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CHANGING CONNECTIVITY DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND INDIA'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT

DR. PUNIT GAUR







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Changing Connectivity Dynamics in Central Asia and India's Growing Engagement

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ABSTRACT



Central Asia is strategically located at the heart of the Eurasian landmass and serves as a land bridge between Asia and Europe. In ancient times, the Silk Road, a vast network connecting Eurasia to North Africa, provided for the movement of goods across continents. Since the beginning of the 21st century, a geopolitical transformation has been underway in Eurasia, and the region is becoming a hub of significant economic and political developments. Close trade and cultural connections between India and Central Asia can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilisation. Goods, people, and ideas flowed along the ancient Silk Road between the two sides. Later on, the waning of the Silk Road, the beginning of the European Age of Discovery, and colonialism were reasons behind the declining ties between India and the region. In the contemporary period, connectivity between India and Central Asia has been constrained due to the lack of a direct land route. Central Asia is landlocked, and connectivity continues to challenge closer cooperation, particularly given India's renewed interest in the region.

The reestablishment of India's connectivity with the Central Asian countries remains a key priority. Central Asia is the focal point of various connectivity initiatives recently launched by different countries. In this context, by examining the changing dynamics of Central Asia connectivity, the paper attempts to understand how these initiatives can further strengthen the relationship between India and Central Asia.

Keywords: India–Central Asia connectivity, INSTC, Chabahar, Ashgabat Agreement, Silk Road



INTRODUCTION



Connectivity has been a critical factor in the development of the world throughout human history. It can take many forms, including physical connectivity through transportation infrastructure, such as roads, railways, and ports, and digital connectivity through communication networks and the Internet. In today's globalised world, connectivity is crucial in shaping economic growth, regional stability, and political cooperation. It promotes collaboration and interdependence between countries, supports economic growth and development, and helps to overcome geographical and cultural barriers. It has become essential to strengthen international relationships, drive economic growth, and impact power distribution and influence.¹

However, connectivity can also increase competition and conflicts, particularly in countries vying for control over crucial transportation and communication routes and hubs. It is a complex and dynamic field shaped by economic, political, and strategic factors and has far-reaching implications for the global economy and international relationships. Nevertheless, the changing connectivity dynamics are complex and multifaceted and involve several political, economic, and security considerations.

Many factors, such as competition between regional powers, territorial disputes and security challenges, and the varying levels

Connectivity has been a critical factor in the development of the world throughout human history.

1 Lowell C. Matthews and B. Thakkar (2012), "The Impact of Globalization on Cross-Cultural Communication," in Hector Cuadra-Montiel (ed.), *Globalization* (ch. 13): IntecOpen

of economic development between countries and regions, influence the geopolitical dynamics of connectivity.² Creating transportation and energy networks can affect regional power dynamics and the economic and strategic interests of the countries involved.

The development of railroads, highways, and air travel in the 19th and 20th centuries significantly increased transportation speed and efficiency and helped spur economic growth and development. Likewise, the development of the Internet and other communication technologies in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have greatly enhanced the flow of information and ideas between countries and regions and facilitated global trade and the growth of commerce.³ In the modern era, transportation and communication technologies have vastly improved connectivity, making it easier and faster to travel and communicate between countries and regions. Advances in transportation, communication, and information technologies, such as the Internet and satellite communication, have facilitated globalisation and increasing interconnectedness.⁴

In this context, Central Asia's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia has made it an important hub for connecting

**Central Asia's strategic location at the crossroads
of Europe and Asia has made it an important
hub for connecting different regions.**

- 2 Colin Flint and Cuiping Zhu (2019), "The geopolitics of connectivity, cooperation, and hegemonic competition: The Belt and Road Initiative," *Geoforum*, Vol. 99, pp. 95-101
- 3 A. Sherratt (2004), *Trade Routes: The Growth of Global Trade*.
- 4 L. A. Ogunsoola (2005), "Information and Communication Technologies and the Effects of Globalization: Twenty First Century "Digital Slavery" for Developing Countries—Myth or Reality?" *E-JASL 1999-2009* (volumes 1-10), 58



different regions. Historically, Central Asia has served as a crossroad for major trade and cultural routes, including the Silk Road, an important trade route linking Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. Similarly, the maritime trade routes of the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean sea connected various regions and facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultures.⁵ The region is located along several important trade routes, such as the ancient Silk Road and the modern-day Trans-Asia Railway network, which connect Europe and Asia.⁶ The Central Asian region connects Europe and Asia and bridges the Middle East and East Asia. The region has been a hub of cultural, commercial, and political exchanges.

Central Asia's location, resources, and economic growth capacity make it an increasingly important player on the global stage. Today, it plays a crucial role in global connectivity through various initiatives such as reviving the Silk Road by establishing transport and trade corridors. In recent years, efforts have been made to revitalise these trade routes, including creating modern infrastructure such as rail and road networks, to enhance connectivity and promote economic development.⁷ There is increased interest in improving connectivity with the Central Asian region through infrastructure development such as constructing new roads, railways, and energy pipelines. These efforts aim to boost economic cooperation, enhance transportation networks,

5 S. Whitfield and U. Sims-Williams (eds) (2004), *The Silk Road: trade, travel, war and faith*, London: Serindia Publication

6 Jonathan E. Hillman (2018), *The Rise of China-Europe Railways Report*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 15, pp. 5-11

7 *ibid*

The Central Asian region is crucial in facilitating connectivity between different parts of the world, promoting economic and commercial interdependence and shaping global energy dynamics.

and promote cultural exchange among the countries in the region and beyond.

The Central Asian region is also crucial in facilitating connectivity between different parts of the world, promoting economic and commercial interdependence and shaping global energy dynamics. In addition to trade, Central Asia is also important for energy transit, as it is home to significant oil and gas reserves and is a major producer of energy resources.⁸ The region is also vital for telecommunications, as it is a key transit point for fibre-optic cables connecting Asia and Europe.⁹ Central Asia can potentially play a more prominent role in the global economy. It can contribute to greater economic integration and cooperation among countries and regions through improved intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity.

Close trade and cultural connections between India and Central Asia can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilisation.¹⁰ Goods, people, and ideas flowed along the ancient Silk Road between the

Close trade and cultural connections between India and Central Asia can be traced back to the Indus Valley civilisation.

8 M. Rakhimov (2015), Central Asia in the Context of Western and Russian Interests. *L'Europe en Formation*, 375, 140–154

9 Kunagorn Kunavut, Atsuko Okuda, and Dongjung Lee (2018), Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): Enhancing ICT connectivity in China-Central Asia Corridor, *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*.

10 Meena Singh Roy (2001), *India's Interests in Central Asia, Strategic Analysis*, Vol. XXIV, No. 12



India and the Central Asian countries are trying to find synergy to reconnect for mutual development.

two sides. Later, the waning of the Silk Road, the beginning of the European Age of Discovery, and colonialism led to a decline in ties between India and the region. Currently, connectivity between India and Central Asia has been constrained due to the lack of a direct land route.¹¹ Central Asia is landlocked, and connectivity continues to challenge closer cooperation, particularly given India's renewed interest in the region.¹²

Nevertheless, India and the Central Asian countries are trying to find synergy to reconnect for mutual development. Central Asia also wants greater engagement with India as it is a big market for energy resources, a potential investor, and a technology partner. Besides, India is a significant player in global economic and political development. India announced the Connect Central Asia policy in 2012 as a comprehensive framework for further deepening ties. The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 to all five Central Asian countries is a milestone in reinvigorating the engagement between India and the region.¹³

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 to all five Central Asian countries is a milestone in reinvigorating the engagement between India and the region.

11 ibid

12 Raj Kumar Kothari (2020), India's Strategic Interests in Central Asia, *World Affairs: The Journal of International Issues*, Vol. 24, No.1, pp. 100-117

13 Introductory Remarks by Amb. Vijay Thakur Singh, DG, ICWA, at the ICWA International Conference, commemorating 30th Anniversary of India-Central Asia Diplomatic Relations titled "Dynamics of India-Central Asia Relations: Scale & Scope", 15 December 2022, available at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=2&ls_id=8711&lid=5700

The lack of inter-regional connectivity is one of the significant limitations deterring the realisation of the full potential of bilateral and regional economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Central Asia is the focal point of various connectivity initiatives. Consequently, reestablishing India's connectivity with the Central Asian countries remains a key priority.¹⁴

Subsequently, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused global supply and demand disruptions, impacting trade in products and services. It harmed global supply networks and restricted regional collaboration. Many nations also blocked their borders to stop cross-border spread early in the pandemic, severely reducing economic growth, causing trade disturbance and threatening global connectivity.¹⁵ Secondly, the takeover of Kabul in 2021 by the Taliban has raised concerns about regional stability in Central and South Asia, significantly impacting the dynamics of regional connectivity.¹⁶ Thirdly, for over a year, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, with its global repercussions, has brought new challenges for the Central Asian region and beyond. Central Asia is economically linked with Russia, and sanctions on the country affect the regional economies and

The takeover of Kabul in 2021 by the Taliban has raised concerns about regional stability in Central and South Asia, significantly impacting the dynamics of regional connectivity.

14 ibid

15 Serpil Aday and Mehmet Seckin Aday (2020), Impact of COVID-19 on the food supply chain, *Food Quality and Safety*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 167-180

16 Jiayi Zhou (2022), Afghanistan and its neighbourhood: A stocktaking of regional cooperation since the Taliban takeover, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute



inter-regional connectivity.¹⁷ However, these unprecedented events in the region are also an opportunity to strengthen intra-regional and inter-regional connectivity.

In this context, the paper examines the changing connectivity dynamics in Central Asia. It also analyses the ongoing connectivity initiatives in the region and discusses how these initiatives can further strengthen the relationship between India and Central Asia. The paper also dwells on the perception of interests of regional and global actors in the region. It examines changing connectivity dynamics in the region and suggests a synergy of a cooperative framework with select initiatives for more significant mutual economic advantages. The paper also attempts to understand how these initiatives can further strengthen the relationship between India and Central Asia.

CENTRAL ASIA: GEOPOLITICS OF (RE)CONNECTIVITY



Central Asia is located in the heart of Eurasia, encompassing the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. It is a diverse region with a rich history and cultural heritage, influenced by a mix of Turkic, Mongol, and Iranian civilisations. It is also known for its vast deserts, mountain ranges, and abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and fertile land. Central Asia is becoming increasingly important as a transportation hub and energy source for the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁸

17 Punit Gaur (2022), Russia-Ukraine Crisis and Implications for Central Asian Countries, Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA), New Delhi

18 Nicola P. Contessi (2016), Central Asia in Asia: Charting growing trans-regional linkages, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 3-13

The region is at the crossroads of major trade and energy routes and is adjacent to several major countries, including China, India, Iran, Russia, and Turkey. It makes the region a critical strategic accolade and has attracted the attention of regional and global powers.¹⁹ Central Asia is rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and water, which are vital to the region's economies and to the world.²⁰ Turkmenistan was the eighth-largest natural gas exporter in 2021 and held the sixth-largest natural gas reserve in the world (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are ranked 15th and 19th, respectively). After Russia and Norway, Turkmenistan is one of Eurasia's top three pipeline gas exporters. Kazakhstan was the ninth-largest crude oil exporter in 2020 and has the twelfth-highest global oil reserve. Furthermore, Kazakhstan was by far the largest producer of uranium in 2021, contributing nearly half of the total quantity produced globally. Kazakhstan also has the second-highest uranium deposit in the world.²¹

In 2021, Ukraine, the largest European producer, was placed tenth, while Uzbekistan ranked fifth in uranium production. Central Asia will become even more significant as certain nations become more receptive to nuclear power to address the oil and gas constraints and lessen dependency on fossil fuels. Contemporary geopolitical events in the region, such as the sanctions placed on Russia after

19 ADBI (2014), *Connecting Central Asia with Economic Centers*, Asian Development Bank Institute

20 *ibid*

21 Yang Jiang (2022), "China leading the race for influence in Central Asia," DIIS Policy Brief, Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark



Economic, political, and security factors significantly shape Central Asia's geopolitics of (re)connectivity.

the Ukraine crisis, the Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan and unstable security conditions experienced in oil-rich nations, have made the region a key focus of competition between regional and global powers seeking to secure access to these resources.²²

Central Asia is also home to diverse ethnic and religious groups. It has a complex history of ethnic and religious conflict.²³ These conflicts can undermine regional stability and security and attract the attention of external actors seeking to exploit these tensions for their strategic gain. The region is crucial for great-power competition as regional and global powers seek to advance their strategic interests. Various factors drive this competition, including resource access, political influence, and security interests.

