

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN A CHANGING WORLD ORDER: RESOURCES, LOGISTICS, AND COMPETITION

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Abstract

The article examines the key geopolitical factors influencing the competitive geo-economic dynamics in Central Asia, with a particular focus on the roles and political priorities of external actors. Central Asia, with its key geographic position on the Eurasian continent, occupies a strategic position in the foreign policy agendas of Russia and China, driven by both security and economic considerations. The United States, the European Union (EU), and Turkey also maintain substantial engagement in the region. Hence, the article analyzes the policies of these external actors in Central Asia, highlighting how, in the context of an evolving global order, their approaches differ significantly and produce varied effects on the region's political stability and developmental trajectories. In this context, the study examines how transport and logistics policies affect the foreign policies of Central Asian states and what strategic issues these states are trying to resolve by participating in regional and international transport routes. The article further addresses key aspects related to the region's long-term geopolitical and geo-economic prospects. It also analyzes the degree of engagement by South Caucasus countries, especially Azerbaijan and Georgia, in Central Asia's transport and logistics networks, along with the broader infrastructural linkages between the two regions.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway, transport policy, logistics.*

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Received: 05.06.2025
Revised: 15.06.2025
Accepted: 22.06.2025

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Introduction

Central Asia holds strategic significance within Eurasia, primarily due to its abundant energy and mineral resources. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this resource-rich region has become a focal point for major international powers seeking to secure access and influence.

Central Asia holds high security importance for Russia. Developments in the region are always observed from the perspective of Russia's vital interests and national security. In parallel, Central Asian states are engaged in various integration organizations with Russia, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

After independence, the region has gained key importance as a transit and logistics hub. This has been highlighted most in terms of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Increased competition within the region is characterized by vying actors who wish to supplant each other's influence, in so doing generating conflicts of interest that will be detrimental to the internal political sustainability of the Central Asian states.

Here, the events in the region, on the one hand, are political and economic drivers, but simultaneously, they cause security issues for the Central Asian states themselves. Assessing Central Asia through the prism of West-Russia rivalry, it becomes apparent that the West seeks to undermine Russia's foothold in the region and to leverage, as fully as possible, the region's critical logistics corridors between East and West.

For China, the region is an important corridor to organize the export of goods to Western Asia and Europe, which, in turn, leads to the growth of Chinese influence. Since the dissolution of the USSR, Western political thought has viewed Central Asia not only as a resource-abundant region, particularly in terms of energy, but also as a pivotal hub for trans-Eurasian transportation and logistics. In this context, control over Central Asia and the key communication corridors traversing it has become essential in the twenty-first century for global actors seeking to strengthen their position within the broader Eurasian landscape.

Thus, this research aims to examine the ongoing dynamics in Central Asia that intensify geopolitical competition and conflicting interests, while also reassessing the strategic significance of transit routes and logistics, and evaluating their broader implications for the political, economic, and security landscape of Eurasia. This research is designed around the following key questions:

1. What impact does the competition among regional and international actors in Central Asia have on regional stability?

2. How is logistics diplomacy reshaping the foreign policy agenda of Central Asian states?
3. What role does logistics diplomacy play in the context of competition for influence between China and Russia?
4. How are transport and logistics projects transforming the foreign economic relations of Central Asian states?
5. How is logistics diplomacy perceived and used as an impact tool in the region?

Methodology: This research is based on quantitative and qualitative methodologies to ensure a multifaceted and comprehensive analysis. Among the qualitative methods, event study, comparative analysis, and content analysis played particularly important roles. First, the event study method was used for a detailed analysis of ongoing political and strategic processes in the region. This approach allowed for the analysis of cause-and-effect relationships within regional developments and the assessment of their impact on Central Asian states.

The comparative analysis method was used to analyze the dynamics of the Central Asian states' foreign policies since the collapse of the USSR. This method compared the political courses of these states, as well as the policies and influence of external actors, particularly Russia, the US, and China, in the region. Comparative analysis was applied to identify the similarities and differences in the strategies of external actors, as well as their potential impacts on the countries of the region. Special attention was given to content analysis, applied to Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 speech in Kazakhstan, which laid the ideological foundation for the BRI, and Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2015 address to the Federal Assembly, where the concept of the Greater Eurasian Partnership was introduced. A comparative analysis of these speeches was conducted to examine the differing approaches of China and Russia toward the integration and political framing of the Eurasian region.

Moreover, the comparative analysis method was applied to evaluate the opportunities for developing transport corridors in Central Asia. The research has investigated how such infrastructure projects affect the foreign policy decisions of countries in this region, with attention to both their outward engagement and their capacity for strategic self-determination.

Literature Review: Several academic works can be highlighted regarding various aspects of this topic, some of which have been used in this study. The application of Zbigniew Brzezinski's perspectives is of significant importance¹ for under-

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Moscow: International Relations, 2003), in Russian: [Збигнев Бжезинский, *Великая шахматная*

standing different regional developments in Central Asia, including geo-economics and regional competition. Brzezinski's approaches allow for an analysis of the influence of international power centers on this strategic area.

In terms of studying regional issues, Vladimir Evseev's article can also be considered a valuable study,² where the relationship between Russia and Uzbekistan is analyzed, making a focus on the existing contradictions. This analysis provides an opportunity to assess the positioning of Russian policy in Central Asia.

Charles E. Ziegler's study³ should also be mentioned. It focuses on the US strategy in Central Asia, particularly in the context of integration processes within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The author analyzes the regional interests of the US and their interaction with the policies of other major actors.

From the perspective of combining international competition and cooperation processes, the discussion of the BRI is also essential. Within the study of transportation communications and logistics issues, we have drawn upon the works of Srikanth Kondapalli,⁴ Kuralay Baizakova,⁵ and Li Na.⁶ These authors argue that the

доска: американское превосходство и его геостратегические императивы (Москва: Международные отношения, 2003)].

² Vladimir Evseev, "On Contradictoriness of Russian-Uzbek Relationships in Military and Political Sphere," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 6 (2013): 66–74, <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2013-6-66-74>, in Russian: [Владимир Евсеев, "О противоречивости российско-узбекских отношений в военно-политической сфере", *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*, no. 6 (2013): 66–74].

³ Charles E. Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia and Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *World Economy and International Relations*, no. 4 (2005): 13–22, <https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2005-4-13-22>, in Russian: [Чарльз Э. Зиглер, "Стратегия США в Центральной Азии и Шанхайская организация сотрудничества", *Мировая экономика и международные отношения*, no. 4 (2005): 13–22].

⁴ Srikanth Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors – The Role of China," in *Logistics and Diplomacy. Collection of Materials from the VII International Seminar*, ed. K. I. Baizakova (Almaty: "Mir" Publishing House, 2024), 10–29, in Russian: [Srikanth Kondapalli, "Eurasian Transport Corridors – The Role of China," см.: *Логистика и дипломатия. Сборник материалов VII международного семинара*, отв. ред. К. И. Байзакова (Алматы: Издательский дом "Мир," 2024), 10–29].

⁵ Kuralay Irtysovna Baizakova, "Transport and Logistics Issues in Foreign Policy in Kazakhstan," in *Logistics and Diplomacy. Collection of Materials from the VII International Seminar*, ed. K. I. Baizakova (Almaty: "Mir" Publishing House, 2024), 77–88, in Russian: [Куралай Иртысовна Байзакова, "Транспортно-логистические вопросы во внешней политике Казахстана", см.: *Логистика и дипломатия. Сборник материалов VII международного семинара*, отв. ред. К. И. Байзакова (Алматы: Издательский дом "Мир," 2024), 77–87].

⁶ Na Li, "'One Belt, One Road' Initiative as a New Cooperation Model of the PRC with Russia and Central Asia Countries," *RUDN Journal of World History* 10, no. 4 (2018): 382–392, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2018-10-4-382-392>, in Russian: [На Ли, "Инициатива "Один пояс, один путь" как новая модель сотрудничества КНР с Россией и странами Центральной Азии", *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Всеобщая история* 10, no. 4 (2018): 382–392].

transport routes passing through the region contribute to deepening economic co-operation and have a beneficial impact on regional integration.

Therefore, a thorough grasp of the international relations evolving in Central Asia can be formed by combining the ideas of the aforementioned authors, highlighting both cooperative and competitive trends.

