute significantly to multilateral initiatives and programmes like the Vienna programme of action for landlocked developing countries (LLDC) and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) Regional action programme for sustainable transport development in Asia – Pacific region (2022–2026), the achievement of the sustainable development goals, and international action on sustainable transport and transit corridors that follow from the UN General Assembly resolutions, and recommendations from two UN global conferences on sustainable transport, in Ashgabat, in November 2016, and Beijing, in October 2021.

Studies by E. Vinokurov, A. Ahunbaev and A. Zaboie estimated the prospective volume of the container and non-container traffic to quantify synergies between the INSTC and the Eurasian East – West corridors. The aim was to propose a new concept for the Eurasian highway and estimate its benefits for LLDCs in Eurasia [3, p. 162–163].

Russian Railways Logistics ("RZD Logistics") launched a regular container service via the eastern branch of the INSTC¹². The train takes up to 31 forty-foot containers and travels across Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran, where the cargoes continue by sea to India. Initially, the train will run monthly, but more frequencies may be added later. The return service will be available for deliveries to the Russian Federation.

According to the Russian deputy Prime Minister, A. Overchuk, by connecting North and South, the corridor brings significant developmental benefits, and they are spread widely across the region. Speaking at the international export forum "Made in Russia – 2022", he emphasised that while the East – West corridor supported transit between China and the West, the INSTC contributed to economic development across the EAEU and the CIS¹³.

When the Russia – Europe relationship returns to normal, the strengths of the North – South corridor will enhance the transit benefits, making it a strong competitor to the Suez Canal. That will cement collaboration across the region, including between Russia and Iran and within South Asia regionally.

⁸EAEU and Iran signed agreement on a free trade zone [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5207751> (date of access: 05.01.2023) (in Russ.).

⁹The head of the Ministry of Industry of India said about the lack of opportunities for negotiations with the EAEU on the FTA [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/15436389> (date of access: 06.01.2023) (in Russ.).

¹⁰The political economics of the International North – South transport corridor [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://thewire.in/world/political-economics-international-north-south-transport-corridor-india-iran-russia> (date of access: 15.12.2022).

¹¹Chalikyan N., Tashjian Y. Geopolitics of the North – South transport corridor [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/geopolitics-of-the-north-south-transport-corridor/> (date of access: 15.12.2022).

¹²RZD Logistics launched a regular container train along the eastern branch of the North – South corridor [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://portnews.ru/news/print/337737/> (date of access: 10.12.2022) (in Russ.).

¹³In 2022, an active reorientation to the markets of countries lying south of Russia began [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://portnews.ru/news/337398/> (date of access: 11.12.2022) (in Russ.).

While the project has been moving forward, it has encountered several constraints, both technical and geopolitical. At the technical level, the slow development of the needed infrastructure has impeded progress, in the absence of a leading actor driving the project politically and financially¹⁴. Unlike the Belt and Road initiative, backed by China and supported by dedicated financial institutions, the INSTC is proceeding in a more ad-hoc way. Its long-term strategy of financing is largely missing, and funds mostly comes from regional development banks or the participating states. As a result, the corridor is encountering a far larger number of bureaucratic and technical issues such as discrepancies in transport laws, adequacy of insurance coverage, and security of the cargo in transit, among others.

Despite these obstacles, the project has the potential to develop into a significant transportation corridor, an engine for economic expansion, and a hub for regional integration. According to A. Karavayev and M. Tishehar, this is only feasible if the INSTC attracts active commerce, a flow of goods, and accompanying investment¹⁵. The long-term viability of the corridor also depends on a coherent regional integration plan and robust institutions for interregional collaboration, policy harmonisation, and digitalisation.

The member states also seek their geopolitical and strategic goals in addition to economic gains. The corridor is seen by Russia, India, and Iran as a possible tool for expanding their international connections, projecting their influence, and enhancing bilateral ties and trade¹⁶.

This study indicates that the INSTC is a crucial component in India's struggle for influence in the South Caucasus, namely in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Azerbaijan is an important partner in the INSTC because of its strategic position, robust infrastructure, and investment potential. The corridor's final segment, the railway link between Astara (Iran) and Rasht (Azerbaijan), is going to be completed with Azerbaijan's insistence. The other route to Iran, meanwhile, goes through Georgia and Armenia, and the Indian ambassador to Iran has often expressed New Delhi's interest in connecting Chabahar Port with Armenia¹⁷.