Economic, political, and security factors significantly shape Central Asia's geopolitics of (re)connectivity. The significance of the Central Asian region as a bridge between several interlinking trade routes connecting Eastern Europe and Africa to South and Eastern Asia, with intersections, is well established. Therefore, for the last three decades (post-USSR disintegration period), voices have been heard worldwide for various (re)connectivity initiatives to enhance overland commercial connectivity with the Central Asian region.²⁴

22 *ibid*

23 Barfield J. Thomas (2010), *Prospects for Plural Societies in Central Asia*, Cultural Survival, Cambridge

24 Manmohan Parkash (2006), *Connecting Central Asia A Road Map for Regional Cooperation*, Asian Development Bank (ADB)

TAKING STOCK OF INTRA-REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY IN CENTRAL ASIA



Despite noticeable development over the past ten years, Central Asian states continue to have some of the least developed economies in the world, with access to global goods and services (GDP) ranking below 60%.²⁵ Central Asia also performs poorly on the World Bank's core trade and transport indices,²⁶ which consider factors such as the timeliness of shipments, quality of the infrastructure, and effectiveness of border crossing and customs clearance procedures.

Despite having more similarities than differences among the five Central Asian countries, such as shared history, language (Russian as lingua franca), religion, geographical location, political system, economic structure and common geo-strategic and geopolitical challenges, the lack of cooperation among Central Asian countries has impacted the realisation of the region's full potential since independence. Absent of comprehensively strengthened intra-regional cooperation and connectivity among Central Asian countries hindered the region's development potential.

Nevertheless, the interaction and cooperation among regional countries have steadily grown over the last few years. Central Asian

Absent of comprehensively strengthened intra-regional cooperation and connectivity among Central Asian countries hindered the region's development potential.

25 OECD International Transport Forum Indicators, available at <https://www.itf-oecd.org/tags/indicators>

26 World Bank, International Logistics Performance Index, available at <https://lpi.worldbank.org/>



Confederation, Central Asian Union, or Central Asian Economic Community, all of which were proposed and discarded in the 1990s and early 2000s, are being brought back into the discussion following the Astana meeting in 2018.²⁷ In 2017, the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, took the initiative to hold regular consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders. The First meeting was held in Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, in March 2018.²⁸

The Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Central Asian Heads of States was held in the city of Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, in 2022. The leaders of all five Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – joined the meeting. These consultative meetings addressed several crucial issues, including common security challenges, improving connectivity, creating a single cultural space in Central Asia, increasing trade, and strengthening the economy.

The Central Asian countries also emphasise the efficient use of transport corridors to unlock the countries' transport and transit potential and improve intra-regional connectivity so that the region could benefit from its significant location on the North-South and East-West routes. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) considered joint development of transport routes for inter-regional connectivity. The Central Asian countries made several proposals to improve connectivity and develop alternative routes. Turkmenistan proposed the development of “Central Asia–Caspian–the Black

27 K. Y. Meshcheryakov (2014), “Central Asian Integration and Russian Foreign Policy,” *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 66–70

28 *The Asia Today*, “4th Consultative Meeting of Heads of Central Asian States kicks off in Kyrgyzstan,” 21 July 2022

Sea” and “Central Asia–Persian Gulf” transport routes. Kyrgyzstan discussed building the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, which would strengthen the investment and transit potential of Central Asia.²⁹

Kazakhstan proposed further development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), also called the “Middle Corridor”. The route has become more relevant due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis since February 2022. Kazakhstan has expressed willingness to participate in constructing the Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar railway line to pursue South Asia–Central Asia connectivity.³⁰

In order to further improve intra-regional economic integration, the Central Asian countries proposed a network of border trade and economic hubs based on the “Unified Commodity Distribution System of the Central Asian countries”. The system envisages uniting agricultural producers, exporters, importers, buyers, and logistics companies from the region and facilitating export to other countries. The leaders of the Central Asian countries called for special attention to the digitalisation of economic sectors, which would reduce costs and ensure the competitiveness of products. They discussed the implementation of joint hydropower projects for the mutually beneficial use of water resources of transboundary rivers, including the construction of Kambarata HPP-1 in Kyrgyzstan.

29 Global Source Partner, “Central Asian presidents meet,” 22 July 2022, <https://www.globalsourcepartners.com/posts/central-asian-presidents-meet/teaser>

30 *Euractiv*, “Kazakhstan announces initiatives at fourth summit of Central Asia states,” 22 July 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/kazakhstan-announces-initiatives-at-fourth-summit-of-central-asia-states/>



Through improved bilateral relations and consultative meetings, the Central Asian countries are embarking on an effort to build wide-ranging intra-regional cooperation in political, trade, economic, cultural, humanitarian, and international affairs.

This hydroelectric power plant will strengthen the energy security of the Central Asian countries.³¹

Through improved bilateral relations and consultative meetings, the Central Asian countries are embarking on an effort to build wide-ranging intra-regional cooperation in political, trade, economic, cultural, humanitarian, and international affairs. The consultative meetings are the only regional platform for the Central Asian countries to discuss and find ways to address regional challenges exclusively. The consultative meetings significantly demonstrate the desire and serve the purpose of the Central Asian countries to create a “five-sided” cooperation framework. In this context, analysing the particular intra-regional connectivity projects in Central Asia is important.

INTRA-REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY PROJECTS IN CENTRAL ASIA



Several key regional connectivity projects are underway or planned in Central Asia to improve transportation, trade, and economic links between the region’s countries. These projects have

31 *News Central Asia*, “Fourth Consultative Summit of the Leaders of Central Asian States in Kyrgyzstan laid out a joint vision and multiple initiatives on better regional aligning against external shocks,” 22 July 2022

the potential to significantly enhance economic and transport ties within the region and with other countries, providing new opportunities for trade and investment and promoting sustainable economic growth and development.

The five well-known multilateral development banks (MDBs) used regional cooperation and integration (RCI) to combat the epidemic and its aftereffects among its members in Asia and the Pacific are:³²

- The Asian Development Bank (ADB),
- The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB),
- The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD),
- The Islamic Development Bank (IsDB),
- The World Bank Group.

One major initiative to strengthen collaboration and connectivity within the region is the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, which aims to increase economic integration and cooperation among the countries in the region. The program focuses on developing transport and energy corridors and improving customs procedures to facilitate cross-border trade.

CENTRAL ASIA REGIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION



The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) is a platform for regional cooperation to promote economic growth

32 ADB (2022), Regional Cooperation and Integration in Asia and The Pacific Responding to the Covid-19 Pandemic and “Building Back Better”, Asian Development Bank



and development through increased trade, investment, and transportation links in Central Asia. The CAREC was established in 2001 and currently involves 11 member countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia.³³

The CAREC's primary focus is to support the development of transport and energy corridors in the region, improve cross-border trade and investment, and promote cooperation on issues such as water and energy resources, environmental protection, and border management. The organisation works to facilitate the implementation of regional connectivity projects, including constructing highways, railroads, airports, and energy transmission lines. The CAREC has also established a program of priority projects and initiatives to improve regional infrastructure and facilitate cross-border trade and investment.³⁴

The CAREC program has received significant support from the ADB, World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The initiative has attracted investment and promoted regional cooperation, contributing to the economic growth and development of the participating countries (Table 1).³⁵

33 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, available at https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=31

34 Shubha Chatterjee, "Revisiting CAREC: A New Approach to Regional Economic Integration in Central Asia," *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1/2, Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation, January 2018, p. 138

35 CAREC 2030 Development Effectiveness Review (2017-2020), available at <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/790611/carec-2030-defr-2017-2020.pdf>

One major initiative to strengthen collaboration and connectivity within the region is the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, which aims to increase economic integration and cooperation among the countries in the region.

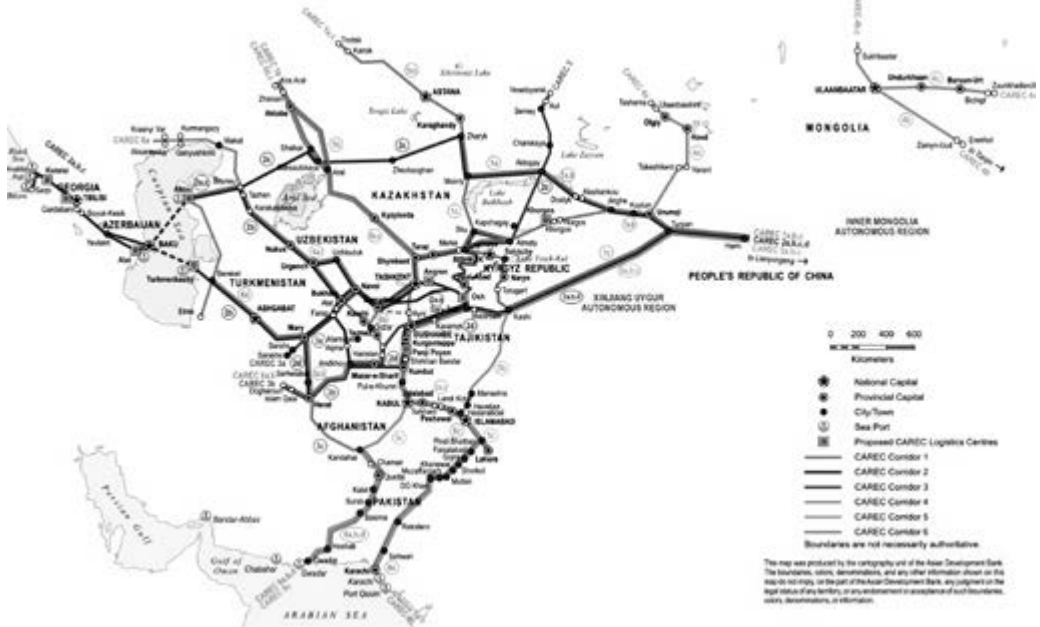
Table 1: CAREC Corridors and the Countries Included

Corridor 1	Europe – East Asia (Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and XUAR)
Corridor 2	Mediterranean – East Asia (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and XUAR)
Corridor 3	Russian Federation – Middle East and South Asia (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan)
Corridor 4	Russian Federation – East Asia (IMAR, Mongolia, and XUAR)
Corridor 5	East Asia – Middle East and South Asia (Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and XUAR)
Corridor 6	Europe – Middle East and South Asia (Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan)

IMAR: Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region; XUAR: Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region
Source: CUTS International

Six priority corridors have been identified by the CAREC project (Map 1) for conversion into economic corridors through improved economic cooperation and increased trade integration of the Central Asian countries. There are some criteria for selecting these corridors, such as current traffic volume, anticipated traffic growth and economic potential, future ability to connect

Map 1: Six Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Corridors



Source: CAREC Secretariat

population and economic centres, the potential to reduce travel times in the future, economic and financial sustainability through investments in infrastructure, technology, and management, and multimodal aspects (road and rail).³⁶ The ports of Chabahar,

Since 2001, the CAREC has made significant strides in regional economic cooperation, particularly in the growth of trade, energy, and transportation corridors.

³⁶ CAREC Transport Strategy 2030, available at <https://www.carecprogram.org/uploads/CAREC-Transport-Strategy-2030-MC-Draft.pdf>

Karachi, and Gwadar to the southern part of these corridors can create substantial prospects for international trade. Each corridor also increases access for the CAREC nations to at least two sizable Eurasian markets.³⁷

Since 2001, the CAREC has made significant strides in regional economic cooperation, particularly in the growth of trade, energy, and transportation corridors. An investment proposal for modernising all six transport corridors to international standards was published in 2013 by the CAREC Transport and Trade Facilitation Strategy (TTFS 2020). Following the 2020 vision, targets for building 1,800 km of rail track and 7,800 km of CAREC corridor roads were achieved in 2017. As stated in the TTFS 2020, Corridors 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 remain in place. In 2017, once Georgia joined the CAREC program, Corridor 2 underwent revision. The CAREC multimodal network's access to the Black Sea ports and the land border with Turkey has increased with the corridor's extension to Georgia.³⁸

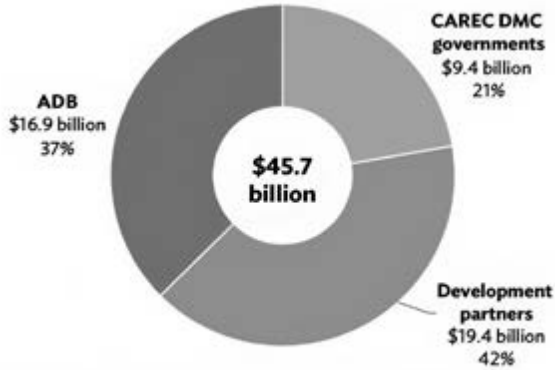
The CAREC investments had increased from US\$41.1 billion in June 2021 to US\$45.7 billion by June 2022, including 246 regional projects spread across the CAREC countries. More than US\$16.9 billion of the program was funded by the ADB, US\$19.4 billion by international development partners, and US\$9 billion by the governments of the CAREC (Figure 1). Almost 71% of these investments, or more than US\$32 billion, is provide for transportation; 22%, or more than

37 Working Note, Learning from CAREC Corridors and Connectivity Prospects for BBIN Sub-region, CUTS International

38 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), "CAREC Corridors", available at <https://www.carecprogram.org/>



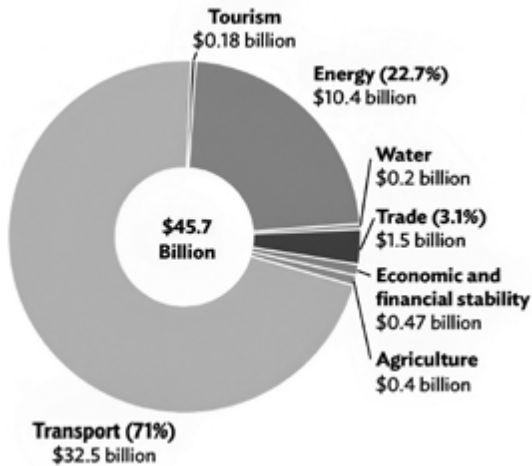
Figure 1: Investments by Funding Source—CARECP
(as on 30 June 2022, \$ billions)



ADB = Asian Development Bank, CAREC = Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, DMC = developing member country.