Great Power Competition in Central Asia: Conflicting Interests and the Dynamics of Instability

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia appeared in an absolutely new geopolitical reality. Like other post-Soviet countries, Central Asian states faced many challenges, including security and political issues, which were of an intra-regional and extra-regional nature. These states, having proclaimed independence, needed to overcome too many difficulties related to the provision of security, the establishment of a full-fledged statehood, and, finally, becoming independent actors in the system of international relations. At the same time, a group of global and regional actors—the United States, Turkey, Iran, China, and, of course, Russia—started developing their policies towards the region of Central Asia. As a result, the area gradually transformed into a turmoil of geopolitical competition. Central Asian states, on their part, recognized the imperative of formulating independent foreign policy priorities based on national interests. The process by which these actors sought to gain more favorable economic and political positions in Central Asia took various forms, including economic diplomacy and cultural diplomacy. To better understand the policies of external actors in the region, we should examine them using a comparative analytical method.

According to the American political scholar Zbigniew Brzezinski, in the 1990s, Turkey perceived Central Asia as a region historically and culturally connected to it. The concept of uniting the Turkic nations of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia began to gain traction among Turkish nationalists, who saw it as a renewed opportunity for advancing Pan-Turkist aspirations.⁷ In this context, the 2009 Nakhchivan Agreement between Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan,⁸ the basis of the Organization of Turkic States opened up new opportunities to build political and economic relations between Central Asian states and Turkey. Azerbaijan was a bridge of connection, and the strategic importance of the South Caucasus in Turkey-Central Asia relations also increased.

⁷ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 161.

⁸ “Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States,” *Organization of Turkic States*, accessed May 28, 2025, <https://www.turkicstates.org/en/key-documents-section>.

Zbigniew Brzezinski mentioned that the United States was also keen on intruding into this resource-rich area, previously under the Russian monopoly. The interest of the United States in the region was economic and geopolitical, including the establishment of new energy reserves and transit road systems.⁹

In this geopolitical competitive environment, most of the Central Asian nations were devoted to a policy of nurturing multisided and multi-dimensional ties with Russia, particularly through integration processes of the CIS in the initial years. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty (CST) on 15 May 1992. Later, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan continued to support the idea of a deeper integration within the CIS and also affiliated with the CSTO. The policies of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the region were not similar. Turkmenistan's quite limited and neutral approach towards the CIS was directly conditioned by its strategy of acquiring permanent neutrality status in its foreign policy. This determination received its legal fixing on December 12, 1995, when the permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan was officially recognized by a United Nations General Assembly resolution, making it a unique case in the post-Soviet region as a subject of international law with neutral status. Turkmenistan's subsequent policy stemmed from its status as a permanently neutral state.

If Turkmenistan's foreign policy trajectory was explained by its status of permanent neutrality, Uzbekistan's foreign policy trajectory was entirely different; Uzbekistan did not prioritize the integration processes of the post-Soviet space under Russia's leadership. During Islam Karimov's presidency, Uzbekistan's relations with almost all external actors (Turkey, Russia, the US) were "periodically reedited." In 1999, Uzbekistan did not renew the CST, which was a consequence of a passive position in relations with Russia. Some researchers attribute this to mistakes made by Russia in the mid-1990s, specifically Russia's refusal in 1997 to assist Uzbekistan with military equipment, as well as, in Tashkent's opinion, Russia's unfriendliness during the Batken events of 1999-2000.¹⁰ Uzbekistan coupled this political line with developing relations with the US and Western power centers, one manifestation of which was its membership in GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova) in 1999. One of the reasons for Uzbekistan's political position was also the threat coming from Afghanistan, which President I. Karimov also tried to neutralize via cooperation with the West. Affiliation to GUUAM also seemed to be another attempt to create a balance against Russia in the Central Asian region, but in essence, Uzbekistan did not show activity within

⁹ Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 168.

¹⁰ Evseev, "On Contradictoriness," 69.

this association; moreover, it showed caution in order not to get involved in anti-Russian political processes.

A new phase and a new competitive environment for external actors began for the states of Central Asia after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, when the United States strengthened its presence in the region, primarily in a military-political sense. This was evidenced by the fact that in early October 2001, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Uzbekistan and signed an agreement. Under this agreement, approximately 1,500 American troops were stationed at the Karshi-Khanabad military air base in exchange for security guarantees. In December 2001, the US and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement granting Americans the right to use Manas Airport. According to the agreement, Kyrgyzstan was to receive 7,000 USD for each American aircraft's takeoff and landing. The term of this agreement was extended for another three years in June 2003.¹¹

The Government of Kazakhstan, in its turn, agreed to grant the US the right to conduct flights through its airspace and also allowed the transit of American cargo through its territory. In addition, Kazakhstan permitted the use of Almaty Airport in emergencies.¹² Similarly, Tajikistan granted the US armed forces the right to use Dushanbe Airport for refueling purposes.¹³

In addition, Russia continued to build up its military-political and economic positions in the region. From a security position, one of the very important steps took place on 25 May 2001 at the Yerevan session of the Collective Security Council of the CSTO, when a Decision on the Establishment of Collective Rapid Deployment Forces for the Central Asian Collective Security Region was adopted. These coalition forces had been formed¹⁴ in August of the very year, which reinforced the multilateral military cooperation among Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. For the Central Asian states, the threats emanating from Afghanistan kept bilateral and multilateral cooperation relevant in the security sphere with Russia, in particular under the CSTO framework. Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan was attempting to engage in security cooperation with the US. The US and Uzbekistan signed the "Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Co-operation Framework between the United States of America and the Republic of

¹¹ Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.

¹² Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.

¹³ Ziegler, "US Strategy in Central Asia," 16.

¹⁴ "The Collective Forces of the Rapid Deployment of the Central Asian Collective Security Region," *CSTO Joint Staff*, accessed May 18, 2025, <https://jscsto.odkb-csto.org/en/voennaya-sostavlyauschaya-odkb/ksbrtsar.php>.

Uzbekistan" on 12 March 2002, which also envisioned cooperation in the security aspect.¹⁵

Moreover, simultaneously, Uzbekistan was considering the possibility of withdrawal of its membership from GUUAM. That set alarm actually in the United States, and on June 15, 2002, the US Department of State press service made a statement that the administration of US President George Bush had hoped that the Government of Uzbekistan would reconsider its intention to withdraw from the GUUAM regional organization. The statement noted, "We also believe that membership in GUUAM will help strengthen Uzbekistan's role as a regional leader."¹⁶ A few days after this statement, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov, during a phone conversation with the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, declared that Uzbekistan did not intend to leave GUUAM, but merely suspended its participation in some of the GUUAM events, according to Kamilov.¹⁷ Earlier, however, Kamilov had officially confirmed the decision to withdraw from GUUAM in an interview with RIA Novosti, emphasizing that Uzbekistan's participation in the GUUAM was dictated by the desire to integrate into the process of multilateral economic cooperation. However, according to him, no positive results were recorded within four years.¹⁸ Consequently, no activity was shown by Uzbekistan within the GUUAM framework.

In May 2005, the President of Uzbekistan announced his country's withdrawal from GUUAM. According to a RIA Novosti report, in a letter to President Vladimir Voronin of Moldova, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan noted the ineffectuality of his country's membership in the GUUAM stating: "Due to its geographical position, Uzbekistan sees no opportunities to realize its interests in the areas of economy and security within the framework of new initiatives and projects announced by GUUAM, and therefore withdraws from this organization."¹⁹ Soon

¹⁵ "Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Between the United States of America and the Republic of Uzbekistan," *U.S. Department of State Archive*, July 8, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/2002/11711.htm>.

¹⁶ "The USA Expressed Hope That Uzbekistan Would Reconsider Its Decision to Withdraw from the GUUAM Organization," ["США выразили надежду, что Узбекистан пересмотрит свое решение о выходе из организации ГУУАМ"], *RIA Novosti*, June 26, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20020615/174829.html>.

¹⁷ "Uzbekistan Does /not Intend to Leave the Regional Organization GUUAM, Which Also Unites Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova," ["Узбекистан не намерен выходить из региональной организации ГУУАМ, объединяющей также Грузию, Украину, Азербайджан и Молдавию"], *RIA Novosti*, June 26, 2002, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20020626/181304.html>.

¹⁸ RIA Novosti, "Uzbekistan Does Not Intend to Leave the Regional Organization GUUAM."

¹⁹ "Moscow Knows Uzbekistan's Withdrawal from GUUAM," ["В Москве известно о выходе Узбекистана из ГУУАМ,"], *RIA Novosti*, May 6, 2005, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://ria.ru/20050506/39940517.html>.

after, relations between Uzbekistan and the West deteriorated in connection with the Andijan events in May 2005.

