



CENTRAL ASIA

CSSPR Country Study Series



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Central Asia – A Regional Study

Central Asia is a region in Asia which stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China and Mongolia in the east, and from Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan in the south to Russian Siberia in the north. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union transformed the fifteen republics of that union into independent states. Among them were the five republics of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹

Geographic Contours

1. Terrain

The total area of the five republics is approximately 4 million square kilometers, slightly more than 40% of the area of the United States and less than one quarter of the area of Russia.² The area of the republics varies greatly: Kazakhstan, by far the largest, occupies about 2.7 million square kilometers, more than two-thirds of the region. The smallest republic, Kyrgyzstan, occupies only 0.198 million square kilometers.³ The Central Asian Republics (CARs) also feature quite different topographies, varying from the wide expanses of desert in primarily flat Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to the steep slopes and river valleys of mountainous Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The treeless, grassy vast steppe areas of Central Asia, considered a part of the steppes of Eastern Europe, go on to constitute a homogeneous geographical zone known as the Eurasian Steppe.

2. Climate

Central Asia has wide-ranging climate regimes, from arid deserts to mountains with heavy precipitation. Across the region the summers are warm to hot, with mean temperatures ranging from 20°C to 40°C, and winters are moderate to cool, with mean temperatures ranging from 3°C to 20°C. In summer, maximum temperatures can be as high as 50°C in the deserts, while in winter, minimum temperatures can drop as low as -45°C in some mountainous areas and as low as -18°C in northern parts of the region.⁴ Annual average precipitation across highly mountainous Tajikistan is around 500 millimeters (mm), largely during spring and early summer, while Uzbekistan receives less than half as much. Heavy winds are at times prevalent across the region, leading to dust storms in many areas, especially during the months of September and October. Floods and mudflows occur frequently across the region, and droughts are also relatively common.

As transitional economies emerging from the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asia Republics' (CARs) vulnerability to climate change is primarily due to its physical geography (dominated by temperate deserts and semi-deserts), decades of over-reliance on agricultural exports from monocultures (cotton in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, wool in Kyrgyzstan, wheat and meat in Kazakhstan), and traumatic economic, institutional upheavals following independence.

Aridity is expected to increase across the entire Central Asian region, but especially in the western parts of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Temperature increases are projected to be particularly high in summer and fall, accompanied by decreases in precipitation. As such, climate-related security issues in Central Asia are rising due to water stress between upstream hydro-rich and downstream carbon-rich states.

Historical Perception

Central Asia has a rich history to which numerous tribes and nationalities have contributed over a period of 2,500 years. A vital factor in the history of the southern part of the region was its location astride the most direct trade route between China and Europe, the Silk Road, which began to develop in the heyday of the Roman Empire. Cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, founded by Persians, became powerful cultural and commercial centers as East-West trade increased.⁵ That prosperity made part or all of the region the object of many conquests (including those by the Arabs in the eighth century A.D, several Turkic groups beginning in the ninth century, and the Mongols in the early thirteenth century).⁶ The Arabs and the Turks brought Islam to Central Asia. Meanwhile, the northern part of the region was inhabited by nomadic herding peoples, including the Turkic predecessors of the Kazaks and Kyrgyz, who also fell under the control of the Mongols.

In the sixteenth century, the Uzbeks established powerful khanates along the Silk Route. Those entities flourished until the nineteenth century, when they were overtaken gradually by the traders and settlers of the expanding Russian Empire. The Russians moved southward from the steppes of Kazakhstan in search of trade and later the cotton that could be grown in present-day Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In the ensuing decades, cotton became the vital economic magnet for increased Russian occupation, and large tracts of the region were devoted to that crop to meet Russia's domestic needs. By the 1900s, the Kazak, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen nomads had suffered massive disruption to their traditional lifestyles as a result of Russian settlers taking their grazing land for farms.⁷

In 1917, the region passed from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union, with little participation by its inhabitants. Full Soviet control was not established until the mid-1920s, as guerrilla bands continued to resist Soviet authority. In the 1920s, four of the five republics came into existence for the first time as Soviet authorities drew borders in anticipation of reordering all of Central

Asian society (Kyrgyzstan gained full republic status in 1936). In the 1930s, the primarily agricultural region was traumatized by the forced collectivization campaign of Joseph V. Stalin's regime; episodes of widespread famine were common.⁸

Throughout the Soviet period, the CARs participated in the life of the union in a rather peripheral sense, and many phases of cultural life were unaffected by Soviet rule. Local communist parties suffered the same purges as those witnessed in other republics, but they exercised little political influence in Moscow. Regional economies were stunted by increased demands for production of cotton and other specifically assigned items. Decades of Soviet-intensive cultivation caused massive pollution, from which the region still suffers. Inter-republican animosities over access to scarce resources went largely ignored by Soviet authorities. The more liberal Soviet regime of Mikhail S. Gorbachev (1985-91) saw increased airing of grievances that long had been withheld by the peoples of the Central Asian republics, but before 1991, no organized movement for independence had sprouted from that discontent.⁹

The five post-Soviet states of Central Asia still are defined by the arbitrary borders created in the early years of the Soviet era, and the demarcation among them still fails to correspond to the ethnic and linguistic situation of the region. Thus, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan have substantial Uzbek minorities, and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have large numbers of their respective neighbor's people. Kazakhstan has few Central Asian people of other nationalities; its largest minorities are Russian, Ukrainian, and German. In 1991, the five Soviet Republics of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—were faced for the first time with the prospect of existence as independent states.

History of Kyrgyzstan

Following the vote by the Supreme Soviet declaring independence on August 31, 1991, Kyrgyzstan became the first of the five Republics of Soviet Central Asia to break away from the Soviet Union. In October 1991, Askar Akayev, ran unopposed and was elected President of the new independent republic by direct ballot receiving the majority of the vote. A new constitution was passed by the parliament in May 1993 and the Republic of Kyrgyzstan was renamed the Kyrgyz Republic. In 1994, however, the parliament failed to produce a quorum for its last scheduled session prior to the expiration of its term in February 1995. President Akayev scheduled an October 1994 referendum, overwhelmingly approved by voters, which proposed two amendments to the constitution—one that would allow the constitution to be amended by means of a referendum, and the other would create a new bicameral parliament called the Jogorku Kenesh. Elections for the two newly created legislative chambers—a 35-seat full-time assembly and a 70-seat part-time assembly—were held in February 1995. President Akayev successfully won his reelection for another five-year term in December 1995.¹⁰ The dawn of the new decade saw two parliamentary elections and a presidential election that ended with President Akayev's victory. In December 2001, through a constitutional amendment, the Russian language was given official status.

2005 Tulip Revolution

Parliamentary elections were held in Kyrgyzstan on February 27 and March 13, 2005. Majority of the seats were secured by the pro-government politicians that supported Ayakev. Citing electoral fraud, protest demonstrations in many regions outside of the capital began, demanding a cancellation of the election results and Ayakev's resignation. On March 24, the opposition protests reached their peak, quickly becoming a full-scale revolution. Akayev fled the country and on March 25 the opposition formed an interim government led by People's Movement of Kyrgyzstan's (PMK) leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in order to ease the transition towards greater democracy in Kyrgyzstan and to organize new presidential elections. On July 10, the interim government held new presidential elections, with a landslide victory for Bakiyev. Bakiyev's term in office was marred by the murder of several prominent politicians, prison riots, economic ills and battles for control of lucrative businesses. Protests erupted in 2006 and 2007 as Bakiyev was accused of not following through with his promises to limit presidential power, give more authority to parliament and the prime minister, and eradicate corruption and crime.

2010 Kyrgyz Revolution

It began in April 2010 with the ousting of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in the capital Bishkek. It was followed by increased ethnic tension involving Kyrgyz people and Uzbeks in the south of the country, which escalated in June 2010. The violence ultimately led to the consolidation of a new parliamentary system in Kyrgyzstan. The new interim government held consultations on a new constitution, intended to increase the powers of the parliament and reduce those of the president. A referendum was held on the resulting document on June 27, 2010, and was approved by over 90% of voters with a turnout of 72%.¹¹ Almazbek Atambayev ran in 2011 to succeed interim President Roza Otunbayeva as President of Kyrgyzstan and won in a landslide on 30 October 2011.

2020 Protests

The presidency was followed by Sooronbay Jeenbekov, who was sworn in as president on 24 November 2017. Mass protests began on 5 October 2020 in response to the parliamentary election that was perceived by protestors to be unfair, with allegations of rigging. The protesters seized control of the Ala-Too Square, the White House and Supreme Council buildings. On 6 October, following the protests, the electoral authorities in the country annulled the results of the parliamentary election. Under immense pressure, President Sooronbay Jeenbekov resigned on October 15, 2020.

History of Kazakhstan

Nursultan Nazarbayev, the last leader of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan and an advocate of maintaining a union of Soviet republics with increased autonomy, became president of an independent Kazakhstan when the Soviet Union split apart in 1991. In the post-Soviet era, Kazakhstan remained closely tied to Russia by energy supply lines, national defence concerns and technology import, but Nazarbayev also sought closer relations with the West. Beginning in the 1990s, the discovery of major new oil fields and subsequent international investment enabled Kazakhstan's economy to initially pull ahead of its Central Asian neighbours.

Since his first election in 1991, Nazarbayev maintained firm control of Kazakhstan's political and economic policy. After cancelling the 1996 presidential election, in 1999, Nazarbayev won an election that received international criticism. Beginning in 1999, a series of corruption scandals arose, and frequent changes of government disrupted economic policy. By 2004, restrictions on opposition parties, including the liquidation of the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DVK), the top opposition group, brought accusations of a political crackdown to the forefront in advance of the 2006 presidential election.

