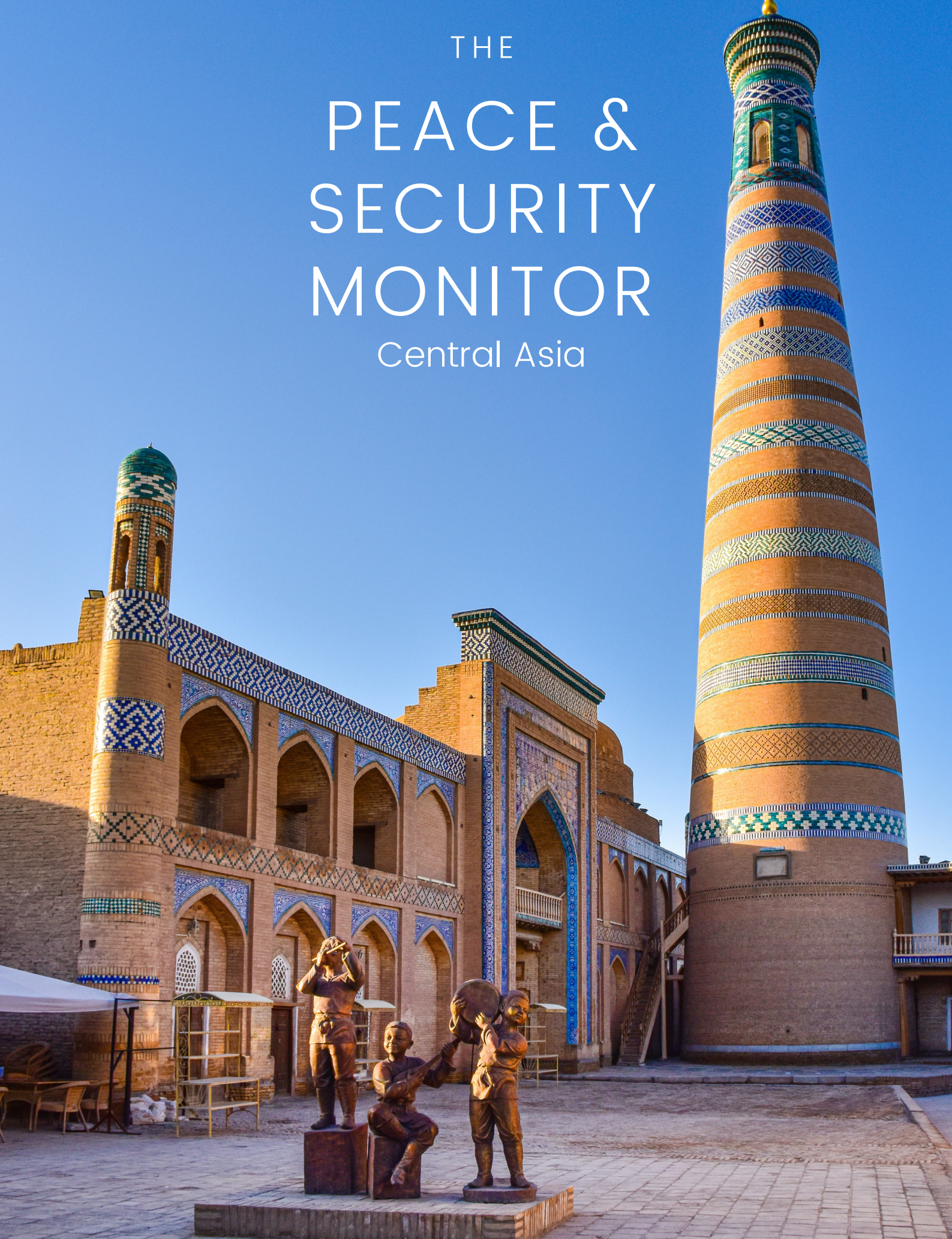


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Project Coordinator

Chris Fitzgerald

Editor

Chris Fitzgerald

Copy Editors

Luke James

Authors

Chris Fitzgerald

Sabrina Lavrut

Maria Sole Brigati

Samantha Drozdowski

Marta Verano

Naomi Napuri



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Central Asia

Issue 3

March 2023

Foreword

Recent events in Central Asia revolve around the regions neighbours to the north and south. To the north, Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the country's economic and political isolation has given Central Asian countries an opportunity to challenge Russia's historical dominance in the region. To the south, Afghanistan continues to cause headaches for the region. The Taliban have overseen the proliferation of terror groups, an ongoing humanitarian crisis and the repression of women and minority groups. Central Asian governments have struggled to develop a consistent approach to the Taliban, with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan flirting with recognition for potential economic gain, while Kyrgyzstan remains vehemently opposed to any diplomatic ties.

The region also continues to grapple with four long-term issues, the impacts of climate change, energy security, disability rights and domestic violence. All four are examples of how the region needs to focus on development and to push for legislative reform consistent with international law to improve quality of life for all Central Asian peoples.



Balancing act: Central Asia's difficult choice between economic opportunity and human rights

Chris Fitzgerald

Key Takeaways

- Signalling a shift in policy, Central Asian governments, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have taken an increasingly pragmatic approach to the Taliban. The lure of economic benefits from lucrative energy and infrastructure projects and a desire for regional stability has driven this approach.
- However, the Taliban continues to oversee the proliferation of terrorist groups in Afghanistan, severely represses women and minority groups and steadfastly refuses to form an inclusive government. These issues threaten these projects and puts official recognition of the regime at risk.
- Despite the approach of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Central Asian governments have used regional forums and public statements to demand the Taliban combat terrorism, respect the human rights of Afghans and form an inclusive government.
- Central Asian governments are likely to take a hybrid approach to this dilemma, informally dealing with the Taliban in an attempt to stabilise the country while officially refusing to recognise the regime. The Taliban will only achieve the latter when they successfully combat terrorism, respect human rights and form an inclusive government.

Introduction

Central Asia continues to debate how best to deal with the Taliban. 18 months after the fall of Kabul, as the movement solidifies its power, the

same barriers to diplomatic recognition remain.

With Central Asian governments clearly communicating the problems the Taliban needs to solve, the ball is in their court if they want international recognition and the economic opportunities that come with it.

Afghanistan continues to be the problem state of the region, and this has gotten worse under the Taliban. In 2021, the movements return caused the economy to collapse, leading to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.[1] The Taliban also continue to use their strict interpretation of Islam to severely repress the human rights of women and girls, the LGBTI community, ethnic minority groups.[2]

But, just like centuries past, Afghanistan is a vital crossroads for intraregional trade and connects important trade routes. This includes China's Belt and Road initiative, linking Central Asia with the Middle East and South and East Asia, as well as several lucrative infrastructure projects between Central Asia and beyond.[3] However, these opportunities are prevented by instability and violence in Afghanistan, such as an increase in terror attacks by extremist groups and concerns over the Taliban's poor governance.

This presents two possible scenarios. Will Central Asian governments, led by Uzbekistan, put profits over demands for an inclusive government in Kabul, or will the Taliban reassess its radical interpretation of Islam and instead respect the human rights of all Afghans? What happens will determine the status of diplomatic relations and whether economic opportunities can bring progress to the region.



Afghanistan-Tajikistan border (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2023)

Economic opportunities

Central Asia has long sought to increase economic connectivity with South Asia and the Middle East by pursuing large-scale transport and energy opportunities. With Afghanistan the buffer between the two regions, its involvement has always been crucial to the success of these projects. However, decades of instability and violence within Afghanistan has hindered any infrastructure project, making finance expensive and difficult to obtain and any progress slow or non-existent.