Source: Asian Economic Integration Report 2023

Figure 2: Investments by Sector—CARECP



Source: Asian Economic Integration Report 2023

US\$10 billion, goes towards energy; and 3%, or US\$1.4 billion, goes towards trade (Figure 2). The CAREC is diversifying its investments, including agriculture and tourism, even if most of its focus is on these conventional support industries.³⁹

IMPORTANCE OF CAREC CORRIDOR 2 FOR SOUTH ASIA



The Europe-Caucasus-Asia corridor, known as CAREC Corridor 2 (Map 2), is a crucial component of the broader CAREC transportation plan. This corridor is vital since it connects East Asia with the Mediterranean area while passing through several nations. Using Iran's Chabahar Port, Corridor 2 further facilitates connections between the BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal) sub-region, Central Asia, and Europe. Corridor 2 also handles substantial imports and exports from Central Asia, with tremendous potential for more trade.⁴⁰

The BBIN sub-region may be connected to Central Asia and Europe through multimodal ways through Corridors 5 and 6. Since Corridors 5 and 6 passes through Pakistan to reach India, considering the complicated and tumultuous ties between the two countries, Corridor 2 is more feasible for regional cooperation within and beyond.⁴¹

Corridor 2 is the longest and spans 9,900 km of roads, 9,700 km of railroads, and six logistics hubs. Regional and domestic cargo movements of manufactured products, industrial machinery,

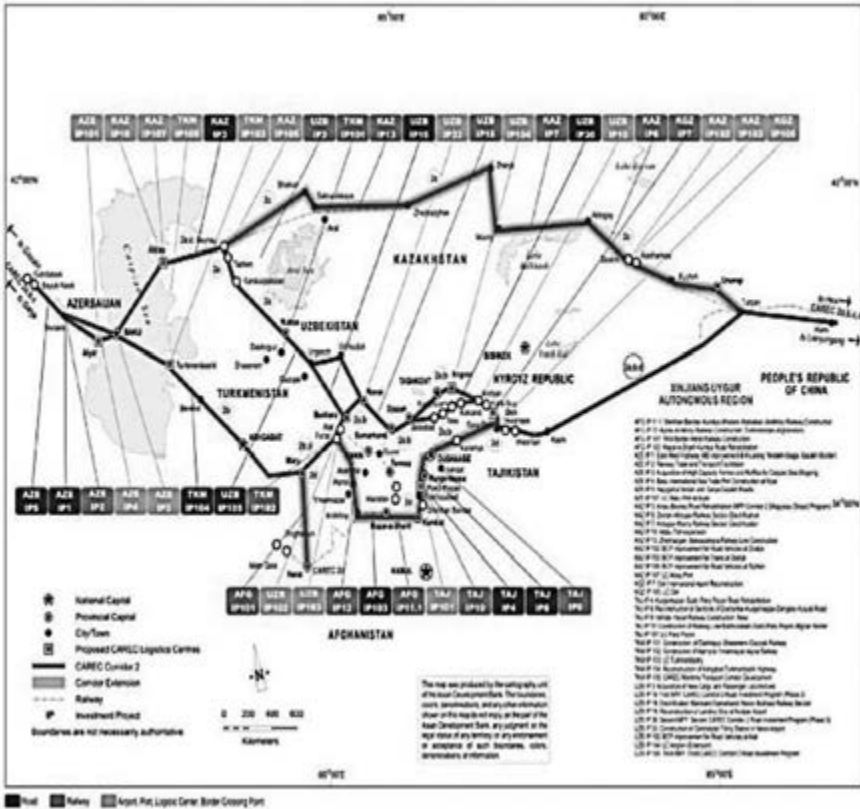
39 Asian Economic Integration Report 2023: Trade, Investment, and Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific, Asian Development Bank

40 Working Note, Learning from CAREC Corridors and Connectivity Prospects for BBIN Sub-region, CUTS International

41 *ibid*



Map 2: CAREC Corridor 2



Source: Source: CAREC Secretariat

and metals, as well as (for export) food, cotton, and yarn, are in great demand.⁴² Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are significant transit hubs for suppliers. A substantial amount of cargo passes through these two nations to reach southern Europe via Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey.⁴³

42 ibid

43 ibid

This corridor may link Central Asia to major population centres and economic hubs. Moreover, Corridor 2 offers excellent potential for multimodal transportation (linking the Black and Caspian Seas; road and rail infrastructure). Nevertheless, because this route crosses numerous nations, Corridor 2 has more border crossing points (BCPs) than other corridors, which might impede transit and transportation.⁴⁴

CAREC ECONOMIC CORRIDOR DEVELOPMENT



The multifaceted strategy used by the CAREC to improve connectivity, commerce, and economic activity in specific cross-border zones of member states includes economic corridor development (ECD). The sector is working towards two outcomes: the successful development of economic corridors and the creation and implementation of ECD-related projects.⁴⁵ The Almaty–Bishkek Economic Corridor (ABEC) is the pilot economic corridor under the CAREC program. The motivation for ABEC is that Almaty (the biggest city of Kazakhstan) and Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, can achieve far more together than either can accomplish alone. The two cities are only 240 kilometres apart, with relatively high economic density concentrated in services in the cities and agriculture in their hinterlands.⁴⁶

The Almaty–Bishkek Economic Corridor (ABEC) is the pilot economic corridor under the CAREC program.

44 Economic Corridor Development, CAREC Secretariat, available at https://www.carecprogram.org/?page_id=18146

45 *ibid*

46 *ibid*



The CAREC corridors and Belt and Road Initiative routes cross ABEC. The historic Silk Road, mountain ranges, and Lake Issyk-Kul underline the tourism potential. However, trade between the two countries is below potential, especially in agricultural goods and services, and the region still needs to benefit from being one economic space. The Shymkent-Tashkent-Khujand Economic Corridor (STKEC) is the second such project in the pipeline. It links Kazakhstan's city of Shymkent with the capital of Uzbekistan, Tashkent, and Khujand in Tajikistan. The three cities and adjacent areas are within easy access to each other, and they have a relatively large population – about 15% of the total population of Central Asia lives in the Turkestan (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and Sogd (Tajikistan) regions.⁴⁷

INTRA-REGIONAL RAIL CORRIDORS



The majority of the CAREC nations are landlocked. The CAREC program intends to assist member countries in transitioning from landlocked to land-linked status, fostering increased trade and enhancing economic growth by more closely integrating the CAREC region with its neighbours. Growing trans-Eurasian and trans-global transit traffic, as well as intraregional trade in the future decades, will be very beneficial for Central Asia. Improving the ability of railways to convey freight traffic, in an affordable and

The Shymkent-Tashkent-Khujand Economic Corridor (STKEC) is the second such project in the pipeline.

47 ibid

environmentally sustainable manner will help expand trade in these landlocked countries.

Within the CAREC region, around 25,000 kilometres of railway tracks connect the countries (MAP 3).⁴⁸ For the region to become more competitive, it needs a reliable and effective transportation system. Railway infrastructure upgrades will boost economic growth and global competitiveness. Moreover, increased rail infrastructure will promote regional integration and cooperation, improving connectivity for people, commodities, and services.

The revised CAREC Transport Strategy 2030 expands on the accomplishments and knowledge gained from TTFS 2020. It connects to the broader CAREC 2030 agenda in the areas of improved connectivity and sustainability. Each strategic program is now more closely tied to the CAREC 2030 objectives.⁴⁹ The Transport Strategy will cooperate with the CAREC Integrated Trade Agenda 2030. Along with developing and restoring new transportation links, Transport Strategy 2030 emphasises enhancing the CAREC transport network's sustainability and quality.⁵⁰

INTRA-REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES



The Central Asian states have developed their economies over time and have enormous potential for expansion. In 2022, the

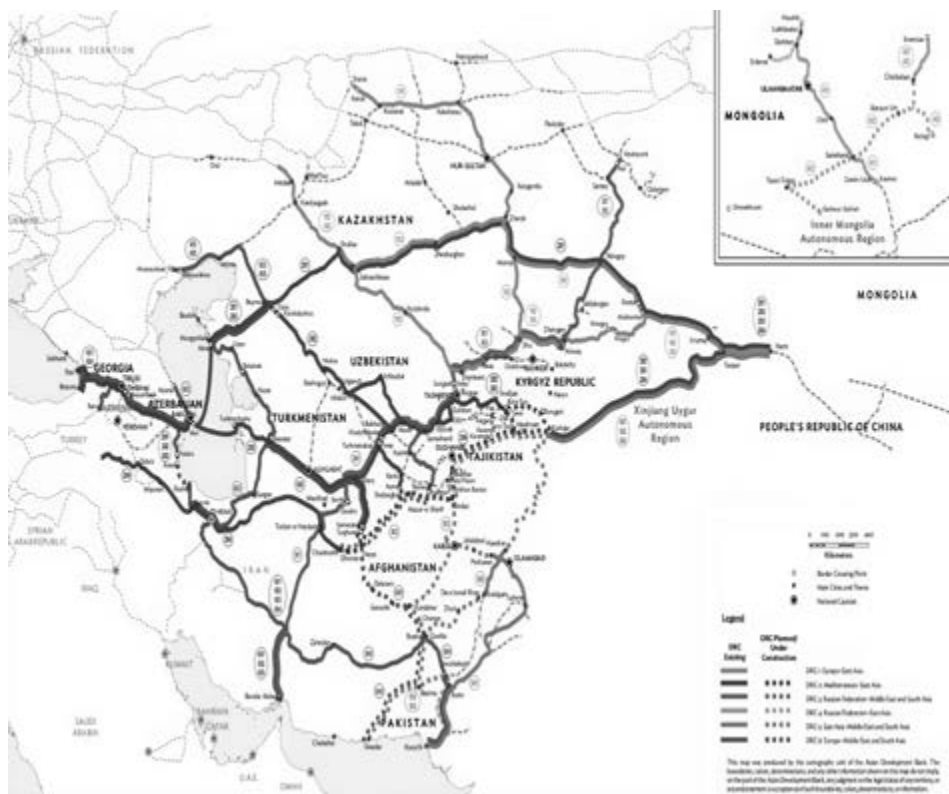
48 Unlocking the Potential of Railways: A Railway Strategy for CAREC, 2017–2030, Asian Development Bank

49 CAREC 2030 Connecting the Region for Shared and Sustainable Development, Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program

50 *ibid*



Map 3: CAREC Designated Rail Corridors



Source: CAREC Secretariat

combined GDP of Central Asia was US\$397 billion. It has grown by a factor of 8.6 since 2000. In purchasing power parity, the region's percentage of the world economy increased 1.8-fold. The GDP per capita, PPP, increased threefold in most of the region's states. According to demographic data, the workforce will likely expand in the coming years. Between 2000 and 2019, population mobility significantly increased, which is more than triple the

average figure.⁵¹ In Central Asia, rising revenues from exports, migrant workers' remittances, and foreign direct investment have supported income growth and decreased poverty. Central Asian nations have had an average of 6.2% yearly economic growth, which is twice as fast as the global average and quicker than many developing nations.

The region's foreign trade in goods reached US\$211.2 billion in 2022 and expanded by 8.4 times. Even more quickly than their overall international trade, bilateral commerce between Central Asian nations is increasing. From 6.4% in 2014 to 10.6% in 2022, mutual commodities trade accounted for a growing portion of Central Asia's overall foreign trade. Since 2017, Uzbekistan's trade activity has significantly increased regional trade numbers. The rate of regional trade development influences cooperation in investment. Through intra-regional cooperation, infrastructure development and industry cooperation are top priorities for regional economies.⁵²

However, the region's economies continue to be significantly influenced by commodity exports and remittances from migrant labourers. Other significant problems include the standard of the institutional setting, congestion in local transit systems, social problems, macroeconomic concerns, and a need for coordination in regional trade and economic linkages. These elements could

The Central Asian states have developed their economies over time and have enormous potential for expansion.

