

Nepal-Central Asia Engagement: Connectivity and Exchanges in Perspective

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Modern Central Asia incorporates five former Soviet republic states- Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan with a combined population of more than 72 million people.

These five Central Asian Republics (CARs) host a rich wealth of natural resources and ancient cities, and today lies at strategic crossroads. Firstly, their geographical location at the heart of both the historical unit of Eurasia and the ancient Silk Road Route- acts as a crossroads of connectivity which allows CARs to act as a bridge between the East and the West. Secondly, their solutions to governance over the 25 years since their independence has placed them at a political crossroads, providing the world with a unique political lab for original governance solutions. These crossroads make the region [strategically significant](#) in terms of geopolitical, geo-economic, geo-cultural and geo-historical subtlety.

Since their independence, all five of the Central Asian Republics have signed bilateral diplomatic relations with Nepal- the first agreement was established between Kyrgyzstan and Nepal on March 26, 1993 and the last was between Uzbekistan and Nepal on January 26, 2018.

For Nepal, Central Asia is seen as its extended neighbors and hopes to converge both their views and interests concerning the promotion of economic, scientific and cultural cooperation.

Connectivity Conundrum and Prospects of Transit Diplomacy for Nepal

States of the CARs are enormously rich in natural resources like oil and gas. Besides petroleum and natural gas, CARs are also rich in aluminum, gold, silver, coal, cotton, iron and uranium.

Nepal's northern neighbor, China, is trying to harness the minerals and hydrocarbons from the CARs through its [One-Belt-One-Road \(OBOR\)](#) inter-regional trade initiative. In the opposite direction, China aims to use the OBOR to supply CARs and beyond with its manufactured goods.

In 2009, China developed the Turkmenistan-China natural gas pipeline. This pipeline delivers gas from Central Asia to China and [could extend to Nepal](#) by connecting new sub-lines or via road/railway networks across the Nepal-China border. Additionally, the Chinese railway network also has [prospects of integrating](#) Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran to the regional network in Central Asia.

In a similar context, the recently developed Qinghai-Tibet Railway connects Golmud in Central China, to Shigatse and Lhasa- the capital of Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR)- bringing the Chinese railway even closer to the Nepal border. Given that, Shigatse is already [connected with Central Asia](#) through a rail and road network, it is more than likely that Nepal will aim to advance its connectivity in the near future and benefit from tapping into these existing networks. In addition, the feasibility study of Sayfrubesi-Rasuwadhi Railway track has already been forwarded on the Nepali side. In such circumstances, it is expected that this will open a new vista of opportunity for Nepal.

According to a [Research](#) at College of William and Mary in the United States seems to suggest that the desire for greater connectivity between Nepal and China, and by extension Central Asia, is not unilateral on Nepal's side. Their studies found that Chinese officials made 1,039 visits to South Asia and 722 visits to Central Asia, between the years 2000 and 2017, of which 129 visits were accredited to Nepal making Nepal the most favored destination in South Asia.

Correspondingly, during the [visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping](#) to Nepal in October 2019, several deals and agreements were signed in the areas of connectivity, border management, trade, tourism, education and security. Additionally, deals on the development of a Trans-Himalayan railway link to Tibet, tunnel infrastructure, and the ambitious Gyiron-Kathmandu connectivity projects were also reached.

The CARs are always interested to expand their oil, gas, and transportation linkages with South Asia through Afghanistan while trying to [diversify](#) their existing linkages with Russia and China.

As an alternative to the prevailing routes to Russia in the north and China in the east, the CARs view Afghanistan and Pakistan as the transit corridor towards entry to South Asia.

At the same time, Nepal's southern neighbor India is also trying to [overcome the disadvantage](#) of not having direct land connectivity to the CARs.

Like China, India also has a proposition for the long-haul connectivity of land routes linking it to the CARs. [India's "Connect Central Asia Policy"](#) aims to revitalize age-old ties despite its [dependence](#) on the unstable and fleeting relationship with Pakistan. The volatile geopolitical struggle taking place in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has only helped to further the challenges associated with such a connectivity plan.

There is mutual distrust, political animosity, and disconnection between India and Pakistan. In such situations, Nepal can be an alternative route linking India with the CARs through China. Hence, the positioning of Nepal in a highly geo-strategic Himalayan region can be a connecting hub for Central Asian economies as their gateway to the larger economies in South Asia and vice versa. The case for Nepal as a connectivity hub is strengthened by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seeing Nepal as a part of the Chinese initiative while India is not. Therefore, India can also tap the potential of the BRI through Nepal even without being directly associated with it.