In July 2005, Uzbekistan demanded that the US troops leave its military base in the period of six months. This demand came after the US sharply criticized the Uzbek government's actions in suppressing the unrest in the Andijan region.²⁰ The US and other Western countries immediately demanded an independent investigation of the Andijan events and accused Tashkent of “indiscriminate and unjustified use of force.” Uzbekistan’s leadership perceived this as interference in the country’s internal affairs.²¹ Later, the West further toughened its policy towards Uzbekistan on this issue. In particular, the European Union imposed sanctions on arms trade against Uzbekistan, temporarily suspended the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and restricted the entry of Uzbek politicians into EU territory.²²

In his attempt to explain the West’s stand in favor of monitoring investigations into the May 13, 2005 events in Andijan, Yuri Lebedev, an advisor to the Embassy of Russia in Uzbekistan, having met on-site with a working group composed of members of the diplomatic corps accredited in Uzbekistan, in Andijan on July 11 of the same year, stated that “the main goal of the forces behind the Andijan events was to destabilize the situation in the Central Asian region.”²³ The sharp difference in these statements almost clearly reflected the growing competition between major players—the West and Russia—in Central Asia. In the geopolitics of the region, therefore, the accession of Uzbekistan into the CSTO in 2006 could be viewed as a movement to strengthen the positions of Moscow.

Despite being a member of the CSTO, Uzbekistan was by no means actively engaged in the military-political sphere. President Karimov would portray the image of a reservist and would occasionally take an obstructive position, especially as important decisions were being adopted. This obstructed the development of unified approaches within the CSTO. This attitude became particularly evident between 2009–2011, when a number of fundamental documents vital for enhancing the CSTO’s effectiveness were adopted within the organization. It was obvious that Uzbekistan did not see the solution to its security problems within the CSTO framework. Finally, in 2012, Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO. However, this step did not mean a radical strategic reorientation towards the West, unlike the po-

²⁰ “The US Air Force Will Leave Uzbekistan Ahead of Schedule,” [“BBC США досрочно покинут Узбекистан”], *RBC*, September 27, 2005, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/09/2005/5703bb3f9a7947afa08c8994>.

²¹ Evseev, “On Contradictoriness,” 70.

²² Evseev, “On Contradictoriness,” 70.

²³ “The Goal of the Andijan Terrorists Is to Destabilize the Situation in the Region,” [“Цель андижанских террористов — дестабилизация ситуации в регионе”], *RBC*, July 14, 2005, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/07/2005/5703bb029a7947afa08c840c>.

litical shift of the late 1990s. Uzbekistan's membership in the CSTO from 2006–2012 can be observed as a response to the political pressure exerted by the West after the Andijan events. Subsequently, Uzbekistan reverted to its traditional foreign policy model, avoiding long-term involvement within any alliance.

The Tulip Revolution of 2005 in Kyrgyzstan was also a consequence of the Western influence in Central Asia. It seemed to be a logical continuation of the post-Soviet “color revolutions” (the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine). As a result, Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev first fled to Moscow and then signed his resignation at the Kyrgyz embassy in Moscow on April 4, 2005. For the first time in one of the Central Asian states, a change of power occurred through a revolution, regarding which different assessments are made about the influence of external factors.²⁴ It was evident that a shift in the balance of power established in the post-Soviet region in the 1990s was taking place, and the color revolutions were part of it. However, on the other hand, researchers also pointed to several internal factors that caused the Tulip Revolution of Kyrgyzstan.²⁵ In the context of these developments, Russia sought not only to maintain its influence within the post-Soviet space but also to revise the international order established after the Cold War on a global scale. One of the key indicators of this trend was President Vladimir Putin's well-known speech delivered in Munich on February 10, 2007, which has been widely interpreted as a manifestation of Moscow's growing dissatisfaction and its demand for a reconfiguration of the global order.²⁶

After the Tulip Revolution, no sharp turns towards the West were observed in Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy, as happened in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan continued to remain in the CSTO and develop relations with Russia at a bilateral level. Moreover, in 2009, the Kyrgyz authorities announced that the Manas facility would cease to operate as a military base and would be transformed into a transit center for the US Air Force. In 2014, it was finally closed, which researchers linked to the freezing of relations between the US and Russia after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis.²⁷

²⁴ “There Were Stones, There Were Horses: Who Was Behind the ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan and How It Led the Country to New Crises,” [“Были камни, были кони”: Кто стоял за ‘тюльпановой революцией’ в Киргизии и как она привела страну к новым кризисам”], *Lenta.ru*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/04/19/kirgizia/>

²⁵ “Tulip Revolution: A Look at the March Events 17 Years Later,” [“Тюльпановая революция: взгляд на мартовские события спустя 17 лет”], *Radio Azattyk*, March 24, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/31768025.html>.

²⁶ “Speech and Discussion at the Munich Security Policy Conference,” [“Выступление и дискуссия на Мюнхенской конференции по вопросам политики безопасности”], video, *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, February 10, 2007, accessed May 29, 2025, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034/videos>.

²⁷ “There Were Stones, There Were Horses: Who Was Behind the ‘Tulip Revolution’ in Kyrgyzstan and How It Led the Country to New Crises,” [“Были камни, были кони”: Кто стоял за

Meanwhile, it was clear in the Russian policy that it handled the internal political development of the Central Asian states cautiously. This was evident, for instance, during the events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan, particularly after June 10, when renewed violence in the south of the country triggered inter-ethnic clashes. On 12 June, the Russian news outlets reported, interim President and government head of Kyrgyzstan, Roza Otunbayeva, appealed to the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to deploy Russian peacekeeping forces in Kyrgyzstan. On 12 June, the Russian president directed the Russian Health and Social Development Minister and the Minister of Emergency Situations to provide humanitarian aid to Kyrgyzstan. As the chairman of the CSTO Collective Security Council, he also instructed the secretaries of the security councils of the member states to hold consultations on developing collective response measures. President Medvedev also held a series of consultations with President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and CSTO Secretary-General Nikolay Bordyuzha. At the same time, official Moscow announced that it did not intend to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan.²⁸

Nevertheless, Russia continued to maintain its military presence in Kyrgyzstan, which speaks to Russia's strengthening positions and military presence in the region. Moreover, according to 2022 data, Russia was equipping its military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with new equipment.²⁹ The presence of these military bases once again underscores Russia's role in the Central Asian region, primarily in military-political terms. The competition between the main actors in international relations in Central Asia became particularly obvious after the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan. This occurred after the Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev appealed to the CSTO for assistance on January 5. On January 6, 2022, US State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters that the US State Department hoped to receive a rational response from the Kazakh authorities regarding what necessitated the introduction of a CSTO peacekeeping contingent into the country, following reports of external forces interfering in the events. The attention of the EU and China was also focused on the developments in Kazakhstan.

²⁸ 'тюльпановой революцией' в Киргизии и как она привела страну к новым кризисам"], *Lenta.ru*, April 19, 2023, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2023/04/19/kirgizia/>.

²⁹ Zhak Manukyan, "Collective Security Treaty Organization Peacekeeping Specifics (2004–2010)," *Bulletin of Yerevan University: International Relations and Political Sciences* 13, no. 3 (39) (2022): 22, <https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2022.13.3.017>, in Armenian: [Ժակ Մանուկյան, "ՀԱՊԿ խաղաղապահ գործունեության առանձնահատկությունները (2004–2010 թթ.)," *Բանրեք Երևանի Համալսարանի Միջազգային հարաբերություններ*, Քաղաքացիություն 13, թիվ 3 (39) (2022): 22].

²⁹ "Russian Military Bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Will Be Reinforced with New Weapons and Equipment," [«Военные базы РФ в Таджикистане и Киргизии усилят новым вооружением и техникой»], *Interfax*, January 24, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/817988>.

On February 16, 2022, the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan became a subject of discussion at a UN Security Council meeting on the topic of co-operation between the UN and the CSTO. These discussions at the UN Security Council once again revealed the competition among the main actors in international relations, particularly the confrontation between Russia and the NATO member states led by the US in the Central Asian region.³⁰

In the summer of 2022, the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, an autonomous administrative unit within Uzbekistan, became the center of instability in Central Asia. Mass protests began there on July 1, 2022, as a result of a draft of amendments to the Constitution of Uzbekistan, which envisioned abolishing the autonomous status of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The largest demonstration took place in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan.