51 Evgeny Vinokurov and Anton Malakhov (2023), "Tackling Central Asia's Remaining Development Challenges," *The Diplomat*

52 *ibid*



threaten the economic development of the Central Asian countries. Lack of access to the sea, underdeveloped financial sector, lack of intra-regional cooperation, especially in the water and energy sector and climate change are some of the key challenges in front of the Central Asian countries.

By promoting economic growth, political stability, and regional integration, and reducing great power competition, intra-regional connectivity has the potential to play a critical role in shaping the future of Central Asia. It includes the development of transport infrastructure such as highways, railroads, and airports to enhance transportation links between cities and regions within each country. Additionally, efforts have been made to promote cross-border trade and investment and energy cooperation between countries in the region. It has been aimed at increasing economic integration and fostering sustainable regional growth and development. The Central Asian countries have also cooperated on issues such as water and energy resources, environmental protection, and border management to improve their economic and social welfare.⁵³ Improving intra-regional connectivity is crucial for the region's long-term stability and prosperity. While the region has specific intractable challenges to deeper economic integration, such as its

By promoting economic growth, political stability, and regional integration, and reducing great power competition, intra-regional connectivity has the potential to play a critical role in shaping the future of Central Asia.

53 The Central Asia Water and Energy Program (CAWEP), *The World Bank*, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/cawep>

landlocked location and distance from major manufacturing hubs, enhanced connectivity within and beyond is necessary to deal with these challenges. Therefore, it is also significant to understand changing dynamics of inter-regional connectivity in Central Asia.

CENTRAL ASIA'S INTER-REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY



Being at the heart of the Silk Road, which connected East Asia to the Middle East and Europe, the Central Asian region immensely benefited. However, in the 18th century, when trade between Asia and Europe shifted to sea routes, Central Asia was no longer situated along important trading routes. Even during the “Great Game”, the rivalry between the British and Russian Empires over Afghanistan extended to neighbouring Central Asia.⁵⁴

The artificial barrier separating Central Asia from the rest of the world was eliminated first with the end of the British Empire in India in 1947 and, more specifically, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁵⁵ Consequently, due to the economic progress of both India and China in the last two decades, the Central Asian region became the link between the Asian and European big markets, comprising 70% of the world’s population, 75% of energy resources, and 70% of GDP.⁵⁶

Land transportation across Central Asia to Europe has increased due to changing inter-regional connectivity dynamics.

54 F. Wolfgang and V. Paul (2019), *Connecting Central Asia to the World*, *Brookings*

55 *ibid*

56 *ibid*



Land transportation across Central Asia to Europe has increased due to changing inter-regional connectivity dynamics. The development of Central Asia's transportation systems is receiving significant funding. Central Asia benefits from existing and forthcoming projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Steady progress has been made to reestablish historic trade routes between Central and South Asia through North-South and East-West connectivity.⁵⁷

The efforts to connect with the Central Asian region are gaining renewed momentum lately. Major world powers have distinct projects of connectivity that progress at varying paces, operating parallel to each other if not precisely coinciding. Central Asia draws the attention of Turkey, Japan, and the European Union (EU). In the coming decades, the great power rivalry between USA-China-Russia would define the power balance in the Central Asian landscape. Inter-regional connectivity projects are practical tools to manifest this rivalry.⁵⁸ Robust inter-regional connectivity with the Central Asian region can facilitate more investment and trade.

The efforts to connect with the Central Asian region are gaining renewed momentum lately. Major world powers have distinct projects of connectivity that progress at varying paces, operating parallel to each other if not precisely coinciding.

57 Roza Nurgozhayeva (2020), How Is China's Belt and Road Changing Central Asia? *The Diplomat*, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/how-is-chinas-belt-and-road-changing-central-asia/>

58 P. Gaur (2019), New Silk Road Diplomacy: India's Challenges and Responses, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol 20, No. 1, pp. 56-61

Consequently, it is essential to analyse the various inter-regional connectivity initiatives.

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

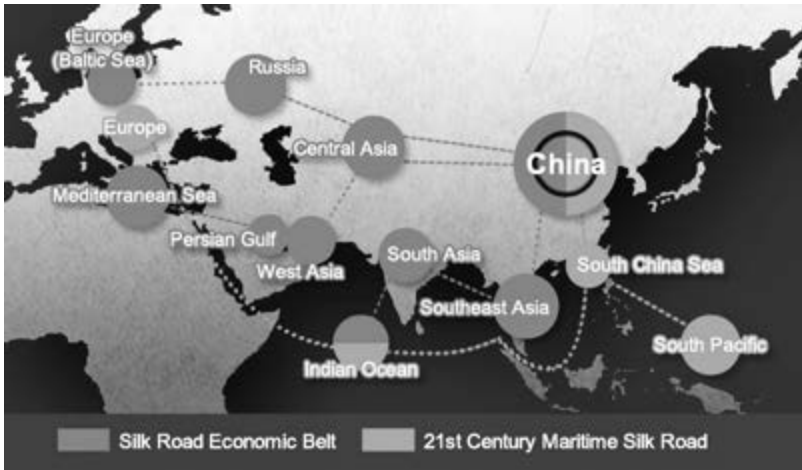


The BRI is an aggregation of land and maritime routes. First is the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which focuses on building infrastructure, such as railways, highways, and ports, connecting China with Europe via Central Asia and the Middle East. Second is the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which aims to connect China's coastal regions to Europe via the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. It has been almost a decade since Chinese President Xi Jinping presented the New Silk Road (Map 4) concept in Astana in 2013. Since then, it has been addressed for its potential to stimulate economic growth and increase trade; it has also faced criticism over concerns about debt sustainability, lack of transparency, investment uncertainty, social resistance, and geopolitical tensions.

Two of the six BRI corridors connecting China to Europe, Iran, and West Asia cross through Central Asia. One is the New Eurasian Land Bridge Economic Corridor, which links China and Europe through Central Asia and Russia. It also entails building new highways and railroads to improve trade and transportation. The second is the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor, which links China with Iran, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Central and West Asia. It focuses on building infrastructure to



Map 4: Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Source: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/special-coverage/Belt%20and%20Road%20Initiative%20News%20Desk.html>

improve communication and trade, including pipelines, highways, and railroads.⁵⁹

Over the period, China's trade with Central Asian countries is growing. For instance, China is Turkmenistan's most significant trading partner by exports and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's largest trading partner by imports in 2019, according to the official statistics of these states. China is a popular place for other Central Asian nations to import and export their goods (Table 2).

China's imports of commodities from Central Asian nations increased by 35% between 2015 and 2019, from US\$15,054 million

59 OECD Business and Finance Outlook 2018, China's Belt and Road Initiative in the global trade, investment and finance landscape, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), available at <https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>

Table 2: China–Central Asia Trade Partnership

China's Role as Central Asia's Most Important Trading Partner						
Central Asia countries		Importing from China			Exporting to China	
	China's ranking as a trading partner	Trade volume (US\$ million)	Share in the country's total imports	China's ranking as a trading partner	Trade volume (US\$ million)	Share in the country's total exports
 Kazakhstan	2	6,537	17.0%	2	7,823	13.6%
 Kyrgyzstan	1	1,733	35.4%	6	81	4.1%
 Tajikistan	3	605	18.2%	5	55.4	5.0%
 Turkmenistan	3	431	14.3%	1	8,686	80.2%
 Uzbekistan	1	5,052	23.1%	3	1,768	12.3%

Source: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-central-asia-bilateral-trade-relationships-and-future-outlook/>

to US\$20,276 million, with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan seeing the most significant growth rates of over 50% (Table 3).⁶⁰

During the same period, China's exports of goods to nations in Central Asia rose by 49%, from US\$17,563 million to US\$26,207 million. The country with the most significant increase in Chinese imports, Uzbekistan, recorded a 126% increase in its purchases from China between 2015 and 2019, while Tajikistan and Turkmenistan saw a decline in Chinese exports (Table 4).⁶¹

60 China Briefing (2021), "China and Central Asia: Bilateral Trade Relationships and Future Outlook", available at <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-central-asia-bilateral-trade-relationships-and-future-outlook/>

61 *ibid*

Table 3: Exports from Central Asian Countries to China (US\$ million) (2015–2019)

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Source: <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/china-and-central-asia-bilateral-trade-relationships-and-future-outlook/>

China is represented as a generous investor through the BRI initiatives, but its “debt trap policy” is no longer a hidden objective

China is also supporting several infrastructure initiatives in Central Asian countries. The Central Asian region is rich in hydrocarbons and is both a significant supply and a reasonably secure alternative. As a result, China has constructed pipelines to import oil from Kazakhstan and natural gas from Turkmenistan.

Moreover, China has built rail and road connections with the CAR and expanded them to include other CIS nations and Europe. Countries in Central Asia also require investment, mainly to capitalise on their vast natural riches. Since independence, none of the other Central Asian nations—aside Kazakhstan—have been able to generate sufficient domestic revenue for growth. For this landlocked area, strong relationships in international trade networks and market-oriented economies are a priority to draw more diverse projects worldwide.⁶²

China aims to extend its markets outside its boundaries due to the overcapacity of its labour-intensive, low-value-added, polluting industrial facilities and technology abroad.⁶³ China

China aims to extend its markets outside its boundaries due to the overcapacity of its labour-intensive, low-value-added, polluting industrial facilities and technology abroad

62 T. Harry (2021), Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia: Desk Study, ITUC

63 *ibid*



**Table 5: China's Loans as Reported by Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan
(in US\$ million)**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017 (Jan-Aug)
Kyrgyzstan total debt	758	1,116	1,296	1,483	1,639
Loans from China	3,159	3,437	3,601	3,743	3,985
Loans from China (in percent, total)	24	32	36	40	41
Kazakhstan total debt	148,753	157,062	153,456	163,758	167,890*
Loans from China	15,840	15,969	13,248	12,589	11,975*
Loans from China (in percent, total)	11	10	9	8	7
Tajikistan total debt	2,188.5	2,095.9	2,194	n/a	n/a
Loans from China	915	915	1,080	n/a	n/a
Loans from China (in percent, total)	42	44	49	n/a	n/a

*Data for the second quarter 2017.

Sources: Ministry of Finance of the Kyrgyz Republic; National Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan

also seeks unrestricted access to the region's resources, mainly since three Central Asian nations border China directly. Chinese businesses, especially those in conventional sectors, have developed inadequately, which prompts them to look for fresh prospects abroad.⁶⁴

China is represented as a generous investor through the BRI initiatives, but its "debt trap policy" is no longer a hidden objective (Table 5). It is also said that "the BRI is the first and foremost a response to China's domestic economic woes, serving to postpone the decisive moment when Chinese production will need to be transitioned from a low-cost model ('Made in China') to a value-added production model ('Created by China')".⁶⁵

64 ibid

65 M. Laruelle (2018), China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia, Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program

China extensively impacts Central Asia's renewable energy industries through various BRI projects. However, there are not any widely accepted categories or critical criteria for what constitutes a BRI project. Because so many bilateral agreements are now being grouped under the Silk Road and BRI umbrella, it is difficult to analytically distinguish the BRI from other active bilateral initiatives between China and the Central Asian nations.⁶⁶

Comprehending many aspects of China's BRI-related strategy for Central Asia is crucial. The principle of China's stated foreign policy is around non-interference in the internal affairs of allies. However, through its debt trap policy, China has been able to make countries economically dependent and intervene in their domestic and political affairs.⁶⁷

Moreover, China is trying to construct an inclusive narrative to convince the sceptics of its new Silk Road program. China's attempts to choose the proper wording for the project have shown a shift from "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) to "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). The Chinese government reasons BRI would more accurately reflect the project's various network clusters, whereas OBOR indicated a single network. The Chinese government also changed the initiative's emphasis to soft power politics, at least in its narrative.⁶⁸

66 B. Dave (2018), China's Silk Road Economic Belt Initiative in Central Asia: Economic and Security Implications, in L. Marlene (ed.), *China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Impact in Central Asia*, pp. 97-108. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, Central Asia Program

67 Deborah Brautigam (2020), A critical look at Chinese 'debt-trap diplomacy': the rise of a meme, *Area Development and Policy*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 1-14, DOI: 10.1080/23792949.2019.1689828

68 Angela Stanzel (2017), China's Belt and Road – new name, same doubts? European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)



CASA-1000



CASA-1000 (Central Asia–South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project) (Map 5) is an intergovernmental project to increase energy cooperation and security between Central and South Asia by connecting their electricity grids. The project seeks to increase energy cooperation and security in the region by allowing the 1,300 megawatts of surplus electricity generated in Central Asia to be exported to energy-deficient countries in South Asia.⁶⁹

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are two countries in Central Asia that experience an excess of electricity. Water cascades from mountain ranges and fills rivers in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, which have some of the earth’s most abundant and clean hydropower resources. At the same time, Afghanistan and Pakistan are two South Asian countries with inadequate electricity and a rapidly expanding demand. Millions of people live without electricity

Map 5: CASA-1000



Source: <https://www.casa-1000.org/>

69 Swati Sinha (2018), *CASA-1000 Construction: A Step towards Afghanistan’s Development*, Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

because both the countries cannot meet their citizens' electricity requirements, especially during the summer.

