

ЦЕНТРАЛЬНІ АЗИЯ МЕМЛЕКЕТТЕРІ БАСШЫЛАРЫНЫҢ  
VІ КОНСУЛЬТАТИВТІК КЕЗДЕСУІ  
2024 жылғы 9 тамыз  
Астана



VІ КОНСУЛЬТАТИВНАЯ ВСТРЕЧА  
ГЛАВ ГОСУДАРСТВ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ  
9 августа 2024 года  
Астана



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## The Rise of a Confident Central Asia

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December 2024



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## The Rise of a Confident Central Asia

Central Asia is a strategically located, landlocked region that has experienced numerous security challenges over the past years. In addition, the geopolitical situation surrounding the region has changed dramatically, beginning with Russia's war on Ukraine which pushed the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) to balance their approach toward Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Another major shift took place to the south in Afghanistan pushing the Central Asian countries to deal with the potential instability there. Then, there is a wider, global geopolitical picture – exacerbating tensions between China and the US around Central Asia, which presents both opportunities and challenges for the region.

### Security

One of the biggest security challenges that Central Asia has faced since 2021 was the surprising withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, which left open a political vacuum and created a security dilemma for the region. Spillover effects from the potential efflorescence of extremism and terrorism in Afghanistan have since occupied the minds of Central Asian politicians. While it may be true that no concrete policy would have guaranteed the successful mitigation of potential threats from Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries still chose to become more proactive in their response toward the conflicted country.

Caused by the *fait accompli* – the reality of the Taliban's grip on power – Central Asian nations were initially hesitant in their response. Recently, however, they have gradually begun normalizing relations with the Taliban government, recognizing them as a dominant force unlikely to be displaced. This pragmatic trend stems from the desire for regional stability and the need to avoid exacerbating Afghanistan's economic woes, which could have widespread repercussions for neighboring nations. Central Asian states believe that though Western governments remain wary and continue to hold back on normalization with Kabul, the possibility of engagement with the West in the future is not entirely off the table. Besides, Afghanistan is also perceived as a near integral part of Central Asian geography, and instability on either side of the border has direct repercussions on the other.

One clear example of Central Asia's diplomacy around Afghanistan is Kazakhstan, which removed the Taliban from the country's list of terrorist organizations – a designation they had held since 2005. The Kazakh government emphasized the importance of fostering trade and economic cooperation with Afghanistan, acknowledging the Taliban's role in shaping the region. This was followed by another decision in August when Kazakhstan accredited a *chargé d'affaires* from the Taliban-led government. Astana also implemented a policy of sending humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and expanding trade relations, which reached nearly \$1 billion in 2022.

What worries Central Asian countries, and Kazakhstan in particular, is how inclusive Afghanistan's government will be and whether it will be able to deal with the country's involvement in the global narcotics trade. Despite a Taliban prohibition on poppy cultivation, the country remains a significant opium producer, generating nearly 330 tons last year alone, undermining stability across Eurasia.



Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries hope that economic development and increased trade can provide alternatives for rural communities historically dependent on opium production. For instance, Kazakhstan has proposed establishing a UN Regional Center for Sustainable Development Goals in Almaty to focus on Central Asia and Afghanistan. This initiative underscores the belief that Afghanistan's socio-economic stability benefits not only its neighbors but also Europe and the US, which face ongoing terrorism threats.

As argued, Kazakhstan's approach is reflective of the overall regional shift. For instance, In July 2023, the C5+1 initiative—a platform uniting the US and five Central Asian countries—held a special session in Astana dealing with Afghanistan. Topics included the importance of regional connectivity and infrastructure projects linking Central Asia to South Asia via the war-torn country. Infrastructure projects, such as the trans-Afghan railway linking Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar, aim to open trade routes between Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Kazakhstan is also resuming work on a railway branch from Rozanak Station to Rabattaryan Station in Afghanistan, further enhancing trade potential. These developments could transform Afghanistan into a critical transit hub, diversifying global supply chains and reducing dependence on congested maritime routes prone to geopolitical disruptions. By creating reliable trade corridors, Central Asian nations hope to unlock economic opportunities and promote stability.

Central Asia's engagement with the Taliban represents a pragmatic approach to addressing the region's wider challenges. By fostering economic ties, supporting infrastructure development, and promoting regional cooperation, the Central Asian countries aim to stabilize Afghanistan while reducing the root causes of extremism and narcotics production in the region.

### **Multi-Vectorial Central Asia**

Despite the tumultuous geopolitical landscape around Central Asia the latter has emerged as a region relatively unscathed from the expanding West-Russia competition and has elevated its posture by pursuing an entirely different set of foreign policies. The five countries now have become more confident and are increasingly in sync when it comes to inter-state cooperation and more importantly the region's position in global affairs.

Part of the growing confidence stems from the multi-vector foreign policy that the Central Asian countries are pursuing. For instance, Kazakhstan has been successfully [navigating](#) between Russia and China, and in this case, the US has played a positive role as a further balancing actor for Astana. The latter wants to avoid over-dependence on Russia and is skillfully using Moscow's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine to limit its projection of power. The idea of multi-vector foreign policy dictates that Kazakhstan should not ditch Russia altogether, even if it could. Astana needs Russia to avoid overdependence on Beijing, especially given the size and growing clout of China. A similar approach is pursued by Uzbekistan, another critically important Central Asian country, which boasts a growing industry, population, and active relations simultaneously with Russia, China, and the West. This provides Tashkent the luxury of choice and minimizes the need to be fixated on any single geopolitical partner.