Given the circumstances of mass protests, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan arrived in Nukus, where he made a statement promising not to amend the articles of the Constitution related to the autonomous republic's status, except Article 73, which defines the inviolability of Karakalpakstan's territorial integrity. At the same time, the president announced the imposition of a state of emergency in the autonomous region from July 3 to August 2.³¹ The Uzbek authorities saw foreign interference in these events, as stated by President Mirziyoyev during a video conference on July 6, 2022, specifically noting, "Of course, these events were not organized in one day or ten days. These actions were prepared for years by foreign forces. Their main goal is to encroach on the territorial integrity of Uzbekistan and create an inter-ethnic conflict."³²

The unresolved border issues between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also negatively impacted the stability of the region. Specifically, from January 2022, border tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated into military clashes in September of the same year, which were unprecedented in scale compared to previous

³⁰ Zhak Manukyan, "Peacekeeping as One of the Priorities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (2011–2022)," *Bulletin of Yerevan University: International Relations and Political Sciences* 14, no. 2 (41) (2023): 31, <https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2023.14.2.022>, in Russian: [Жак Манукян, "Миротворческая деятельность как один из приоритетов Организации Договора о коллективной безопасности (2011–2022 гг.)], *Вестник Ереванского Университета: Международные отношения, Политология* 14, № 2 (41) (2023): 31].

³¹ "Attempt to Deprive Karakalpakstan of Autonomy: What Is Behind It?," ["Попытка лишить Каракалпакстан автономии: что за этим стоит?"], *Deutsche Welle*, July 4, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ru/popytka-lishit-karakalpakstan-avtonomii-cto-za-jetim-stoit/a-62357771>.

³² "Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Foreign Forces Were Behind the Unrest in Nukus," ["Шавкат Мирзиёев: за беспорядками в Нукусе стояли иностранные силы"], *Sputnik Uzbekistan*, July 6, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/20220706/shavkat-mirziyoyev-za-besporiadkami-v-nukuse-stoyali-inostrannye-sily-25955347.html>.

border clashes between these two countries since the collapse of the USSR.³³ However, the parties were able to put an end to military actions. Sadyr Japarov and Emomali Rahmon, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, signed a treaty on the state border between the two countries on March 13, 2025. Two checkpoints on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, which were closed in 2021, are now open again.³⁴ From March 14, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan resumed air transportation, which had been suspended since May 2021.³⁵ The signing of this agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan was important for ensuring stability in the region and for the implementation of several regional logistics projects.

How Transport and Logistics Diplomacy Reshapes the Foreign Policies of Central Asian States

The states of Central Asia, which formed the periphery of the Soviet Union, possess diverse opportunities for economic development, determined by both the availability of internal resources and the economic policies implemented. The global economic crisis that began in 2008 affected the countries of the region differently.³⁶ These differences were conditioned not only by their domestic economic policies but also directly by their economic relations with Russia and China. Therefore, it was not possible to completely avoid the negative consequences of the crisis.

By 2009, the impact of the economic crisis was already being felt in the countries of Central Asia.³⁷ For example, the economy of Uzbekistan, which was less integrated into the global economy compared to Kazakhstan, began to decline due to a decrease in demand in the global market for a number of goods exported from Uzbekistan, particularly the prices of precious and non-ferrous metals, cotton, ura-

³³ “Media Reported the Death of Two Tajik Soldiers in a Shootout on the Border with Kyrgyzstan,” [“СМИ сообщили о гибели двух таджикских солдат в перестрелке на границе с Киргизией”], *Interfax*, September 14, 2022, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.interfax.ru/amp/862125>.

³⁴ “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Signed a Border Treaty,” [“Кыргызстан и Таджикистан подписали договор о границе”], *Gazeta.uz*, March 13, 2025, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2025/03/13/border/>.

³⁵ “Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Resume Air Traffic: First Flight from Dushanbe to Bishkek in Four Years,” [“Таджикистан и Кыргызстан возобновили авиасообщение: в Бишкек прилетел первый за четыре года рейс из Душанбе”], *Radio Ozodi*, March 14, 2025, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/33347470.html>.

³⁶ “IMF Survey: IMF to Step Up Its Engagement, Support in Central Asia,” *International Monetary Fund*, June 22, 2009, accessed May 11, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/socar062209a>.

³⁷ “Global Economic Crisis Led to Severe Humanitarian Consequences in Europe and Central Asia,” [“Глобальный экономический кризис привел к тяжелым гуманитарным последствиям в Европе и Центральной Азии”] *United Nations News*, October 19, 2009, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2009/10/1153261>.

rium, oil products, mineral fertilizers, and other raw materials. This, in turn, led to a decrease in the income of both exporting economic entities and investors, as well as a decline in production profitability. As a result, these processes negatively affected economic growth rates and macroeconomic indicators.³⁸

In these circumstances, China's initiative to establish a land route connection with Europe through the territory of the region gained strategic importance for the Central Asian states. On September 7, 2013, President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping delivered a historic speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan, introducing the BRI.³⁹ In his speech, the Chinese leader presented the main principles of China's policy in Central Asia, emphasizing that the initiative would not pursue a goal of a competitive positioning, but was about the deepening of cooperation. Xi Jinping considered the alignment of external and internal forces, as well as the overlapping of interests in the region, speaking about the initiative. The Chinese President particularly emphasized the need for policy coordination with Russia, focusing on the priority of bilateral cooperation:

“We respect the path of development, the foreign and domestic policy that the peoples of other countries have independently chosen. We absolutely do not interfere in the internal affairs of the Middle Asian countries, do not seek leadership in resolving regional issues, and do not create spheres of influence for ourselves. We are ready to intensify exchanges and coordination with Russia and the countries of Middle Asia and jointly make unremitting efforts to create a harmonious region.”⁴⁰

According to Xi Jinping, the essence and content of strategic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states lie in the mutual support of each other's state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political stability. By subordinating competitive approaches and replacing them with a cooperative model, China proposed deepening bilateral relations with both individual states and within the framework of the SCO. In this context, an essential direction was considered the joint fight

³⁸ “Global Financial and Economic Crisis, Ways and Measures to Overcome It in the Conditions of Uzbekistan,” [“Мировой финансово-экономический кризис, пути и меры по его преодолению в условиях Узбекистана”], *Embassy of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan*, March 2009, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.uzembassy.kz/ru/page/mirovoy-finansovo-ekonomicheskiy-krizis-puti-i-mery-po-ego-preodoleniyu-v-usloviyah-uzbekistana>.

³⁹ Anna A. Kireeva, “Belt and Road Initiative: Overview, Objectives and Implications,” *Comparative Politics Russia* 9, no. 3 (2018): 61, <https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-3-61-74>. [Анна Андреевна Киреева, “Инициатива пояса и пути:” содержание, цели и значение, *Сравнительная политика* 9, № 3 (2018): 61, <https://doi.org/10.18611/2221-3279-2018-9-3-61-74>].

⁴⁰ Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Foreign Language Literature Publishing House, 2017), 389, in Russian: [Си Цзиньпин, *О государственном управлении*, 2-е изд. (Пекин: Издательство литературы на иностранных языках, 2017), 389].

against the “three forces of evil”—terrorism, separatism, and extremism—as well as against illegal drug trafficking and transnational organized crime. In the context of deepening economic integration, Xi Jinping proposed the joint creation of the New Silk Road Economic Belt, aimed at promoting economic cooperation among the countries of the region. For the implementation of this strategic initiative, five main complementary steps were proposed:

First, it was deemed necessary to promote mutual recognition of each country’s political positions. This provision implied that the countries of the region should exchange information on economic development strategies. At the same time, it was important to respect national characteristics and differences, developing harmonized programs that would pave the way for the implementation of regional economic integration.⁴¹

Second, it was considered necessary to develop road communication. Xi Jinping recalled that the SCO was conducting negotiations on signing an agreement on simplifying transport formalities. Therefore, in his opinion, it was necessary to sign and implement this document as soon as possible, which would allow for the formation of a large-scale transport corridor in the “Pacific Ocean–Baltic Sea” direction. The Chinese leader noted that on this basis, they are ready to actively discuss issues of improving cross-border transport infrastructure with all interested parties, gradually forming a transport network connecting East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia.⁴²

Third, it was necessary to ensure unimpeded trade. The Chinese leader noted that the Silk Road Economic Belt is home to approximately 3 billion people. He also emphasized that the scale and potential of the regional market are unique.