Like the CARs, Nepal is also geographically remote with inadequate transport infrastructure and poor trade logistics. Both the CARs and Nepal are further challenged by the constraints of multiple border crossings and must depend on the transport system and regulations in transit countries. Nevertheless, as conferred earlier, both Nepal and the states of CARs are landlocked but have huge potential to be 'land-linked'. The overland connectivity has the potential to lessen Nepal's vulnerabilities by expanding the nation's opportunities and positioning it as the connecting link for the inter-regional trade and transport routes.

Nepal is ['mostly'](#) using the Indian ports of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Haldia in Kolkata for trade. However, in recent times, Nepal has also been seeking an [alternative trade route](#) with and through China. In such a background, Nepal shall seek greater engagement with the CARs in order to import more of their Petro-products via China. For this, Nepal needs to negotiate with China bilaterally and also through platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Furthermore, the energy-hungry India can be benefitted by the Trans-Himalayan road and railway connectivity. At the same time, supplies from India can be marketed to both China and the CARs. For this to happen, there is a need for multilateral cooperation and meaningful engagement from the concerned countries.

Moreover, when connected to Chinese road and railway network through BRI and other projects, Nepal will be able to source large amounts of revenues from trade and transit.

The alternative quest for “prosperity through transit diplomacy” is possible for Nepal if it can initiate and institutionalize the trilateral and multilateral dialogues by engaging and involving all the countries concerned. For this, it is of the utmost necessity to induct a multilateral or ministerial-level meeting between the CARs, China, and India.

There are some regional frameworks in which the Central Asian countries are already engaged in, like for instance, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) where 6 other countries and development partners are united with an overarching vision of ["Good Neighbors, Good Partners and Good Prospects."](#) Similarly, there is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to which Nepal is also a [dialogue partner](#). These institutions primarily work on various affairs related to socio-economic and security cooperation. Nepal should try to harness its direct and indirect affiliation with these regional frameworks in order to capitalize on the prospects of alternative trade routes and ‘transit diplomacy’ for inter-state and inter-regional cooperation.

To further strengthen the multilateral cooperation for infrastructure development, it will likely be paramount that the [new financial architectures](#) covered by the framework of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the New Development Bank (NDB) act as the mainstay.

Cultural Exchange: Historical and Contemporary Perspective

Nepal and Central Asia share a long and intertwined cultural history. One of the most prominent examples of the cultural overlap between these two regions comes from the Trans-Himalayan silk road and Buddhism.

Like the modern day OBOR interregional trade initiative, the Trans-Himalayan Silk Road represented an important historical route which connected South Asia to Central Asia and enabled commercial and cultural exchange between the regions. This ancient road established and facilitated the movement of Bactria traders traveling between Central and South Asia. These traders came from the ancient Bactria region in Central Asia situated just north of the Hindu Kush mountain range and straddle between what is now Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The movement of these Bactria traders not only helped shape the OBOR trade route today but also the world religion of Buddhism. Whilst the percentage of Buddhists in Central Asian countries today is less than one percent, the historical importance of the region and its mercantile people in shaping Buddhism is significant. The Buddha was born over 2,500 years ago, in what is present day Lumbini, Nepal. He is the revered founder of the religion of Buddhism. However, whilst the Buddha was Nepali and lived his entire life in South Asia, the [first people who he converted to Buddhism](#) were in fact Central Asian Bactria traders.

Through these traders, Buddhism spread from Nepal and South Asia along the Silk Road to Central Asia and when it came back the modern-day images of Buddhism came with it. The Trans-Himalayan Silk Road played a large role in the exchange of art and in particular, Buddhist art from Nepal and South Asia to Central Asia and back again. For example, the first anthropomorphic Buddha and the image of the standing Buddha originate from Central Asia, prior to this, Buddha was only represented through symbolism such as footsteps in the sand.

This exchange of culture via the Trans-Himalayan Silk Road has continued throughout history and stretches beyond Buddhism. The Silk Road itself has even often inspired contemporary art in the region.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asian state leaders and politicians have set out to [de-sovietize](#) the world's perception of the region. In the last three decades cultural and ideological changes, as well as political and economic reforms, have been enacted by Central Asian state leaders. Such changes are endorsed as a result of state desire to deviate from the conceptions of their 'former Soviet' past and establish the region as a collection of emerging states with their own distinct national identities.

However, the post-Soviet postcolonial nation-building efforts, as well as the construction of new national identities, habitually misguides Central Asian politicians to view the region as a

geopolitical chess board of power relations, borders, and culture. As a result, the geography of the region is rigidly divided into the political imagination of its state leaders and only includes one or another non-Soviet country given contextual circumstances. The strict and inflexible division of borders and cultures by Central Asian state leaders is particularly surprising given the importance which is given to the heritage and historicity of the fluid Silk Road in the region's identity. The Silk Road's status as an identifying aspect of Central Asia could not be higher considering its frequent prominence in national museums, advertisements in major cities across the region, and presidential speeches. Therefore, it is intriguing that the concept of the Silk Road and its routes which spread across continents have been portrayed by nation-builders in Central Asia as [singular, rigid, and fixed in time and space.](#)

Nevertheless, artists in Central Asia have managed to escape the state's fixed conception and strict characterisation of the region with regards to the Silk Road. For artists, the Silk Road represents an exchange of vibrant cultures along with colourful and diverse personal experiences and imaginations. An important factor of modern artistic outputs is the notion that Central Asian people and political borders are rarely fixed but rather remain in a permanent state of motion in homage to their nomadic heritage.