Projects include the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI), a 1,840 kilometre long pipeline to supply natural gas from Turkmenistan, and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan power transmission line (TAP), a 500 kilometre transmission line that intends to support Afghanistan and Pakistan with 4,000 megawatts of Turkmenistan produced electricity. Another project is the \$1.2 billion Central Asia-South Asia power project (CASA-100), aiming to provide Afghanistan and Pakistan with an estimated 1,300 megawatts of hydroelectric power.[4]

Uzbekistan has been the most active in working with the Taliban, stemming from a desire for increased economic opportunities and because of ongoing gas shortages, culminating in an energy crisis earlier this year.[5] This includes a recently signed deal to provide 450 megawatts of power to Afghanistan and two major infrastructure projects, the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) transmission line and the \$5.96 billion, 573 kilometre Termez-Mazar-I-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar railway construction project.[6] The latter is intended to increase connectivity for landlocked Uzbekistan and Afghanistan and was labelled the “project of the century” by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in November 2022. [7]



(Agreement signed to extend import of power from Uzbekistan, Tolo News, 2 January 2023)

However, the cost of completing these projects is prohibitively expensive. International finance has been sought by all states involved, but Taliban rule in Afghanistan has created barriers to obtaining finance because the Taliban is not internationally recognised as the government of Afghanistan. The increased prevalence of terrorist organisations in Afghanistan and the economic and humanitarian crisis has meant that undertaking any large scale infrastructure projects is difficult at best and unfeasible at worst.

Diplomacy

Infrastructure projects aside, most engagement with Afghanistan by Central Asian governments has focused on security and stability, particularly addressing problems that originate within Afghanistan, like terrorism, human rights abuses and the ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis. For example, in January, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation Secretariat's 36th meeting of the Working Group of Afghanistan, which Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are members, outlined the need to continue to provide economic and humanitarian support to the people of Afghanistan and to assist in its reconstruction. This includes a statement from CSTO Deputy Secretary General S.I. Ordabayev from Kazakhstan, who stressed the importance of coordinating the positions of CSTO member states on all key aspects of the Afghan problem. [8] However, energy and transport projects are seen as a mutually beneficial way of helping to rebuild Afghanistan while providing its Central Asian neighbours with energy security and economic benefits.

Uzbekistan has attempted what it calls "positive neutrality" with the Taliban. The Uzbek government argues dialogue is necessary, particularly with moderate members of the organisation, to help address the issues Afghanistan faces.

Uzbekistan's special representative for Afghanistan, Ismatulla Irgashev, stated in November last year that "There are several movements and sensibilities within the Taliban, and the Uzbek government managed to gather several moderates that are willing to cooperate with the international community" and that dialogue with the Taliban is "critical and pragmatic." [9]

Uzbekistan's approach is primarily for economic reasons. A stable and economically viable Afghanistan will enable infrastructure projects and trade to move through the country to Iran, Pakistan and India and leave ports as exports in these countries. Rahmatullah Hassan, an Afghan political commentator supports this, telling Ariana News TV that "Uzbekistan was more concerned about its own interests than those of Afghanistan as it wanted to use Afghanistan as an access route to the sea." [6] In a meeting between Iranian and Uzbek foreign ministers on 12 March, both sides called for "cooperation for peace and security in Afghanistan". Bilal Karimi, the Deputy Spokesman for Iran stated that "we hope the strengthening of official relations and the increase of legitimate economic engagement happens." In response to the meeting, Hassan Haqqar, a political analyst based in Afghanistan stated that "the countries should solve their problems with the Afghans through understanding and cooperation with the Afghans in economic and political areas." [10]



The 5th Multilateral Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Moscow, (Voice of America, 9 February 2023)

Diplomacy

However, significant barriers remain between Central Asia and any improvement in diplomatic relations with the Taliban.

Terrorism

Terrorism remains a security problem in Afghanistan. The Taliban claims it has made attempts to combat terrorism. On 28 February, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed Qari Fateh, an ISK intelligence chief, was killed by Taliban forces.[11] On 3 March, the Taliban claimed to have killed six ISK members in an anti-terror operation in Herat.[12] But the Taliban's approach has been inconsistent at best, allowing al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to live in central Kabul before he was killed by a US drone strike in July 2022.[13]

It is estimated that there are now over twelve transnational militant and terrorist groups operating in the country, with several connected to the Taliban.[14] In January, Islamic State Khorasan (ISK) claimed responsibility for a suicide bomb attack outside of a military base in Kabul, killing twenty people.[15] This reflects the Taliban's inability to secure its border regions, which has caused tension with Central Asia. The threat of ISK in particular is seen as acute, as the group broadcasts threats in regional languages and seeks recruits from Afghanistan's neighbours.[16]

Last September, the Foreign Minister of Tajikistan, Sirajuddin Mehruddin, said that "Afghanistan is rapidly becoming a safe haven for terrorist groups." [17] At the 5th Multilateral Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in February, Central Asian governments joined Russia, Iran, India and China in calling for the Taliban to counter terrorism and extremism.[18] As part of this meeting, India highlighted the need to "evolve a mechanism of intelligence and security cooperation" to deal with regional terror groups, such as ISK and Al-Qaeda.[19]

The Taliban's struggle to contain terror groups also threatens to affect its relationship with Russia and China, both of whom are major players in Central Asia. In December, ISK claimed responsibility for the shooting of five Chinese businesspeople at the Longman Hotel in Kabul. [20] This came after two Russian embassy staff were killed in a suicide bombing by ISK at the Russian Embassy.[21] China and Russia are part of only a small group of states willing to deal with the Taliban and attacks like this make doing business and improving relations even more difficult.

Human Rights

The Taliban continues to disrespect international human rights law by severely repressing women, ethnic minority groups and targeting former government officials. The movement also remains firmly opposed to forming an inclusive government comprising on these groups as well as former political leaders, such as Mohammad Noor, Dostum and Mohammad Mohaqiq.[22] This has been publicly criticised by Central Asian governments. For example, on 6 January the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan released a statement outlining its "deep concern" over the Taliban's ban on female education and expressed its "hope that this decision shall be reconsidered." [23] In September 2022, The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, signed the Samarkand Declaration, calling for an inclusive government in Afghanistan.[24]



Islamic State Khorasan (Combating Terrorism Center, West Point 2023)

Later, in November, the Tajik government stressed the need for the Taliban to focus on how to establish an inclusive political system and offered support from the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[25] More recently, at the 5th Multilateral Security Dialogue on Afghanistan in Moscow, Central Asian governments called for the Taliban to form an “form an ethno-politically balanced government”.[26]

On Ariana News in March, Sama Karmand, a Germany-based Afghan political commentator, stated that the political and human rights issues in Afghanistan remain an impediment to official recognition. Karmand said that: “The crisis in Afghanistan is first and foremost a political one” and that “The Taliban know that if the international community does not recognise [the government of] Afghanistan, the country will go even deeper into a political and economic crisis.”[27]

Economic and Humanitarian Crises

The ongoing economic and humanitarian crises continue and have already plunged millions into poverty and starvation. In March, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that, with 28.3 million people in need of humanitarian assistance this year, Afghanistan started the year as the “world’s largest and most severe” humanitarian crisis.[28] The governance of the Taliban has only made matters worse.

In December, the Taliban banned women from working for local and international aid agencies, leading to a number of organisations, such as CARE and Save the Children, suspending operations.[29] With a large number of women working for aid agencies, and with men not allowed to deliver assistance to women, this has made the humanitarian crisis worse.[26] According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 28.3 million people are estimated to require urgent humanitarian assistance this year, most of whom are women and children.[30]



Taliban fighters pictured in Laghman Province (BBC News, 12 August 2022)

Conclusion

Central Asian governments have had 18 months to determine what diplomatic approach to take in relation to the Taliban. Some, like Uzbekistan, have taken a pragmatic approach and have used economic opportunities to tentatively improve relations, while, alternatively, Tajikistan has steadfastly refused to recognise the Taliban. Where Central Asian governments have been consistent is their demands for the Taliban to respect human rights, form an inclusive government and combat terrorism. It remains to be seen whether these governments will stand by these values or give in to the lure of economic benefits and engage further with the Taliban.

But if Central Asian governments hold firm, the Taliban will not achieve international recognition and forge closer relationships with the region unless they address these problems. If the Taliban can govern for all Afghans, they will find a receptive region and the economic opportunities this brings. If it continues to rule through ignorance and brutality while courting extremists, it will continue to be isolated and will struggle to solve the country’s economic and humanitarian crises.



CSTO says fighting the Taliban is a top priority (The Diplomat, 2023)

Recommendations

- Central Asian governments should continue to utilise regional dialogue forums, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the OSCE, to continue to relay a consistent response to the problems Afghanistan faces. This includes tackling extremism, respecting human rights and solving the humanitarian crisis.
- The Taliban should govern responsibly and address the concerns of the region. This includes meeting their international legal obligations and respecting the human rights of Afghans and working to form an inclusive government that includes women and ethnic minority groups.
- Lucrative energy and transport infrastructure projects will not be successful unless the Taliban tackles terrorism in Afghanistan. The movement needs to cut ties with extremist groups, conduct counterterrorism operations and secure its border regions with Central Asia.
- Central Asian governments need to work with the region and the United Nations to call for humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and to find ways to tackle terrorism.