Fourth, Xi Jinping considered it necessary to strengthen the monetary circulation sector. In his speech, he recalled that China, Russia, and other countries have developed positive cooperation within the framework of national currencies and have achieved encouraging results and accumulated valuable experience.

Fifth, the Chinese leader considered it necessary to promote mutual recognition of peoples’ aspirations, as, to his mind, relations between countries are largely determined by the rapprochement of peoples.⁴³

Therefore, China offered the states of the region an economic cooperation project that balances the interests of Russia and China in the region, also emphasizing the cooperation achieved within the SCO. This initiative by the Chinese leader promoted the idea of cooperation as a path to development in a civilizational di-

⁴¹ Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 391.

⁴² Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 391.

⁴³ Xi Jinping, *On Public Administration*, 392.

mension, in some ways contrasting it with competition and the concept of the clash of civilizations.

This economic cooperation was an additional opportunity for the Central Asian states to diversify their foreign policy, which, as mentioned above, Uzbekistan sought to achieve. Kazakhstan also had such a political course, having already taken steps to reduce its dependence on Russia in the field of energy exports.⁴⁴

Two months after the speech of Xi Jinping, on November 7, 2013, as part of the II International Transport and Logistics Business Forum “New Silk Road” in Astana, the leaders of JSC “National Company “Kazakhstan Temir Zholy,” CJSC “Azerbaijan Railways,” and JSC “Georgian Railway” signed an agreement on the establishment of a Coordination Committee for the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR).⁴⁵

In February 2014, the Coordination Committee for the Development of the TITR was established to increase the flow of goods along the TITR.⁴⁶ This road would stretch from China to Europe and would play an important role in the geopolitics of Central Asia, making it a transport route with a certain role in China-Europe trade and economic relations, and taken separately, it could turn Kazakhstan into an important transport and logistics hub in the Eurasian region as a whole. In parallel with these processes, Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed the Treaty of the EAEU (2014). Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined later. As a result, two Central Asian states became participants in a new integration process in the post-Soviet space. The creation of the EAEU also somewhat changed the political and economic image of the region.

By promoting integration within the EAEU, Russia also considered China’s growing role in the region and the initiatives China had put forward in the Eurasian region. President Putin articulated this in his annual address to the Federal Assembly on December 3, 2015, where he emphasized: “We have reached the next level of cooperation within the Eurasian Economic Union by creating a common space, with free movement of capital, goods, and labor. We have reached a basic agree-

⁴⁴ Zhak S. Manukyan, “Oil Diplomacy of Azerbaijan and Security Problems of the Republic of Armenia,” in *Axis of World Politics of the XXI Century: Increasing the Struggle for Resources in Asia and Africa*, ed. A. M. Khazanova (Moscow: Center for Strategic Conjunctures, Institute of Eastern Studies RAS, 2012), 270, in Russian: [Жак Самвелович Манукян, “Нефтяная дипломатия Азербайджана и проблемы безопасности Республики Армения,” см.: *Ось мировой политики XXI в.: Обострение борьбы за ресурсы в Азии и Африке*, под ред. А. М. Хазановой (Москва: Центр стратегической конъюнктуры, Институт востоковедения РАН, 2012), 270].

⁴⁵ The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also known as the Middle Corridor, has gained strategic importance in recent years. In this paper, the term Middle Corridor will be used interchangeably with TITR.

⁴⁶ “Trans-Caspian International Transport Route: History,” accessed May 13, 2025, <https://middlecorridor.com/en/about-the-association/history-en>.

ment on combining Eurasian integration with the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt.”⁴⁷ This implied that Russia preferred collaboration over rivalry in Eurasia. In this context, Putin proposed the idea of a Eurasian partnership in his address, specifically stating:

“I propose holding consultations, in conjunction with our colleagues from the Eurasian Economic Union, with the SCO and the ASEAN members, as well as with the states that are about to join the SCO, with the view of potentially forming an economic partnership. Together, our states make up nearly a third of the global economy in terms of purchasing power parity. Such a partnership could initially focus on protecting investments, streamlining procedures for the cross-border movement of goods, joint development of technical standards for next-generation technology products, and the mutual provision of access to markets for both services and capital. Of course, this partnership should be based on principles of equality and mutual interest.”⁴⁸

It is evident from comparing the key points of Xi Jinping’s speech on September 7, 2013, and Vladimir Putin’s speech on December 3, 2015, that the concepts presented are compatible and share similar values. Chinese and Russian officials place a strong emphasis on expanding logistical hubs, updating transportation infrastructure, and strengthening the SCO cooperation.

Integration within the EAEU framework differs considerably from the integration processes in the post-Soviet space, since here integration is carried out within the framework of an organization endowed with supranational powers, in which Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which are part of the EAEU common market, participate. Some researchers even believed that this organization could be an opportunity to ease tensions between the EU and Russia through EU-EAEU cooperation.⁴⁹ In this case, the EAEU could be a serious global player on the Eurasian continent, taking into consideration the idea of Eurasian cooperation put forward by the Russian President. In the policies of both Russia and China, an important fact was that the leaders of the two states sought not to oppose each other on regional issues. In

⁴⁷ “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” *Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia*, December 3, 2015, accessed May 11, 2025, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864>.

⁴⁸ “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Official Internet Resources of the President of Russia.

⁴⁹ Tigran Yepremyan, “Armenia Within the Complex of “Overlapping Authority and Multiple Loyalty”: Security Challenges,” in *The European Union and The Eastern Partnership: Security Challenges*. Ed. Vasile Cucerescu, Carlos E. Pacheco Amaral, Ioan Horga [et al.]. Supplement to *Eurolimes Journal*, 2018, 234.

this context, according to researchers, the projects of the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the EAEU are characterized by an asymmetric nature.⁵⁰

In 2015, the main routes of the New Silk Road Economic Belt were outlined: from China through Central Asia and Russia to Europe; from China through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea; and from China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean⁵¹. The Maritime Silk Road was formulated as two main routes: from Chinese seaports through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and then to Europe and Africa, and from Chinese ports through the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean.⁵²

In accordance with the New Silk Road project, Kazakhstan has actively been implementing its transport and logistics policy. In December 2016, the participants of the Coordinating Committee for the Development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route -Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia -decided to establish the International Association of the TITR. Since February 2017, the TITR has started its activities.⁵³

In 2017, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway was also completed, the construction of which lasted about 10 years. The operation of the BTK railway further increased the strategic opportunities of the TITR, thanks to which the TITR had two important routes: the first is the Trans-Kazakhstan railway, and the second is the BTK railway.⁵⁴ The development of the Middle Corridor is institutionally independent and potentially transformative for the economies of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Turkey.⁵⁵

Uzbekistan's interest in the operational prospects of the BTK railway has been evident as well. In December 2017, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev approved a program to diversify international cargo transport routes from 2018 to 2022. According to this document, the transit cargo transportation via the BTK railway line was planned to begin as early as 2018.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Li ““One Belt, One Road” Initiative,” 388.

⁵¹ Kireeva, “Belt and Road Initiative,” 62.

⁵² Kireeva, “Belt and Road Initiative,” 62.

⁵³ “Trans-Caspian International Transport Route: History,” accessed May 13, 2025, <https://middlecorridor.com/en/about-the-association/history-en>.

⁵⁴ Baizakova, “Transport and Logistics Issues,” 80.

⁵⁵ Tristan Kenderdine and Peter Bucsky, *Middle Corridor—Policy Development and Trade Potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, ADBI Working Paper 1268 (Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.adb.org/publications/middle-corridor-policy-development-trade-potential>.

⁵⁶ “Cargo transportation to Georgia has begun via a multimodal corridor through Uzbekistan,” [“По мультимодальному коридору через Узбекистан начаты грузовые перевозки в Грузию”], *Review.uz*, January 28, 2020, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://review.uz/post/po-multimodalnomu-koridoru-cerez-uzbekistan-nacaty-gruzovye-perevozki-v-gruziu>.

Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan also expressed interest in the cargo transportation via the BTK railway. On December 19-20, 2019, a meeting was held in Tashkent to develop an international multimodal route, with the participation of the heads of railway companies from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan also participated, which highlighted the importance of Uzbekistan on this transport route. This meeting, organized at the initiative of the Uzbekistani side, discussed the priority issues of increasing cargo volumes and developing multimodal land transport through the territories of the participating countries. During the discussion, unified transit tariff rates and conditions for cargo transportation along the route were approved. The participants agreed to create a Coordination Committee consisting of the heads of the railway companies of the participating countries, under the chairmanship of the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan.⁵⁷

As of March 2021, approximately 45 containers had been sent from Uzbekistan towards Turkey and Europe via the BTK railway line.⁵⁸ Uzbekistan continued to show consistent activity in this direction. Notably, on August 2, 2022, the first joint meeting of the Foreign Ministers and Ministers of Economy, Trade, and Transport of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey took place in Tashkent. Acting Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Vladimir Norov, summarizing the meeting's results, told journalists that the authorities of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Turkey expressed their readiness to actively use the BTK railway as part of deepening cooperation among the Turkic states.⁵⁹ Thus, it becomes obvious how transport and logistics diplomacy contributes to the development of relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan on one side, and Turkey and the Central Asian states on the other. Despite this political activism from the aforementioned states, the freight transportation figures along the BTK railway route remained quite modest. According to expert assessments, freight volumes on the BTK railway line continued to be at an extremely low level until 2023. For example, in 2022 (the latest data before the reconstruction started in 2023), only 690,000 tons of cargo were transported via the

⁵⁷ “Uzbekistan Plans to Launch Transit Trains to Azerbaijan and Georgia by Spring 2020,” [“Узбекистан планируют к весне 2020 года запустить транзитные поезда в Азербайджан и Грузию”], *Review.uz*, December 21, 2019, accessed May 12, 2025, <https://review.uz/news/sentral-asia/uzbekistan-planiruyut-k-vesne-2020-goda-zapustit-tranzitniye-poezda-v-azerbaydjan-i-gruziyu>.

⁵⁸ “Cargo from Uzbekistan to Europe Goes through Georgia,” [“Грузы из Узбекистана в Европу едут через территорию Грузии”], *Sputnik Georgia*, March 3, 2021, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20210304/Gruzy-iz-Uzbekistana-v-Evropy-edut-cherez-territoriyu-Gruzii-251074513.html>.

⁵⁹ “Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Türkiye Are Ready to Actively Use the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway,” [“Узбекистан, Азербайджан и Турция готовы активно использовать ж/д Баку–Тбилиси–Карс”], *Sputnik Georgia*, August 2, 2022, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20220802/269133926.html>.

BTK line. According to experts, the main reason for the less active operation of the BTK railway was the ‘bottlenecks’ in Georgia. Specifically, the underdeveloped infrastructure in the Marabda-Turkish border section led to congestion and slow cargo movement. To solve this problem, reconstruction work was carried out in that section, for which the Azerbaijani government allocated 100 million US dollars.⁶⁰ Thus, it becomes clear how transport and logistics diplomacy contributes to the deepening of relations between Turkey and the Central Asian states. Despite such political activity of these states, the indicators of cargo transportation along the BTK railway route were quite modest; according to experts, until 2023, the volumes of cargo transportation along the BTK railway line will continue to remain at an extremely low level. The main goal of modernizing the BTK railway line was to increase the competitiveness of the Middle Corridor and make the BTK railway one of its main cargo arteries. As a result of the expansion, the BTK’s annual capacity increased from 1 million tons to 5 million tons.⁶¹ However, a significant obstacle arose in this context: the COVID-19 pandemic, which adversely affected the transport and logistics policies of Central Asian states.

The significance of the BTK railway in the process of delivering goods from China and Central Asian states to Europe by land increased Azerbaijan’s role not only from an economic and logistical standpoint but also made it a crucial transport route, especially after Russia launched its special military operations in Ukraine. In terms of developing transport routes in the South Caucasus and increasing the transit potential of the region, Armenia took an important initiative by putting forward the “Crossroad of Peace” project, which Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of Armenia presented on October 26, 2023, during the “Silk Road” international conference held in Tbilisi.⁶² The implementation of this project would also contribute to the establishment of stable peace in the South Caucasus. However, it has not received a positive response from Azerbaijan. Moreover, on January 28, 2025, during a consultation dedicated to the discussion of transport issues, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated about this project: “This so-called project is not worth two cents without Azerbaijan, and we have repeatedly conveyed this to the Arme-

⁶⁰ “Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Becomes the Most Important Link of the Middle Corridor,” [“Баку–Тбилиси–Карс становится важнейшим звеном Среднего коридора”], *Sputnik Georgia*, April 21, 2024, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://sputnik-georgia.ru/20240421/287461956.html>.

⁶¹ “Modernization Work on the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line Has Been Completed,” [“Завершены работы по модернизации железнодорожной линии Баку–Тбилиси–Карс”], *Azertag*, May 3, 2024, accessed May 29, 2025, https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/zaversheny_raboty_po_modernizacii_zheleznodorozhnoi_liniii_baku_tbilisi_kars-2985445.

⁶² “Prime Minister Pashinyan Presents the “Crossroads of Peace” Project and Its Principles at the Tbilisi International Forum,” *Official Website of the Prime Minister of Armenia*, October 26, 2023, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/26/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

nian side through various channels. If you truly want to implement this project, first of all, you should approach Azerbaijan.”⁶³

The importance of the BTK railway also grew after Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed a new agreement on November 15, 2017, regarding the launch of the Lapis Lazuli Transit Corridor during a five-sided meeting held in Ashgabat on November 15, within the framework of the seventh session of the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA).⁶⁴ This regional corridor starts from Herat province in Afghanistan and continues to the Turkmenbashi port in Turkmenistan, from where goods are transported by ferries to Baku, and then via the BTK railway to Europe.⁶⁵ On January 16, 2021, the heads of the interdepartmental working groups of Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan reached an agreement on a trilateral roadmap for deepened cooperation regarding the “Lapis Lazuli” corridor.⁶⁶ The participating states of the Lapis Lazuli corridor consistently keep the development of transport and logistics opportunities in focus, discussing it in bilateral and multilateral formats. The Ashgabat negotiations of February 26, 2024, between representatives of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan state about this.⁶⁷ In October 2024, during a working visit to Turkey, Azerbaijan’s Minister of Digital Development and Transport, Rashad Nabiiev, met with Afghanistan’s Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation, Hamidullah Akhundzada. During the meeting, the opportunities for bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the transport sector were discussed, particularly within the framework of the Lapis Lazuli international transport route.⁶⁸

⁶³ “Meeting Dedicated to Transportation Issues Was Held – President Ilham Aliyev Addressed the Meeting,” Azertag, January 28, 2025, accessed May 29, 2025, https://azertag.az/en/xeber/meeting_dedicated_to_transportation_issues_was_held_president_ilham_aliyev_addressed_the_meeting_video-3392171.

⁶⁴ Fuad Shahbazov, “Lapis Lazuli: A New Transit Corridor to Link Asia and Europe via the South Caucasus,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, November 30, 2017, accessed May 29, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/lapis-lazuli-new-transit-corridor-link-asia-europe-via-south-caucasus/>.

⁶⁵ Kondapalli, “Eurasian Transport Corridors,” 16.

⁶⁶ Naghi Ahmadov, “Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Turkmenistan Sign Trilateral Roadmap for Cooperation on Eurasian Connectivity,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, February 10, 2021, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/azerbaijan-afghanistan-and-turkmenistan-sign-trilateral-roadmap-for-cooperation-on-eurasian-connectivity/>.

⁶⁷ “Ashgabat Will Host a Meeting of Representatives of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor Member Countries,” [“Ашхабад примет встречу представителей стран-участниц Лазуритового коридора”], *Business Turkmenistan*, February 28, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://business.com.tm/ru/post/11473/ashhabad-primet-vstrechu-predstavitelei-stranuchastnic-lazuritovogo-koriydora>.

⁶⁸ “Azerbaijan and Afghanistan Discussed Cooperation Opportunities Within the Lapis Lazuli Route,” [“Азербайджан и Афганистан обсудили возможности сотрудничества в рамках маршрута Лапис Лазули”], Azertag, October 4, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, https://azertag.az/ru/xeber/azerbaidzhan_i_afghanistan_obsudili_vozmozhnosti_sotrudnichestva_v_rumkah_marshuta_lazuli_obnovleno-3213882.