Azerbaijan and Turkey have been collaborating to create a new land route between the two countries via the Armenian Syunik Province bordering Iran. However, this development has India on guard. In addition to changing the future of the INSTC's Georgian, Armenian, and Iranian sectors, it also allows Turkey the chance to

leverage Azerbaijan's strategic location to strengthen its position in Central Asia. India's interests may coincide with Armenia's worries about the Pakistan – Azerbaijan – Turkey axis being strengthened, as it was during the 2020 Karabakh War¹⁸.

The close ties between Pakistan and Turkey worry India the most, especially in light of Ankara's backing of Islamabad in the Kashmir dispute. India's rising worries that Turkey may be aiming to take the lead in South and Central Asia were evident in 2021 news reports of Turkey supporting Syrian mercenaries in Kashmir¹⁹.

We hypothesise that to compete with Turkey and Azerbaijan for influence in this increasingly competitive region, India may be motivated to engage more closely with Armenia on the Armenian component of the INSTC.

India has staked out its geopolitical interests in Central Asia, where the INSTC has become a front of an intense struggle for dominance.

India's increased presence in Central Asia balances China's growing sway, which is projected, among other things, through its multiple Belt and Road transit initiatives, including the 70 bln US dollars CPEC. Indian efforts have helped relieve the CARs' concerns about Chinese hegemony. The INSTC supports Indian aspirations to diversify its energy sources and take an active role in Eurasia.

The INSTC is still in the initial phases of implementation, in contrast to the Belt and Road initiative. With the potential to grow into an important transport and logistics hub for all of Eurasia, it already functions as a geostrategic counterbalance and an alternative to the new Silk Road. It also acts as a supplement to the China – Central Asia – West Asia economic corridor.

India has expressed interest in expanding the INSTC to include Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. A land route via Kabul and Tashkent would create the Eastern branch of the INSTC, thus expanding partnerships. With its increasing influence and commitment to the INSTC, India can maintain the parties' interest in creating the transportation corridor's infrastructure. Already, it is serving as an example of effective energy collaboration with the Russian Federation in the face of anti-Russian sanctions.

Additionally, the Chabahar seaport in Iran and the expansion of the trade corridor to Afghanistan and Uzbekistan may create a significant Eurasian commercial route that links landlocked Central Asian nations to the rest of the world²⁰.

¹⁴Chalikian N., Tashjian Y. Geopolitics of the North – South transport corridor [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://southasianvoices.org/geopolitics-of-the-north-south-transport-corridor/> (date of access: 15.12.2022).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Shvaikovskiy A. Will the Iranian port of Chabahar connect India, Russia and Central Asia [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://rg.ru/2022/11/30/soedinit-li-iranskij-port-chabahar-indiiu-rossiiu-i-centralnuiu-aziiu.html> (date of access: 21.12.2022) (in Russ.).

India also wants Chabahar to develop into a significant logistical and strategic hub on the Oman Gulf. Today, Chabahar is among the top ten global economic and transportation centers. India's interest in Chabahar Port originates from its geopolitical competition with Gwadar Port on the CPEC, a project where China plays a dominant role²¹.

Geopolitical perspectives of Indian “Act East” and “Neighbourhood first” policies

The Indian government renamed its “Look East” policy to “Act East” under N. Modi's premiership in 2014, it increased its involvement in several regional organisations, including the Bay of Bengal initiative for multi-sectoral technical and economic cooperation (BIMSTEC), which is now seen by India as the main means of regional integration in the South Asian region [7, p. 152]. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation has faced growing constraints due to tensions between India and Pakistan; in New Delhi's vision, BIMSTEC should ultimately take its place. The major focus of the “Act East” policy is on strengthening the relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The “Act East” policy starts in Bangladesh, as Indian Prime Minister N. Modi stated during his visit there in 2014. Another important component of Indian foreign policy is “Neighbourhood First”, which prioritises international economic relationships within India's neighbourhood and is particularly focused on trade relations with Southeast Asia [11, p. 68]. A 2018 World Bank analysis found that there are 14 rail and 19 road routes between Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, Nepal, and East India²².