Although a reform package that included a reduction in the length of the presidential term and an expansion of parliamentary power was passed in 2007, a constitutional amendment was passed alongside it that rendered Nazarbayev personally exempt from the standard two-term limit on the presidency. In 2010, the Kazakh parliament approved plans for a referendum for 2011 that would cancel the next two rounds of presidential elections, effectively extending Nazarbayev's term until at least 2020. However, the planned referendum was rejected by Kazakhstan's constitutional court in January 2011. Nazarbayev accepted the court's ruling and called for early presidential elections. In April 2011, running against token opposition, Nazarbayev was elected to another term as president, winning more than 95% of the vote.¹²

In May 2011, reaction to the Zhanaozen massacre began protests in Kazakhstan. Oil workers who had gone on strike over pay and working conditions in the town of Zhanaozen were gunned down by police. The incident led to a wider crackdown on dissent that saw a number of opposition activists jailed. The next presidential election was held in April 2015, wherein Nazarbayev won nearly 98% of the vote. In 2017, he advanced a set of constitutional amendments that gave more power to the parliament and the cabinet. Saying he wanted to facilitate the rise of a new generation to lead the nation, Nazarbayev resigned from the presidency on March 19. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the speaker of the Senate, then acceded to the presidency.¹³

History of Uzbekistan

In the late 1980s, the liberalized atmosphere of the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev fostered political opposition groups and open (albeit limited) opposition to Soviet policy in Uzbekistan. Islam Karimov, an Ethnic Uzbek rose to power as Communist Party Chief following the Osh Riots of 1990 - a series of ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups. When the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan reluctantly approved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Karimov became president of the Republic of Uzbekistan and by 1992 Uzbekistan adopted a new constitution.¹⁴

In 1995, a national referendum extended Karimov's term of office from 1997 to 2000.¹⁵ In 2000, Karimov was re-elected overwhelmingly in an election whose procedures received international criticism.¹⁶ To build relations with the U.S. in light of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Uzbekistan provided logistical support to the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan. However, in 2004, the United States cut non-humanitarian aid to Uzbekistan, citing recurrent human rights violations.¹⁷ In mid-2005, brutal suppression of riots in Andijon brought severe criticism from the United States and the European Union (EU). Under pressure from the Karimov regime, the United States vacated its air base at Karshi-Khanabad, and sanctions by the EU and the United States followed.¹⁸ In the same period, a mutual defence treaty substantially enhanced relations between Russia and Uzbekistan.¹⁹ In December 2007, President Karimov was re-elected to power. Uzbekistan allowed the U.S. limited use of its southern Termez air base for operations in Afghanistan, partially reversing its decision to expel U.S. forces from the Khanabad base in 2005.²⁰ In September 2016 Karimov died, leaving the long-serving Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev as interim president. Mirziyoyev won a full term as president in December, with nearly 90% of the vote in an election in which he faced only token opposition.²¹

History of Tajikistan

In the late 1980s, the openness of the Soviet regime of Mikhail Gorbachev stimulated a nationalist movement in Tajikistan, and Tajik leaders reluctantly declared sovereignty in September 1991, when the dissolution of the Soviet Union became inevitable. The last of the communist party leaders, Rakhmon Nabiyev, was elected the first president of independent Tajikistan in 1991. In March 1992, massive nonviolent demonstrations protesting his dismissal of opposition elements began in Dushanbe. After government forces opened fire on the demonstrators in April, violence soon spread to the southern city of Kūlob and elsewhere. The conflict between the government and reform groups led to the collapse of the Nabiyev government. The turmoil deteriorated into an all-out civil war between the communist elites and an alliance of Islamic and democratic forces. Emomali Rahmon, who had taken power after the collapse of the coalition government that followed Nabiyev's fall, was elected president in 1994 without the participation of opposition parties.

By the mid-1990s, rebel forces gained control of large parts of eastern Tajikistan, even though the government had Russian troops at its disposal. After sporadic ceasefires and negotiations, in 1997 the Emomali Rahmon government signed a peace accord with the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), a coalition of Islamic leaders and secular politicians. The peace agreement brokered by the United Nations, Russia, and Iran essentially ended the war and produced some order in the strife that had characterized much of Tajik life since the country's independence. The fighting had left tens of thousands dead and about 10-20% of the population internally displaced.²² In the years that followed, insurgent groups of the UTO remained active in some parts of the country. In 1999, the UTO responded to the addition of more UTO representatives in government positions by disbanding its armed forces, and the UTO fighting force was integrated into the armed forces of Tajikistan.

Emomali Rahmon easily won re-election in the presidential election of 1999, and the parliamentary elections of 2000 gave Rahmon's party a strong majority. After his electoral victory, Rahmon sought to establish the authority of the central government throughout Tajikistan, carrying out a campaign to disarm non-state militias. He also began what some observers saw as a drift toward authoritarianism, using the presidency to steer the country away from the political pluralism called for by the 1997 peace agreement.

In 2003, voters approved a referendum on a package of constitutional amendments. These included an amendment loosening presidential term limits for President Rahmon which initially limited the President to a single term of office. In June 2004, Tajikistan signed an agreement with Russia calling for a permanent Russian military base in Tajikistan, as well as increased Russian investment in Tajikistan's economy.

The legislative election of February 2005 resulted in a victory for Rahmon's People's Democratic Party, which won a majority in the Assembly of Representatives. In 2006, Rahmon removed several provincial governors in order to strengthen his base for the presidential election, which he won easily in November for a seven-year term. In March 2007, Rahmon had formally dropped the Russian suffix (-ov) from his surname as an acknowledgment of his Tajik identity. The change initiated a trend of "Tajikization" of surnames that was followed by many senior members of the government.²³

In May 2016, voters in Tajikistan approved a referendum on a package of constitutional changes that included lifting term limits for President Rahmon and lowering the minimum age for presidential candidates from 35 to 30. Observers noted that the amendments further strengthened the Rahmon family's already tight grip on power; the amendment concerning presidential term limits had been written to apply only to Rahmon, based on his special status

as "Leader of the Nation" granted by the Assembly of Representatives in 2015, and the amendment concerning the age of presidential candidates was widely seen as a way to clear a path to the presidency for Rahmon's son Rustam Emomali, who then became eligible for the presidency in late 2017.²⁴ Another amendment in the 2016 referendum banned all political parties based on religion, imposing an additional obstacle for the opposition to reconstitute itself. In October 2020, with the main opposition fully side-lined, Rahmon won another presidential election without significant contest.

History of Turkmenistan

Throughout the Soviet period, Turkmenistan remained isolated from the political events in Moscow. Gorbachev's policies of glasnost and perestroika did not have a significant impact on Turkmenistan.²⁵ In 1990, however, the Supreme Soviet of Turkmenistan declared sovereignty as a nationalist response to perceived exploitation by Moscow. Although Turkmenistan was ill prepared for independence and communist leader Saparmurad Niyazov preferred to preserve the Soviet Union, in October 1991 the fragmentation of the USSR forced him to call a national referendum that approved independence.

After independence, Saparmurad Niyazov continued as Turkmenistan's Chief of State, replacing communism with a unique brand of independent nationalism reinforced by a pervasive cult of personality. A 1994 referendum and legislation in 1999 removed further requirements for the president to stand for re-election (although in 1992 he completely dominated the only presidential election in which he ran), making him effectively president for life. Throughout the post-Soviet era, Turkmenistan has taken a neutral position on almost all international issues. Niyazov eschewed membership in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

In 2002, an alleged assassination attempt against Niyazov led to a new wave of security restrictions, dismissals of government officials, and restrictions placed on the media. Between 2002 and 2004, serious tension arose between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan because of bilateral disputes and Niyazov's implication that Uzbekistan had a role in the 2002 assassination attempt. Through a series of bilateral treaties, friendly relations were restored between the two neighbours.

In late 2006, after more than two decades of rule, Niyazov died suddenly of heart failure. Public fears that the absence of a designated successor would threaten the country's stability were not immediately realized, though the naming of former minister of health Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov as acting president—a departure from the dictates of the country's constitution—was unprecedented. Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow was declared the winner of the 2007 presidential election on February 14, receiving 89% of the vote and was sworn in immediately.²⁶ Early into his presidency, Berdimukhammedov took steps toward reversing some

of his predecessor's controversial orders. Berdymukhammedov was elected to a second five-year term as president in February 2012. In December 2012, Turkmenistan held parliamentary elections that were termed as the first to feature multiple political parties in the country's history, though both contesting parties claimed loyalty to President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow. In February 2016, a commission headed by Berdymukhammedov, drafted amendments to the constitution that would increase the length of a presidential term from five to seven years and remove the upper age limit on the president, which had been set at 70. Turkmenistan's fifth presidential elections were held in Turkmenistan on 12 February 2017. Berdymukhammedov won a seven-year term with 98% of the vote.

Society

1. Demography

Kazakhstan has a population of 18.51 million and there are several ethnic groups in Kazakhstan, to include Kazakh (Qazaq) 68%, Russian 19.3%, Uzbek 3.2%, Ukrainian 1.5%, Uighur 1.5%, Tatar 1.1%, German 1% and others 4.4%.²⁷ Kyrgyzstan has a population of 6.45 million with an ethnic demography of Kyrgyz at 73.5%, Uzbek at 14.7%, and Russian at 5.5%, Dungan at 1.1% and others at 5.2% (includes Uyghur, Tajik, Turk, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Korean, and German).²⁸ The population of Tajikistan is around 9.31 million people with 84.3% Tajik (including Pamiri and Yagnobi), 13.8% Uzbek, 2% others (including Kyrgyz, Russian, Turkmen, Tatar, Arab).²⁹ Turkmenistan's population is around 5.94 million with the majority of them being Turkmen at 85%, Uzbeks at 5%, Russian at 4%, and others at 6%.³⁰ Uzbekistan has a population of 33.58 million and the ethnic groups in Uzbekistan include Uzbek 83.8%, Tajik 4.8%, Kazakh 2.5%, Russian 2.3%, Karakalpak 2.2%, Tatar 1.5%, and others 4.4%.³¹

2. Languages

Kazakh is understood by 83.1% of the population, and has the status of state language, whereas Russian, which is spoken by most Kazakhs at 94.4%, is declared an official language, and is used routinely in business and government. 22.3% of the population is trilingual and can speak Kazakh, Russian and English.³² In Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyz is the state language of Kyrgyzstan while Russian is additionally an official language. Kyrgyz is spoken by 71.4% of the population, Uzbek 14.4%, Russian 9%, and others 5.2%.³³ The state and official language of the Republic of Tajikistan is Tajik. Tajik is spoken by 84.4% of the population, Uzbek 11.9%, Kyrgyz 0.8%, Russian 0.5%, and others 2.4%.³⁴ Turkmen is the official language of Turkmenistan (as per the 1992 Constitution), although Russian still is widely spoken in cities as a "language of inter-ethnic communication". Turkmen is spoken by 72% of the population, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, and other 7%.³⁵ Though Uzbek is the first official and only declared national language of Uzbekistan, Russian is widely used in many fields. Uzbek is spoken by 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, and others 7.1%.³⁶

3. Social Structure

a. Identity

Ethnicity and national identity are extremely fluid and flexible constructs in Central Asia, where many ethnonyms did not exist a little more than a century ago. The most important term that helps define local understandings of ethnicity and group identity in Central Asia is *qawm*, which translates into “solidarity group”. The ethnic identities began to congeal in new ways during the early-Soviet period with the policy of “Korenizatsiya” that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁷ The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of new republics had a significant impact on language instruction and incentives for minorities to study in their native languages.