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Tracking Russian–Central Asian diplomacy Q1 2023

Marta Verano

Key takeaways

- A year after the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has had its regional influence threatened, with no Central Asian country having publicly backed its position on the conflict.
- Kazakhstan, previously one of Russia's closest allies, has challenged Russian influence by supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and providing minor forms of aid.
- Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have taken a 'business as usual' approach with Russia, avoiding polarising official stances about the conflict.
- Turkmenistan has followed its principle of permanent neutrality, but is reported to have launched a pro-Russian propaganda campaign, suggesting it remains close to Russia's orbit.
- Uzbekistan has recognised Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, but has continued to send mixed signals about its stance on the war.

Introduction

Moscow's relations with its Central Asian neighbors have dramatically changed since last year's invasion of Ukraine. For Russia, the former Soviet Republics remain a key sphere of influence. It is precisely the refusal to recognise the Kremlin's leadership and a turn towards the 'West' that led Russia to invade Ukraine and illegally annex Crimea in 2014.

Avoiding the loss of influence over another member of the former Eastern bloc is a key concern for Russia, which wants to maintain what is left of its global standing. This is particularly relevant considering it has been shunned by the international community since the invasion.

At the same time, Central Asian countries have found themselves in a compromised position. They are caught between fearing retaliation from the 'West' if they publicly back Russia, or, alternatively, being next on Putin's list if they do the opposite. They also continue to be largely dependent on Russia for security, transport routes, and as a source of remittances, making any move away from its orbit risky.^[1] This has led to the region adopting a position of hedging, avoiding openly supporting Russia's invasion but equally positioning themselves against it.

Russia's regional hegemony has arguably been questioned as the Central Asian countries have drifted away in some capacity. Since the invasion, no Central Asian country has voted in support of Russia in the four United Nations General Assembly votes condemning the war in Ukraine. All of them have either abstained or simply not voted.^{[2][3][4][5]} However, in April 2022, just a few weeks after the invasion, all Central Asian countries with the exception of Turkmenistan voted against Russia's expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council.^[6]

This suggests Central Asian countries have balanced a historically friendly relationship with Russia, largely based on dependence, with some displays of deviance. In some cases, these countries have looked for

ways to exit Moscow's orbit, and in others simply tried to avoid secondary sanctions or security issues from a spurned Russia.

Foreign powers like China, Turkey, the United States and the European Union have seen this situation as an opportunity to increase their influence in the region. This could potentially lead to Central Asian countries embracing partnerships elsewhere, away from Russia. This would damage the Kremlin's historical hegemony in the region.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan's relations with Russia have soured amidst pushback from the Kazakh government against Putin's invasion of Ukraine. According to Russian think tank Niirk, Kazakhstan, which was deemed the friendliest ex-Soviet republic towards Russia in 2021, is now in the middle of the pack.[7] The country, which shares the world's longest land border with Russia, has refused to recognize Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory and has firmly stood by the inviolability of internationally recognised borders. [8]

Since the beginning of 2023, the country has continued to drift away from Russia.

In January, the opening by a Kazakh association of a "Yurt of Invincibility" to provide aid in the Ukrainian town of Bucha, sparked tensions between Russia and Kazakhstan. The Kremlin demanded an official explanation "to avoid damaging Russia-Kazakhstan strategic partnership and alliance". In response, the Kazakh Foreign Ministry spokesman Aibek Smadiyarov said that "there was nothing to explain".[9] This suggests that Kazakhstan's position goes well beyond failing to support Russia's invasion, as it is, to a small extent, aiding Ukraine. This takes Kazakhstan's estrangement from the Kremlin a step further, potentially placing Russo-Kazakh relations beyond a point of no return.

During the first week of February, Almaty hosted a regular meeting of the Eurasian

Intergovernmental Council, attended by high-level representatives from member states Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and observer states Uzbekistan and Cuba.[10] The meeting saw a discussion between Kazakh Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov and his Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin. [11] During the meeting, Smailov made a claim for the Eurasian Economic Union's (EAEU) activities to be "strictly economic".[12] Through this comment, Kazakhstan is looking to neutralise Russia's use of the EAEU as a political tool.

In February, Kazakhstan announced that it was closing its trade office in Moscow.[13] The announcement came weeks before Blinken's meeting with Kazakh president Tokayev, with the former traveling to Kazakhstan on a mission to "reaffirm the United States commitment to support the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity" of Central Asian countries.[14] The closing of the trade office, open since 1992, was due to its "functions having already been completed". However, the decision can be seen as reflective of the worsening relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia.[15]

Kyrgyz Republic

Relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan have largely remained stable since the beginning of Russia's invasion.



Heads of Government of the EAEU at the Eurasian Intergovernmental Council's meeting held on February 2-3 2023 in Almaty (EAEU, 2023)

The Central Asian republic is largely dependent on Russian economic aid, security assistance, and labor markets, as many Kyrgyz labor migrants seek employment in Russia every year. [16] In 2020, remittances made up 33% of the country's GDP, with 83% of those coming from Russia. [17]

In a sign of closer ties, Kyrgyzstan has taken advantage of Russia's economic isolation and international sanctions to gain a new role as a re-exporter. It has increased the practice of importing goods from Europe that are then exported to Russia labeled as Kyrgyz goods. This has allowed it to more-than-double exports to Russia. However, this has potentially placed it at risk of secondary sanctions by the west that could damage its economy.[18] This could cause issues for Kyrgyzstan as it has been identified by the US Financial Crimes Enforcement Network and Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security as a likely transshipment point for US goods with Russia or Belarus as their destination. These entities released a statement in June last year "urging financial institutions to be vigilant" about exports to the Kyrgyz Republic.[19] As a result, business associations in the country have expressed their concern. Temir Shabdanaliev, head of the Association of Carriers and Logisticians of the Kyrgyz Republic lobbying group voiced his fears, stating that "if this is uncovered and can be proved, Kyrgyzstan could have a hard time".[20] In this way, while Kyrgyzstan is benefitting from the new position it has acquired through the conflict it is also taking on a significant amount of risk.

While the Kyrgyz Republic has an official position of neutrality in regards to Ukraine, it has made some small displays of political favour towards Russia. On the anniversary of the invasion in February, police in Bishkek fined and detained four Russian citizens at a pro-Ukrainian commemoration. One of the detainees has claimed that the police initially told them that they would face a charge inciting ethnic hatred, but were eventually fined for an unrelated administrative offence.[21]

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In March, Kyrgyzstan extradited Volodymyr Kadaria, a born in Belarus but naturalized Ukrainian refugee to Minsk. Kadaria had moved to Ukraine and then to Kyrgyzstan, fearing for his safety administering an opposition site in Belarus. After obtaining asylum in Kyrgyzstan in August, the Kyrgyz government has now extradited him to Belarus, where he is wanted on unspecified charges.[22] Despite the lack of transparency, the political implications of this reveal the republic is siding with the Kremlin-backed Lukashenko regime.