The project's primary objective is to alleviate the electricity shortages in Afghanistan and Pakistan by importing surplus electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In this context, the US\$1.2 billion CASA-1000 electrical transmission and trade project aims to establish a 1,300-kilometer-long transmission line to transport electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The transmission line will have a capacity of 1,300 megawatts and is expected to export up to 5,000 gigawatt-hours of electricity annually. The project is expected to bring significant economic and social benefits to the participating countries, including creating jobs, increasing access to electricity, and promoting regional trade and cooperation. CASA-1000 is being implemented with the support of various international organisations, including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank. The project is expected to be completed by 2025.⁷⁰

Although the CASA-1000 project has been temporarily put on hold due to the coronavirus outbreak, the future economic prospects of the CASA-1000 project also depend on the political situation in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover in August 2021.⁷¹

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70 Waris Ahmad Faizi (2022), *The Future of the CASA-1000 Electric Megaproject in the Context of the New Afghanistan*, The Central Asia Program (CAP), George Washington University, Washington, DC

71 *The Future of the CASA-1000 Electric Megaproject in the Context of the ...* <https://centralasiaprogram.org/future-casa-1000-electric-megaproject-context-afghanistan>



This project is a significant step in promoting regional economic integration and fostering sustainable development. CASA-1000 is expected to increase energy trade and enhance regional cooperation, contributing to the participating countries' sustainable economic growth and development. The project is also seen as a way to address the energy deficit in South Asia and provide a cleaner and more sustainable energy source compared to traditional sources such as coal and oil.

TRANSIT AND TRANSPORT CORRIDOR



The Transit and Transport Corridor (TRACECA) (Map 6) is an international transport program aimed at improving transportation links between Europe and Asia through the countries of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea region. TRACECA's mission is to promote regional cooperation in the field of transportation and to improve the regional transport infrastructure. The pro-

Map 6: TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia)



Source: <https://report.ge/en/economics/traceca-unified-transit-deal-approved/>

gram focuses on developing the existing transportation corridors, improving customs procedures and border crossings, and promoting regional trade and investment. TRACECA also provides a platform for the participating countries to share knowledge and best practices and coordinate their development strategies. The European Union started the TRACECA initiative, and in 1993, the EU signed multilateral agreements with the three South Caucasus Republics, the five Central Asian Republics, Iran, and Ukraine.

The TRACECA program has received significant support from the EU, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), and the World Bank. Since 1995, the EU has provided funding for 14 transportation initiatives in the area, although these initiatives have not significantly impacted the creation of regional corridors. On 10 October 2022, the third meeting of the working group on testing the global transit document (GTrD) project, which consists of representatives of state bodies and customs departments of TRACECA nations, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, took place. The first pilot project for the movement of products via the GTrD was initiated by member nations of TRACECA (the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor) at this meeting.⁷²

However, TRACECA's development and utilisation of transport routes through Central Asia and the Caucasus have proved inadequate. It is extravagant for commercial use because of its high cost and lengthy transit times. The program also faces

72 *Eurasia Business Today* (2022), GTrD Supported Cargo Transportation Launched by TRACECA countries, available at <https://eurasiabusinesstoday.com/by-industry/automotive-transport/gtrd-supported-cargo-transportation-launched-by-traceca-countries/>



several challenges, including insufficient funding and investment, inadequate infrastructure in some regions, and political instability and conflicts in certain countries.⁷³

THE CENTRAL ASIA–PERSIAN GULF TRANSPORT CORRIDOR



The Central Asia–Persian Gulf Transport Corridor (Map 7) is a proposed transportation route that aims to connect the countries of Central Asia with the Persian Gulf region. The corridor would run through Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkmenistan, providing a direct link between Central Asia’s energy-rich countries and the Persian Gulf ports. The proposed transport corridor is a way to increase trade and investment between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf and provide a shorter and more cost-effective transportation route for goods and commodities. The project is expected to promote regional cooperation and integration and contribute to the economic growth and development of the participating countries.⁷⁴

The Central Asia–Persian Gulf Transport Corridor is part of a larger initiative to improve regional connectivity and cooperation in Central Asia. It is being considered in the context of other regional transportation projects, such as TRACECA and the Lapis Lazuli

73 Tristan Kenderdine and Péter Bucsky (2021), *Middle Corridor—Policy Development and Trade Potential of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route*, ADBI Working Paper Series, Asian Development Bank Institute

74 Paul Goble (2021), *Competition among Transportation Corridors in South Caucasus Heating Up*, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Washington, DC, available at <https://jamestown.org/about-us/contact-us/>

Map 7: The Central Asia–Persian Gulf Transport Corridor



Source: <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/02/09/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-why-does-iran-need-a-new-gateway/>

Corridor.⁷⁵ The transport corridor includes a network of highways, railroads, ports, and customs and border crossing facilities. By providing a more direct route for the transportation of goods, the Central Asia–Persian Gulf Transport Corridor is expected to increase trade and investment between the participating countries, improve access to international markets, and create new opportunities for economic cooperation. The implementation of the project would require significant investment and collaboration among the

75 ibid



participating countries and the international community, as well as the resolution of political, security, and technical challenges.

LAPIS LAZULI CORRIDOR



The Lapis Lazuli Corridor (Map 8) is a transportation route that connects Afghanistan to the ports of the Black Sea and Europe through the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2017, an agreement was made between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey on constructing the Lapis Lazuli transit corridor, which will link the five nations, at the 7th Afghanistan Regional Economic Cooperation Conference (RECCA) held in Ashgabat.⁷⁶ The term “Lapis Lazuli” comes from the ancient trade routes transporting semi-precious stones from

Map 8: Lapis Lazuli Corridor



Source: http://recca.af/?page_id=2080

76 Shoab Ahmad Rahim (2019), Lapis Lazuli Corridor: Meeting the Economic Aspirations of Afghanistan and Member Countries, Kardan Journal of Economics and Management Sciences, Kardan Publications Kabul, Afghanistan

The Central Asia–Persian Gulf Transport Corridor is part of a larger initiative to improve regional connectivity and cooperation in Central Asia. It is being considered in the context of other regional transportation projects, such as TRACECA and the Lapis Lazuli Corridor.

Afghanistan to the Caucasus, Russia, the Balkans, Europe, and North Africa about 2,000 years ago.⁷⁷ The corridor aims to provide a more direct and efficient route for transporting goods between Afghanistan and the markets of Europe and beyond and enhance regional connectivity in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Aqina City in northern Faryab province and Torghundi City in western Herat, located near Afghanistan’s border with Turkmenistan, are the starting points for the corridor. Moreover, there are rail connections from Torghundi and Aqina to Turkmenistan. The roads continue west to Turkmenbashi, a port on the Caspian Sea in Turkmenistan. Following the crossing of the Caspian, the corridor continues to Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Then it links to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, and the Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi. Finally, the corridor will connect to the Turkish cities of Kars and Istanbul at the European gateway.⁷⁸

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor includes a network of highways, railroads, ports, and customs and border crossing facilities. The project is part of a broader effort to improve economic growth and development in Afghanistan and to integrate the country into the

77 ibid

78 Neelapu Shanti (2018), Lapis Lazuli Project to create vibrant transit route for Afghanistan, *The Economic Times*, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/lapis-lazuli-project-to-create-vibrant-transit-route-for-afghanistan/>



regional and global economy. By providing a more direct route for transporting goods, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is expected to increase trade and investment between Afghanistan and the participating countries, improve access to international markets, and create new opportunities for economic cooperation.

The initiative has received support from the international community, including the United Nations, the World Bank, and the European Union. The Lapis Lazuli Corridor is vital to the more significant effort to improve connectivity between Europe and Asia and enhance regional economic cooperation.

THE CENTRAL ASIA–CHINA GAS PIPELINE

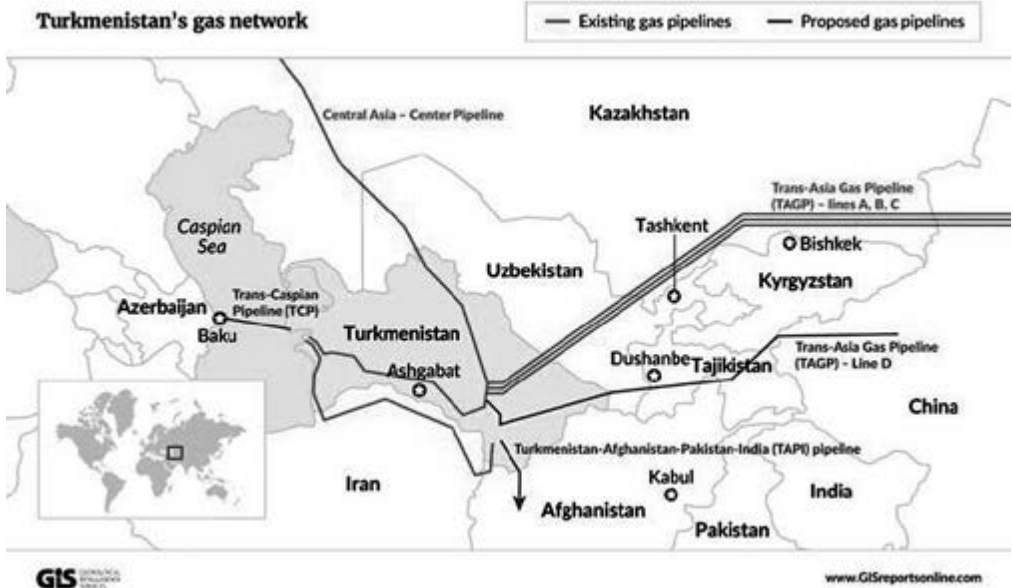


The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline (MAP 9) is a natural gas pipeline system from Central Asia to China, built to meet China’s growing energy demand and diversify its imports. The pipeline starts from Turkmenistan and passes through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan before reaching China. It has several branches and runs over a distance of over 8,000 km.⁷⁹ The idea of sending Turkmen gas to China via a new pipeline has been the subject of discussions between Chinese and Turkmen leaders since 2006. The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline’s first line (Line A) went into service in 2009, the second line (Line B) in 2010, and the third line (Line C) in 2014. The pipeline’s three parallel sections, which connect Turkmenistan with China via Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, have a combined annual capacity of 55 billion cubic metres of gas

79 Mamuka Tsereteli (2020), *The Evolution of Central Asian Energy*, American Foreign Policy Council, Washington, DC

as of 2014. This is the most extended pipeline network in Central Asia and the most expensive Chinese project ever carried out in the region, with a total length of 5,511 kilometres for the three main lines.⁸⁰ The network has transported 390 billion cubic metres (bcm) of gas to China overall since it began operating in 2009 till March 2022.⁸¹ The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline has been seen as an effective regional integration and cooperation project promoting the region’s economic development and energy security.

Map 9: The Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline



Source: Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline (Line A, Line B, and Line C) - The People’s Map of Global China (thepeoplesmap.net)

80 Farkhod Aminjonov and Olesya Doygalyuk (2023), “Central Asia–China Gas Pipeline (Line A, Line B, and Line C),” The People’s Map of Global China

81 *ibid*



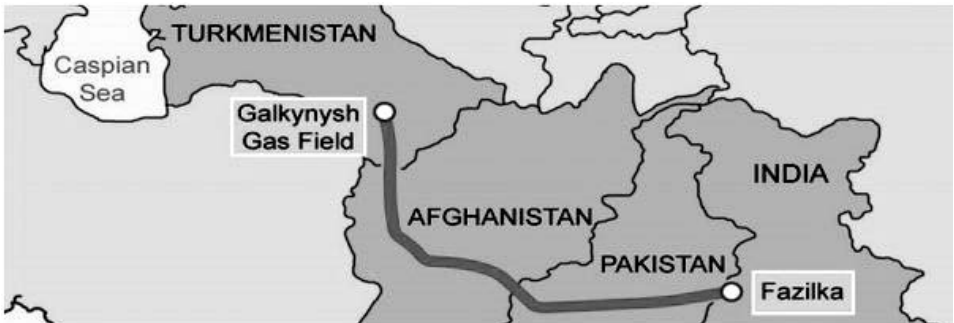
THE TRANS-AFGHANISTAN PIPELINE (TAPI)



The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline (Map 10) is a natural gas pipeline project first proposed in the 1990s to transport natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and into Pakistan and India. The project aims to transport 33 billion cubic metres of gas from Turkmenistan’s Galkynysh gas field to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India through the proposed 1814-km-long pipeline called the “Peace Pipeline”. It is expected to pass through the Kandahar and Herat provinces of Afghanistan, from where it will pass through Quetta and Multan of Pakistan and then terminate in Fazilka, a district in Punjab near the India-Pakistan border. The US\$10 billion project failed to progress since it was conceived about three decades back.⁸²

India continues participating in the mega gas pipeline project conceived in the 1990s. A special-purpose international consortium

Map 10: The Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI)



Source: <https://www.khabarindia.in/afghanistan-start-part-tapi-gas-pipeline-project-soon/>

82 Madhura Joshi (2011), Turkmenistan-Afghanistan Pakistan-India Pipeline Possibility or Pipe Dream?, Gateway House: Indian Council on Global Relations

— TAPI Pipeline Co. Ltd (TPCL) — was incorporated in November 2014. It was decided that from India, state-owned GAIL will pick up a 5% stake in TPCL, along with Pakistan’s Interstate Gas Systems (ISGS) and Afghanistan’s Afghan Gas Enterprise (AGE), both of which will have a 5% stake each in the project. At the same time, Turkmenistan’s Turkmengaz will hold a majority stake of 85%. In April 2016, India, along with other project shareholders, signed an investment agreement with the Asian Development Bank, under which an initial budget of US\$200 million was earmarked to fund one of the phases of the project.⁸³

With the Taliban’s return to Afghanistan in 2021, worries about the project’s safety and security have increased. In October 2021, a high-level delegation from Turkmenistan met the senior Taliban leaders in Kabul to discuss the project’s future roadmap, in which it was decided that the TAPI project would be given “special attention”.⁸⁴ In January 2022, a Taliban delegation led by their acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi also visited Turkmenistan’s capital Ashgabat to hold talks on TAPI, where the Taliban has claimed that the TAPI project remains a priority and will provide security. During the first India–Central Asia Summit in

During the first India–Central Asia Summit in January 2022, the President of Turkmenistan also “emphasised the importance” of the TAPI project.