In responding to their neighbors in the new independence period, the policy makers of the five states have moved in two contrary directions: toward establishing common goals and greater unity in a regional grouping, and toward individual economic and political development and identification with countries outside the region.

The philosophical ideal of Pan-Turkism, an ethnically based unity concept that originated among Central Asian intellectuals in the nineteenth century, still receives support, but relatively few concrete steps have been taken to realize the ideal. Furthermore, the people of Tajikistan are of predominantly Persian rather than Turkic origin. Meanwhile, Central Asians have placed special emphasis on ethnic self-differentiation as a belated reaction against the stereotyping of non-Slavs that was common practice in the Soviet Union. To classify the people of Central Asia under a single banner or identity would be unwise. They are a people of diverse nomadic roots and traditions all the across the Eurasian steppes and this diversity lends a resounding pride in the long cultural heritage that serves to build stronger connections between the Central Asian Republics.

The most important single cultural commonality among the republics is the practice of Sunni Islam, which is the professed religion of a very large majority of the peoples of the five republics and which has experienced a significant revival throughout the region since the 1990s. Propaganda from Russia and from the ruling regimes in the republics identifies Islamic political activity as a vague, monolithic threat to political stability everywhere in the region. However, the role of Islam in the five cultures is far from uniform, and its role in politics has been minimal everywhere except in Tajikistan. For Kazaks, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen, whose society was based on a nomadic lifestyle that carried on many traditional tribal beliefs after their nominal conversion, Islam has had a less profound influence on culture than for the sedentary Tajik and Uzbek Muslims, who have a conventional religious hierarchy.

b. Women and Gender Roles

Historically, the women in Central Asia's nomadic society played an outstanding role by undertaking an array of tasks necessary for the survival of the tribe. The participation of women in the political and social landscape has improved much since the Soviet period. The Central Asian Women Leaders' Caucus was established to support women in the region to attain a more prominent political, economic and social role and enable them to increasingly influence the decision-making process on issues related to peace, stability and sustainable development in the region. Women comprise 27.1% in Kazakhstan's Mazhilis and 6.4% in the Senate. The Jogorku Kenesh of the Kyrgyz Republic is the highest representative body in the country and 15% of the elected officials are women. Tajikistan's House of Representatives and National Council constitutes 19% and 21.9% women. The Mejlis of Turkmenistan is 25% women and Uzbekistan's two parliamentary chambers - the lower legislative chamber and the upper Senate comprises 16% and 17% women, respectively.³⁸

4. Religion

According to its Constitution, Kazakhstan is a secular state and 70.2% of the population is Muslim, Christian 26.2% (mainly Russian Orthodox), others 0.2%, atheist 2.8%, and unspecified 0.5% others.³⁹ Islam is the dominant religion of Kyrgyzstan. Muslims constitute 90% (majority Sunni) of the population, Christian 7% (Russian Orthodox 3%), others 3% (includes Jewish, Buddhist, Baha'i).⁴⁰ The population of Tajikistan is 98% Muslims. Approximately 87%-95% of them are Sunnis, 3% are Shias and roughly 7% are non-denominational Muslims.⁴¹ In Turkmenistan, Muslims constitute 93% of the population while 6% of the population are followers of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the remaining 1% population is reported as non-religious.⁴² In Uzbekistan, Muslims constitute 88% of the population (mostly Sunni) while 9% of the population follows Russian Orthodox Christianity, the remaining 4% are non-religious.⁴³

5. Education

While traditions of education in the region date back centuries, the base of the modern education system in Central Asia dates to the Soviet period. The former Soviet Republics of Central Asia were overwhelmed with the fiscal challenges of nation-building soon after independence. State budgets for education were negatively affected during the 'transition' period and the hope for the sort of educational innovations heard in the Russian Federation during perestroika only became visible in Central Asia by the dawn of the 21st century. CARs faced a series of educational 'crises' including expenditure decline, decentralization, and 'structural anomalies' - a historical legacy of the systems, processes and social attitudes of the Soviet period. On average, education budgets throughout the CARs declined by 50% from 1991 to the end of the decade.⁴⁴

By the turn of the century, education markers for the general population had begun to improve. The existing human capital base in Central Asia has a number of strengths, such as high literacy rates and an above average enrolment in tertiary education. The literacy rate for Kazakhstan in 2018 was 99.78%, Tajikistan at 99.8%, Kyrgyzstan at 99.6%, Turkmenistan at 99.7% and Uzbekistan at nearly 99%.⁴⁵

Despite these achievements education quality is at risk and vast numbers of youth, well over half the populations, have little prospect of finding work. As a consequence, the issues of access and equity in education have become more pronounced: women and girls are worse off, rural areas are more marginalized and minorities more under threat.

The governments of the Central Asian Republics are determined to overcome the tremendous challenges to reform their education system and improve its quality. Educational expenditure in Tajikistan amounts to 5.2% of its GDP, 5.3% of Uzbekistan's GDP, 3.1% of Turkmenistan's GDP, 6% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 2.6% of Kazakhstan's GDP.⁴⁶ The Central Asian higher education space in 1991 looked a lot like its counterparts in other former republics of the now collapsed Soviet Union in terms of organization and governance. The national governments of Central Asia grappled with the challenges of sovereignty - and as a civil war ravaged in Tajikistan - higher education was largely left to its own devices.

The Central Asian states inherited a flagship university (two in the case of Kazakhstan and three in Uzbekistan) and many tens of higher education institutes offering specialist higher level learning in a particular specialty such as teaching, art, agriculture. Significant responses to the geopolitical shock of independence were the dramatic privatization of higher education and the rapid outflow of academics leaving the system.

During the Soviet period, mobility was mainly limited to other Soviet republics, with students drawn to intellectual centers such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Novosibirsk. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, opportunities for students from Central Asia to travel and study abroad have greatly increased. That said, Russia remains the top destination, hosting around 75,000 Central Asian students in 2018/19.⁴⁷ Knowledge of the language, lower tuition fees, closer cultural norms, and similar education systems drive students' choice of Russia for studies abroad.

Carefully focused external funding, active partnerships with local governments, local organizations, and civil structures are unquestionably needed to turn around the situation in education and for new developments to take hold and create effects. In the longer term, this will require a coherent national framework for education policy and reform but short- term policy decisions focused on inclusive and accessible education will help to revive the education system.

6. Health Care

In the Soviet era, health services were provided largely by the state-owned health institutions and financed by the state budget, but informal out-of-pocket payments by patients and their families played an important role as well. The national Ministries of Health assumed responsibility for developing and implementing national health policies. They had inherited from the Soviet period a health system that was divided into three administrative tiers: republican (national), oblast (regional), and district (rayon) or city, being funded from separate budgets.

Most problems experienced by the Central Asian health systems partially result from the collapse of the “Semashko” centralised healthcare system of the Soviet Union, and are associated with the subsequent transition period and the restructuring of healthcare systems in these countries.⁴⁸ Healthcare reforms initiated since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 had different rates of success across the Central Asian region. The degree of success was largely dependent on the consistency of government policy and the state of economic development. Most countries of Central Asia started to embark on wide-ranging reforms in the second half of the 1990s; however, the pace has varied, with Kazakhstan only adopting a systematic approach after 2004, while reforms in Tajikistan were delayed by their civil war.

The Central Asian region is ripe for many infectious diseases including viral hepatitis and blood-borne infections. An additional public health challenge is the uncontrolled use of and self-medication with antibiotics, potentially leading to antibiotic resistance.

In general, health facilities are still funded according to rigid budget line items, which reinforce excess hospital capacity and offer little opportunity for innovation by managers or staff, while potentially encouraging wasteful patterns of treatment.

During the past two decades, countries of Central Asia attempted to transform their centrally planned, supply-driven healthcare systems and implemented many interesting innovations. For instance, since gaining independence, for example Kazakhstan has undertaken major efforts to reduce expenditures on the hospital sector and to focus on primary healthcare. But important public health challenges like the double burden of chronic and infectious diseases and lack of formalised epidemiological research programmes exist against the health care development plans of Central Asian economies.⁴⁹

Kazakhstan has undertaken major efforts in reforming its post-Soviet health system. Three comprehensive reform programmes were developed from 2000 till 2019 with the State Program for the Development of Healthcare 2020-2025 focused on increasing capacity and procuring public-private partnerships. Changes in health service provision include a reduction of the hospital sector and an increased emphasis on primary health care. However, inpatient facilities continue to consume the bulk of health financing.⁵⁰

In Tajikistan, following independence and the consequences of the civil war, health funding had collapsed and informal out-of-pocket payments became the main source of revenue, with particularly severe consequences for the poor.⁵¹ Tajikistan's Ministry of Health has implemented reform programmes but the main challenge has been to reorient the health system towards primary care and public health rather than hospital-based secondary and tertiary care.

Kyrgyzstan has undertaken wide-ranging reforms to introduce comprehensive structural changes to the health care delivery system with the aim of strengthening primary health care, developing family medicine and restructuring the hospital sector.⁵² Major service delivery improvements have included the introduction of new clinical practice guidelines, improvements in the provision and use of pharmaceuticals, quality improvements in the priority programmes for mother and child health, cardiovascular diseases, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, strengthening of public health and improvements in medical education.

