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INDIA–KAZAKHSTAN RELATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE SHADOW OF INDIA–CHINA CONFLICT

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of India–Kazakhstan relations against the backdrop of the India–China conflict. As a key Central Asian state rich in energy resources and strategically located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, Kazakhstan holds significant relevance for India’s foreign policy. The paper highlights the historical foundation of India–Kazakhstan ties, emphasizing cooperation in energy security, trade, cultural diplomacy, and multilateral forums such as the SCO. At the same time, it analyzes the challenges posed by geographical barriers, limited connectivity, and Kazakhstan’s strong economic engagement with China, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative. The India–China conflict has further underscored the need for India to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, both as a counterbalance to China’s influence and as a means of securing long-term strategic interests. By exploring opportunities and constraints, this study argues that India–Kazakhstan relations can serve as a cornerstone of India’s Central Asia policy, provided that New Delhi adopts innovative strategies to overcome connectivity hurdles and expands multi-sectoral cooperation with Astana.

Keywords: India–Kazakhstan Relations, Central Asia, India–China Conflict, Energy Security, Geopolitics, Belt and Road Initiative



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Introduction

The relationship between India and Kazakhstan is deep-rooted, with its origins in the ancient Silk Route and the civilizational interactions that spanned trade, religion, and culture. Over centuries, these connections evolved through the medieval Central Asian linkages, the Mughal Empire's origins, and Sufi traditions, before taking new shapes in the Soviet period and modern post-independence diplomacy. The historical context provides not only cultural affinity but also a strong foundation for present-day strategic cooperation between the two nations. Kazakhstan occupied a central position in the historic Silk Route, which served as the lifeline for trade and cultural exchange between India, Central Asia, Persia, and Europe.

Through this extensive network, Indian traders carried spices, textiles, precious stones, and ivory, while goods such as horses, furs, metals, and leather products were transported from Central Asia, including the Kazakh steppe, to the Indian subcontinent¹. These exchanges were not limited to commodities but also extended to ideas, religions, and cultural practices. One of the most significant aspects of this early interaction was the spread of Buddhism. From India, Buddhism moved northward through Central Asia, where regions of present-day southern Kazakhstan such as Taraz and Otrar became centers of Buddhist culture. Archaeological excavations in Kazakhstan have revealed remnants of monasteries and stupas that trace their origins back to the Buddhist influence from India. This cultural diffusion made Kazakhstan an important transit point in the transmission of Indian religious. Philosophical traditions to China and beyond. Additionally, the Silk Route facilitated intellectual and linguistic exchanges². Sanskrit, Persian, and Turkic languages influenced each other, with stories and epics traveling across regions. Indian philosophical texts, along with ideas of medicine and astronomy, were disseminated, while Central Asian folklore and traditions left their imprint on Indian culture. The medieval period saw a strengthening of India–Central Asia ties, in which Kazakhstan played a role as part of the broader Turko-Mongol cultural and political space. The most visible link comes from the Mughal dynasty

¹ Ramakrushna Pradhan (2002) “*India-Kazakhstan energy relations: Looking back and looking ahead*” Journal of Eurasian Studies, Vol. 13(2) 103 –118, p no 105

² Cutler, M. R. (2011) “*India raises energy profile in central Asia*” Asia Times. www.asiatimes.com



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of India, which traced its ancestry to Central Asia. Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, hailed from the Ferghana Valley (in present-day Uzbekistan), but his Turko-Mongol lineage was also tied to the Kazakh steppes. The political and cultural ethos of the Mughal rulers reflected their Central Asian roots, embedding a permanent connection between India and the region. Trade also flourished during this period. The Kazakh steppe was renowned for its horses, which were prized by Indian rulers for their strength and endurance. Horses were essential to medieval warfare, and Indian empires relied on imports from Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, to sustain their cavalry³. This exchange formed an enduring economic linkage. Another dimension of medieval interactions was the spread of Sufism. Central Asia was a prominent center of Islamic learning and spirituality, and Sufi saints and scholars from the region traveled to India. Their influence shaped Indian Islam, leaving a strong spiritual legacy. The movement of scholars, merchants, and mystics fostered cultural affinity between the Kazakh steppes and the Indian subcontinent.