An alternative to the Lapis Lazuli corridor could be the Iran-Afghanistan Khaf-Herat railway, which is scheduled to be operational by 2026, but we believe that Ankara and Baku will try to downplay the importance of this railway, since the operation of such communications also contributes to the weakening of Iran's political influence. This eighteen-year-old project connects the city of Herat to the Iranian railway network through the city of Khaf, located in Razavi Khorasan Province. This line is considered an important link in a wider transnational corridor connecting China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and eventually the Persian Gulf and Europe.⁶⁹

In general, the development of transit routes in the Central Asian region has faced some challenges, particularly those of the economic resources and investment strategies of the TITR member states, as the question revolves around the capacity of railways and seaports.⁷⁰ It will become easier to overcome these challenges by enhancing the transit capacity of the TITR member states. In 2024, Kazakhstan started the modernization of the Aktau port, which is a central part of the TITR. Given that expanding the port's capacity will naturally promote growth in transit cargo transport and enhance Kazakhstan's role along the route, the modernization of the Aktau Port is of strategic importance. This is particularly true due to its inclusion in the key North–South transport corridor connecting Russia and India via Iran.⁷¹

Because the TITR cargo shipping goes through Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Georgian government started restoring and modernizing the country's logistics infrastructure. For instance, in 2024, Georgia initiated the construction of the Anaklia port, which is to further cement Georgia's position in the TITR system. Anaklia's deep-water port is planned to be opened in 2029. During the first phase of the project, the transit capacity of the port will be 600,000 containers per year. According to Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze of Georgia, "the development of the Anaklia project is one of the country's priorities."⁷² It must be noted that during the first 11

⁶⁹ "Khaf-Herat Railway to Be Fully Operational by Mar. 2026, Official Says," *Tehran Times*, April 18, 2025, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/511954/Khaf-Herat-railway-to-be-fully-operational-by-Mar-2026-official>.

⁷⁰ Baizakova, "Transport and Logistics Issues," 81.

⁷¹ "How the Modernization of Aktau Port Will Change the Economic Future of Kazakhstan," ["Как модернизация порта Актау изменит экономическое будущее Казахстана"], *Rail-news.kz*, December 27, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://rail-news.kz/ru/interview/19499-kak-modernizaciia-porta-aktau-izmenit-ekonomiceskoe-budushhee-kazaxstana.html>.

⁷² "Belgian company to build Anaklia port marine infrastructure," ["Строительством морской инфраструктуры порта Анаклия займется бельгийская компания"], *Echo Kavkaza*, August 1, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/33059094.html>.

months of 2024, the cargo transportation via the TITR increased by 63%, reaching 4.1 million tons, and the container transportation increased 2.6 times.⁷³

Although the EU has been cooperating with the Central Asian states within the framework of the TRACECA program since 1993,⁷⁴ in the post-COVID period, the EU has also made active efforts to develop transport and logistics diplomacy in the Central Asian region. To this extent, the “Global Gateway” plan launched in 2021 is of particular importance, as it aims to develop transport links and enhance interconnectedness with the Central Asian states.

The role played by Uzbekistan in these processes is noteworthy. The country pursues an active foreign policy in promoting logistics cooperation in the region, a living embodiment of which was the inaugural EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference in Samarkand in November 2022.⁷⁵ Addressing the conference participants, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev particularly emphasized the importance of further development of the ties between the EU and Central Asia. He stressed that in order to provide for effective implementation of the “Global Gateway” project, particular priority should be assigned to the following areas: digital transformation, transport connectivity, and the implementation of “green” development projects. President Mirziyoyev also said that diversification of the transport route is a priority task, calling it a new task for all Central Asian states. In his estimation, this process would provide access to world markets for the states in the region and would stimulate their participation in global integration and international cooperation processes.⁷⁶

Additionally, the President of Uzbekistan stressed the significance of the Trans-Caspian Multimodal Route, viewing it as essential not only for bolstering trade and economic ties between Europe and Asia but also for enhancing the capacity of Central Asian nations to access external markets through improved transportation

⁷³ “Growth and Development of TITR: Cargo Volume in 2024 Increased by 63%, Exceeding 4 Million Tons,” [“Рост и развитие ТМТМ: объем перевозок грузов в 2024 году увеличился на 63%, превысив 4 млн тонн”], *Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, December 17, 2024, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.gov.kz/memlekет/entities/transport/press/news/-details/904094?lang=ru>.

⁷⁴ Kondapalli, “Eurasian Transport Corridors,” 20.

⁷⁵ “Transport, Digital, Green Growth: Key Areas of Cooperation with the European Union,” [“Транспорт, цифровой, “зеленый” рост: главные направления сотрудничества с Евросоюзом”], *Spot.uz*, November 18, 2022, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2022/11/18/eu-central-asia/>.

⁷⁶ “To the participants of the first international conference “Interconnectivity of the European Union and Central Asia: Global Gateways for Sustainable Development,”” [“Участникам первой международной конференции “Взаимосвязанность Европейского союза и Центральной Азии: глобальные ворота для устойчивого развития””], *Official website of the President of Uzbekistan*, November 18, 2022, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/5714>.

corridors.⁷⁷ Uzbekistan's aspiration to become an inter-regional communications hub is evident.

A significant development in the EU-Central Asian cooperation was the first “Central Asia - European Union” summit held in Samarkand on April 3-4, 2025. There, the EU and the five Central Asian states announced their intention to expand trade relations and strategic partnership. During this summit of EU leaders and Central Asian presidents in Samarkand, on April 4, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen made a statement signaling the start of a “new era.”⁷⁸ She announced that the European Union is preparing to allocate 12 billion euros for Central Asian states within the framework of the European infrastructure initiative “Global Gateway.” According to her, the initiative prioritizes four main directions: the development of the transport sector, effective management of raw material resources, promotion of renewable energy, and digitalization. It was also specifically mentioned that the European satellites are planned to be used to provide high-speed internet access to the region “without the control of neighbors.” In this assessment, Ursula von der Leyen's allusion presumably referred to the influence of Russia and China in the region. Ursula von der Leyen emphasized that the “European offer” differs from the initiatives of other states due to its value-based foundations and the logic of mutually beneficial cooperation.⁷⁹

The European Union and Western states often criticize China for its strategy of creating debt dependence in developing countries, including in Central Asia. At the same time, Russia is also a target of criticism, as it uses the tool of energy and arms supply to maintain influence in the region, thereby deepening the structural dependence of Central Asian states.⁸⁰

In the Central Asian competitive processes, Russia, in turn, does not wish to be left out of the transport diplomacy practiced in the region. Here, in the inaugural SCO Transport Forum organized by Tashkent in Autumn 2023, the Uzbekistani Transport Minister Ilhom Mahkamov, the Kyrgyzstani Transport and Communications Minister Tilek Tekebaev, and the Russian Deputy Transport Minister Dmitry Zverev signed a memorandum of understanding for the development and establishment of the “Russia–Caspian Sea–Turkmenistan–Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan” international multimodal transport corridor.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Official website of the President of Uzbekistan, “To the participants of the first international conference ‘Interconnectivity of the European Union and Central Asia.’”

⁷⁸ “EU Proclaimed ‘New Era’ in Relations with Central Asia” [“ЕС провозгласил “новую эру” в отношениях с Центральной Азией”], *Deutsche Welle*, April 4, 2025, accessed May 30, 2025, <https://www.dw.com/ru/es-provozglasili-novu-u-eru-v-otnoseniiah-s-centralnoj-aziej/a-72140006>.

⁷⁹ Deutsche Welle, “EU Proclaimed ‘New Era’ in Relations with Central Asia.”

⁸⁰ Deutsche Welle, “EU Proclaimed ‘New Era’ in Relations with Central Asia.”

⁸¹ “Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia Agreed to Create a Transport Corridor across the Caspian Sea,” [“Кыргызстан, Узбекистан и Россия договорились создать транспортный коридор через

Within the framework of the same forum, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia signed memoranda of understanding aimed at developing and forming the “Belarus–Russia–Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan” international transport corridor.⁸² The next significant step in this direction was taken on April 23, 2024, in the city of Termez, where the first session of the working group for the development of the above-mentioned multimodal corridor took place.⁸³

According to the Uzbekistan Ministry of Transport, the volume of transit cargo shipping through Afghanistan increased by more than 30% in recent years to nearly 1 million tons. The volumes have increased radically since the transit trade agreement was signed between Uzbekistan and Pakistan in 2021.⁸⁴

In the context of these developments, China is actively engaged in the building of Central Asian transport connections. On June 6, 2024, the governments of China, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan signed an intergovernmental agreement in Beijing on the construction of a railroad.⁸⁵ In addition to making another route to fill the Middle Corridor and diversifying the supply of cargo, this project presents China with new possibilities for entering the market of Uzbekistan.