Uzbekistan's primary care in rural areas has been changed to a two-tiered system, while specialized polyclinics in urban areas are being transformed into general polyclinics covering all groups of the urban population. There are also efforts to improve allocative efficiency, with a slowly increasing share of resources devoted to the reformed primary health care system. Health care provision has largely remained in public ownership and while the share of public expenditure is slowly increasing, financial protection remains an area of concern.⁵³

Turkmenistan's healthcare has suffered under the lasting legacy of the Soviet Union's centralized healthcare programme. The abysmal conditions are exacerbated by the lack of capacity and trained personnel. Buttressing the alarming view of Turkmenistan's crumbling healthcare infrastructure is the fact that so-called health tourism for Turkmen citizens is booming. Many Turkmen travel to neighbouring Uzbekistan to seek medical treatment, sometimes taking considerable risks to cross the border illegally.

7. Sports

Equestrian sports are traditional in Central Asia, with disciplines like endurance riding, buzkashi, dzhigit and kyz kuu.⁵⁴ The traditional game of Buzkashi is played throughout the Central Asian region, the countries sometimes organize Buzkashi competitions amongst each other. Association football is popular across Central Asia. Most countries are members of the Central Asian Football Association, a region of the Asian Football Confederation. However, Kazakhstan is a member of the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA). Wrestling is popular across Central Asia, with Kazakhstan having claimed 16 Olympic medals, Uzbekistan 7, and Kyrgyzstan 3.^{55 56 57}

Government

1. Constitution

All the republics of Central Asia had adopted new constitutions by 1995, though imbalance in favor of the executive still persists. All CARs specify independent judicial branches and due processes. Kyrgyzstan's 1993 constitution was replaced on June 27, 2010 after the Kyrgyz Revolution of 2010 accompanied by a Governmental shift from presidential form to a parliamentary one. The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan was approved by referendum on 30 August 1995 and has been subject to four amendments. The Constitution of Tajikistan was adopted on 6 November 1994 and amended two times, in September 26, 1999 and June 22, 2003. The Constitution of Uzbekistan was adopted on 8 December 1992 on the 11th session of the Supreme Council of Uzbekistan. The 1992 Constitution of Turkmenistan has been subject to five amendments till a new constitution was adopted on September 14, 2016.⁵⁸

2. Government Structure

The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan oversees a presidential republic. The President of Kazakhstan (elected by popular vote for a five-year term), is head of state and nominates the head of government. Executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is vested in both the government and the two chambers of parliament: the Assembly (Mazhilis) and the Senate. There are forty four judges in the Supreme Court of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is divided into fourteen regions and the three municipal districts of Almaty, Nur-Sultan, and Shymkent.

The Government of Tajikistan works within the framework of a presidential republic, whereby the President is both head of state and head of government, and of a multi-party system. Legislative power is vested in both the executive branch and the two chambers of parliament. The 2003 constitution, among other amendments, set a limit of two seven-year terms for the president. The bicameral Supreme Assembly (Majlisi Oli) includes the Assembly of Representatives (Majlisi Namoyandagon) and the National Assembly (Majlisi milli). The Supreme Court is the highest court but other high courts include the Supreme Economic Court and the Constitutional Court, which decides questions of constitutionality. Tajikistan consists of four administrative divisions that are the provinces of Sughd and Khatlon, the autonomous province of Gorno-Badakhshan and the Region of Republican Subordination.

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a presidential constitutional republic, whereby the President of Uzbekistan is both head of state and head of government. Executive power is exercised by the government and legislative power is vested in the two chambers of the Supreme Assembly, the Senate and the Legislative Chamber. The judicial branch is composed of the Supreme Court,

Constitutional Court, and Higher Economic Court that exercises judicial power. Uzbekistan is divided into twelve regions, one autonomous republic (Karakalpakstan) and one independent city.

The Government of Turkmenistan is a presidential republic where the president is both head of state and head of government. The president is directly elected by an absolute majority “popular” vote in two rounds if needed for a 7-year term. The constitution calls for a unicameral National Assembly or Mejlis (125 members directly elected from single-seat constituencies by absolute majority vote and serve 5-year terms). The Supreme Court of Turkmenistan (consists of the court president and 21 associate judges and organized into civil, criminal, and military chambers).

Kyrgyzstan is a parliamentary republic with the Government of Kyrgyzstan as an executive body which exercises its authority and power through the Cabinet of Ministers led by the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan as head of government. The constitution calls for a unicameral Supreme Council (Jogorku Kengesh). The president is directly elected by an absolute majority popular vote in two rounds if needed for a single 6-year term. The prime minister is nominated by the majority party or majority coalition in the Supreme Council, appointed by the president upon approval by the Supreme Council. The Supreme Court of Kyrgyzstan consists of 25 judges. Kyrgyzstan is divided into seven regions and each region is further divided into districts (raion), administered by government-appointed officials.

Economy

Regional economic cooperation, another type of unity that has received substantial lip service in the 1990s, had initially failed to materialize on a large scale. All five republics joined the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) shortly after independence, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan established a limited common market in 1994. But Uzbekistan vetoed the membership of unstable Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan refused to join. Existing arrangements within the free-trade zone had not significantly promoted large-scale commerce within the group of three. For all five republics, Russia remained the top trading partner because much of the emphasis in their agricultural and industrial infrastructures remained the same as when the republics had assigned roles in supplying Moscow. Several factors encouraged economic rivalry rather than cooperation. Water, a crucial resource for agriculture and power generation, had been the object of bitter bilateral and multilateral disputes both before and after independence. The apportionment of water consumption favoring downstream consumers like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan created further tension between the CARs. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had come close to conflict over water in the Fergana Valley, where vital agricultural reform and privatization programs were endangered by unresolved water disputes.

Central Asian countries went through a painful process of correcting huge macroeconomic imbalances and structural distortions inherited from the Soviet era. They also had to adapt to the partial loss of the Soviet Union market (especially in the military-industrial sector) and the termination of direct and indirect transfers from Russia.

Macroeconomic stabilization and market-oriented reforms in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan started by 1994. In Tajikistan, they started a few years later, after the end of its civil war in 1997. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan resisted market transformation for much longer and tried to retain many of the instruments of a command economy.

Growth recovery started between 1995 and 1997 but accelerated only in the 2000s with new investment in hydrocarbons and other mineral resources and the start of the global commodity boom. After the period of output decline in the first half of the 1990s, GDP per capita in current international dollars in PPP terms has systematically increased in all Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have managed to grow rapidly, however, thanks primarily to the hydrocarbon bonanza. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan grew at a slower pace. As a result, the income per capita differences between those two subgroups of Central Asian countries have increased in the last 15 years.

Exports and imports account for a substantial share of GDP of all the Central Asian countries, but this does not necessarily mean that this results from their open trade regimes. Rather, this is the result of their narrow specialization in commodity dominated exports (especially energy). Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan largely follow autarkic development strategies and protectionist policies. The high proportion of exports to GDP in Turkmenistan results from its hydrocarbon monoculture. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan conduct more open trade policies.

The EU is the largest export market for Kazakhstan, and the EU remains quite significant as a source of imports into Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Turkey is an important destination for Tajikistan's exports and source for Turkmenistan's imports. The Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has gained greater prominence over the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the organization created by the former Soviet republics at the end of 1991 to retain free trade and visa-free movement of people. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the EAEU and Uzbekistan is an observer member.

Overall, membership in the WTO, CIS, and EAEU helped their Central Asian members to modernize, to a certain degree, customs administration and technical standards, and reduce non-tariff barriers to trade and investment barriers. Framework Agreement on Trade Cooperation under the banner of Economic Trade Organization (ECO) have been signed between some of the Central Asian Republics but haven't been ratified by all of them.

Despite its increasing share of Central Asia's exports and imports, China has not advanced formal free trade arrangements with the region and trades with its Central Asia partners on WTO terms. The EU on the other hand concluded bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with each country, which offered the Most-Favoured Nation tariffs in bilateral trade relations, even before the accession of Central Asian countries to the WTO.

International remittances in Central Asia have increased dramatically during the last two decades. Two Central Asian states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are among five countries of the

world where remittances equal or surpass 25% of GDP.⁵⁹ Remittances serve to contribute to the household budget in developing countries, thereby improving living conditions, reducing poverty, and increasing well-being. International migration and remittances significantly reduced poverty in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.⁶⁰

The biggest challenges to economic development that Central Asian countries as a whole region face are in the areas of governance, enterprise restructuring, and corruption and competition policy, pointing to their limited progress in more complex institutional and legal reforms. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have achieved some progress in building market oriented financial sectors. Kazakhstan has attracted meaningful foreign investment into this sector. It also has the largest banking sector. The currencies of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are not convertible even for current account transactions, resulting in multiple exchange rates. The financial sectors of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remain highly repressed.

1. Agriculture

Agriculture is among the most risk-prone sectors in the economies of Central Asia. Production shocks from weather, pests and diseases and adverse movements in agricultural product and input prices not only impact farmers and agri-business firms, but can also strain government finances. Although the region is blessed with ample arable land, most of that land becomes useful only when irrigated. Large-scale irrigation, in turn, has taken a huge toll on the hydrological systems of the region—in the most obvious case, the system that fed the nearly disappeared Aral Sea. Regional cooperation on the Aral Sea problem, recognized as one of the most serious environmental crises in the world, received much lip service and little action in the first half of the 1990s. By the late 2010s an estimated 36,000 square kilometers of the sea's bed had been exposed, and only about 10% of the original waters remain.⁶¹

Agriculture is the backbone of the Kyrgyz Republic's rural economy. It employs about 40% of the country's labour force and accounts for 20% of the gross domestic product.⁶² Misuse and poor practices have resulted in the degradation of agricultural land. Additionally, inadequate water management, long a problem in the country, continues to hamper production.