The 18th and 19th centuries marked a shift in the dynamics of India–Kazakhstan ties. With the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia, Kazakhstan gradually came under Tsarist control, later becoming part of the Soviet Union. At the same time, India was colonized by the British. These developments limited direct engagement between India and Kazakhstan, as both were under foreign rule. However, indirect connections existed through the wider geopolitical context. British India closely monitored Russian advances into Central Asia, fearing the so-called “Great Game.” During this period, the direct India–Kazakhstan channel weakened, but the perception of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, remained significant in Indian political and strategic thinking. The early 20th century also saw ideological interactions. Some Indian freedom fighters, seeking support against British colonial rule, looked toward Soviet Russia. Kazakhstan, being integrated within the USSR, indirectly became part of this revolutionary nexus. These interactions, though limited, kept the India–Central Asia connection alive during colonial times. When Kazakhstan was formally integrated into the Soviet Union in the 1920s, its foreign policy was directed by Moscow. Therefore, India–Kazakhstan relations during this period unfolded within the broader framework of India–Soviet ties. India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru,

³ Albina Muratbekova (2021) “*Relations Between Kazakhstan and India: Discussion of Key Features*” Eurasian Research Institute, Kazakhstan, Weekly e-bulletin, p no 02



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visited Kazakhstan as part of his larger visits to the Soviet Union. Later, Indira Gandhi and other Indian leaders also toured Kazakhstan, cementing familiarity between the two peoples. Cultural diplomacy played a remarkable role. Indian films, particularly Bollywood cinema, became hugely popular in Kazakhstan, creating strong emotional bonds. Songs, dances, and Indian cultural motifs resonated with Kazakh audiences. At the same time, educational exchanges allowed Kazakh students to study in Indian universities. While Indian professionals, particularly in medicine and engineering, contributed to Soviet programs. Although these ties were mediated by the USSR, they laid the foundation for future independent relations. By the late Soviet era, Kazakhstan had become one of the most developed republics, and India's engagement with it symbolized the broader Indo-Soviet friendship. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened a new chapter in India-Kazakhstan relations.

Kazakhstan declared its independence in December 1991, and India was among the first countries to recognize it in February 1992⁴. Diplomatic relations were formally established soon after. High-level political visits marked the early years of bilateral engagement. President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's first President, visited India multiple times, including as the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in 2009. Indian Prime Ministers, including Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh, and Narendra Modi, have also visited Kazakhstan, strengthening diplomatic ties. Economic cooperation emerged as a cornerstone of the relationship. Kazakhstan's vast reserves of hydrocarbons and uranium aligned with India's growing energy needs. In fact, Kazakhstan became one of the primary suppliers of uranium for India's nuclear energy program, cementing energy as a pillar of partnership. Defense cooperation also expanded. The annual joint military exercise "Prabal Dostyk" reflects mutual efforts to enhance security collaboration. Both countries share concerns over terrorism, extremism, and regional stability, making defense dialogue increasingly relevant. Multilateral platforms further reinforced ties. Both nations are active members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), where they coordinate on regional security, connectivity, and economic initiatives. Kazakhstan's central location makes it a strategic partner in India's Connect Central Asia Policy. Cultural diplomacy remains vibrant.

⁴ Mihir Vikrant Kaulgud (2021) *"India-Central Asia Energy Relations: Prospects and Barriers"* Social and Political Research Foundation, p no 08



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Bollywood continues to enjoy popularity, while yoga and Ayurveda have been embraced in Kazakhstan. Educational exchanges and people-to-people contacts also contribute to a positive perception of India.

Strategic Opportunities for India

Energy Security

Energy security forms the backbone of India–Kazakhstan relations. As one of the fastest-growing economies, India’s demand for energy continues to rise, while Kazakhstan, endowed with vast reserves of oil, natural gas, and uranium, emerges as a natural partner in meeting these needs. Kazakhstan is among the world’s top fifteen oil-producing countries and holds significant natural gas reserves. For India, which imports more than 80% of its crude oil, diversification of energy partners is critical. Kazakhstan’s geographical location in Central Asia, coupled with its role as a stable energy supplier, provides India with an opportunity to strengthen its energy basket. Though transportation remains a challenge due to lack of direct land access, initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and cooperation through Iranian ports (like Chabahar) can help India secure a reliable energy corridor. Kazakhstan holds approximately 30 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, placing it among the top 15 countries globally in terms of reserves U.S. Energy Information Administration⁵ and in 2024, its petroleum production averaged around 1.9 million barrels per day and the Chevron-led Tengiz field expansion, a \$48 billion investment, is expected to contribute an additional 260,000 bpd, signifying the field’s strategic importance Reuters. Moreover, Kazakhstan increased its oil output by 11.6% in the first half of 2025, with exports projected at 70.5 million tons for the year Reuters⁵. To optimize energy corridors, Kazakhstan’s 2025–2040 refining strategy targets fuel exports to India, with plans to raise export share to 30% of total refining output by 2040 Reuters. On the nuclear front, Kazakhstan is the world’s largest uranium producer, supplying India with nuclear fuel under longstanding agreements⁶. The initial 2015–2019 supply contract delivered 5,000 tonnes of uranium, with plans underway to scale up to 7,500 tonnes in upcoming agreements

⁵ Dr.Angira Sen Sarma (2024) “India’s Policy towards Central Asia: Navigating the External Challenges” PPF-Centre for Neighbourhood Studies, p no 35

⁶ Boris Rumer (ed) (2003), Central Asia in Transition: Dilemmas of Political and Economic Development, Aakar Books, New Delhi.