Priority has so far been placed on transport routes connecting India's heartland with its Northeast and ultimately with Myanmar. The State of Myanmar serves as a bridge between India and ASEAN thanks to its geographic location, which is important to India for several reasons. First, its 1,600 km border with Myanmar is porous, which raises concerns about the entry of radicals and illegal immigration. Second, there is serious anxiety over Beijing's desire to use Myanmar's frontiers as a passageway to the Bay of Bengal and ultimately the Indian Ocean. Thirdly, Myanmar shows potential as a source of mineral resources.

The “Act East” programme major transportation initiatives include three projects.

The INSTC has the potential for further extension and enhanced collaboration, and it does not end in South Asia, as is evident from the geopolitical analysis. The initiatives of the Indian government under N. Modi, such as the Howrah – Nagpur – Mumbai line, reform of the regulatory environment, and incentives for participating nations, facilitate the corridor's expansion to Southeast Asia.

The first of them is project for multimodal transit transportation in Kaladan²³. India is interested in a transit route through Myanmar for geopolitical reasons, including establishing a connection to Southeast Asia and expanding its influence to balance Beijing's pronounced presence. The project establishes a link between Kolkata and the port in Sittwe, Myanmar. The path continues overland to the Indian state of Mizoram through the Kaladan River and Lashio [8, p. 218].

The second project is the trilateral highway project between India, Myanmar, and Thailand²⁴ (Trilateral Highway). The project's goal is to link Thailand, Myanmar, and the North East of India. From the Indian city of Moreh to the Thai city of Mae Sot, the 1,360 km route passes primarily through Myanmar. This route might eventually be extended to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam [9]. The project is expected to benefit from the geographical location of the Northeastern Indian states. The Kaladan transit project is seen as essential for improving connectedness with the land-locked northeastern nations. The need for a reliable transport link has never been any stronger in the region. This immediate demand is met by the Trilateral highway study, which also lays out routes for medium- and longer-term integrated connectivity solutions between India and ASEAN²⁵.

The third project is Agartala – Akhaura rail link between India and Bangladesh. In a speech delivered in October 2022, J. S. Lakra, divisional railway manager for Northeast Frontier Railway, predicted that the railway project would be finished in the middle of 2023²⁶. The governments of Bangladesh and India signed a Memorandum of understanding on the Agartala – Akhaura project in 2013²⁷. With the 15-kilometre link, the journey from Agartala to Kolkata through Dhaka will take 10 h as opposed to 31 h²⁸.

²¹What is the INSTC? [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://byjus.com/free-ias-prep/international-north-south-transport-corridor/> (date of access: 17.12.2022).

²²The WEB of transport corridors in South Asia [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/430671534922434794/pdf/The-Web-of-Transport-Corridors-in-South-Asia.pdf> (date of access: 02.01.2023).

²³Pulipaka S., Singh A. G., Sircar S. India and connectivity frameworks [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policyreports/india-and-connectivity-frameworks.html> (date of access: 06.01.2023).

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Executive summary [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/2020-02-Trilateral-Highway-Report/Executive-Summary.pdf> (date of access: 30.12.2022).

²⁶Deb D. Tripura: Agartala – Akhaura international railway project to be completed in next few months [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/tripura-agartala-akhaura-international-railway-project-to-be-completed-in-next-few-months-says-official-8203183/> (date of access: 29.12.2022).

²⁷Agartala – Akhaura rail project to be completed in next 4–5 months [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/agartalaakhaura-rail-project-to-be-completed-in-next-4-5-months-nfr-official-101665546558545.html> (date of access: 23.12.2022).

²⁸Ibid.

Additionally, the project will give India a direct train connection between Mumbai and Agartala via Bangladesh. The project would connect Bangladesh to the INSTC, a relevant detail for the topic discussed earlier in the article.

The Indian Prime Minister asserts that his country's interactions with other East Asian countries give rise to opportunities for greater adaptability, mobility, and strategic thinking. The "Made in India", "Skill in India", and "Digital India" programmes all work to advance energy security, infrastructure development, and a transition to smart cities. Additionally, they expand the political possibilities for contesting Beijing's hegemony. The governments of Southeast Asia are wary of China's stance and would want to see India play a more prominent role in the area, as noted by A. Sajjanhar, a former Indian ambassador. Their choices are in line with India's initiatives to forge alliances within the region to cooperate on mutually advantageous projects [8, p. 219].