Once considered the breadbasket of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan still suffers from the effects of agricultural and environmental mismanagement during the Soviet era. Approximately 75% of the country's territory is suitable for agricultural production, but only about 30% of the land is currently under agricultural production.⁶³ Single-crop cultivation and lack of anti-erosion measures have limited the agriculture sectors output. According to the OECD, in 2019 the agricultural sector accounted for approximately 4.5% of Kazakhstan's economic production.⁶⁴ Approximately 45% of the country's population lives in rural areas, and incomes of almost 30% of the economically active population are generated by employment in the agricultural sector.⁶⁵

Tajikistan is the most vulnerable country in Central Asia with regard to food insecurity given its limited irrigated land that accounts for 95% of crop production, underdeveloped agriculture methods, and poor connectivity between markets and agricultural production areas. For Tajikistan, only 34.7% of its territory is agricultural land and it contributes to 28.6% of the GDP while it makes up 43% of the workforce.⁶⁶ Given the widespread migration of male Tajik workers overseas, women constitute the majority of employees.

Uzbekistan's agriculture is one of the most regulated sectors of the economy by the state. For Uzbekistan, nearly 62.6% of its territory is agricultural land while only 10.1% is arable and it contributes to 17.9% of the GDP while it occupies 25.9% of the labour work force.⁶⁷ Cotton is Uzbekistan's main cash crop and though Uzbekistan is one of the largest producers of cotton in the world, risks associated with a one-crop economy as well as from considerations of food insecurity have resulted in Uzbekistan diversifying its production into cereals as well. Another cause behind moves to diversify is environmental, because the large quantities of irrigation and fertilization needed to produce cotton have contributed to the drying up of the Aral Sea and to the severe pollution of the soil in the surrounding areas.

Agriculture in Turkmenistan is not a significant sector of the economy as it contributes to 7.5% of the GDP and employs 48.2% of the workforce.⁶⁸ Agricultural land accounts for more than 72% of Turkmenistan's total territory, however, Turkmenistan is an arid country and most of its agricultural land is desert pasture with very little cultivable land.⁶⁹ Because of the arid climate, irrigation is necessary for nearly all cultivated land. The two most significant crops are cotton - which is grown on half of the country's irrigated land, and wheat.

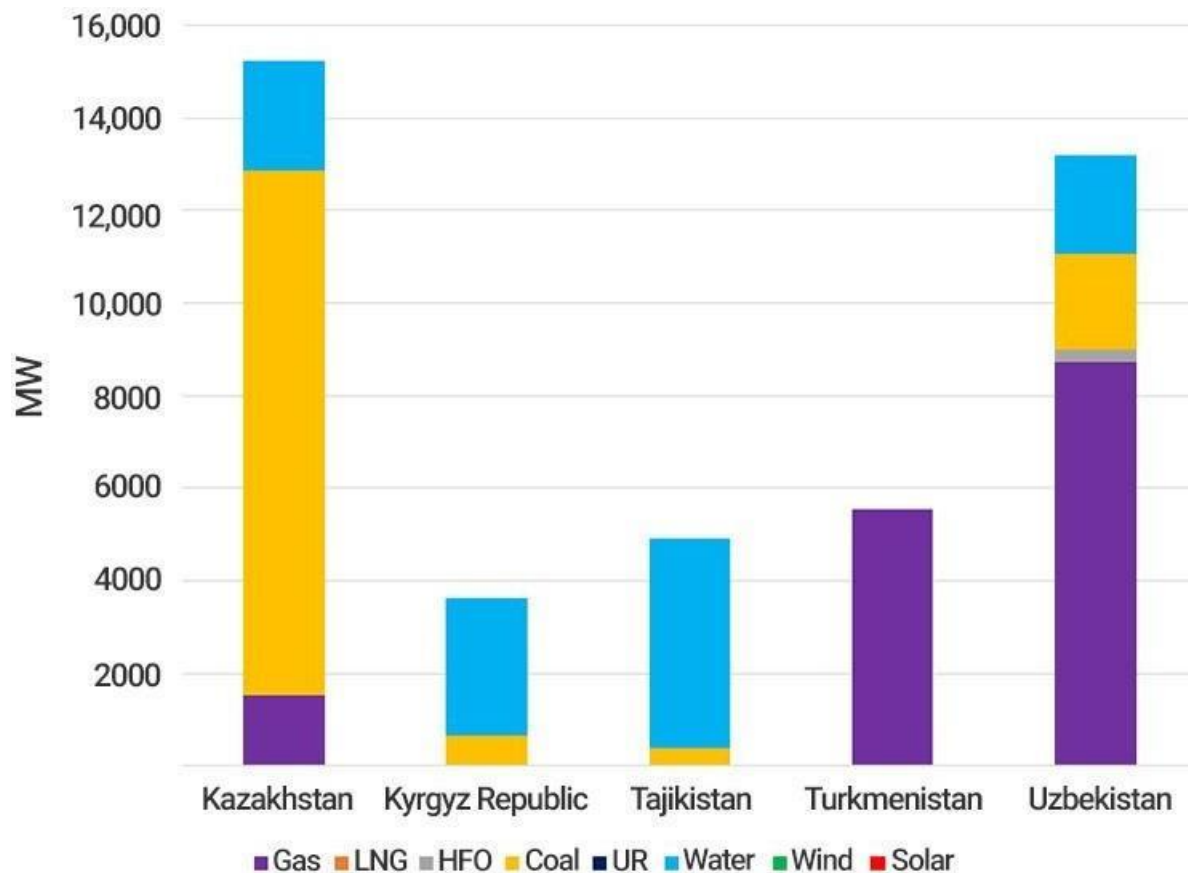
2. Industry

Kazakhstan is a significant producer of coal, crude oil and natural gas, and a major energy exporter. The country is the largest oil producer in Central Asia, with the 12th-highest proven crude oil reserves in the world. While coal dominates the country's energy mix, renewable sources of energy are a small but growing share of Kazakhstan's electricity generation. Gas pipeline network expansion remains a priority, in order to expand access and reduce reliance on coal and LPG for household consumption

Kazakhstan's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has risen six-fold since 2002. In 2019, Kazakhstan's real GDP grew 4.5% as a result of higher consumer spending and mining-related investments.⁷⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic and the precipitous fall in oil prices have been double hits to the economy. GDP fell by 3.0% in 2020, reflecting the stringency of the restrictions that depressed economic activity.⁷¹ Aside from oil-related activity, the main industries are metals processing, machine building, and the manufacture of construction materials. Kazakhstan's industries are concentrated in the northern and north-eastern provinces. Substantial foreign investment has bolstered the metallurgy industries, and privatization has revived some enterprises. The energy sector of Kyrgyzstan represents 4% of its GDP and 16% of industrial production, and hydropower accounts for two-thirds of energy production.⁷² Kyrgyzstan exploits coal and some oil and gas, but most hydrocarbons are imported. Kyrgyzstan's hydro-rich energy sector is characterized by aging infrastructure and significant losses, which are exacerbated by a combination of weather-related shocks and growing demand. Kyrgyzstan relies on oil and gas imports for more than half of its energy needs, particularly during the winter months when hydropower production is low. Energy policy aims to improve energy security by developing indigenous energy sources and rehabilitating and expanding transmission and distribution networks.

Uzbekistan's subsoil is rich in oil, gas, coal and uranium. For natural gas, it ranks 11th in the world for mining and 14th for reserves, and for uranium it is 6th for mining and 7th for explored reserves.⁷³ It is also among the world leaders for producing and supplying reserves of certain minerals: gold, copper, phosphorites and molybdenum. Despite being energy self-sufficient thanks to its gas sector, Uzbekistan's ageing infrastructure struggles to meet growing domestic demand. Losses, overuse and financing remain problematic. Wide-ranging reforms focused on improving and diversification of the energy sector are being introduced and the government has adopted the Strategy of Actions 2017-2021, which prioritizes improving energy efficiency, generating capacity and use of renewables. The rest of Uzbekistan's industry focuses on manufactured products like textiles, food processing, machine, metallurgy, and mining.

Figure 1.1 Power Generation mix in Central Asia in 2019.



Source: World Bank Estimates, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/20/central-asia-electricity-trade-brings-economic-growth-and-fosters-regional-cooperation>

With foreign revenue precariously dependent upon exports of cotton and aluminum, Tajikistan's economy is highly vulnerable to external shocks. In Tajikistan, the industrial sector and services sector accounts for 25.5% and 45.9% of the GDP, respectively. 10.6% of the labour force is involved in industries while 46.4% is in the services sector.⁷⁴ Hydropower is the main source of energy in Tajikistan, followed by imported oil, gas and coal. However, Tajikistan's energy sector is prone to supply shocks, due to seasonal shortages. Energy policy focuses on providing uninterrupted energy access to all users while improving regional co-operation and energy sector efficiency, but significant domestic and foreign investment will be necessary for continued energy sector development.

Turkmenistan is one of the largest gas resource holders in the Caspian region and has the fourth-largest total offshore and onshore gas reserves in the world after Iran, Russia and Qatar. Around 85% of total exports are gas and oil. The industrial sector accounts for 44.9% of the GDP and employs 14% of the labour force.⁷⁵ Turkmenistan's government is continuously investing in oil and gas, to modernize and expand the electricity and energy sector. Moreover, the energy sector is almost fully subsidized, with citizens receiving free electricity, heat and gas up to a certain level of consumption, until 2030, but the government is taking steps to reduce subsidies to curb domestic demand and increase exports. According to its Oil and Gas Development Plan 2030, Turkmenistan's gas production will increase to 250 billion cubic metres (bcm) by 2030 and oil production is expected to be 110 million tonnes (Mt).⁷⁶ In addition to cotton and natural gas, the country is rich in petroleum, sulfur, iodine, salt, bentonite clays, limestone, gypsum, and cement—all potential inputs to chemical and construction industries.