Russian President Vladimir Putin With the President of Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Japarov (President of Russia, 2023)

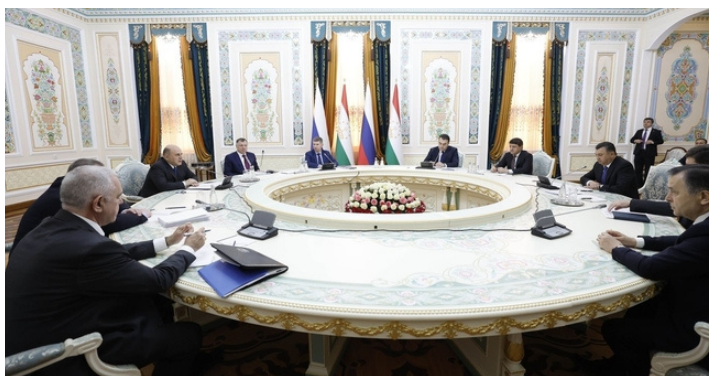
Tajikistan

Tajikistan, like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is particularly susceptible to Russian influence as it is largely dependent on Russia for economic and security reasons. This includes remittances from labor migrants in Russia, constituting 27% of the country's GDP in 2020.[23] [24]

However, Tajikistan has been caught up in Russia's actions. In March last year, it was estimated remittances would decrease by 22% due to the weakening of the Russian economy and job market. [25] Additionally, despite the Tajik government warning its citizens' to not get involved in the conflict, a significant number of Tajik migrant workers are now working in occupied Ukraine.[26]

On 3 March, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin held talks with Tajik Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda. The leaders discussed Russian-Tajik trade and economic cooperation, interaction in energy, industrial production, transport and culture in regular bilateral talks, signing a number of bilateral agreements to deepen cooperation in these areas. The Tajik Prime Minister praised relationships between the two countries, claiming that they "are noted for a high level of trust and steadfast mutual support" in a show of Tajikistan's closeness to Moscow, even a year after the invasion of Ukraine.[27]

Overall, Tajikistan's relationship with Russia remains close, with it still dependent on its larger neighbor. With public statements supporting maintaining a close relationship, it appears unlikely this will change anytime soon.



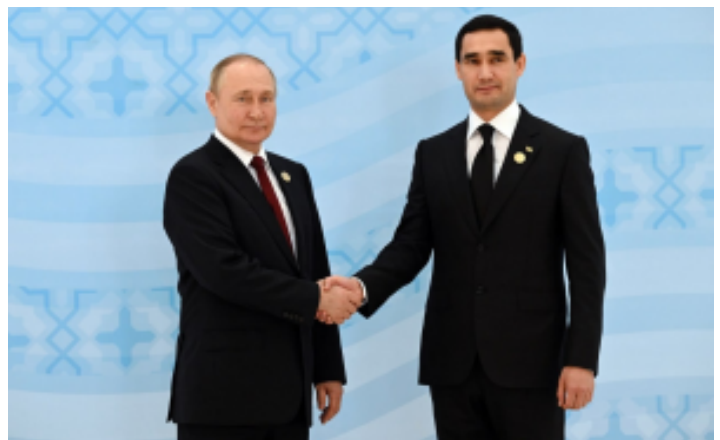
Russia-Tajikistan talks (Russian Government News, 2023)

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's position of "permanent neutrality" has remained in place since the invasion of Ukraine, with the government not making its position public.

However, a number of visits have taken place between Turkmen President Serdar Berdimukhammedov and Vladimir Putin, suggesting the country's close ties to Russia remain in place.[28]

In December last year, Hembra Amannazarov, the Turkmen representative to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) walked out of a speech by the Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister during an OSCE meeting.[29] Amannazarov's actions are consistent with the country's pro-Russia stance on the conflict.



Turkmen President Serdar Berdimukhammedov and Russian President Vladimir Putin shake hands during a meeting in Uzbekistan, on September 15 2022 (Turkmen Portal, 2023)

It should then come as no surprise that the Turkmen government has launched a domestic pro-Russian propaganda campaign against western support of Ukraine. According to Radio Free Europe, a series of meetings with students have been held by education officials and intelligence officers in the Balkan and Lebap provinces of Turkmenistan.[30] These meetings were designed to warn students of the west's 'poisonous influence' over Turkmenistan, and the possibility of a war happening in the country if young people don't stay away from western media. The campaign was reportedly a direct result of criticism of the invasion by Turkmen students.[31]

In the energy sector, Aleksey Miller, the head of Russian gas giant Gazprom, traveled to Ashgabat in February to meet with president Serdar Berdimukhammedov.

Miller's visit has raised suspicion that Russia is demanding Turkmen support for the invasion, and is threatening to block any development of a lucrative Trans-Caspian pipeline, which would supply energy to the EU, if this doesn't occur.[32] as part of these discussions, Russia has reportedly offered Turkmenistan participation in an alternative pipeline, would bring gas to Turkey through Iran. Participation in this [33] The offer of involvement in an alternative pipeline comes as Russia aims to gain access to Iran through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, reshaping its gas markets to avoid the west. [34] The future of the projects remains unclear as there has been no official comment from Turkmenistan on the visit. While diversifying its exports to Europe could have enormous profits for Turkmenistan, it remains to be seen whether it will instead continue to be loyal to Russia.

Uzbekistan

The invasion of Ukraine saw Uzbekistan drift away from Russia. The Uzbek government refused to recognise the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic's and, instead, supported Ukrainian territorial sovereignty. The Uzbek government has also publicly called for a peaceful solution to the conflict by diplomatic means.[35] However, only a few weeks later, it joined Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan vote against Russia's removal from the UN Human Rights Council.[36]

Like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is highly dependent on trade and security aid with Russia, as well as remittances from Uzbek migrant workers. Adopting a two-sided position on the conflict has allowed Uzbekistan to not damage its relationship with Russia, while at the same time avoiding criticism from the west by publicly condemning the invasion.

Publicly, the relationship with Russia looks to remain relatively close., In a telephonic meeting between Putin and Uzbek president Shavkat Mirziyoyev on January 4th saw them "reaffirm commitment to strengthening Russia-Uzbekistan

relations of alliance and strategic partnership, boosting trade, and expanding mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields, including in energy," according to the Kremlin.[37]

In the energy field, in February an investigation by Radio Free Europe exposed a Russian plan to interfere in the Uzbek energy sector through a system of offshore companies. A series of multibillion-dollar deals struck under the Mirziyoyev' energy initiatives have risked the country's energy security. The deals, which benefit mostly Russian elites and include some officials in Mirziyoyev's orbit, have resulted in projects filled with gross violations which obstruct the sustainable development of the country's energy industry. [38] The issue came to a head this winter, as outcry erupted amongst the Uzbek population, who suffered massive power outages during one of the coldest winters in decades. [39]

The protests over energy shortages saw Uzbeks blocking roads and demonstrating in front of government buildings. Several prominent energy sector officials were arrested in relation to the issue and gas exports abroad stopped.[40] Despite the sacking of senior officials and technocrats, the report has exposed that the Uzbek administration was warned of the problematic deals as early as 2020. Mirziyoev seems to be directly involved and to have benefited from the deal. Although public outrage seems to have subsided, the ramifications of the scandal remain to be seen.[41]



President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev. and Russian President Vladimir Putin (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2023)

On 1 March, Antony Blinken visited Tashkent in a show of US commitment to “standing for the sovereignty, the territorial integrity, the independence of countries across Central Asia”. Amidst a show of concern for the region’s vulnerability at the hands of Russia, he highlighted American aid to counteract the effects of the war on food prices, which have “acutely affected Central Asia”. Blinken was making a point of how America is helping the region counter the dire effects of the conflict started by Russia. [42] The Uzbek Secretary of Foreign Affairs Bakhtiyor Saidov, who also met with Blinken, tweeted about the meeting, stating that “they had agreed to join efforts towards strengthening regional security in Central Asia”. This suggests Uzbekistan is itself as receptive to an increased US presence in the region.[43]

Conclusion

To varying extents, the invasion of Ukraine has re-shaped Russia’s relationship with Central Asia from last year into 2023. Although the region has largely refrained from making polarising statements in either direction, Kazakhstan has openly challenged Moscow’s influence, while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have continued to have stable relations with Russia. Turkmenistan remains permanently neutral, but its pro-Russian propaganda campaign suggests it remains firmly in Russia’s sphere of influence.

While the relationship with Russia remains relatively strong, Central Asia is increasingly gaining strategic importance on the world stage. Turkey, the US, the EU, and China are looking to move into any potential vacuum left by fading Russian influence.

But Russia continues to expect the region to respect its historical dominance and is against any form of agency for its Central Asian neighbours. In the future, and if this attitude continues, Russia’s regional dominance may begin to disappear as the region looks to diversify its economic and political relationships. But, in the short term, Central Asian governments continue to

find themselves in an awkward position, still largely dependent on Russia but increasingly questioning its hegemony. Diplomatic developments in early 2023 point to this dynamic not changing any time soon.