83 Nayanima Basu (2022), Turkmenistan, Afghanistan push TAPI gas pipeline again but this is why India is being cautious, *The Print*, available at <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/turkmenistan-afghanistan-push-tapi-gas-pipeline-again-but-this-is-why-india-is-being-cautious/823185/>

84 *ibid*



January 2022, the President of Turkmenistan also “emphasised the importance” of the TAPI project.⁸⁵

Once completed, the TAPI project would promote regional cooperation and enhance the energy security of the participating countries by providing access to a new source of natural gas. The pipeline is also expected to create new economic opportunities in the region, such as job creation and revenue generation.

THE TRANS-CASPIAN INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT ROUTE / MIDDLE CORRIDOR



The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as Middle Corridor (Map 11), starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and further to European countries. It combines rail, sea, and road transportation modes and provides an alternative to traditional transportation routes through Russia. The middle corridor promotes economic growth and regional integration in the Caspian region. Establishing the TITR has been seen as a significant step towards increasing regional trade and investment opportunities, promoting economic development and regional integration.⁸⁶

The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), known as Middle Corridor, starts from Southeast Asia and China, runs through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and further to European countries.

85 *ibid*

86 James Jay Carafano (2022), *Central Asia's Middle Corridor gains traction at Russia's expense*, Geopolitical Intelligence Services AG (GIS), Liechtenstein

Map 11: The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) / Middle Corridor



Source: <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/04/07/middle-corridor-utlc-to-be-established-in-2023/?gdpr=deny>

Four nations—Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Kazakhstan—signed a quadrilateral declaration on developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor on 31 March 2022, intending to foster greater cooperation and enhance the transit potential of the nations bordering the corridor.⁸⁷ This joint venture aims to fully automate freight transport services from China to Turkey and the Black Sea ports by offering high-quality intermodal transport and logistics services, harmonising cross-border prices, and establishing a unified IT platform.

87 Nikos Papatolios (2022), Middle Corridor joint venture to be established in 2023, RailFreight.com, available at <https://www.newsilkroaddiscovery.com/kazakhstan-azerbaijan-georgia-and-turkey-signed-a-roadmap-for-the-development-of-the-middle-corridor-for-2022-2027/>



The Russia-Ukraine crisis is having a significant impact on world geopolitics. Countries are now seeking alternatives for commodities to reach the European market.

The Russia-Ukraine crisis is having a significant impact on world geopolitics. Russian neighbours are also impacted by international sanctions imposed on the Russian government. Countries are now seeking alternatives for commodities to reach the European market. In addition to fostering relationships and collaborations, the Central Asian countries are now looking to the Caucasus to strengthen the Trans-Caspian corridor. Through “Trans-Caucasus Transit Corridor (CTC)”, with an emphasis on the role to be played by Georgia and Azerbaijan in developing the CTC into a competitive alternative to other regional routes for the transport of goods, particularly for containerised goods between China and Europe, and to promote a strong and professional transport system in the two countries, in association with neighbouring economies (Kazakhstan, Turkey, and others).⁸⁸

INTER-REGIONAL RAIL CONNECTIVITY IN CENTRAL ASIA



Several rail connectivity projects in Central Asia aim to improve transportation infrastructure and promote economic growth in the region. These projects are part of a more considerable effort to enhance connectivity between the countries of Central Asia

88 Nikos Papatolios (2022), World Bank: “Azerbaijan and Georgia can transform the Middle Corridor, here’s what they should do,” RailFreight.com, available at <https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2022/04/18/world-bank-azerbaijan-and-georgia-can-transform-the-middle-corridor-heres-what-they-should-do/>

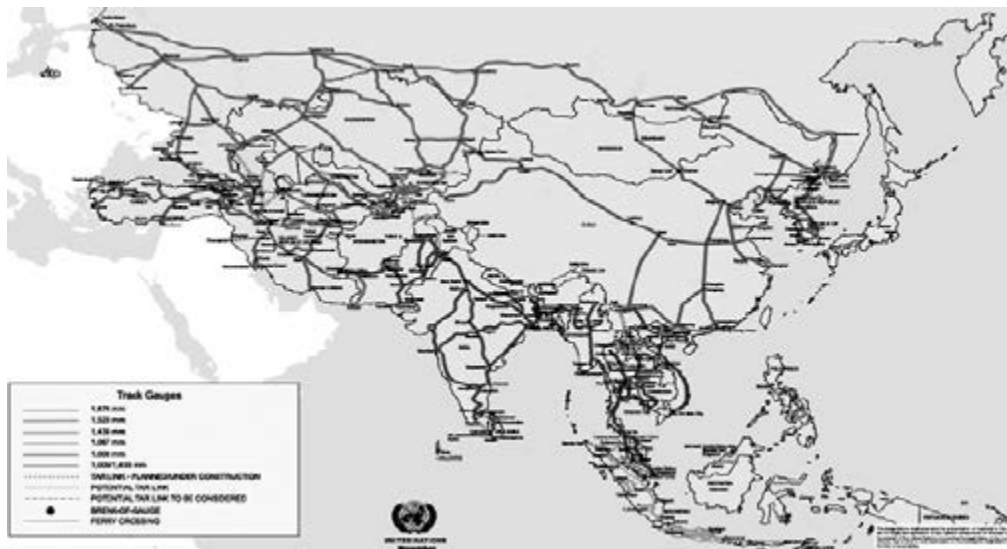
The Trans-Asian Railway Network is a project that aims to connect the railway networks of various countries in Asia and Europe, intending to promote trade, tourism, and cultural exchange among the participating nations.

and to integrate them into the more comprehensive Eurasian transportation network.

THE TRANS-ASIAN RAILWAY NETWORK

The Trans-Asian Railway Network (Map 12) is a project that aims to connect the railway networks of various countries in Asia and Europe, intending to promote trade, tourism, and cultural exchange among the participating nations. The project was

Map 12: The Trans-Asian Railway Network



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Trans-Asian-Railway-Network_fig2_228285292



initiated by the United Nations’ Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in the 1960s and has since been endorsed by many countries.⁸⁹

Table 2: Trans-Asian Railway Routes

Southeast Asia	Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam	12,600 km
Northeast Asia	China, Mongolia, South Korea, North Korea, Russian Federation	32,500 km
Central Asia and the Caucasus	Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	13,200 km
South Asia, plus Iran and Turkey	Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Turkey	22,600 km
Total		80,900 km

Source: www.unescap.org

The Trans-Asian Railway Network has several corridors across Asia, connecting various countries and regions. The corridors include the North-South Corridor, the East-West Corridor, the Southeast Asia Corridor, the South Asia Corridor, and the Central Asia Corridor. It consists of both existing railway infrastructure as well as new railway lines that are being constructed.⁹⁰

89 Pierre Chartie (2007), The Trans-Asian Railway, Transport and Communications Bulletin for Asia and the Pacific, No. 77, pp. 1-24

90 Mohammed S. Karim et al. (2020), Trans-Asian Railway Network: A Getway to the East and West to Attain Sustainable Development Goals, *International Journal of Arts and Social Science*, Vol. 3 No. 3, pp. 130-141

The project has faced various challenges, including funding, technical and logistical issues, and political obstacles. However, many countries continue to invest in the project, recognising the potential benefits of the Trans-Asian Railway Network in promoting regional cooperation and development.

Once completed, the Trans-Asian Railway Network is expected to facilitate the movement of people and goods across the regions and continents, improving trade and economic growth and promoting cultural exchange among the participating countries.

THE KAZAKHSTAN-TURKMENISTAN-IRAN RAIL LINK

The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) rail link (Map 13) is a railway project that connects the three countries, providing a direct route for goods and passengers to travel between them. The project began in 2007 and was completed in 2014. The 908-km-long

Map 13: Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Rail Link



Source: <https://railturkey.org/2014/12/03/kazakhstan-turkmenistan-iran-railway/>



The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (KTI) rail link is a railway project that connects the three countries, providing a direct route for goods and passengers to travel between them.

segment begins in Kazakhstan at Uzen (120 km), travels through Turkmenistan at Gyzylgaya-Bereket-Etrek (700 km), and concludes in Iran at Gorgan (88 km). The route will focus more on trains by linking all crucial ports and terminals in the region. The railway line is a part of the more significant North-South Transport Corridor, which connects India and the Middle East to Russia and Europe via Iran and the Caspian Sea.⁹¹

The Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran rail link significantly impacts the regional transportation network and the economies of the countries involved. It provides a more efficient and cost-effective route for the transportation of goods between the three countries and connects them to the broader Eurasian transportation network.

The project has also strengthened the political and economic ties between the three countries, promoting regional cooperation and integration. It has also provided new opportunities for tourism and cultural exchange, as travellers can now easily explore the diverse landscapes and cultures of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Iran.

THE CHINA-KYRGYZSTAN-UZBEKISTAN RAILWAY



The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway (Map 14) is a major transportation project that connects China's Xinjiang province to Uzbekistan via Kyrgyzstan. The railway has a total

91 Slavomír Horák (2022), Turkmenistan in Eurasian railway geopolitics, Central Asian Survey, DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2022.2085663

Map 14: China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway



Source: <https://www.railfreight.com/beltandroad/2022/06/06/is-the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-route-finally-happening/>

length of approximately 1,000 kilometres. It is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to promote trade and economic development in the region.⁹²

The project includes the construction of new railway lines as well as the renovation of existing railway infrastructure. The railway line starts from China's Kashgar city and passes through Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek before heading to Uzbekistan's cities of Andijan and Kokand.⁹³

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is expected to significantly improve transportation infrastructure and promote

92 Omirbek Hanay (2017), The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway Project: Problems and Prospects, weekly e-bulletin no. 131, Eurasian Research Institute

93 Jalil Saparov and Bakyt Ibraimov (2021), China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway remains uncertain, *The Third Pole*, available at <https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/regional-cooperation/china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway-remains-uncertain/>



economic development in the region. It will provide a more efficient and cost-effective transportation route between China and Central Asia for goods and passengers, reducing transportation costs and improving trade links between the countries.

The CKU railway project has faced various challenges, including funding, technical issues, and security concerns due to the region's proximity to Afghanistan. However, the project has the potential to significantly improve transportation infrastructure and promote economic development in the region, making it an essential part of China's BRI strategy.⁹⁴

THE TRANS-AFGHAN RAILWAY LINE

The Trans-Afghan Railway Line is a proposed railway project connecting Afghanistan to neighbouring countries, including Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and potentially further to China and Pakistan. The project aims to promote regional connectivity and economic development.⁹⁵

The railway project has been under discussion for several years and has faced various challenges, including security concerns and financing issues. The security situation in Afghanistan, which has been plagued by conflict and instability for decades, poses a significant challenge to the project's implementation. In addition, the financing for the project is still being determined, as Afghanistan is a low-income country with limited financial

94 ibid

95 Sophia Nina Burna-Asefi (2022), *The Trans-Afghan Railway Line: Back on Track? The Diplomat*, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/the-trans-afghan-railway-line-back-on-track/>

resources, and the international community has been hesitant to invest in infrastructure projects in the country.