3. Human Resource Management

The human cost of the economic contraction across Central Asia because of COVID-19 will be profound, and will require tailored and incisive policy interventions to support people and businesses. Of the 2.4 million people in Europe and Central Asia that the World Bank estimates will be pushed into poverty in 2021, 58% of them live in Central Asia (nearly 1.4 million).⁷⁷ In countries where the services sector accounts for two thirds of employment, such as Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, the impact of lockdown measures and lower consumption on retail, risks having a serious impact on the job market. With COVID-19, women are facing greater reductions in paid work and more job losses, with 26% of women reporting a job loss in Kazakhstan, compared to 22% of men.⁷⁸ Migrant workers are also facing unprecedented risks of unemployment. A recent survey of Central Asian migrants in Russia found that 40% of respondents had lost their job and 75% were forced into unpaid leave, compared to 23% and 48% of the local population.⁷⁹

In Kazakhstan, unemployment has risen by 0.2% to 5% in July 2020 according to official statistics, and is expected to increase to above 6% in 2021 while Tajikistan's unemployment rate for 2020 was 10.99%.⁸⁰ In Kyrgyzstan, returning labor migrants and domestic contraction have led to an increase in unemployment, with worst-case scenarios estimating a surge of up to 21%. Uzbekistan's unemployment jumped from 9.4% to 15% between the two first quarters of 2020.⁸¹

Defense & Security

1. Law and Order

In the post-Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan has not developed an armed force of significant size, and remains dependent on Russia in many aspects of national defence. In January 2017, President Almazbek Atambayev officially founded the Kyrgyz Army where ground forces constitute the main fighting element. Most troops are ethnic Kyrgyz conscripts, though some officers are Russians. Kyrgyzstan's armed forces number about 10,900 active ground and air force troops. Paramilitary forces include 5,000 border guards, 3,500 police troops, and 1,000 National Guard troops. In September 2012, President Atambayev signed a decree to set up an independent State Border Service (previously, border guards were part of the State National Security Committee).⁸²

Kazakhstan still relies heavily on Russia for military training and equipment, but has expanded defense cooperation with other states.⁸³ About 20,000 Kazakh troops serve in the army, 12,000 in the air force, and 3,000 in the navy. There are about 4,000 personnel in the special forces, 9,000 border guards, 20,000 Internal Security (police) troops, and 2,500 presidential and government guards.⁸⁴

The Tajik armed forces consist of about 8,800 ground, air force-air defence, and mobile (rapid reaction) troops. There also are about 3,800 troops in the Interior Ministry, 1,200 in the National Guard, and 2,500 in the Emergencies Ministry, and an unreported number of border guards.⁸⁵

The Uzbek armed forces are the largest in the region in terms of manpower, but some observers have argued that Kazakhstan's military modernization efforts are challenging Uzbekistan's security dominance. The armed forces consist of about 24,500 ground force troops, 7,500 air force troops, and 16,000 joint troops. There are also up to 19,000 internal security (police) troops and 1,000 national guard troops.⁸⁶

Turkmenistan's armed forces number about 22,000, including 18,500 ground, 3,000 air, and about 500 naval/coast guard forces. The army has about 700 tanks, 2,000 vehicles, and 560 artillery pieces, the air force has slightly more than 100 combat capable aircraft and helicopters, and the naval force has 10 patrol boats (including a former U.S. Coast Guard vessel).⁸⁷ Other forces include police and security troops, a presidential guard, and border troops.

2. Security Concerns

Nowadays, Central Asia is one of those regions of the world where security issues are always on the agenda. In the international community, the Central Asian region is still associated with drug trafficking, danger of religious extremism and terrorism, and the underdevelopment of political and civil institutions.

Politico-military cooperation among the Central Asian countries is necessary for ensuring regional security. The geopolitical tension in the surrounding regions, the security situation in Afghanistan, as well as intraregional socio-economic problems directly contribute to securitization of the region. Intra-regionalism among the Central Asian Republics suffers from a lack of mutual understanding, underdevelopment of interstate dialogue and interaction among them. The interstate relations in the Central Asian region carried with them the potential for conflict because of border issues and territorial disputes.

The threat of terrorism and religious extremism is the sword of Damocles constantly hanging over the CARs because of the proximity of the region to Afghanistan and the Middle East. Terrorist attacks in the capitals of CARs carried out by militant groups like “Union of Islamic Jihad”, “Zhaishul Mahdi”, “Jund al-Khalifat” and “Katibad Tauhit al-Jihad” raises concerns for possible violence and conflict in the future.

Internal socio-economic problems of Central Asian countries have self-destructive capacities that underscore the threats posed from external factors. Unpredictable global trends of prices for oil, gas and metals, which form the basis for the export of Central Asian states, deprives them of all chances to raise their social and economic spheres. Devaluation of national currencies, drops in the incomes of labourers who leave for work in Russia and a “demographic hump” of an unemployed youth naturally strike the economic and social spheres of the states.

Historical literature associated the problems of politico-military security in the region with either economic or political processes or considered the regional security paradigm in terms of ethnic, social and religious tensions. The “regional security complex” in Central Asia needs to be analysed in the context of other regional security sub-systems (taking into account both the internal and external factors).⁸⁸ Indeed, to date, in Central Asia, the external and internal factors are so entwined that they should be considered in close connection for understanding and forecasting the situation in the sphere of regional security.

The security architecture in Central Asia relies on multilateral mechanisms with pillars such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, (CSTO), The Shanghai Cooperation (SCO), The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The system of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia covers the cooperation in areas such as international security, environmental security, the economics as well as humanitarian and cultural fields. In particular, cooperation in the field of international security associated with: transparency in military preparations, maneuvers and troop movements in the border areas, exchange of military information and supporting efforts to use outer space for peaceful purposes.

Despite the diversification of ways and mechanisms of security maintenance, the military-political cooperation between Central Asian countries is based on the Russian factor, as the security guarantor in Central Asia. “Big Brother” Russia, as an active participant in the CSTO, SCO, and CICA, has a direct impact on the regional issues, and hence it maintains close bilateral relations with all the countries of Central Asia.

Russia's main defence tool in Central Asia is the CSTO. Russia's support of the CSTO lends credible legitimization of Russia's military presence in member countries and supports Russia's efforts to counterbalance NATO and U.S. military activities in the former Soviet space. The SCO creates an opportunity for Russia and China to offset each other's influence.

Intra-regional efforts have also improved with two summits of the heads of Central Asian states having been held in 2018 and 2019. Among the most important priorities were the fights against international political and religious extremism, terrorism, illegal drug trafficking, and sale of weapons. The 2018 summit resulted in the signing of the Treaty on Joint Action to fight terrorism, political and religious extremism, transnational organized crime and other factors threatening stability and security among the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

A successful Central Asian Union if realized under the framework of multilateral mechanism would represent a counterbalance to the existing Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Chinese-Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Pakistan's Relations with CARs

Relations between Pakistan and the five republics of Central Asia are based on the foundations of a corresponding history of intercultural exchange, migration and religion. The overall bilateral trade of Pakistan with the CARs has increased from US\$ 84.47 million in 2019 to 86.15 million in 2020. COVID-19 hampered the overall trade volume due to border lockdowns and trade restrictions but Pakistan's exports to the CARs have increased from US \$73 million in 2019 to US \$80 million in 2020.⁸⁹ Lately, Pakistan has laid emphasis on turning a page in its ties with Central Asian countries, given the increase in economic connectivity and integration. Improving ties with Central Asian countries fits in well with Islamabad's focus on enhancing economic security.

Pakistan-Kyrgyzstan Relations

Pakistan immediately established diplomatic relations with the Kyrgyz Republic post-independence on December 20, 1991 and a protocol for the foundation of strategic relations was signed on May 10, 1992.⁹⁰ In the past two decades, the two country's leaders have met to discuss bilateral relations and perspectives of cooperation on multiple occasions.⁹¹ One of the achievements of mutual cooperation has been the establishment of the framework of Bilateral Political Consultations (BPC).⁹² The first round of consultations between the two states was held Bishkek on January 24, 2018. Both sides examined strategic priorities and opportunities for partnership in areas of education, trade, parliamentary exchanges and investment. Over 2000 Pakistani students are studying in the Kyrgyz Republic, promoting intercultural interaction and building the pathway for collaboration between the people of both countries.⁹³ Pakistan has also expressed its interest in signing an extradition treaty as well as a treaty on exchange of offenders with the Kyrgyz Republic.⁹⁴

The volume of total bilateral trade between Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan stood at US \$1.86 million in 2019-2020.⁹⁵ Pakistan's major exports to Kyrgyzstan include pharmaceutical equipment, medicines, appliances and machinery while Kyrgyzstan's exports to Pakistan include livestock, tanned leather and dried vegetables. Kyrgyz-Pakistani Joint Ministerial Commission on Trade and Economic Cooperation is operating to promote the development of trade and economic collaboration. Three Joint Commission meetings were held in 2003, 2007 and 2017 and the fourth was scheduled in February 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹⁶

Pakistan-Tajikistan Relations

Pakistan was one of the first countries that recognized the autonomy of Tajikistan and established diplomatic and economic relations on June 6, 1992. Pakistan's embassy was opened in Dushanbe in 1993 and Tajikistan's embassy was set up in Islamabad by 1997.⁹⁷ Their relationship embodies a union of topographical vicinity, brotherhood and shared conviction to curb illegal medicine trafficking and regional terrorism. The governments of Tajikistan and Pakistan have consented on more than 64 treaties, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and conventions in different economic spheres.⁹⁸

Tripartite meeting between the President of Tajikistan, Prime Minister of Pakistan and the Afghan President was held on July 6, 2017 at Dushanbe. The leaders met to discuss economic and security challenges being faced by the region due to poor connectivity and infrastructure. The idea to establish a Tripartite Ministerial Commission to strengthen trilateral cooperation in economic, social and political spheres was also suggested.⁹⁹ The Joint Business Council (JBC) between Tajikistan and Pakistan serves to facilitate trade.¹⁰⁰ Somon Air, Tajikistan's first private airline carried direct flights from Pakistan's major cities to Dushanbe and vice versa till its services were terminated. If the contracts are renegotiated, a direct air passage will serve to promote trade, tourism and intercultural exchange.