Recommendations

- In the short-term, Central Asian governments should continue to pursue a hedging foreign policy vis à vis Russia. This will allow them to maintain economic stability through their dependence on Russia. This will prevent any economic shocks in what is an uncertain time globally.
- In the medium to long-term, Central Asian governments should diversify their economies to decrease dependence on Russia. Whether this results in closer ties to a rising China or the west, or both, remains to be seen. Russia’s influence appears to be waning and Central Asian countries should manoeuvre to avoid their current economic and political dependency on Russia.
- The CA5 should seek consultations with local stakeholders and groups in devising climate change policies.
- Climate and energy related non-governmental organisations, researchers, and activists should promote public engagement efforts on climate change advocacy and awareness. In these initiatives, the participation of state actors should be encouraged to enable effective consultations

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Climate change in Central Asia: The impacts on development, diplomacy and future prospects

Naomi Napuri

Key takeaways

- Climate change has significant economic impacts on Central Asia, including reduced agricultural productivity, increased water scarcity, and higher healthcare costs.
- Central Asian countries are taking steps to address climate change, including promoting renewable energy and developing climate adaptation plans.
- Despite these efforts, Central Asia remains vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, and more action is needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and adapt to changing conditions.
- International cooperation and funding are crucial for addressing the impacts of climate change in Central Asia.

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most significant global challenges facing humanity in the 21st century, and Central Asia is particularly vulnerable to its impacts. In recent years, Central Asia has experienced a significant increase in temperature, with average temperatures rising by 1-2 degrees Celsius over the past century. This increase in temperature has had a significant impact on the region, leading to more frequent droughts that are affecting agricultural production and putting food security at risk.

The effects of climate change in Central Asia are not limited to the environment.

Climate change is also influencing regional cooperation and diplomacy, as countries in Central Asia grapple with shared environmental challenges. Additionally, the World Bank's latest assessment suggests that climate change could force 216 million people worldwide to migrate within their own countries by 2050, posing significant challenges to the region's stability and security.

Given the urgency of the situation, there is a growing need to address the impacts of climate change in Central Asia and to develop strategies for sustainable development and cooperation in the region. This report seeks to explore the impacts of climate change on Central Asia's development, diplomacy, and future prospects and to provide policy recommendations aimed at promoting sustainable development and cooperation in the region.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, known for its coal-centered energy economy, has become one of the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters. Reports indicate that in 2020, the country was responsible for 0.84% of global emissions (524.47 tons of CO₂).^[1] The country also entered the top 30 in CO₂ emissions overall by country in 2019, ranking 27th in the world.^[2] Despite economic growth in the past two decades, the nation's energy resources remain lacking in diversity. The majority of emissions in Kazakhstan stem from electric heating, transportation, and residential use.^[3] Due to its geography and climate, the World Bank predicts Kazakhstan will experience warming faster than the rest of the world, with temperatures potentially increasing between

1.6°C and 5.3°C by the end of the century.[4] As temperatures rise, glaciers will melt, which will likely lead to recurrent flooding in Kazakhstan. This melting causes mountain river levels to rise, making certain regions of the country more susceptible to flooding. Severe drought is also expected to occur more frequently, aggravating existing environmental issues such as land degradation and desertification. As a result, impoverished rural civilians will be the most vulnerable to natural disasters. This group is also less likely to have easy mobility or access to response services and early warnings, making them particularly susceptible.[5]

Despite its reliance on coal, Kazakhstan acknowledges the importance of enhancing its energy options and mitigating the consequences of climate change. The Prime Minister of Kazakhstan Alihan Smayilov affirmed the country's dedication to the Paris Climate Agreement in his address at COP 27 in Egypt. He emphasized that Kazakhstan's objective is to attain carbon neutrality by 2060 by implementing a Low Carbon Development Strategy by the conclusion of 2023. As a result, the country plans to become a primary hub for renewable energy source advancement in Central Asia.[6]

Uzbekistan

Like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is threatened by natural disasters, such as drought and floods. The effects of climate change risks the agricultural sector, which is Uzbekistan's main economic activity. The potential increase in the frequency of droughts is a result of reduced river runoff, notably from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya Rivers. There is also a high likelihood of aridity and drought hazards, especially in areas experiencing a surge in demand and consumption due to economic growth and population expansion.[7]

Recognising the potential threat to its primary economic activity, Uzbekistan has taken steps towards transitioning to a green economy. In a



Sheep graze on a dusty and dry landscape east of Bukhara in July 2013 (Eurasianet, 2016)

decree signed in December 2022, a series of reforms were announced by the authorities. This includes the Plan of Action for Transitioning to a Green Economy and Ensuring Green Growth until 2030, which aims to address the current challenges faced in achieving green development. The plan highlights the need to shift towards a sustainable economy and outlines specific measures to be taken to achieve this goal.[8]

The Uzbek government has also realised that climate change is not just their issue, but a regional one. Boriy Alikhanov, Senator, Chairman of the Committee of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan, used a conference hosted by the United Nations Development Programme to state that "the main goal of joint actions should be to find solutions and their implementation to stabilise the aquatic ecosystem of the region". Alikhanov also highlighted the importance of regional cooperation, stating that "Innovative approaches are needed to stabilise glaciers and ecosystems of the upper catchment area, increase water resources, improve the efficiency of their use, further stabilise the Aral Sea area, stop desertification and reduce the impact of droughts. All of these actions will become the basis for eliminating risks for the socio-economic development of the region."[9]

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's susceptibility to climate change stems from its arid conditions. The country's rivers are crucial for irrigation. Their uneven

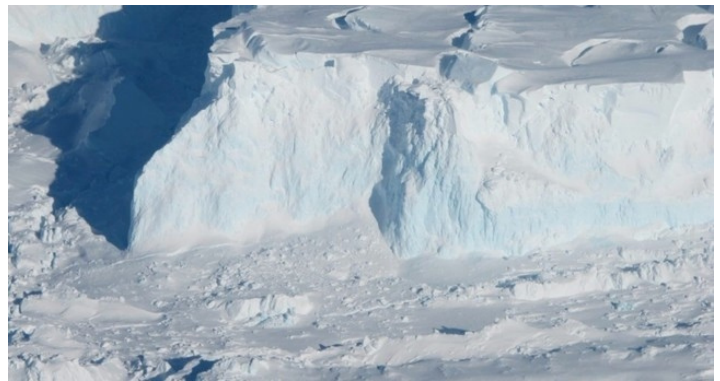
distribution throughout the country aggravates the scarcity of water, particularly in the south and west. [10] Droughts caused by climate change make this problem worse and threaten to reduce the availability of water for irrigation. This threatens to constrain crop production and presents a serious threat to food security, especially as the population continues to grow. Additionally, the nation's inhabitants are exposed to the dangers of heat stress resulting from spikes in temperature, aggravated by the dry climate, low precipitation levels, and high frequency of sunny days.

Overall, Turkmenistan confronts significant obstacles in improving the living standards of its people, including addressing poverty and environmental stresses associated with water availability. The nation is prone to frequent droughts and extreme weather events that render it susceptible to current climatic conditions.[11]

Turkmenistan's energy system heavily relies on natural gas, given its significant proven natural gas reserves and annual production exceeding 60 billion cubic meters, serving as the sole source for electricity generation.[12] Despite the dependence on natural gas, Turkmenistan has submitted its second Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement. Outlining its commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% by 2030, relative to 2010 levels across all sectors of the economy, including energy, industry, agriculture, and waste [13]. To accomplish these objectives, Turkmenistan is seeking approximately US\$500 million in international financial assistance to implement necessary adaptation measures until 2030.[14]

As the need for action rises, in December 2022, Turkmenistan's Ministry of Agriculture and Environmental Protection partnered with the UNDP to implement the 'Development a National Adaptation Planning Process in Turkmenistan'. The project, which has financial assistance from the Green Climate Fund, aims to enhance

Turkmenistan's adaptive and resiliency capacities by developing a national adaptation plan process. This project seeks to strengthen the coordination mechanism and governance processes for conducting adaptation planning and measures, as well as enhance the evidence base in the water sector to facilitate effective decision-making. The project also aims to increase the capacity of those involved in adaptation planning within the water sector and in general. The Hydrometeorological Service plays a critical role in supporting adaptation planning for vulnerable sectors of the national economy, such as agriculture and water resources management.[15]



Glacier in Tajikistan (AKIpress, 2022)

Tajikistan

Tajikistan's economic development heavily relies on hydropower, making its energy security susceptible to climate variability and change, including rising temperatures, droughts, and storms. The country is the primary glacial hub of Central Asia, with glaciers occupying approximately 6% of the country's total area. These glaciers serve a critical role by storing water, regulating flows, and controlling the climate. They also constitute the principal water source recharging the river basins that contribute to the Aral Sea, alongside permafrost. [16]