However, the project has recently gained renewed attention, particularly following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. Uzbekistan also emphasises access to Pakistan's seaports of Karachi, Gwadar, and Qasim as part of Tashkent's effort to diversify its supply channels and boost quantities of Euro-Asian trade.⁹⁶ China has also expressed interest in the project, and discussions took place about potential Chinese investment in the railway line.⁹⁷

The Trans-Afghan Railway Line has the potential to promote regional connectivity and economic development, as well as to facilitate the movement of goods and people across borders. However, its implementation will depend on various factors, including security, financing, and regional political stability.

CHANGING CONNECTIVITY DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan and the Russia-Ukraine crisis severely impacted connectivity prospects in Central Asia concerning transport and energy. In this context, the Central

The Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan and the Russia-Ukraine crisis severely impacted connectivity prospects in Central Asia concerning transport and energy.

96 Umida Hahimova (2021), Uzbekistan Prioritizes Pakistani Over Iranian Ports, *The Diplomat*, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/uzbekistan-prioritizes-pakistani-over-iranian-ports/>

97 Chris D. Ellis (2022), China Ready to Assist in Afghanistan Belt and Road Railway Infrastructure, *Silk Road Briefing*, available at <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/07/28/china-ready-to-assist-in-afghanistan-belt-and-road-railway-infrastructure/>



The dynamics of energy connectivity are also changing significantly in the Caspian region.

Asian countries are also searching for alternative routes, which are essential for the countries of the landlocked region. The onset of the Ukraine conflict revealed a clear desire to circumvent Russia, on which the West has imposed extensive sanctions.⁹⁸

As a result, Central Asian transport networks are growing in two directions: to the West, where Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea serve as essential links in Sino-European trade routes, and to the south, which can be reached either by land or by sea (the development of port links from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and Iran).⁹⁹

The dynamics of energy connectivity are also changing significantly in the Caspian region. Kazakhstan is using the Caspian Sea to continue shipping oil to European markets despite Russian blockades of its main oil pipeline. Turkmenistan's gas shipments to China and South Asia were also impeded by Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan. Due to the conflict between Iran and Azerbaijan, Middle Corridor connecting Turkey with China has significance in the Caspian region. With this background, it is essential to analyse India's connectivity strengths and prospects with the Central Asian region, especially amid current geopolitical events.

98 Michaël Levystone (2022), "Connectivity in Central Asia at the Crossroads of International Crises: Transport, Energy and Water from Interdependence to New Cooperation Ways," *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 41, Ifri, November 2022

99 *ibid*

Connectivity and regional security are India's utmost reasons to connect the Central Asian region.

INDIA'S GROWING ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

India's readiness to advance diplomatic ties with the Central Asian region is essential, especially amid a rapidly shifting global, economic, and political situation. Connectivity and regional security are India's utmost reasons to connect the Central Asian region. The current situation in Afghanistan and the region's overall geopolitical and geo-strategic situation stimulate India to focus more on connectivity, especially to overcome the challenges of direct land access.

Since the early 1990s, Central Asian countries have been looking towards India for a fruitful partnership for economic diversification and social development. The 30th anniversary of the diplomatic relations between India and the region's five republics provides further impetus to strengthen cooperation based on mutual interest, understanding, and friendship. India is making constructive and earnest efforts for multifarious engagement with Central Asian countries. The recent meetings indicate the practical steps envisaged by the two sides to have tangible outcomes.

Over the last decades, there have been continuous high-level exchanges, especially at the ministerial levels, including India-

Since the early 1990s, Central Asian countries have been looking towards India for a fruitful partnership for economic diversification and social development.



India hosted the first-ever India–Central Asia
Summit virtually on 27 January 2022.

Central Asia Dialogue and Regional Security Dialogue on Afghanistan, to strengthen the engagement, especially in swiftly altering regional geopolitical conditions. The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 to all five Central Asian countries was a milestone in amplifying the engagement between India and the Central Asian countries.¹⁰⁰

India hosted the first-ever India–Central Asia Summit virtually on 27 January 2022.¹⁰¹ The Summit reinforced political understanding between the leaders of the Central Asian countries and India. At the first Summit, India and the Central Asian countries proposed a roadmap to strengthen the cooperation for the next thirty years. PM Modi highlighted “Central Asia is Central” to India’s vision of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood. PM Modi also urged the creation of an “ambitious vision” for future collaboration between India and Central Asia, stating that it will enable a complete strategy for connectivity and cooperation between both sides.¹⁰² A comprehensive “Delhi Declaration” was adopted by both sides to reckon mutual interest. It has been decided to hold

PM Modi highlighted “Central Asia is Central” to India’s vision
of an integrated and stable extended neighbourhood.

100 *ibid*

101 Athar Zafar (2022), India-Central Asia Summit: A Milestone in Engagement with the Region, Issue Brief, Indian Council of World Affairs, available at https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=7074&lid=4798

102 *ibid*

External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar, stated that the “relations between India and Central Asia must focus on 4Cs—commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity, and contacts”.

the Summit level meeting every two years and set up the “India–Central Asia Centre” as the Secretariat in New Delhi for continuing inclusive partnership through India–Central Asia Summit.¹⁰³

There has been a growing focus on connectivity from both sides in recent years. External Affairs Minister (EAM) Dr. S. Jaishankar, at the third meeting of the India–Central Asia Dialogue on 18 December 2022, stated that the “relations between India and Central Asia must focus on 4Cs—commerce, capacity enhancement, connectivity, and contacts”.¹⁰⁴ Several significant initiatives have been undertaken to promote greater connectivity between India and Central Asia, such as the Chabahar Port, International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Ashgabat Agreement. For infrastructure projects in Central Asia, India recently announced a US\$ 1 billion Line of Credit and is currently putting multiple High Impact Community Development Projects (HICDPs) in place across the region. These initiatives aim to enhance economic and commercial linkages and support the flow of goods, services, and energy between the countries.

103 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit”, 27 January 2022, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/34773/Delhi+Declaration+of+the+1st+IndiaCentral+Asia+Summit>, accessed on 28 January 2022

104 *The Times of India* (2021), India will take ties to next level, with focus on commerce, connectivity: Jaishankar at Central Asia Dialogue, available at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/88368574.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

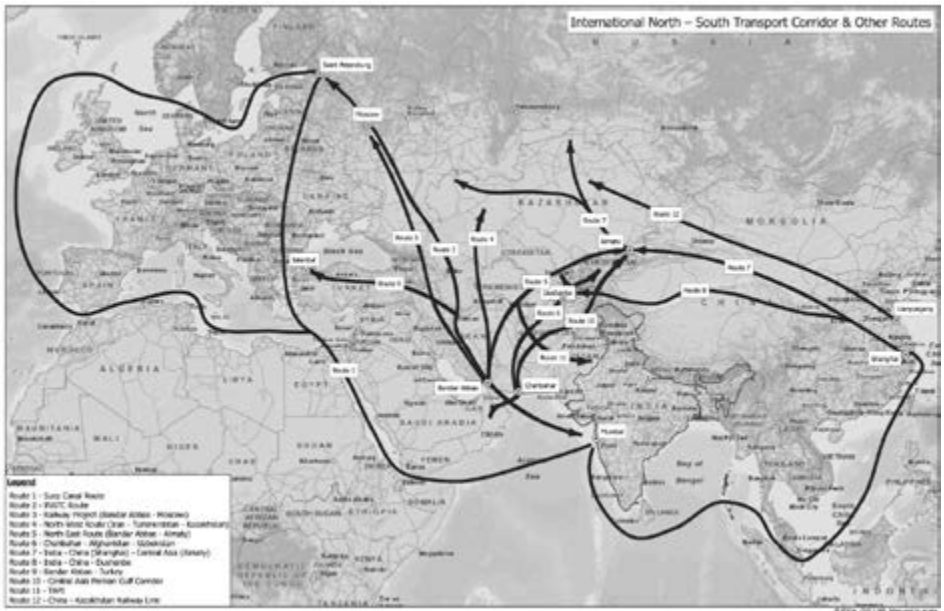


INTERNATIONAL NORTH-SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDORS



An interconnected system of roads, rails, and sea lanes is known as the International North-South Transport Corridor (Map 15). It links the countries of Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean to the northwestern region of Europe and the Nordic countries. This corridor could make it easier for freight flows to transition from maritime routes that pass-through Gibraltar and the Suez Canal to multimodal routes in Eurasia. The Intergovernmental Agreement on the International North-South Transport Corridor (“the Agreement”), signed by the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and India, provided the

Map 15: International North-South Transport Corridors (INSTC)



Source: https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/InternationalNorthSouthTransportCorridor_msroy_180815

framework for the corridor's creation in the second International Eurasian Conference on Transport, held in September 2000. After being ratified by all three parties, the agreement came into effect on 16 May 2002.¹⁰⁵ Since then, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Oman, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Ukraine, Turkey, Belarus, and Syria have joined, while Bulgaria has served as an observer.

The activation of this multimodal route was long delayed. With the sanctions placed on Iran and the transportation infrastructure's limitations, the INSTC has not been able to take off as much as the other Eurasian corridors. The project moved along at a modest pace. The Federation of Freight Forwarders Association in India (FFFAI) did a dry run in 2014 to understand the issue areas and realise the full potential of the corridor, which gave it a slight boost after that. Additionally, representatives from Russia, Iran, India, and eleven additional nations gathered in New Delhi in 2015 to approve draught transit and customs agreements for the INSTC. The agreement of a ship-rail-road network connecting India, Iran, Russia, the CARs, and Europe offered the legal foundation for addressing logistical problems and transferring goods.¹⁰⁶

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2020 by the Russian Railways Logistics Joint Stock Company (RZD) and the state-owned Container Corporation of India (Concor) to use the INSTC to transport cargo between the two nations. The

105 Evgeny Y. Vinokurov et al. (2022), International North-South Transport Corridor: Boosting Russia's "Pivot to the South" and Tran-Eurasian Connectivity, *Russian Journal of Economics*, Vol. 8, pp. 159-173

106 "India and Iran to Connect Supply Chains Via Iran's INSTC," *Silk Road Briefing*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/03/24/india-russia-connect-supply-chains-via-irans-instc/>, accessed on 15 June 2022



INSTC's western route, which connects India and Europe, became operational in June 2021; using this corridor, a Finnish logistics business delivered 30 containers to Mumbai. A test cargo left Solyanka in Astrakhan, Russia's Caspian Sea port zone, on 11 June 2022. From there, it was transported to Anzali in Iran, then by road to Bandar Abbas Port, and then to Nhava Sheva in Navi Mumbai, India's largest container port known as Jawaharlal Nehru Port. The shipment reportedly contained two 40-foot containers of wood laminates that together weighed about 41 tonnes. It reached India in 24 days, representing a significant reduction from the usual route via the Suez Canal.¹⁰⁷

In comparison to the conventional route, the corridor will allow India to reach the Russian, Central Asian, and European markets directly. On the other hand, the corridor will assist Russia and Iran in overcoming the difficulties posed by the sanctions in conducting business with their long-standing trading partners. In this context, completing the pilot test is a noteworthy milestone, particularly given the current US sanctions imposed on Russia and Iran. After Western countries imposed strict sanctions, Russia became more focused on the INSTC, which provides Moscow with a crucial economic transit route. It is expected that by 2030, the INSTC

After Western countries imposed strict sanctions, Russia became more focused on the INSTC, which provides Moscow with a crucial economic transit route.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid*

There is a need to reconfigure freight transport supply chains in Eurasia affected by the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

corridor may move up to 25 million tonnes of freight yearly, or 75% of all container traffic between Eurasia, South Asia, and the Gulf.¹⁰⁸

In 2022, before the EU intervened to open the way for the shipment to travel, Lithuania imposed a transit ban on goods sanctioned by the EU bound for Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave in the Baltic. Kazakhstan was also considering a law prohibiting such goods' transit into Russia.¹⁰⁹ However, the rapid operationalization of the INSTC is of particular relevance given the recent significant changes in the region's geopolitical landscape. There is a need to reconfigure freight transport supply chains in Eurasia affected by the pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine crisis. The entire region of Eurasia is faced with a formidable issue of reorganising logistics and supply chains in the context of severe Western sanctions and the EU countries' blockade of road transit along their land border with two EAEU members—Russia and Belarus. The INSTC becomes more critical for Russia in this context and would become a crucial step towards trade expansion with India, Iran, Turkey, and other South Asian and Persian Gulf nations, especially for the EAEU and Central Asian countries.¹¹⁰

108 Charu Sudan Kasturi (2022), "Is the INSTC Russia's new economic escape route?" Aljazeera

109 *ibid*

110 Muhammad Athar Javed (2023), Logistics of the 21st Century & New Economic Order: Prospects for a New North-South Transport Corridor, Expert Opinion, Valdai Discussion Club, available at <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/logistics-of-the-21st-century-new-economic-order/>