Another aspect of Central Asia's growing confidence is reflected in the region's growing ties with the Middle East, in particular with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. The two regions recognize overlapping economic and geopolitical visions. As Central Asia's importance has grown



in the past few years, the GCC is now interested in investing in railways, pipelines, and fiber optic cables that are multiplying across the region. One manifestation of these growing ties was the inaugural GCC-C5 Summit, which was held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in July 2023. The Saudi side emphasized the need for collective action to address global challenges, including energy security and food supply chains. The joint statement from the summit stressed the importance of greater synergy in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to secure reliable food supplies for vulnerable nations.

The trend continued into 2024 as Uzbekistan hosted another Central Asia-GCC summit in April focused on enhancing collaboration in the areas of politics, economics, investment, transportation, and communication. The attendees also discussed issues of environmental preservation, security, humanitarian cooperation, and cultural exchange. Preparations for the 2025 summit, which is scheduled to take place in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, are already underway and are likely to include discussions on mutual security and investment/trade ties.

Indeed, untapped commercial ties between the two sides stood at \$3.1 billion in 2021 with copper, gold, and precious metals imported to the Gulf region from Central Asia. Both sides also recognize the need to develop cooperation in renewable energy. Central Asia is concerned with diminishing water resources and is actively working on developing a post-oil economy (especially Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan where Saudi Arabia's Masdar and ACWA Power have invested over \$13.5 billion in various clean energy projects). Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have also pledged billions in USD to the region. Diversifying economies away from oil is a shared vision between the Central Asian and the GCC states, as each has its own national agenda with plans for building sustainable, post-oil economies. This shared concern is just one example of how common interests drive the deepening of bilateral ties between the two sides.

They also face shared challenges such as terrorism and extremism. The rise of the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) poses a direct threat to Central Asia and the Middle East. This is especially true now, given the unstable situation following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Joint efforts to combat terrorism, enhance border security, and address the socio-economic drivers of extremism remain high on the agenda between Central Asian countries and the GCC states.

### **Eurasian Connectivity**

Central Asia has also become a key player in the rapidly evolving Eurasian connectivity. One of the projects that is set to elevate the region's role is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor, a trade route that is of much interest to the GCC.

The use of the Middle Corridor has expanded in recent years. In the first ten months of 2024, cargo movement increased by 68%. The spike in container shipping from China to the EU and back reached 20,000 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units), a significant milestone as it equals a nearly twentyfold increase over prior years.

The goal behind the expansion of the corridor is to diversify global supply chains. Additionally, the route has gained popularity as it shortens transit times and is the shortest route between western China and Europe (commodities from China to Europe normally take 10 to 15 days using the Corridor, as opposed to 35 to 45 days by sea routes). From a European point of view, it offers faster access to the South Caucasus, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia through ports in Georgia



and Turkey. Given that Georgia is building its first deep sea port in Anaklia, the trend of increased traffic on the Corridor for international trade is likely to accelerate as businesses will be more attracted to improved infrastructure along the route in addition to faster shipping times. Yet, the project is not without constraints. For all of its improvements, the Middle Corridor remains a multi-modal route that necessitates cooperation between numerous countries and transit via land and sea, which is partly why the Russian route has always been preferred.

Still, connectivity has changed so much that even Turkmenistan has begun pursuing an active foreign policy. Ashgabat benefits from the nation's advantageous location along the expanding east-west and north-south trade routes, and quite naturally, Ashgabat wants to avoid being sidelined. At the core of Turkmenistan's outreach is a version of multi-vector foreign policy-- Ashgabat does not favor any single trade corridor but wants to play a central role in each developing initiative, which explains why the country simultaneously pins its hopes on rival initiatives – The Middle Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor.

Ashgabat has upped its diplomatic efforts to increase its gas exports and is looking beyond its role as a transit region, including an agreement to deliver 10 billion cubic meters of gas to the Islamic Republic in early July. More significantly, Iran, with which Turkmenistan has had tense ties in recent years, has consented to participate in the project by constructing a 125-kilometer pipeline to make delivery easier. Moreover, the Turkmen side signed an agreement with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Romania to establish an energy corridor with the purpose of linking the EU with Central Asia was announced on July 22.

Other nations have committed to the expansion of the Middle Corridor as well. China has stepped up its involvement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and as part of the EU's Global Gateway initiative which is anticipated to involve around 300 billion euros in infrastructure investment across Eurasia by the end of this decade, Brussels stated its intention to contribute 10 billion euros to its ongoing development.

In a parallel step, Kazakhstan, Russia, Iran, and Turkmenistan have created a plan for the development of the eastern branch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) in July 2024 in Aktau, Kazakhstan, the site of the first North-South Transport Trade and Export Forum. By the end of this decade, the agreement between the four countries aims to increase the branch's capacity to 20 million tonnes.

The overall result is that Central Asia has emerged as a pivotal point of geography which is increasingly central to Eurasia's connectivity as well as security. In the age of great power competition, the region's five countries has advanced its geopolitical interests by engaging in multi-aligned foreign policy. This offers a glimpse into an emerging new world order where not one but several big powers will be vying for influence. Smaller countries, or so-called middle powers, will have greater room for maneuver. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are just such players turning Central Asia into a vital component in the new balance of power.

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