Contemporary artists have challenged the state's preconceived concepts and relationship to the Silk Road in Central Asia and presented alternative perspectives and definitions for the Silk Road through their cultural production. Through their creative output artists have become a gateway to contemporary Central Asia for outsiders who may not be familiar with the region apart from its former Soviet past. They help to expand the horizons of the region. Contemporary artists are able to extend borders and cultures and provide connections to Central Asia, the Silk Road and the various locations along its path which some nation-building politicians may try to hide or misrepresent. For example, whilst politicians would exclude the Hindu Kush Himalayas from Central Asia, the famous Kazakh contemporary artist Erbossyn Meldibekov believes that their westernmost peaks constitute a major part of Central Asia and its contemporary art. To him, the Himalayan peaks not only represent the historical artistic connections between Buddhist travellers, Newari artists, and Central Asia but also represent the concept of imagined geographies. Meldibekov's 'Mountains of Revolution' series rematerializes and re-spatialises the actual geography of Central Asia by creating a series of mountain peaks out of old metal saucepans and

carton boxes. The ability to pack up and move the series of mountains from Central Asia to different museums further into Europe and Asia represents the reach of the Silk Road and highlights Meldibekov's vision that geography, as well as political borders, are fluid and mobile. Whilst nation-builders in Central Asia may believe that the borders on the political maps are as rigid as real mountains, Meldibekov's series provides an alternative narrative to foreigners; it tells a story of Central Asia's regional cultures and people being as resilient and portable as the metal saucepan and carton box mountains.

Community resilience in Central Asia is a theme which many contemporary artists use to portray an ulterior picture of the Central Asian landscape and peoples than that which nation-builders in the region would want you to believe. In 2009, Kyrgyz contemporary artists Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev worked together to create an exhibition which stripped away the nostalgic and romanticised views of the Silk Road often presented by the region's leaders. The photography and video exhibition titled '[A New Silk Road](#)' describes the real-life struggles of mountainous communities along the Silk Road's highways and villages in Kyrgyzstan as well as highlighting the creative resilience adopted by these communities to survive in the modern world. The photographs and videos displayed throughout the exhibition are edited in a way that paints vivid juxtaposing scenes comparing the dilapidated Soviet-era trucks which are used by Kyrgyz drivers to transport scrap metal to China with the most recent model huge machines used by Chinese drivers to transport manufactured goods through Kyrgyzstan to Europe. [The title of the exhibition intends](#) to divert the people's perception of the ancient trading routes from the nostalgic rhetoric proclaimed by national governments and channel national and international traffic towards the difficulties brought about by nation-building under the Soviet Union and the reliance of old trade for survival. The 'A New Silk Road' exhibition as well as dispelling nationalistic romanticised myths of the Silk Road also powerfully reveals the real residents of the tiny Kyrgyz farms and towns which straddle the present 'new' Silk Road. The entrepreneurial ingenuity of these residents is depicted in the images and showcases how establishing bonds with peoples from distance locations and cultures can be mutually beneficial for both residents and travellers.

However, despite the dynamic messages of mobility, multiculturalism, and resilience represented in these cultural works many contemporary artists in Central Asia lack an institutionalised network of communication within which their art can be shared. Contemporary artists in the region lack a

permanent home to display their work as many find only temporary exhibitions in the nation's museums. Therefore, in order to showcase their work contemporary artists in Central Asia often have to find their own space within local and international cultural institutions. This normally involves active participation in public art and public festivals as well as international art fairs and large international biennale art exhibitions.

Nepalese contemporary artists have, like their Central Asian counterparts, also felt a [lack of institutional support](#) and have also suffered from a similar transitional political situation. Government initiatives have been criticised for promoting contemporary art as an intellectual academic pursuit and for focusing on individual artists rather than the collective. Even the independent National Art Academy in Nepal has been accused of falling victim to institutional politics and subsequently remaining as conservative towards contemporary art as it was more than two decades ago. Therefore, contemporary artists in Nepal, like those in Central Asia, have had to establish their own spaces. Private institutions, such as the Siddhartha Art Gallery, have been established in Kathmandu by contemporary artists as a permanent space to showcase their work as well as provide a meeting point for artists from both Nepal and abroad. The contemporary artists of the [Siddhartha Art Gallery](#) believe that culture constitutes an important factor of development and therefore galleries represent a gathering point for artists, writers and musicians to express their views on socio-cultural and political issues and help [sculpt national and international perceptions](#), contributing towards development. Particular importance is put on community projects which bring artists and people together. For example, the Khulla Dhoka project brought together artists, poets, and individuals from various ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds at a time when Nepal was going through a political impasse. This community project focused on dialogue as well as creating an intercultural awareness and acceptance between the different communities in Nepal. The Khulla Dhoka community project provided the Nepalese people with an innovative opportunity to learn from one another and understand how they can collectively work together to achieve a common goal.