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dharmakshethra.comDawn. Notably, India sources nearly 80% of its uranium needs from Kazakhstan, underscoring its strategic significance Business Standard The Week. In summary, Kazakhstan is indispensable to India's energy diversification: its vast oil reserves and growing production capacity, combined with its crucial role in uranium supply, bolster India's efforts to reduce reliance on Middle Eastern sources and enhance energy security across both fossil fuel and clean energy domains.

Connectivity & Trade

India and Kazakhstan, as strategic partners, share deep historical and cultural ties through the Silk Route. In recent decades, the two countries have focused on strengthening connectivity and trade to unlock the vast potential of Central Asia's resources and India's growing market. Kazakhstan, the largest landlocked country in the world, is rich in oil, natural gas, uranium, and rare earths. India, being the fastest-growing major economy, views Kazakhstan as a vital partner in energy security, minerals, and regional connectivity. Bilateral trade has grown steadily, crossing USD 2.5 billion in 2023, though both sides agree it remains far below potential⁷. India mainly exports pharmaceuticals, tea, textiles, and engineering goods, while importing crude oil, uranium, and ferroalloys from Kazakhstan. Connectivity, however, remains a major challenge due to the absence of direct land routes between India and Kazakhstan. To address this, both countries are working through regional initiatives such as the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port in Iran, which can significantly reduce transit time and costs for trade. Kazakhstan is also part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and India is seeking complementary linkages rather than competition. Air connectivity through direct flights between Delhi and Almaty has already boosted business and tourism. Additionally, platforms like the India-Central Asia Dialogue and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are providing frameworks to deepen trade, energy cooperation, and digital connectivity. The focus is also on IT, pharmaceuticals, education, and renewable energy partnerships. In the long run, improved transport corridors, digital trade, and energy pipelines could transform India-Kazakhstan trade

⁷ Sajjanhar Ashok(2010) "*India-Kazakhstan Relations: Opportunities for Future*," Economic Diplomacy: India's Experience, CUTS, 2011 for a comprehensive account of the role of economic diplomacy in enhancing trade and investment relations



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relations, making Kazakhstan a gateway for India to access Central Asia, and India a key partner for Kazakhstan to engage South Asia.

Defense & Security Cooperation

India and Kazakhstan share a robust defence and security partnership, shaped by common interests in regional stability, counterterrorism, and strategic balance in Eurasia. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, defence cooperation has become a central pillar of their bilateral engagement. Kazakhstan, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, is geopolitically significant, particularly in the context of Afghanistan and Central Asian security⁸. Both nations closely cooperate on countering terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Kazakhstan has also been supportive of India's initiatives in the United Nations on counterterrorism. Military-to-military engagement has grown steadily. The two sides conduct joint military exercises, notably the annual "Prabal Dostyk" exercise, which focuses on counterinsurgency and peacekeeping operations. Defence industrial collaboration is another area of interest, with India exploring joint ventures in military equipment, training, and maintenance. Kazakhstan is also a major contributor to UN peacekeeping operations, aligning with India's global peacekeeping commitments. Additionally, their cooperation under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) framework enhances coordination in regional security and counterterrorism drills. Overall, India-Kazakhstan defence ties are evolving from basic military exchanges to strategic collaboration, reflecting their shared vision for a secure and multipolar Eurasian region.