Majority of the country is comprised of mountains, with only 7% classified as flat terrain. With just 0.06 hectares of irrigated land available per resident, the country is especially susceptible to climate-related shocks, such as droughts,

floods, and landslides. Moreover, up to one-third of Central Asia's glaciers are anticipated to vanish entirely by 2050, significantly increasing the risk of sudden floods from glacier lake outbursts. The glaciers in Tajikistan could lose up to half their volume by 2050.[17]

The agro-pastoral productivity, which significantly affects food and nutrition security, is negatively impacted due to the rise in extreme weather events frequency and intensity, plus the changes in the hydrological cycle. Leading to a reduction in biodiversity. The risk of infectious disease outbreaks can also increase due to elevated temperatures and flood-related water contamination. This further amplifies the risks associated with foodborne and waterborne diseases, such as gastrointestinal infections.xvii

Acknowledging the country's high vulnerability, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) approved in November 2022 a \$30 million grant to Tajikistan to help the country's risk management and economic losses caused by the impacts of climate change.[18]

In addition to ADB's grant, in January 2023, The World Bank sanctioned \$50 million in grant financing through the International Development Association to support the Tajikistan Development Policy Operation. This program aims to assist Tajikistan in implementing its reform agenda, which focuses on promoting sustainable and resilient economic growth to facilitate poverty reduction and enhance the well-being of its citizens.[19]

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is experiencing an increased number of impacts due to climate change. Rising temperatures have led to more frequent and intense events, such as drought, unpredictable seasonal weather, and natural disasters like landslides, mudflows, and avalanches. These events are causing negative impacts on the country's economic sectors, including agriculture

and energy, resulting in increased levels of poverty.[20]

Between the early 1990's and early 2010's, Kyrgyzstan's agricultural losses due to hazards average at least \$14 million annually. The events that cause such losses are mainly attributable to droughts and water shortages. Considering the country's dependence on its agricultural sector it is possible to link those climate induced events to poverty. The ABD states that, as the effects of climate change become more frequent, Kyrzgystan could experience 50.1 climate-related deaths per million population by the year 2050. [21]

To combat the impact of climate change, the Kyrgyz Republic has committed to transitioning to sustainable, low-carbon development. The country has been a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change since 2000 and ratified the Paris Agreement in February 2020. In 2021, The Kyrgyzstan submitted its Nationally Determined Contribution, outlining how it plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across its economic sectors.[22]

During COP27, the country's Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and head of Kyrgyzstan's official delegation, Beksultan Ibraimov, highlighted the country's struggles with the impacts of climate change. Saying "we, unfortunately, are witnessing how political processes impact on a climate agenda. In today's realities, it becomes doubly difficult for Kyrgyzstan. Over the past 20 years, due to global warming our country has seen an increase in the number of avalanches, mudflows and floods by 60%, which cause economic damage in the hundreds of millions of US dollars. At the same time, being emitters of 0.03% of global greenhouse gasses, Kyrgyzstan is calling for climate justice".[23]

He also expressed concerns for not only the present, but also for the future generations as he continued, stating that "the time has come for a

common decision to recognise that mountain ecosystems, with all available water, mineral and biological resources, and, of course, ambassadors of high mountain snow peaks—snow leopards—are extremely sensitive to climate change and, at the same time, are of paramount importance for the present and the future of humanity.”[24]

Tackling climate change through diplomacy

The challenges posed by climate change in the region require coordinated efforts and global cooperation, making diplomacy a critical tool in tackling this complex issue. Diplomacy plays a crucial role in facilitating multilateral agreements, promoting sustainable practices, and sharing knowledge and resources to mitigate the effects of climate change in Central Asia. In this context, diplomatic initiatives can play a vital role in building a more resilient and sustainable future for the region.

Thus, the European Union launched the Global Gateway Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate Change in Central Asia in November 2022. This initiative serves as a flagship program, bringing together European financial institutions and member states with the goal of promoting regional cooperation and governance for sustainable development. Additionally, it seeks to increase investment in a regionally integrated transition toward green and blue economies.[25]



European Union-Central Asia Conference on Environment and Water Cooperation on 23-24 February 2023 (WECOOP, 2023)

A regional initiative was also agreed in January 2023. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan agreed to jointly construct the Kambar-Ata-1 hydroelectric power plant (HPP) on the Naryn River in Kyrgyzstan. The HPP aims to provide a sustainable source of electricity to Central Asian countries while also helping to ensure the region's water supply. The project is set to become the largest hydroelectric power plant in Kyrgyzstan, and will be equally funded by three countries. The parties are currently working on an intergovernmental agreement to outline the terms and conditions for the project's implementation, in compliance with the requirements of international treaties. Kazakhstan's involvement in the project is rooted in the country's commitment to ensuring the sustainable management of the Syrdarya River's water supply.[26]

In March 2023, Uzbekistan hosted a two-day event as part of UNDP and the European Union's joint project Climate Change and Resilience in Central Asia. The two-day training aimed at promoting climate change resilience in Uzbekistan, focusing on the NEXUS approach. The NEXUS approach is a vital system that employs innovative methods to ensure sustainable development in the water, energy, food, and environmental sectors. One of its main benefits is the promotion of mutually beneficial decisions based on cross-sectoral cooperation.[27]

Conclusion

Central Asia faces various threats from climate change that have the potential to severely impact their economies, populations, and environments.

Overall, each Central Asian country faces significant challenges from climate change, but each has recognised the importance of embracing renewable energy and taking action to mitigate its effects.

Kazakhstan, a high emitter, has recognised the need to diversify its energy resources while Uzbekistan is heavily dependent on agriculture and has planned to transition to a green economy. Turkmenistan, with its arid climate, has committed to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels while Tajikistan continues to embrace hydroelectricity. Kyrgyzstan has made public statements that it is willing to embrace decarbonisation due to its vulnerability to climate change.

Through these efforts, Central Asian countries are working towards a more sustainable future. However, more collaboration between these countries and with the international community is necessary to ensure the success of these efforts and address the urgent challenges posed by climate change.

Recommendations

- Utilise diplomacy and regional cooperation to address the challenges of climate change. This means that countries in the region should work together to find effective ways to combat the effects of climate change.
 - Shared technologies and scientific research. Collaborating in the development and implementation of new technologies and techniques that reduce emissions, improve energy efficiency, and promote sustainable practices is a way to address climate change challenges effectively.
 - Transition to renewable energy resources as soon as possible. Investing in renewable energy technologies like wind, solar, and hydropower is essential to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and limit greenhouse gas emissions. These investments can also attract foreign investments, which can contribute to sustainable development in the region.
- Look for more funding and resources outside the region to tackle climate change. Governments in Central Asia should explore opportunities for securing external funding and resources, such as international aid, to support their efforts. Helping accelerate the implementation of sustainable development practices and promote green growth in the region.

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Energy shortages in Uzbekistan: The political, economic and social effects

Sabrina Lavrut

Key takeaways

- Uzbekistan has faced severe energy shortages over the 2022–2023 winter period resulting in residents having no access to electricity and gas.
- The Uzbek government has fired senior officials deemed responsible for the energy crisis, with allegations of serious mismanagement over the years and a lack of government transparency.
- Residents of Uzbekistan are becoming increasingly frustrated by energy shortages, resulting in vocal but sporadic protests.
- The crisis is impacting the health of Uzbeks, with children and women disproportionately affected and hospitals not equipped to deal with blackouts.

Introduction

Leading up to last November, Uzbekistan was facing electricity and gas shortages. Over winter these shortages culminated into an energy crisis. [1][2] Uzbeks were left without power and heating for hours on end and streets ran dark as lamp posts were turned off to save energy. [3] As winter continued, shortages intersected with record cold temperatures, reaching -20 degrees Celsius, the coldest it has been in half a decade. [4] During this time, Uzbeks found themselves facing freezing temperatures with limited ways to keep warm. Businesses, hospitals and schools were cut off from the power grid resulting, leading to them closing their doors. [5]

The government reacted by blaming the weather, failure of infrastructure and by arresting and charging several authorities of the energy sector, including state energy official Muzaffar Aliyev in December 2022. [7][8] Aliyev was accused of unauthorised supply of gas to a factory that was supposed to have its deliveries suspended over winter. [9] The president of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev used Aliyev as an example, warning other officials to follow Uzbek law and to ensure a reliable power supply.