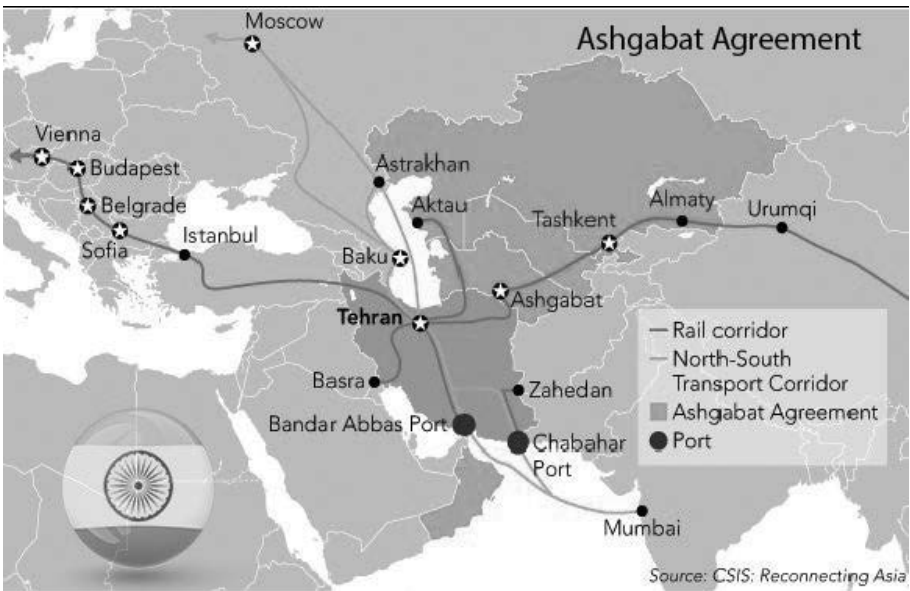


ASHGABAT AGREEMENT



The Ashgabat Agreement was established in April 2011 to create a multimodal transit corridor between Central Asia and the Persian Gulf (Map 16). On 25 April 2011, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, and Qatar were the first countries to sign the agreement.¹¹¹ The Ashgabat Agreement established the foundation for the shortest commercial route linking the Central Asian Republics (CARs) with Persian and Omani ports.

Map 16: Ashgabat Agreement



Source: CSIS: Reconnecting Asia

111 P. Stobdan (2018), Significance of India joining the Ashgabat Agreement, IDSA-Comment, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), available at https://idsa.in/idsacomments/significance-of-india-joining-the-ashgabat-agreement_p-stobdan-120218

Ashgabat Agreement enables India to use the current transit and transportation route to promote trade with the Eurasian region.

On 6 August 2014, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), including the legal, procedural, and infrastructure, was signed in Muscat. However, Qatar later withdrew from the pact in 2013. In April 2016, the Ashgabat Agreement went into effect. Kazakhstan and Pakistan joined the alliance in 2016.¹¹²

India formally expressed interest in joining the Ashgabat Agreement on 23 March 2016. Subsequently, India joined the Ashgabat Agreement. The Ashgabat Agreement's depository state, Turkmenistan, informed India in 2018 that "all four founding members have accepted India's membership to the agreement".¹¹³ Ashgabat Agreement enables India to use the current transit and transportation route to promote trade with the Eurasian region. India's attempts to implement the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) for better connectivity would also be coordinated. Ashgabat Agreement might help India to switch its freight business from traditional sea channels to transcontinental land routes.

CHABAHAR AGREEMENT



The idea of Iran as a transit country first gained traction in the 1990s due to its proximity to Central Asia. Since 2003,

112 *ibid*

113 *ibid*



prolonged discussions have happened over using the Chabahar Port to access Afghanistan and beyond. However, little progress has been made due to sanctions against Iran.¹¹⁴ The 2016 trilateral agreement between India, Iran, and Afghanistan on using the Chabahar Port and India's willingness to contribute US\$500 million for its development and related infrastructure was concluded following the Iran nuclear agreement formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in July 2015. The trilateral agreement aims to establish a strategic transit and transport route between these countries through the Chabahar Port in south-eastern Iran.¹¹⁵

A trilateral working committee was created in 2020 to seek convergence on Chabahar Port and other connectivity projects between Iran, India, and Uzbekistan. The committee stressed the significance of the Shahid Beheshti Terminal in Chabahar in its second meeting in December 2021. It discussed further creating a transportation corridor between South Asia and Central Asia.¹¹⁶ Steps were also taken at the India–Central Asia Summit in January 2022 to synergise various connectivity initiatives. For example,

Steps were also taken at the India–Central Asia Summit in January 2022 to synergise various connectivity initiatives.

114 Vinay Kaura (2017), India's Aims in Central Asia and India-Afghanistan-Iran Triangular Relationship, *The Journal of Central Asian Studies*, Vol. XXIV, pp. 23–41

115 Subhomoy Bhattacharjee (2018), Chabahar Port and India, Policy Brief 80, Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), New Delhi

116 Ministry of External Affairs, India, Iran, Uzbekistan hold trilateral meeting on Chabahar Port, 14 December 2021, available at <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/india-iran-uzbekistan-hold-trilateral-meeting-on-chabahar-port20211214225509/>

Map 17: Chabahar Port



Source: <https://www.newsbharati.com/Encyc/2021/3/4/Chabahar-Day-India-Iran-.html>

India proposed establishing a Joint Working Group at Chabahar Port to discuss the free movement of goods and services and achieve its potential. All five Central Asian countries agreed on India's proposal to include Chabahar Port in the INSTC.¹¹⁷

Chabahar is a seaport in south-eastern Iran, located on the Gulf of Oman (Map 17). It is in the Sistan-Baluchestan province, one of Iran's least developed provinces. Contrary to Bandar Abbas, the busiest port in Iran, Chabahar is a deep-water port with direct

117 Ministry of External Affairs, Delhi Declaration of the 1st India-Central Asia Summit, 27 January 2022, available at <https://eoi.gov.in/tashkent/?pdf13991?000>



access to the Indian Ocean outside the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's only open seaport consists of two ports: Shahid Beheshti and Shahid Kalantari.¹¹⁸

The Chabahar Agreement is a significant development for regional trade and economic integration, particularly for landlocked Afghanistan, which relies heavily on Pakistan's ports for international trade. China is also shown interest in Chabahar by developing bilateral ties with Iran. The lately signed China-Iran 25-year cooperation program, in which China agreed to invest US\$400 billion into the Iranian economy in exchange for discounted and guaranteed energy prices and cooperation on BRI projects, is seen by many analysts as a way for China to gradually assert its presence in the port even though it has not yet directly entered the Chabahar Port project. The scale of Sino-Iranian contact in Chabahar Port is still relatively small. However, signs of increased Chinese activity with Iran suggest China vies with India for more significant regional sway.¹¹⁹

The Taliban dispensation in Afghanistan has supported the Chabahar Port and stated that it is prepared to give the required "facilities". The Taliban's foreign ministry "welcomed" the idea of including Chabahar Port in the North-South International Transport Corridor, which runs via Iran and Azerbaijan and connects Mumbai to Moscow. The statement emphasised that the

118 What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal? Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>

119 Soroush Aliasgari and Marin Ekstrom (2021), "Chabahar Port and Iran's Strategic Balancing with China and India," *The Diplomat*

India is participating in the development of the first stage of the Shahid Behesti Port at Chabahar in collaboration with Iran.

regime is “ready to provide all necessary protection and facilities in this regard”.¹²⁰

India is participating in the development of the first stage of the Shahid Behesti Port at Chabahar in collaboration with Iran. As the project will increase connectivity throughout the region, particularly to landlocked Central Asia, India has spent US\$85 million. Additionally, India has provided additional equipment worth US\$25 million, including six mobile harbour cranes with 140 tonnes and four with 100 tonnes of capacity.

Humanitarian aid has been delivered to Afghanistan via this port. India used Chabahar Port in 2020 to send 75,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian food aid. The port has handled 215 boats and 4 million tonnes of bulk and general cargo since December 2018, when the operations were taken over by the Indian company India Ports Global Limited (IPGL).¹²¹

THE CHABAHAR-ZAHEDAN RAILWAY



The Chabahar-Zahedan Railway (Map 18) is a railway line project that connects the south-eastern port city of Chabahar

India used Chabahar Port in 2020 to send 75,000 MT of wheat to Afghanistan as humanitarian food aid.

120 Sidhant Sibal (2022), “Taliban back usage of India-built Chabahar Port, say ‘ready to provide facilities.’”

121 ibid



with the town of Zahedan in Iran's southeast. The railway project is a part of the INSTC, which links India and the Middle East to Russia and Europe via Iran.¹²²

The Chabahar-Zahedan Railway has a total length of approximately 628 kilometres and is being constructed in several phases. India built this 200-kilometre highway from Zaranj to Delram (Map) and transferred it to Afghanistan in 2009.¹²³

Map 18: The Chabahar-Zahedan Railway



Source: <https://www.drishtias.com/daily-news-analysis/india-dropped-from-chabahar-rail-project>

During the Prime Minister's visit to Iran in 2016, an MoU was signed between the Building and Development of Transportation Infrastructures Company (CDTIC) of Iranian Railways and IRCON of Indian Railways regarding the building of the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway project. The railway initiative aligns with India's objective

122 Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury (2021), INSTC focus on inclusion of Chabahar Port in mega-regional connectivity initiative, *The Economic Times*, available at https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/instc-focus-on-inclusion-of-chabahar-port-in-mega-regional-connectivity-initiative/articleshow/86749583.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

123 V. K. Shashikumar (2011), Indian built Zaranj-Delaram Highway under Taliban Control, *Indian Defence Review*, available at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/indian-built-zaranj-delaram-highway-under-taliban-control/>

to establish an alternate trade path aside from a hostile Pakistan to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Under the terms of the MoU, IRCON, a division of Indian Railways, agreed to supply all services, perform superstructure work, and finance the railway project. The total assistance was estimated to be worth \$1.6 billion.¹²⁴

Once completed, the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway is expected to facilitate the transportation of goods and passengers between the two cities and the more comprehensive Iranian railway network. It will also provide a more efficient and cost-effective route for transporting goods between India and Afghanistan and connect the region to the broader Eurasian transportation network. It also strengthens Iran's position as a transit hub and promotes regional cooperation and integration.

CONCLUSION



The Central and South Asian regions are the least economically integrated worldwide regarding trade, investment, banking, infrastructure, regional value chains, and connectivity. Realising the potential of such regional connectivity among and across these regions would significantly boost economic development, productivity, and prosperity. Encouraging cross-border cooperation between the countries of Central Asia is crucial in promoting regional stability and economic growth. By supporting initiatives that encourage cross-border collaboration and facilitate

¹²⁴ Devanjana Nag (2021), "India engaged with Iran on Chabahar-Zahedan railway project", Financial Express available at <https://www.financialexpress.com/business/railways-india-engaged-with-iran-on-chabahar-zahedan-railway-project-says-modi-government-details-here-2187687/>



Due to recent geopolitical events in the region and beyond, connectivity dynamics in Central Asia are changing rapidly, providing an opportunity for the region to increase the diversity and competitiveness of the Central Asian economies.

the flow of goods, people, and information, it is possible to foster closer ties among the countries of Central Asia.

Improved Eurasian connectivity allows Central Asian countries to diversify their economy. Due to recent geopolitical events in the region and beyond, connectivity dynamics in Central Asia are changing rapidly, providing an opportunity for the region to increase the diversity and competitiveness of the Central Asian economies. Politically and economically, the Caspian region is at a crossroads and has multiple options to connect routes. The trans-Caspian corridor and other new transportation possibilities also require Central Asian nations to execute domestic policy reforms that simplify businesses and cross-border trade. Contemporary Central Asia is in the process of transformation and facing common geopolitical, security, and economic challenges. These challenges are interconnected in Central Asia and need a collective approach from the region to mitigate them. Prospects of multilateral and

Contemporary Central Asia is in the process of transformation and facing common geopolitical, security, and economic challenges. These challenges are interconnected in Central Asia and need a collective approach from the region to mitigate them.

Growing engagements between India and Central Asian countries are critical for both sides amid changing geopolitical landscape in the region.

international cooperation in Central Asia will also depend on regional cooperation among all five countries.

Synergising local, regional, and international connectivity initiatives in Central Asia is essential for promoting regional stability and economic growth. Synergising different initiatives will facilitate a more integrated and efficient network to support regional trade and investment. It will also provide cost-effective implementation. By bringing together various initiatives from other actors, it is possible to maximise the benefits of each initiative and create a more comprehensive and interconnected regional infrastructure network. Integrated transport, energy, and communication networks would promote regional stability and economic growth. Coordination between local, regional, and international actors and sharing information and resources make it possible to ensure that initiatives are complementary and consistent with efforts.

In this context, over the past few years, numerous regional and international connectivity initiatives have become crucial to fostering cooperation between India and the Central Asian countries. Growing engagements between India and Central Asian countries are critical for both sides amid changing geopolitical landscape in the region.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR





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