Cultural & Educational Diplomacy

Cultural and educational diplomacy is a vital dimension of India-Kazakhstan relations, strengthening people-to-people ties and enhancing mutual understanding. The two nations share ancient cultural linkages through Buddhism, trade routes, and Sufi traditions, which provide a historical foundation for present-day exchanges. Indian culture enjoys wide popularity in Kazakhstan. Bollywood films, Indian music, and yoga are deeply appreciated by Kazakh citizens, contributing to India's soft power in Central Asia. The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre in Almaty, run by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), plays a key role in promoting

⁸ Bhatia, Vijay Kumar (2009) "India-Kazakhstan Relations: Challenges and Prospects" Mainstream, Vol. XLVII, No 38, p no 23



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Indian art, dance, music, and Hindi language. Annual events such as the International Day of Yoga and cultural festivals attract large participation and symbolize the growing cultural connect. Educational ties are also expanding⁹. Thousands of Indian students pursue higher education, particularly medicine, in Kazakh universities, making education a strong bridge between the two countries. At the same time, Kazakh professionals benefit from scholarships and capacity-building programs under India's Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) scheme. Academic collaborations, faculty exchanges, and joint research projects further enrich bilateral engagement. Thus, cultural and educational diplomacy not only enhances goodwill but also complements the strategic, economic, and security dimensions of India–Kazakhstan relations.

Regional Challenges China as Factor

India–Kazakhstan relations, though marked by growing cooperation in energy, connectivity, and defence, face regional challenges largely shaped by the China factor. Kazakhstan, as the largest Central Asian state, is a crucial partner for both India and China. However, China enjoys a significant head start in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), massive infrastructure investments, and dominant trade presence. This often sidelines India, which lacks direct geographical access to Central Asia. Kazakhstan's economy is deeply linked with China through pipelines, railways, and markets, while India continues to depend on alternative routes like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar Port to expand its reach. This connectivity gap poses a structural disadvantage for India. Strategically, China's growing influence in Central Asia under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) framework also limits India's space to project its interests. Furthermore, Beijing's close ties with Pakistan, particularly via the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), add another layer of challenge for New Delhi. Despite these hurdles, Kazakhstan values its multi-vector foreign policy and sees India as a balancing partner. For India, overcoming China's dominance requires sustained

⁹ Islam Supyaldiyarov (2024) "Charting New (Old) Paths: Unraveling India-Kazakhstan Ties in Eurasian Geopolitics" *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, Volume 5 Special Issue VI July 2024, p no 35



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engagement, faster connectivity projects, and deeper cultural, educational, and economic ties with Kazakhstan.

Impact of India–China Conflict

The India–China conflict, particularly after the 2020 Galwan clash, has reshaped India’s strategic outreach in Central Asia, including its relations with Kazakhstan. China is Kazakhstan’s second-largest trading partner and a leading investor in its energy and infrastructure sectors through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the same time, India views Kazakhstan as a crucial partner for energy security, connectivity, and regional stability. This overlapping interest creates both opportunities and challenges. On the positive side, India’s friction with China has pushed New Delhi to diversify strategic and economic partnerships in Central Asia to counterbalance Beijing’s influence. Kazakhstan, being the region’s largest economy and a gateway to Central Asia, has emerged as a natural partner. India has intensified diplomatic engagement through forums like the India–Central Asia Dialogue and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), where Kazakhstan plays an active role. New Delhi is also seeking to expand trade, energy cooperation, and cultural ties to project itself as a credible alternative to China’s dominance¹⁰. However, the India–China rivalry also creates constraints. Kazakhstan maintains a delicate balance in its foreign policy, engaging with both China and Russia as well as emerging partners like India. Astana is unlikely to take sides in the India–China conflict, as its economic dependence on China limits the space for alignment with New Delhi on strategic issues.

Furthermore, India’s lack of direct land connectivity to Kazakhstan, compounded by China’s geographical centrality in the region, restricts India’s influence. In conclusion, while the India–China conflict has increased India’s urgency to deepen ties with Kazakhstan, structural challenges and Kazakhstan’s balancing act prevent relations from expanding at the desired pace¹¹. The rivalry

¹⁰ Mozaffari Falarti, M. (2023) “Central Asian Republics: India's Shifting Foreign Policy Landscape under Narendra Modi” *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies*, 6 (1), 15-28. DOI

¹¹ Cooley, A. (2015). The new Great Game in Central Asia. *Foreign Affairs* (Council on Foreign Relations). Retrieved from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-asia/2012-08-07/new-great-game-central-asia> accessed on 15th June 2020.



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thus serves both as a driver of engagement and as a limitation in realizing the full potential of India–Kazakhstan relations.