India will likely put a lot of effort into expanding its exports to Southeast Asian countries in the coming years. To achieve better conditions for accessing these markets through its policy actions, it may choose to join the Regional comprehensive economic partnership (RCEP). Fifteen Asia – Pacific nations, including 10 members of ASEAN, have proposed a free trade agreement called the RCEP. With around one-third of the global population and GDP, the alliance could become the greatest trade bloc in human history. Reduced tariffs, more market access for goods and services, greater commerce, and higher investment are some of the anticipated advantages²⁹.

In light of this, it is possible to conclude that the current initiatives are crucial to the development of a coherent network of transport corridors that extend beyond South Asia to Southeast Asia. Within the INSTC project, India can and does play a role in bringing Western, Central, South, and Southeast Asia together, and its activities support this role by enhancing India's international standing.

Geopolitical aspects of the CPEP

In all internal and international circumstances, China and Pakistan have maintained a strong friendship and long-standing strategic cooperation. According to a writer of the "Global Village Space Magazine"³⁰, China and Pakistan must increase mutual trust, foster cooperation, and stand shoulder to shoulder against new challenges as the world goes through fundamental changes and the international landscape become more turbulent, complex, and unstable. By hosting the CPEC, one of the Belt and Road initiative signature projects, Pakistan acts as its crucial partner. The corridor's geopolitical importance has been extensively discussed by academics as a tool for a rising China to maintain a presence in a periphery nation and assert its global leadership. The BRI is centered on the CPEC. As a "symbol of connectedness and integration in a new era", it represents Pakistan's desire to convert regional economic growth into improved levels of well-being for its citizens [13, p. 6].

The corridor links Gwadar, a seaport in Pakistan's Balochistan province, with China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous region [24, p. 134]. According to its architects, the corridor would be lined with motorways, roads, railways, pipelines, ports, and information technology parks³¹. One most important elements of the corridor is Gwadar, a gateway for cargo shipped from Western China across the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. After modernisation, the Karakoram highway, the second cru-

cial component, would improve the connection between Gilgit in Northern Pakistan and Gwadar in South³². With more than 62 bln US dollars invested in the CPEC by Chinese entities³³, China has shown a greater interest in funding Pakistan's infrastructure than any of Islamabad's other strategic partners [10, p. 15].

To benefit their economies, countries are looking for shorter trade routes to minimise time and costs and conduct more commerce in less time. Through its significant time and cost savings, CPEC serves to expand economic links [15, p. 5–6]. CPEC project's implementation is seen to provide greater opportunities for commerce and enhance regional growth [16, p. 1–3].

In an interview with the "Global Village Space Magazine", G. Khan, president and CEO of Engro Corporation Ltd., said: "The most important economic benefit is Pakistan's potential transformation into a trans-regional trading corridor. Furthermore, it will attract Chinese foreign direct investments (FDI) into special economic zones (SEZs) and contribute to the country's industrialisation"³⁴.

Pakistan acts as a geopolitical link between China, Central Asia, Western Asia, and South Asia [17, p. 187]. According to a different study, CPEC projects significantly influence how the local population perceives their quality of life, economic possibilities, and ability to escape poverty [18, p. 1–4]. Beijing continues to view

²⁹Summary of the Regional comprehensive economic partnership agreement [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/files/100114908.pdf> (date of access: 02.01.2023).

³⁰Pirzada M. Editorial periscope // Glob. Village Space Mag. 2020. Vol. III, issue X. P. 21.

³¹Long-term plan for China – Pakistan economic corridor (2017–2030) [Electronic resource]. P. 26. URL: <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/cpec/LTP.pdf> (date of access: 04.01.2023).

³²Husain K. Exclusive: CPEC master plan revealed [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1333101> (date of access: 13.01.2023).

³³Hussain S. China's CPEC investment in Pakistan reaches \$62 billion [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/dB5tQKISoKNrvl7EwDPFbP/Chinas-CPEC-investment-in-Pakistan-reaches-62-billion.html> (date of access: 13.01.2023).