In the Central Asian region, even Turkmenistan, a permanently neutral country, has an active participation in the transport policy development, enhancing its own transport diplomacy. In May 2023, during the II Conference “International Transport Corridors: Interconnection and Development – 2023” held in Ashgabat, the Protocol of Operators of the CASCA+ transport corridor was signed. This corridor represents the “China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan-Georgia-Europe” route.⁸⁶ The important geographical location of Turkmenistan in

Каспийское море”], *Radio Azattyk*, November 3, 2023, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/32666962.html>.

⁸² Radio Azattyk, “Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Russia Agreed to Create a Transport Corridor across the Caspian Sea.”

⁸³ “A ‘Roadmap’ for the Development of the Multimodal Transport Corridor ‘Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan’ Has Been Signed,” [“Подписана “Дорожная карта” по развитию мультимодального транспортного коридора “Беларусь Россия Казахстан Узбекистан-Афганистан-Пакистан””], *Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, April 24, 2024, accessed May 31, 2025, <https://mintrans.uz/ru/news/belarus-rossiya-qozog-iston-ozbekiston-afg-oniston-pokiston-multimodal-transport-koridorini-rivojlantirish-bo-yicha-yo-l-xaritasi-imzolandi>.

⁸⁴ Ministry of Transport of the Republic of Uzbekistan, “A ‘Roadmap’ for the Development of the Multimodal Transport Corridor ‘Belarus-Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan’ Has Been Signed.”

⁸⁵ “Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China Signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on the Railway Project,” [“Узбекистан, Кыргызстан и Китай подписали межправсоглашение по проекту железной дороги”], *Gazeta.uz*, June 6, 2024, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2024/06/06/railway/>.

⁸⁶ “Transport Diplomacy of Turkmenistan – an Effective Tool for Cooperation,” [“Транспортная дипломатия Туркменистана – эффективный инструмент сотрудничества”], *Internet-portal CIS*, May 30, 2023, accessed June 1, 2025, <https://e-cis.info/news/566/109396>.

Central Asia enables its involvement in the formation of regional international transport routes.

In recent years, Central Asian states have actively participated in the implementation of regional and international transport projects. However, experts in the field point out several systemic issues that significantly limit the full realization of the region's transport and logistics potential. Specifically:

1. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan lack a unified and integrated railway infrastructure, which hinders the efficient organization of freight transportation within the countries and the region.
2. Transport infrastructure in all Central Asian states is not developed to a sufficient degree, and rolling stock exhibits a high level of wear and tear, reducing the reliability and efficiency of transportation.
3. There are serious obstacles in customs clearance processes, and the capacity of border checkpoints is extremely low, which prolongs the overall time for cargo movement.
4. All countries in the region face a shortage of warehouse space and logistics capacities, creating additional problems in freight transportation and distribution processes.⁸⁷

These issues can objectively limit the potential of Central Asian states as transit hubs and their effective participation in global transport networks. Nevertheless, in the post-COVID period, there has been a noticeable intensification of policy efforts focused on infrastructure development and enhancement within the sector. Among the measures undertaken in this direction are the initiatives aimed at developing the Aktau Port, as previously discussed.

Conclusion

The Central Asian region holds a position of significant strategic importance within the broader context of Eurasian geopolitics. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey, the United States, the European Union, and China actively sought to expand their influence in the region, primarily motivated by the prospect of accessing its abundant natural resources. Conversely, Russia's approach has been shaped by enduring historical links, rooted in the legacies of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet period, and by the region's critical geographic importance to Russian security.

⁸⁷ Ibrokhim Akrom ugli Akromov, "Development of Central Asia: Transport and Logistics Routes" [Иброхим Акром угли Акромов, "Развитие Центральной Азии: транспортно-логистические пути"], *Russian International Affairs Council*, December 13, 2024, accessed June 2, 2025, <https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/polit-ekspert/razvitiye-tsentralnoy-azii-transportnologisticheskie-puti/>.

Therefore, Russia's objective has been to have maximum presence in regional developments. Naturally, the role of bilateral relations between Russia and the Central Asian republics is pivotal in this respect. Strategically, Russia has been able to maintain the exclusive status of a state with military bases in Central Asia, i.e., in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Simultaneously, Russia is the only great power that has allied relations with some Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—within the CSTO format.

However, the Russian policy in Central Asia exhibits several distinct characteristics. Notably, it adopts a cautious stance toward the internal political dynamics of the regional states. This approach appears to stem from the perception that such domestic developments do not pose an immediate threat to Russia's strategic interests. Moreover, active interference in these processes is viewed as potentially destabilizing, with the risk of generating unintended consequences that could undermine Russia's long-term influence in the region.

One illustrative example is the case of Kazakhstan in 2022, when Russia intervened in efforts to restore internal stability. Notably, this intervention was not unilateral but was conducted within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), reflecting a multilateral approach that helped mitigate potential negative perceptions. It is also important to note that the timing of the events in Kazakhstan coincided with the lead-up to Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. This broader geopolitical context likely influenced Russia to adopt a more cautious and calculated posture in Central Asia, in order to avoid overextension and preserve its regional influence.

Turkey also plays a significant role in the region, drawing on historical ties with several neighboring nations, much like Russia. However, unlike Russia, Turkey places particular emphasis on the ethnic dimension, which enables it to cultivate closer relations with Turkic-speaking nations. In this context, the deepening of co-operation through the Organization of Turkic States has become a strategic priority. Nevertheless, political developments in recent decades indicate that the ethnolinguistic factor alone is insufficient to secure comprehensive influence across the region. States in the South Caucasus and Central Asia remain strongly committed to the principle of sovereignty and are generally cautious about allowing external actors to interfere in their domestic affairs.

The US policy toward Central Asia is fundamentally different from the strategy pursued by Russia. While Russia has sought to establish and maintain a long-term strategic presence in the region, the United States has not adopted a comparable approach. Washington has generally refrained from viewing Central Asia as a zone for sustained military deployment and has not aimed to establish permanent military bases there.

However, Central Asia is strategically important for the US. First, the region is energy-rich. Second, Central Asia geographically adjoins the Greater Middle East, further adding to its value in Washington's strategic interests. At the same time, the US sees Central Asia and the South Caucasus through the lens of undermining Russia's military-political influence. This fits with the whole US strategy in the post-Soviet space, aimed at the shift of the balance of power.

The EU policy in the region somewhat resembles that of the US, but also varies significantly. Notably, the EU tries to implement a more intrusive economic policy in Central Asia and thereby expand its influence not only on Central Asia but also on the neighboring regions. Among the most significant attempts in this regard is the Global Gateway project, which competes with China's BRI.

China's involvement, however, is direct in Central Asia through economic and infrastructural projects, as opposed to the strategic thought of the US and the EU.

The increasing competition among the great powers in the region has not only economic but also security implications for the Central Asian states. These processes have a direct impact on internal political developments, as evidenced by the events in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Kazakhstan in 2022, and Uzbekistan in 2022. Despite the current efforts of Central Asian states to pursue an even and multi-vector foreign policy in accordance with their national interests, the aforementioned external factors still have an influence on shaping and adhering to this policy. Due to this, foreign policy orientations of the region's states are generally categorized based on geopolitical conditions and domestic settings.

As observed, transport and logistics diplomacy is another key driver of regional dynamics because it has really intensified the focus of the great powers on Central Asia. While Russia shows some dynamism in the transport and logistics spheres, it is difficult to consider it the outright leader. China's participation in the sector is rising significantly, as it implements different transport and communication projects in the region. Along with this, some of these corridors are set to transport Chinese products to Europe or the Persian Gulf nations. To this extent, China is a big beneficiary and active initiator in transport diplomacy. The European Union would be capable of becoming a stringent competitor to China in this field, as it has been more deliberately striving to join the logistics sector of Central Asia over the past few years. Among the South Caucasus countries, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Turkey are also significant stakeholders as strategic stops along transit routes.

Thus, the post-Soviet Central Asian states have gained strategic importance for the major international actors across several interconnected regions, from security to infrastructure and transport. Under these conditions, a pressing question for the five Central Asian states is whether to act individually or through cooperative formats based on regional integration. The effectiveness and stability of their foreign

policies within the intricate landscape of Eurasian geopolitics will depend to a great extent on this decision.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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