India–China competition in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, the largest and resource-rich country in Central Asia, has become a significant arena for India–China competition. China already enjoys a dominant position in Kazakhstan through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), energy imports, and infrastructure investments. Nearly one-fourth of Kazakhstan’s oil exports go to China, and Chinese companies are heavily involved in building pipelines, roads, and industrial zones¹². This gives Beijing a strong economic and geopolitical footprint in the region. India, though geographically distant, sees Kazakhstan as a crucial partner for energy security, trade diversification, and connectivity to Eurasia. Kazakhstan is the largest supplier of uranium to India, and both countries are working on expanding cooperation in oil, gas, and renewable energy. India also uses platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the India–Central Asia Dialogue to strengthen its engagement. Unlike China, India emphasizes cultural, educational, and civilizational ties, projecting itself as a non-hegemonic partner. The competition, however, is asymmetric. China’s economic presence and direct borders with Kazakhstan give it a clear advantage, whereas India faces logistical challenges due to the absence of direct connectivity. The proposed International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port project are India’s key strategies to overcome this handicap and create alternative routes to Central Asia.

Kazakhstan, for its part, practices a “multi-vector” foreign policy, engaging with China, Russia, the U.S., the EU, and India simultaneously¹³. While it benefits from China’s infrastructure investments, it also seeks India’s partnership to avoid overdependence on Beijing. This creates space for India to expand soft power, educational exchanges, and niche economic collaborations.

¹² Penpa Dhoundup & Dr. Kishor Jose (2023) “*India-China in Central Asia: Converging Views and Diverging Interests*” IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Volume 28, Issue 1, Series 1 (January, 2023) 38-51 e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845.

¹³ Gulshan Sachdeva(2006) “*India’s Attitude towards China’s Growing Influence in Central Asia*” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program ISSN: 1653-4212, Volume 4, No. 3 (2006) p. No 23-34



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In summary, India–China competition in Kazakhstan is defined by China’s economic dominance and India’s gradual but strategic engagement. The balance Kazakhstan maintains between the two reflects its broader policy of diversifying partners while safeguarding sovereignty.

India–China competition in SCO

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as an important platform where India and China compete for influence in Eurasia, including Central Asia. Originally founded by China, Russia, and Central Asian states, the SCO was expanded in 2017 to include India and Pakistan and Since then, the organization has become not only a vehicle for regional security and connectivity but also an arena for India–China rivalry. China uses the SCO to consolidate its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and deepen strategic ties with Central Asian members¹⁴. Through initiatives in infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity, Beijing projects itself as the primary driver of economic integration in the region. It also leverages the SCO to expand security cooperation, including counter-terrorism mechanisms and military exercises, thereby reinforcing its leadership role. India, on the other hand, approaches the SCO with caution. While it values the platform for access to Central Asia and for engaging regional players on issues like terrorism, energy security, and connectivity, New Delhi resists China’s attempts to impose the BRI as a collective agenda. India has consistently refused to endorse BRI projects, citing sovereignty concerns due to the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Instead, India highlights its own connectivity initiatives such as the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar port to present alternatives and the India–China competition in the SCO is also visible in security narratives¹⁵. China emphasizes collective security frameworks, while India stresses the need to combat terrorism without double standards, indirectly targeting Pakistan, a close ally of China. This divergence often leads to friction within SCO deliberations. In conclusion, the SCO serves as a stage for both cooperation and competition between India and China. While China seeks to

¹⁴ Tran, L., Tran (2023) “*Competition of strategy between China and India in the Indian Ocean nowadays*” Journal of Liberty and International Affairs, 9(2), 454-468, p no 456

¹⁵ M. Doraibabu (2018) “India and China at Sea: Competition for Naval Dominance in the Indian Ocean” edited by David Brewster, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 278,



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dominate economically and strategically, India leverages the forum to counterbalance Chinese influence and strengthen ties with Central Asian members.

Conclusion

India–Kazakhstan relations hold immense potential, but their trajectory is inevitably shaped by the larger strategic environment, particularly the India–China conflict. On the one hand, the rivalry has pushed India to strengthen its outreach to Central Asia as a way to balance China’s growing dominance. Kazakhstan, with its vast energy resources, geostrategic location, and multi-vector foreign policy, offers New Delhi important opportunities for cooperation in energy security, trade, connectivity, and cultural diplomacy. Forums like the SCO and the India–Central Asia Dialogue provide platforms to institutionalize this engagement. On the other hand, challenges remain significant. China’s economic weight, geographical proximity, and deep involvement in Kazakhstan’s infrastructure and energy sectors give it an advantage that India struggles to match due to limited connectivity and financial resources. Moreover, Kazakhstan’s careful balancing between major powers means that it cannot afford to lean too heavily toward India at the expense of China. Thus, while the India–China conflict indirectly drives India closer to Kazakhstan, it also creates structural constraints on how far the partnership can progress. For New Delhi, sustained engagement, creative connectivity solutions, and leveraging its soft power will be critical to transforming opportunities into tangible gains in this strategic relationship.