³⁴Khan G. Speaks to Global Village Space // Glob. Village Space Mag. 2020. Vol. III, issue X. P. 78.

close cooperation with Islamabad as the cornerstone of regional peace, and the CPEP as a great example of the success of the Belt and Road initiative on the continent, according to N. Zamaraeva [19, p. 170–171].

Russia sees Pakistan as a key link connecting the Eurasian Economic Union to the rest of Asia, the Indian Ocean area, and beyond [20, p. 173]. China's profit from the CPEC route's successful completion could amount to 70 bln US dollars [28, p. 4]. Additional benefits are anticipated for both countries after all the infrastructure is complete, and the mode of transportation is switched from sea to land. China is expected to gain from alternative commercial and energy routes and easier access to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Overall, CPEC is a complex initiative that gives China the quickest access to the 21st century maritime Silk Road across the Indian Ocean [23], promotes the growth, integration, and connectivity of regional economies and markets [12, p. 4], assures Pakistan's participation in the BRI as a key partner and provides China with a secure economic corridor in a scenario of war in the South China Sea.

Sovereignty, security, and a stronger strategic alliance between China and Pakistan are India's three primary concerns about the CPEC. In Jammu and Kashmir, where the borders of China, India, and Pakistan intersect, these issues are particularly evident. It is difficult to envisage New Delhi connecting its regional infrastructure projects to CPEC, given these concerns. India's participation in the project is viewed as unlikely because of concerns over sovereignty and territorial interests in Jammu and Kashmir.

In his remarks during the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in 2015, the Indian representative, A. Singh, said that "India's reservations about the proposed China – Pakistan economic corridor stem from the fact that it passes through Indian territory illegally occupied by Pakistan for many years". India has informed China of its worries and asked Beijing to halt all works in the area while it closely monitors developments surrounding the CPEC. If the CPEC is allowed to proceed, it will weaken India's sovereignty and strengthen Pakistan's claim to the disputed area³⁵.

The more enduring military presence of China along its northwest frontier via Pakistan would have an impact on New Delhi's defence and security priorities [22, p. 86].

India reads Beijing's shift in policy towards Kashmir as an indication of a more comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Pakistan³⁶.

From India's perspective, the CPEC signals China's emergence as Pakistan's principal international ally,

replacing the United States. This is happening at a time when the United States' status is diminishing relative to other countries, China – US ties are deteriorating, India – US relations are improving, and new tensions between China and India are escalating. The development of as a land link between China and Pakistan is enlarging the already substantial geopolitical divide between New Delhi and Beijing, while Gwadar provides the BRI's maritime component. In India's view, Gwadar may develop into a potential site of Chinese military activity in the Indian Ocean. Although it is still a civilian port, there are many worries in New Delhi that it could one day transform into a significant naval base for China. If true, China's projection of its naval might may change the balance of power in the area [10, p. 16–17].

The presence of the Chinese navy in the Oman Gulf is due to political considerations, which include, but are not limited to, reducing Indo-US supremacy in the Indian Ocean [14, p. 305–310]. To gain a foothold in this region where the Indian navy has historically dominated, China requires ports and military infrastructure. Cooperation between China and India on this route is now unlikely because of New Delhi's worries about its sovereignty over Kashmir and the declining level of confidence between India and China [24, p. 129].

Because of its limited presence in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, China has a geopolitical and geostrategic interest in the deep-water port of Gwadar [21, p. 471].

This corridor, unlike any other, embodies China's goal for a new economic and strategic status quo³⁷.

In case the Strait of Malacca is threatened, CPEC is crucial for China strategically as a backup route to the Indian Ocean. It also serves as a tool for China's rise to regional domination and a vehicle for its military and political influence [25, p. 131].

In addition to being a significant turning point in China and Pakistan's friendship, the CPEC also stands out among the other six important corridors of the Belt and Road and offers extensive potential for continuous collaboration.

Importantly, CPEC promotes connectivity and regional collaboration. However, it has sparked strategic worries from several important powers, most notably India. The success of CPEC, Pakistan's economy, and eventually the region's prosperity depends on India and Pakistan's ability to reevaluate their regional strategies and normalise their bilateral ties. The Pakistani-Indian peace dialogue has so far been sporadic and centered more on political and ideological disagreements than on the countries' common interests in economic development and cultural exchange.