The two nations cooperated for the repatriation of stranded Pakistani nationals in Tajikistan and vice versa due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown.¹⁰¹ The Embassy of Pakistan in Dushanbe recently donated 68 tons of cement to 67 flood-affected families of Khatlan Region in Tajikistan.¹⁰² Six sessions of the Pakistan-Tajikistan Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, and Scientific-Technical Cooperation along with two meetings of the Joint Working Group on Cooperation in Oil and Gas Sector have been held till now. The trade turnover between the two countries reached 56 million during 2019 and only improved by 0.9% in 2020.¹⁰³ ¹⁰⁴ During the civil war in Tajikistan and the Soviet-Afghan war, scores of ethnic Tajik refugees, around 1.2 million, sought refuge in Pakistan.¹⁰⁵ Although the refugee crisis was financial weight on the country, Pakistan, in the spirit of brotherhood, provided aid to the refugees. Nearly 958,000 Tajiks still live in the northern parts of Pakistan.¹⁰⁶

Pakistan-Kazakhstan Relations

Pakistan was amongst the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan soon after its independence in 1991 and the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan was established in Islamabad on November 27, 1994.¹⁰⁷ Pakistan and Kazakhstan have maintained cordial relations, mutual understanding and a common approach toward global issues. Numerous diplomatic dialogues and exchanges between representatives of both countries have occurred. Currently, the main mechanism for implementing interstate cooperation in the trade and economic sphere is the Kazakhstan-Pakistan Intergovernmental Commission on Trade and Economic, Scientific-Technical and Cultural Cooperation of which nine meetings have been held to date. The commission met in February 2020, wherein Kazakhstan agreed to establish a Joint Working Group on Trade and Investment, with Pakistan to remove trade barriers for each other.

Kazakhstan is the largest export market for Pakistan among the CARs and the volume of bilateral trade in 2020 amounted to US \$25 million.¹⁰⁸ Pakistan exports vegetables, pharmaceutical equipment, medicines, cereals, textiles and leather. Pakistan's imports from Kazakhstan include steel, iron and machinery parts. Lack of direct air link and visa issues are major barriers to trade, tourism and people to people contact. The Iranian port of Bandar Abbas is used to deliver cargo from Pakistan to Kazakhstan and back by rail through Turkmenistan, while Afghanistan is used to transport cargo by road through Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁹ The Khorgos special economic zone (SEZ) along the Chinese border is another economic opportunity for Pakistani investment. Certain Pakistani companies have already registered with Khorgos Dryport and if a Khorgos-Gowadar linkage can be developed, trade can be bolstered between China, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan.¹¹⁰

Pakistan and Kazakhstan signed a Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the military field at Astana on November 14, 2012.¹¹¹ The MoU calls for interaction in the field of military education, training of special forces and military-technical cooperation (specially defence industry exhibitions). The Joint Kazakh-Pakistani Military Commission negotiates on issues of coordination and organization of military events. 38 military personnel of Kazakhstan have received training in Pakistan's military educational institutions.¹¹²

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pakistan provided a set of requested medicines to Kazakhstan as humanitarian aid exemplifying the strong brotherly relations that the two nations share.

Pakistan-Turkmenistan Relations

After recognizing Turkmenistan's independence in December 1991, formal diplomatic relations were established on May 10, 1992.¹¹³ Despite centuries- old cultural and religious connection between Pakistan and Turkmenistan, relations grew much faster after economic initiatives brought the two nations closer. Since Turkmenistan's independence, the interchange of reciprocal visits of the two country's heads of state and government representatives have developed a strong Pak-Turkmen relationship based on social affinities and shared outlook on economic development. The relationship was solidified upon the signing of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project. Nearly 47 agreements and declarations have been signed between the governments of Pakistan and Turkmenistan.¹¹⁴ Turkmenistan's imports from Pakistan include vegetables, fruits, rice, textiles, and miscellaneous manufactured articles. Pakistan's imports from Turkmenistan crude minerals, raw cotton, petroleum products and chemicals.

Five sessions of the Pakistan-Turkmenistan Joint Governmental Commission (JGC) have been held to discuss measures for trade enhancement and ways to intensify bilateral cooperation in communications, IT, technology and industries.¹¹⁵ The two countries can sign a MoU between Gwadar Port and Turkmen Ports that can facilitate trade.¹¹⁶

The Pakistan-Turkmenistan Business Forum was held during the Turkmen President Berdimuhamedow's visit to Pakistan in 2016 to discuss plans relating to opening of communications channels and improving tourism. In March 2020, the Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chamber of Commerce of Turkmenistan signed a memorandum of understanding to set up the Pak-Turkmen Joint Business Council (PTJBC).¹¹⁷ The PTJBC facilitates large number of commodity purchases for both countries.

Despite collaborative achievements like TAPI, Pakistan's exports to Turkmenistan are affected by factors such as difficulties in obtaining visa, strict regulations to goods entering Turkmenistan and high custom duties.¹¹⁸

The bilateral relation between the two countries also encapsulates cooperation in the area of defence and military training. Pakistan has provided training to land, air and naval armed forces officers of Turkmenistan's army.

Pakistan-Uzbekistan Relations

Relations between Uzbekistan and Pakistan were established when Uzbekistan became independent in 1992.¹¹⁹ Pakistan and Uzbekistan have cordial relations with each other and have signed 69 bilateral agreements with each other covering telecommunications, IT, healthcare, military training and economic trade.¹²⁰ Trade turnover reached more than \$122 million USD in 2019 and has the potential to reach \$300 million USD.¹²¹ Pakistan's exports to

Uzbekistan includes pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and chemical products while Pakistan's imports from Uzbekistan includes fertilizers, horticultural products and raw hide.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan's interest in Afghanistan align as both have a strategic and economic interest in a peaceful Afghanistan. An Afghan Taliban delegation visited Uzbekistan to discuss regional transport and power lines issues.¹²² It showed Uzbekistan's sincere efforts to bring peace in Afghanistan through regional resolve, dialogue and development much like Pakistan.

During the visit of Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sardor Umurzakov a MoU to establish a Joint Working Group on Trade and Economic Affairs was signed in September 2020.¹²³ In a follow-up visit Pakistan and Uzbekistan agreed to further negotiate a proposed preferential trade agreement (PTA) on transit trade and customs cooperation to enhance trade volume between the two countries.¹²⁴ A PTA would likely be a financial benefit to both countries, because landlocked Uzbekistan would have cheaper access to Pakistani ports and Pakistan's lucrative textile industry would benefit from cheaper access to Uzbek cotton. Revival of the Joint Business Council was also discussed and both sides agreed that the Inter-Governmental Commission should be held more frequently to resolve bilateral trade issues.¹²⁵

Pakistan Afghanistan and Uzbekistan have formally inked a roadmap for a rail link that connects South Asia to Central Asia during a trilateral meeting. The proposed 573 kilometre trans-Afghan "Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway" track would connect Tashkent via Kabul to Peshawar. The three countries have signed a joint request seeking a \$4.8 billion loan from international financial institutions for the Trans-Afghan railway project.¹²⁶

Economic Opportunities & Geopolitics

1. Wakhan Corridor

Geographically, the Wakhan Corridor is unique as it is situated at the crossroads of four countries: China, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. At an elevation of 5400 kilometers, it is about 350 kilometers long and 13 kilometers wide.¹²⁷ The corridor is a narrow strip of territory in the Badakhshan Province of Afghanistan flanked by the exquisite Pamir Mountains to the north and the Karakoram Range to the south. In the south, it shares a 300 kilometer border with Pakistan, on its northeast and west direction it has more than a 260-long kilometer-long border with Tajikistan, and a 74 kilometer-long one with China.¹²⁸ The Wakhan Corridor at one point narrows the distance between Pakistan and Central Asia to barely 13 kilometers.¹²⁹

The western side near the Panj River Valley is called Lower Wakhan, whereas the eastern Pamir River and valleys of Wakhan along with their tributaries constitute Upper Wakhan. Along the eastern side in Upper Wakhan, there are three mountain ranges converging at the Pamir Knot locally named as Bam-e-Duniya (Roof of the World).

The Wakhan Corridor appeared as a bridge among the nations on the Silk Route. Marco Polo traversed the valley enroute to Kashgar, the ancient Silk Road station in western China. The existence of the Wakhan corridor is a reflection of the 19th century geopolitical contest between the British Raj in India and the Russian Empire, the “Great Game”. Britain and Russia formed the ‘Pamir Boundary Commission’ to define their sphere of influence in Wakhan in March 1895. According to the agreement, Afghanistan became the buffer between the two powers; and thus no territory previously under the British Raj touches Central Asia directly. This region thereafter lied within the domain of Abdur Rahman, Emir of Afghanistan. As per the agreement:

Her Britannic Majesty’s and the Government of His Majesty, the Emperor of Russia, engage to abstain from exercising any political influence or control the former to the north, the latter to the south-of the above line of demarcation” and “the territory lying within the British sphere of influence between the Hindu Kush and the line running from the east end of Lake Victoria to the Chinese frontier shall form part of the territory of the Amir of Afghanistan; that it shall not be annexed to Great Britain, and that no military posts or forts shall be established in it.¹³⁰

Wakhan is the shortest trade route for Pakistan to reach Central Asia and for China to enter Afghanistan. The Broghal Pass (Chitral) provides Pakistan with direct logistical access to the Wakhan Corridor. Due to its closeness to the Karakoram Highway (KKH), the Wakhan Corridor could be linked with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a mega-infrastructure investment project “to transform the region into the strategic energy nexus through pipelines, power grids and railways”.¹³¹ It will not only provide market access to Tajikistan but by extension the rest of Central Asia for exporting oil and energy products.

Pakistan can greatly benefit from the Wakhan Corridor as its northern highlands along Chitral provide an excellent trade route linking Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asian States through a single narrow strip. The 250 kilometres passage starting from Broghal Pass may connect Chitral with Afghanistan via Mastuj and Booni. The proposed route can help a great deal to balance the Indian influence in Afghanistan by building link roads from Shandur to Gilgit via Gahkuch and Singul to the Karakorum Highway. It may serve as an alternate route through Wakhjir Pass which due to harsh climatic conditions remains closed for about five months every year.

If the corridor becomes operational, Pakistan has the opportunity to open all passages in the Hindu Kush mountain range that access Wakhan Corridor including Ochhili Pass (5553 meters high), Khan Khun Pass (4985 meters high), Broghal Pass (3801 meters high), Darwaz Pass (3893 meters high) and Karambar Pass (4358 meters high) to suit its geo-political scenario.¹³² The north-eastern Badakhshan province has large scale natural resources such as azure, gold, ruby and diamond mines in addition to copper and iron.