The energy shortages have had a massive impact on Uzbeks and communities who consistently face harsh winters without adequate heating. A continuous cycle of energy shortages in Uzbekistan is damaging to the stability of the country through economic disruption, reduced access to basic needs and rising public unrest. This has flow on effects for the wider region, as Uzbekistan is the second largest natural gas producer in Central Asia. [12]

This article seeks to take a deep-dive analysis into Uzbekistan's current energy crisis and will explore a historical overview of the country's episodic energy crises and analysing the political, economic, and social impacts this has on the country.

Historical overview

Central Asia has experienced energy shortages for a long time. In 2008, the region experienced an energy crisis which severely affected the population due to the combination of abnormally cold weather and high food and fuel prices. [13] In Tajikistan, there were reports of children dying in hospitals due to blackouts and a lack of heating. [14]

The same crisis saw harsh weather freeze gas supplies to homes and businesses across Uzbekistan, resulting in households turning to traditional methods to stay warm.[15] At the time, Uzbekistan could not receive water from the Hydropower reservoir in Kyrgyzstan due to the extreme cold, resulting in basic water and heating supplies not being available.[16]

Severe energy shortages also occurred in 2019. In Uzbekistan, shortages of gas and electricity sparked protests demanding officials solve the problem.[17] This attests to the severity of the crisis, as anti-government protests are rare in the region. Residents were distraught, with one protestor stating, “we don’t have gas and electricity in our homes and people are angry about it”.[18] At the time, officials promised to solve the problem however, current shortages show this to not be the case.



Cleaners clean the road after snowfall in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, January 13, 2020 (Xinhua Photo/Zafar Khalilov, 2020)

Environmental factors

Central Asia’s geography plays a large role in the stability of the regions energy sector, with high mountain rivers powering electricity generation and irrigation in the lowlands.[19] However, the region also faces extreme weather and the increasing effects of climate change, resulting in reduced glacier surface area and infrequent rainfall.[20]

Central Asian countries have also seen some of the worst droughts these past five years, which has led to shortages of water for hydropower.[21]

Uzbekistan is one of the most affected countries as it relies on water resources from its neighbours.[22] In 2021, a heat wave led to drought, crop failures and widespread energy shortages.[23] This intersected with high temperatures, with Tashkent recording 42.6 degrees Celsius.[24] This led to energy shortages due to alarmingly low levels of water in the reservoir which supplies most electricity to the region.[25]

The make-up of the water and energy markets in the region has made each country reliant on the other. Environmental issues in one country often lead to energy shortages in another and climate change threatens to make this worse over time.

Governmental factors

The region’s energy infrastructure has largely not changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with most power plants decades old. In 2016, the Asian Development Bank reported that 70 per cent of the power generation infrastructure required rehabilitation.[26] Some modernisation has been attempted, including a \$386 million dollar project by a Chinese company in Kyrgyzstan in 2017. This region still faced shortages which led to the resignation of the former Director of Bishkek Heating and Power Plant.[27] Alisher Khamidov, a consultant based in Kyrgyzstan revealed that the shortages are caused mainly by mismanagement and that “there are huge losses of electricity” because “the grid networks are so outdated, and governments have not renovated them in years”.[28]

The Uzbek government has attempted to renovate older power plants since 2018. However, this has taken several plants offline, which then led to an overwhelmed energy system and further blackouts. Poor government decision making also led to electricity transformers being incorrectly switched off, which only amplified the country’s energy problems.[29] These issues played a key role in the recent energy crisis over winter, with a shortfall of three billion kilowatts. [30]

Uzbekistan's government decision-making has been increasingly questioned. An investigation by Radio Free Europe revealed that President Mirziyoyev was warned three years ago that his projects to boost gas and oil output were problematic. These projects reportedly involved multi-million deals giving full control of the gas network to a Russian firm whose owner is under western sanctions. These deals led to energy projects "rife with miscalculation, inefficiency, overpricing, and a lack of transparency."^[31] This played a big role in putting the country's energy security at risk.^[32]



State energy official Muzaffar Aliyev in handcuffs after his arrest in December, January 24, 2023 (OpenDemocracy, 2023)

Social and economic effects

The energy crisis had had acute effects on the health of Uzbeks. Families have struggled to live through the combination of harsh weather and a lack of power. This has meant that Uzbeks have resorted to burning dangerous materials to heat their homes, such as wood, coal, dung, or through dangerous gas connections.^[33] Uzbekistan has the third highest rate in Central Asia for air pollution fatalities in the home.^[34] For example, in December last year, two members of a family died from carbon monoxide poisoning after attempting to heat their home.^[35]

This energy crisis has also intersected with existing issues in Uzbek society, women and children are disproportionately affected by air

pollution in poorer areas due to deep rooted patriarchal attitudes and the male-heavy workforce.^[36] More broadly, 14 percent, or approximately five million people, live under the poverty line in Uzbekistan.^[37] These people predominantly live in rural areas, face harsher climates and are at greater risk of unemployment. An energy crisis disproportionately affects people living in poverty as they may not have the resources to help them get through a cold and dark winter. Hospitals in Uzbekistan are also not adequately equipped for energy shortages and periodically have to run without electricity. This results in patients not receiving adequate health care, especially during the winter months.

Finally, the energy crisis has had economic consequences. Blackouts cause industries and business to close, causing a loss in wages and wider economic growth. This leads to increased unemployment, as those working in energy-reliant industries, like heavy industry, lose their jobs during the winter months.^[38]



A resident of Termez district heats an artisanal stove (CABAR, 2023)

Political backlash

Politically, the energy crisis has caused public unrest. A report from Voice of America in early 2023 outlined this public frustration ^[60]. Sporadic protests were held throughout the country and outrage towards the government

was heard in restaurants, stores, schools and on the streets.[39] Voice of America reports that one woman said that “we have been waiting for days, water lines are frozen without energy”; “I feel like we are in this crisis forever and this system does nothing”.[40] The combination of senior officials being fired, and the protests sparked by the crisis point towards the political risks of a fragile state. Political analyst Kamoliddin Rabbimov stated that “the system must be as transparent as possible with deals and investments” and that “critical thinking is on the rise in our society”.[41] Uzbeks are increasingly becoming more vocal. If the government puts the needs of their citizens behind, public outrage will only continue to worsen.

The government has met this unrest with a mixture of arrests and repression. In December 2022, an Uzbek blogger was fined over a thousand dollars for writing about the energy shortages and the protests by workers who demand that the government solve the natural gas deficiency.[42] Several of these protesters were imprisoned. The rights to freedom of speech remain restricted despite the Constitution of Uzbekistan guaranteeing the right to freedom of speech.[43] But, as citizens become more vocal, there is a risk of more large-scale protests in the future if the problem isn't solved.

The government has attempted to appease the public by arresting senior officials in the energy sector. Sardor Umurzakov, the head of the country's presidential administration, responds to the crisis by stating that “those who got us into this situation will not come out of it untouched” [44]. This includes the arrest of Muzaffar Aliyev, the head of the Tashkent division of the gas distribution network operator. Aliyev was accused of continuing to supply energy to a brick factory when deliveries when orders were to be suspended and diverted to homes. Tashkent's mayor, Jahongir Artikhojaye, was also reported to have been fired in January 2023 due to his “empty words and false reporting” on the crisis. [45]

The 2022–2023 energy crisis is revealing cracks in the government's administration and basic needs not being met is a human rights issue. Furthermore, Tashkent being hit for the first time with an energy crisis illustrates the situation is getting worse each year. However, this could potentially mean that matters are taken more seriously this year with business and political elites feeling the brunt of winter and blackouts for the first time.

How will the problem be solved?

The government has made attempts to include more energy into the grid. Saudi Arabian company ACWA Power has announced its intention to construct two solar plants in Uzbekistan, worth \$2.5 billion.[46][47] Additionally, on 7 March, the World Bank approved a \$12 million solar energy project for Uzbekistan. Both projects are consistent with the government's commitment to include renewable energy into the power grid.[48][49] These initiatives are designed to signal to international investors that Uzbekistan encourages further investment in its energy grid.