³⁵Statement by First Secretary, Permanent Mission of India to the UN, exercising India's right of reply during the general debate of 70th session of UN General Assembly [Electronic resource]. URL: [http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25872/Statement by First Secretary Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations exercising India's Right of Reply during the General Debate of 70th session \(date of access: 12.12.2022\)](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25872/Statement%20by%20First%20Secretary%20Permanent%20Mission%20of%20India%20to%20the%20United%20Nations%20exercising%20India's%20Right%20of%20Reply%20during%20the%20General%20Debate%20of%2070th%20session%20(date%20of%20access%20:12.12.2022)).

³⁶Menon S. As China's Pakistan ties deepen, India needs a strategy to mitigate the fallout [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/chinas-pakistan-ties-deepen-india-needs-strategy-mitigate-fallout> (date of access: 06.01.2023).

³⁷Malik A. What CPEC means for South Asia: it fundamentally alters Pakistan's alignment, sundering its link to the subcontinent [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://www.orfonline.org/research/what-cpec-means-for-south-asia/> (date of access: 14.01.2023).

Conclusions

The world's largest region in terms of both area and population is Asia. As the most populated region in Asia, the region covered by this study offers tremendous potential for commerce, economic cooperation, and greater integration.

Transportation infrastructure and integration have a complicated relationship, as our analysis shows. Contacts among nations are strengthened via transport infrastructure, and ITCs support many forms of international collaboration. According to our examination of South Asian international transport corridors, geopolitics and the predominance of national interests determine how countries engage along these corridors. As follows from our analysis, the region covered gives international transport projects a high priority as they are crucial to the growth of the individual nations and the region as a whole.

If India and Pakistan could settle their differences, regional ties might be enhanced and reinforced. India can build contacts with the Russian Federation and Central Asia through the INSTC while avoiding its regional competitor, Pakistan. By spending 2.1 bln US dollars, including the expansion of port "Chabahar" in Iran and the building of the 500-kilometre Chabahar – Zahedan railway line, India has demonstrated its interest in the INSTC project. port "Chabahar" competes directly with Pakistan's port "Gwadar".

The INSTC serves as both an economic and political development engine for India and a check on China's expanding regional dominance. South Asian countries have a chance to expand their regional and global influence as a result of the Western political and economic blockade of Russia. The INSTC might be used by EAEU members as a means of diversifying imports and export.

India makes a substantial contribution to the creation of a coordinated network of transport corridors both inside and outside of South Asia with its "Act East" and "Neighbourhood first" projects. From a geopolitical perspective, India may be a key player in the integration of Western, Central, South, and Southeast Asia. It strives to

expand its influence internationally and uses the INTSC as a vehicle to project its soft power.

Across the border, China and Pakistan are building the CPEC. The corridor stands out among the Belt and Road's six main economic arteries and gives China speedy access to the Indian Ocean. It also marks a significant turning point in the history of ties between China and Pakistan. Additionally, the CPEC acts as a geopolitical and economic alternative to the Malacca Straits, China's primary accessway to the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, China and India are changing the pattern of influence in South Asia, as indicated by the expanding roles of China and India in multilateral economic and security diplomacy (e.g. as members of the G20), and the variety of other international entities participating. It appears that a new global order is taking shape, with China, the United States, Russia, and India actively pursuing their interests while the EU members perform a difficult balancing act.

South Asia is entering the geopolitical and economic centre stage in this shifting geopolitical landscape. Regional integration might spread over all of Eurasia with improved connectivity. Russia conducts a balanced foreign policy in South Asia and may make a substantial contribution to this integration along with partners such as China and Pakistan, as well as India, Iran, and Afghanistan [20, p. 174].

In the South Asia region, an integrated transport and logistics system would aid in several local and international policy objectives, such as job creation, reducing unemployment, and stemming out-migration.

In conclusion, the continuing international transport corridor projects in South Asia contribute to a greater level of regional integration and the involvement of every state in world affairs. Despite the disagreements, conflicts, and issues impacting its states, the area has enormous potential to connect Central, Western, and Southeast Asia. It is impossible to overstate the significance of international transportation routes in this area with a large population and vast territory.

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