Similarly, Central Asian states and Nepal share a common goal of expanding their mutually beneficial relations in tourism, trade, cultural exchange, and education, as highlighted in the declaration of diplomatic relations between Kazakhstan and Nepal in 2015. Therefore, contemporary art represents one such possible outlet which can be utilised to improve these

mutually beneficial relations. Contemporary art has the potential to be used as a medium between Central Asia and Nepal to increase tourism and education through a cultural exchange of contemporary artistic expressions and methods. This has already been seen from Chinese-Nepalese relations such as the 2017 art exhibition in Kathmandu by Chinese artist Liu Junqi entitled “[Ancient Echo, New Silk Road](#)” or the 2019 “[Meet on the Silk Road](#)” exhibition by Chinese artist Xiao Ben which was also hosted in Kathmandu. Other additional platforms for cultural exchange which could assist in boosting Central Asian-Nepali relations could be international art festivals such as the Kathmandu Triennale in Nepal or the Art Biennale in Uzbekistan, the only such event in Central Asia. Given the importance of tourism to both the Nepalese and Central Asian economies and one of their major sources of foreign exchange and revenue, encouraged the participation of artists between these two regions could potentially boost their shared economic and cultural relations.

As both Nepal and the Central Asian Republics emerge from an isolated agrarian society and pursue greater economic integration with their neighbours and the rest of the world, they must seek greater connectivity. This involves building hard infrastructures like that of OBOR initiative and soft infrastructures such as trade-agreements, customs-agreements, and technical cooperation all which come from a greater understanding of each other's cultural context and long-term goals.

Nepal and the CARs: Prospects of One-on-One Cooperation

There is considerable scope of cooperation between Nepal and the CARs in the areas of energy, agriculture, biotechnology, IT development, joint commercial ventures, improving air connectivity to boost trade and tourism, poverty alleviation, e-education and financial cooperation.

To materialize the prospects of cooperation to an optimum level, exchange of high-level political, diplomatic, business and cultural delegations should take place between Nepal and the CARs more often.

The rich cultural heritage and diverse geography of both Nepal and the CARs are conducive to tourism. The synergies of collaboration in the tourism industry along with improvements in the development of local tourism infrastructure must be realized by reforming the micro and macro-

economic policies and institutions in both regions. For this, knowledge and experience sharing platforms should be jointly streamlined. For instance, Nepal can learn from double-landlocked Uzbekistan, which turned its geographical remoteness into an instrument of development due to its active development of internal and external transport corridors, leading to increased trade and tourism with neighbors. In a similar line, there could be many circumstances with Nepal that CARs could learn.

Similarly, work should be done by Nepal and the CARs to implement projects in the field of agriculture- like horticulture and animal husbandry to build a favorable condition for the export of agricultural products. Likewise, an expansion of cooperation in the field of mining and mineral exploration is another large-scale prospective project for which these actors could collaborate on.

Both the CARs and Nepal should act towards long term networking and continuous engagement between the entities and agencies for a transboundary market. It is necessary for both the regions to craft soft power strategies by mobilizing media for communication between the regions and state entities along with involving diplomatic and business entities more rigorously.

The mutual understanding needs to be further reinforced through the synergy of thought and action between the governments and various other institutions of both the regions so that the linkages between them can be strengthened.

Nepal and Central Asian blocs can facilitate the visit, study, and exchange of a few hundred students to universities and institutions by providing scholarships. Exchanging students between the CARs and Nepal can boost the academic, intellectual and technical exchanges that will be imperative for knowledge and expertise collaboration in the long run.

The development of academic and cultural exchanges between Nepal and the CARs should be streamlined and institutionalized at the level of universities and relevant institutions. Both Nepal and the CARs needs to prioritize this collaboration by exchanging their experts and specialists also from various other sectors.

Another critical scope of cultural cooperation between Nepal and the CARs is the joint production of films, publications of journals and books, exchange of print, and visual materials.

To sum up, apart from dialogues, knowledge sharing mechanisms, and academic-cum-cultural exchanges, the multicity transport linkages is a 'must' comprehensive framework in facilitating the energy transit and trade administering channel that will act as a level playing field to all the countries concerned.