Opening of the Wakhan Corridor will assist in Pakistan's security and strategic interests by enabling an increased military posture and countermeasures against Indian intrusions in Gilgit-Baltistan from Ladakh region. The areas across Qala Panja, Mintaka and Wakhjir Passes interlink Gilgit-Baltistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Such an interlinked connection was further reinforced with the construction of concrete-base suspension bridges in the valleys of Darel, Yasin, Gupis, Shigar and Tangir. Moreover, the Darel and Tangir bridges connect with the Indus right-bank road as an interchange for protractible supply line towards the Karakorum Highway.¹³³ This corridor (extended by the Wakhjir Pass) would allow for shorter pipeline routes between western China and the CARs, paving the way for greater energy security in central, west and south Asia.

China has begun construction of an airport on Pamirs Plateau, Taxkorgan, the only county-level city in northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region that borders three countries - Pakistan, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.¹³⁴ This would provide an "air passage" that connects Central Asia and South Asia in the shortest time.

Similarly, the land-locked and resource rich region desires improved access to the regional markets including India, Bangladesh and South Asian states. In this regard, CPEC constitutes a strategic opportunity for Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to transport their goods and facilitate them more competitively on the regional and global markets via Afghanistan, Wakhan Corridor and Gwadar port.

This corridor is an opportunity to develop the economic and political order in CARs by promoting a network of transportation, trade routes, mutual economic and political cooperation and cultural exchanges. For economic growth and regional connectivity, the improved transportation network (roads and air) is highly crucial, which commonly leads to the connection of corridors of economic centers through the spatial concentration of flows along what become privileged axes.

India has aspirations for greater political influence in Afghanistan and the Wakhjir Pass would undermine its desire by integrating China and Pakistan with Afghanistan even further. Indian effort to link with Afghanistan through the Chabahar Port would be left inconsequential because Pakistan would serve as a more reliable and secure route to the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman.

2. Khyber Pass Economic Corridor

The Khyber Pass Economic Corridor (KPEC) is an infrastructure project that aims to expand Pakistan's economic connectivity with Afghanistan, and by extension Central Asia, via the Khyber Pass. It is part of Corridors 5 and 6 of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) routes, which will provide the shortest link between Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the Arabian Sea. The Peshawar-Torkham expressway in Corridor 5 is Pakistan's commitment under CAREC for improved regional connectivity. KPEC is part of ongoing and planned road investments from Dushanbe to Karachi by the countries along the corridor. The project will build a 48-kilometer 4-lane expressway between Peshawar and Torkham by June 2024.¹³⁵ The existing road between Peshawar and Torkham carries about 9,110 vehicles per day. Traffic congestion and road quality are major hurdles in achieving the logistical efficiency required for the busiest port of entry between the two countries.

It will also generate local economic opportunities and create up to 100,000 new jobs for Pakistanis in Khyber district. The project was designed by the National Highway Authority (NHA) and the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). KPEC is financed with a \$460.6 million International Development Association (IDA) concessional credit from the World Bank and \$22.15 million from the government.¹³⁶ KPEC has a \$72 million component to support businesses, revitalization of industrial estates, and commercial infrastructure along the road corridor in Khyber district.¹³⁷

KPEC would serve the role of providing abundant hydrocarbon resources of Central Asia to an energy starved South Asia. Partnering the framework of KPEC with the infrastructure development of CPEC would serve to develop Pakistan as an energy transit-hub and facilitate the economy by rents and transit fees. This would consolidate Pakistan's strategic foothold and allow it to leverage regional stakes for its stability.¹³⁸ It would provide a means for greater trade with the Central Asian Republics. Similarly, Pakistan's trade with the Central Asian Republics (CARs) has been minimal (less than \$50 million), or a meagre 0.13% of Pakistan's total trade, and not even 0.1% of the CARs' total trade.¹³⁹

3. Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement

The Quadrilateral Agreement on Traffic in Transit was signed by Pakistan, China, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan on 9th March 1995 in Islamabad. The deal facilitates transit of goods and traffic and will offer Pakistan access to the Central Asia Republics, circumventing Afghanistan via the Karakoram Highway to China. The CARs, being landlocked countries, need access to seaports. QTA opens the door that links China's Xinjiang region with Gilgit-Baltistan as a transit tunnel. The land routes would extend from Karachi Sea Ports to Gilgit and Sust (along the Karakorum

Highway) to Khunjab Pass in China that leads to Kashgar-Torugart (Kyrgyzstan), Bishkek-Akjol-Kordai (Kazakhstan) and Almaty (Kazakhstan).

Uzbekistan has agreed to become part of the QTTA while Tajikistan has expressed interest in joining. During the March 2017 ECO Summit in Islamabad, then-Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held talks with Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon on the sidelines of the Summit and reaffirmed Pakistan's support for the in-principle approval of Tajikistan's accession to the QTTA. Perhaps the QTTA will soon have to be renamed as it would no longer be "Quadrilateral" but rather a "Hexalateral" agreement.

4. Ashgabat Agreement and Lapis Lazuli Corridor

The Ashgabat Agreement is a multimodal transport agreement between the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, India, and Oman, for creating an international transport and transit corridor facilitating transportation of goods between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf. Qatar was an original signatory of the agreement but formally withdrew in 2013. The Ashgabat Agreement will synchronize with the North-South Transport Corridor for moving freight between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) rail line, Afghanistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey transportation corridor, Iran-Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan railroad and TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia).

The Lapis-Lazuli Transit, Trade & Transport Route is an international transit route opened in 2018 linking Afghanistan to Turkey via Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia with a goal to enhancing regional economic integration and trade-based connectivity. The name is derived from the historic route that Afghanistan's semiprecious stones were exported along, more than 2,000 years ago to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe, and North Africa. Pakistan joined the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and Ashgabat Agreement in 2016 at the global Sustainable Transport Conference in Turkmenistan. Original proponents of these two initiatives claimed that this would allow Afghanistan to no longer rely on Pakistan for its international trade in the light of international conventions and bilateral agreements like the Afghanistan Transit Trade Agreement (ATTA) and Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA). Pakistan joining these two initiatives allows for opportunities to sync the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor for greater regional linkages. Gwadar port can create trade links which can connect east and west and allow Afghanistan to overcome transit trade challenges for access to Europe and the Gulf States. It also serves to offset India's intentions to dictate regional trade and connectivity in the South Asia-Central Asia nexus.

5. TAPI, CASA-1000 and TUTAP-500

In 2016, the Central Asia-South Asia Power Project (CASA-1000) was launched as a way to export surplus hydroelectricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. Under the project, 1,300 MW of electricity would be transmitted, with Afghanistan receiving 300 MW of electricity and Pakistan 1000 MW of electricity at 9.50 cents per unit in the summer season from May to October.¹⁴⁰ The project was initiated with support from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. The project has support and funding from World Bank Group, Islamic Development Bank, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), US State Department, UK Department for International Development (DFID), Australian Agency for International Development, and other donor communities. The CASA-1000 project is expected to increase Tajikistan's annual income to over \$150 million. However, more importantly, it will fuel industries and development in Afghanistan by providing a much needed boost to the country's energy sector. Pakistan has requested Tajikistan to invoke the open access clause in the agreement under CASA-1000 project, paving the way for two-way trade of electricity as under the existing deal. Pakistan has also stated that it will not bear the electricity transit loss in Afghanistan in case of any subversive activity in the Afghan territory. Pakistan with a surplus in electricity during the winter season can export it to the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Afghanistan by employing the same transmission line network of the CASA-1000 project.

In the same vein, on December 13, 2015, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) project was launched. Through TAPI, 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas will be transported from the Galkynysh gas reserve of Turkmenistan annually via a 1,800 km route that passes through Herat and Kandahar provinces in Afghanistan,¹⁴¹ Multan in Pakistan and ends at Fazilka in India. Despite suffering delays, work on the Afghanistan side officially began in February 2018 with President Ghani calling the pipeline a "corridor of development". Work on the Pakistani side is expected to be completed by 2022. Similar to CASA-1000, the TAPI pipeline is expected to bridge the energy shortfalls of Afghanistan and help boost development and regional cooperation. A fiber optic cable line will run alongside TAPI from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and help to provide Internet services to the people living in areas alongside the project.¹⁴²

Turkmenistan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (TUTAP-500) is an Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded project that will help build transmission lines which will supply power at lower costs to the region. This would support Afghanistan's energy needs and enable power trade and exchange among the three countries. The project is phased into two concurrent stages. The first phase—to be completed by late 2021—will use the existing infrastructure under the ADB-financed Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan- Pakistan (TUTAP) power interconnection project which aims to export power from Turkmenistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The second phase—to be completed by 2022—will transfer power from Turkmenistan through the border of Serhetabad (in Turkmenistan) and Torghundy into Herat, Kandahar, and Spin Boldak in Afghanistan and export to Chaman and Quetta in Pakista

Figure 1.2 CASA-1000 Regional Interconnection Project.



Source: CASA-1000, World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2020/10/20/central-asia-electricity-trade-brings-economic-growth-and-fosters-regional-cooperation>

The project will include the construction of around 500 kilometers of 500 kilovolt transmission line between Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Once completed, the project will be able to transfer up to 4,000 megawatts of power from Turkmenistan into Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁴³ Afghanistan's lack of a national grid prevents power conversion across different voltages and frequencies. Conversion capacity needs to be enhanced if power transmission across multiple voltages is to be imported from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Layout of transmission cables is also another matter that is complicated by ethno-political problems.

Pakistan and the CARs have prospects to build a strong and profitable relationship underscored by the foundations of centuries- old regional connections, religious and social affinity and a conviction towards achieving sustainable economic strength. Many mechanisms have been established that can support cooperation and infrastructure development of many projects is already being realized. The road ahead for Pakistan and the CARs can only be paved further by undertaking rational policy decisions and following the examples of the European Union and ASEAN nations. The future for South Asia and Central Asia is brimming with economic and diplomatic possibilities, if realized, the Central-South Asia nexus will serve as a game changer for inter-regional connection, à la the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

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