The government has also made moves to keep more gas for domestic consumption, ceasing all exports by 2025. In 2020, Prime Minister Abdulla stated, “By 2025, Uzbekistan will take measures to cease the export of natural gas and start its full processing in the country”.[50] While this move is still in process, it could result in increased domestic power generation that would help prevent power shortages.



Uzbeks line up for food (Kursiv media, 2023)

Conclusion

The energy crisis in Uzbekistan is not a recent development and the country faces continuous social, economic and political effects of an outdated and poorly governed energy system. As a result, there has been a rise in vocal public dissatisfaction and sporadic protests against the government in response to this ongoing problem.

However, there is hope that gas exports will be halted and more renewable energy will be brought into the system. This could result in fewer blackouts, more jobs and a cleaner, sustainable way of living. As Uzbekistan faces serious impacts from climate change, it is vital that renewable energy is brought in and proper infrastructure changes are made to accommodate this.

Despite this, the Uzbek government has not been transparent, leading to mistrust between citizens and the government. Countless money has been spent to modernise the energy grids but issues with it seem to be increasing. The political consequences of the region's dated and mishandled infrastructure are rising to the surface and could potentially have devastating consequences if proper changes are not made.

Recommendations

- The Uzbek government needs to adequately and transparently fund improvements in the energy grid. This includes refurbishing existing power infrastructure while also investing in renewable energy. This will reduce the reliance on the regions infrastructure and so the grid can be adapted to the effects of climate change.
- The government should take responsibility for instances of poor governance during the crisis by reforming the system and being accountable, rather than responding with the repression of Uzbeks who have legitimate grievances.

- The government should collaborate with the wider region to construct a climate change adaptation policy that will help to assist the entire region transition to renewable energy and be less vulnerable to ageing infrastructure and extreme weather events.

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Domestic violence in Tajikistan

Samantha Drozdowski

Key Takeaways

- Domestic violence is a severe problem in Tajikistan. Due to the nation's economic instability and patriarchal culture women are seen as second-class citizens who should remain in the home and raise children, not contribute financially. The stress of being in a one-income household in a poor nation puts a strain on relationships, often leading to domestic violence.
- The Coronavirus pandemic worsened the domestic violence problem in Tajikistan. Russia's border closure and the Tajik government's stay-at-home restrictions left many Tajik men unemployed and forced to stay at home. This left many women vulnerable to domestic violence.
- While the Tajik government is aware of the country's high rate of domestic violence, it has not been criminalised. The government has attempted to reduce the rate of domestic violence through means, but it has not taken the necessary step of criminalising it. The international community has attempted to aid the nation in reducing the rate of domestic violence; however, it is still a prevalent issue.

Introduction

In Tajikistan, one-third of women are victims of domestic violence.[1] The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women has described gender-based domestic violence in Tajikistan as "prevalent" and "surrounded by a

culture of silence".[2] It estimates that while 20 percent of married women in Tajikistan are victims of violence by their husbands, only 5 percent file a report with the authorities.[3]

Tajikistan has suffered from instability and high rates of poverty for decades and is ranked amongst the 30 poorest countries in the world. [4] Tajik women suffer disproportionately from poverty compared to men, and this intersects with the country's conservative and patriarchal views. This often leaves women vulnerable to abuse from their husbands or family members as they are reliant upon them for income and basic necessities.

The government has serious international legal obligations when it comes to the rights and safety of women, but it has been lacking in its response. Domestic violence is still not criminalised and there is a fundamental lack of protection and services for abuse survivors.

The prevalence of domestic violence in Tajikistan is an acute problem in need of a solution. This report will therefore explain domestic violence prevalence in Tajikistan, including the causes, the government response, and international legal obligations relating to women's safety and domestic violence.

Domestic Abuse and its forms

The United Nations defines domestic violence as "a pattern of behaviour in any relationship that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. Abuse is physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person.

[5] Domestic violence is a violation of human rights.[6]

Women in Tajikistan often experience domestic violence in several forms, including rape, stabbing, strangulation, withholding of food, and beatings with sharp and heavy objects such as a shovel, fireplace pokers, or irons. This abuse can cause lasting injuries that include internal bleeding and damage to vital organs, concussions, skull fractures, broken jaws, and severe bruises, as well as trauma and emotional distress [7].



A theatre performance devoted to activism against gender-based violence in Tajikistan (OSCE, 2017)

This abuse is common for many women in Tajikistan. Earlier this month, the UN reported on the situation of Shermatova Marjona. The report outlines psychical, mental, and financial abuse, including family members demanding money and instances of violence that Ms. Sharmatova has suffered. Ms. Sharmatova made several police reports, but the authorities were initially unable or unwilling to assist her.[7]

Coronavirus Pandemic

In March 2020, the Coronavirus Pandemic shut down the world causing an abundance of lasting issues.[8] As previously stated, many citizens of Tajikistan rely on working abroad for their income; therefore, they were out of work after the borders closed and shelter-in-place restrictions were enacted.

The government's shelter-in-place restrictions forced many victims of domestic violence to

remain in their homes with abusive family members. The pandemic also increased instances of food insecurity, saw a rise in poverty, and affected the mental health of Tajiks, leading to greater tensions in households.[9] For example, the border closure with Russia led to unemployment for many Tajik men. International Alert reports one Tajik man told them "violence is happening because of unemployment when you are sitting at home jobless, then disputes start and then it leads to violence, the more you sit at home, the more there is a risk of violence, if jobs are secured for men in the village, family violence will be minimised".[10]

The Legality of Domestic Violence in Tajikistan

The Tajik government does little to investigate instances of domestic violence or take legal action against perpetrators. Domestic violence has not been criminalised and victims lack adequate protection and access to shelters and other services. Additionally, marital rape is not recognised as a crime under Tajik law. Instead, victims seeking prosecution of an abuser must bring claims under articles of the Tajik Criminal Code that relate to assault and similar acts of force and violence.

There have been a few attempts to nationally reduce the rate of domestic abuse, such as the 2013 law "On the Prevention of Domestic Violence." This law requires that the nation creates a central database that collects statistics on domestic violence cases; however, a decade later, this still has not been done.[11]

Tajikistan also has important international legal obligations when it comes to domestic violence and women's rights. Tajikistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 and its optional protocol in 2014, which is a step in the right direction. Article 5 of the convention states that "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures: (a) To modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and

women, to achieve the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.”.[12] Under this article, the government of Tajikistan needs to address the culture that allows domestic abuse to be normalised.

Moreover, the United Nations Committee against Torture published recommendations for Tajikistan on how to tackle the problem. This included criminalising domestic violence, which is currently still legal, and providing victims access to shelters, separating them from their abusers.[13]

In 2013, the UN recommended that Tajik authorities “amend the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and other relevant legislation in order to enforce, among other things, the provisions of Law No. 954 on prevention of violence in the family with a view to criminalising all forms of violence against women.”.[14] As previously mentioned, this still has not been done as of 2023, domestic violence is still legal in Tajikistan.[15]

The aforementioned laws grant some protection for victims, but they fall short of punishing abusers.

Victim blaming

Societal change needs to occur in Tajikistan for domestic violence to be effectively addressed, which will not be an easy task. There is a deep-rooted stigma and shame for domestic violence victims in Tajikistan due to a patriarchal culture and lack of awareness about domestic violence. It is important to note that there is no shame or repercussions from society for the abusers as it is normalised.

After reporting violence, women are, generally, told that they need to alter their actions in order to prevent abuse. They are told that their actions

and behaviour caused the abuse and that they need to change to reconcile with their abusers. In a Human Rights Watch report, one Tajik woman stated that while she was attempting to report abuse, the authorities interrupted her saying “aren’t you yourself to blame?” The police then reportedly called the woman’s husband, exposing her whereabouts, and telling her “everything will work out fine. Go home”.[16] This example of victim-blaming reinforces the idea that abusers are justified in their actions and is a significant barrier to tackling domestic violence in Tajikistan.



Tajik women at a legal information session (Helvetas, 2023)

Resources and Aid for Victims

There is a lack of adequate resources and aid for victims of domestic violence in Tajikistan. For example, there are only four specialised shelters despite having a population of approximately nine million people.[17] In addition, qualified professional psychologists and mental health counsellors are extremely hard to come across. This means that a majority of the help comes from non-governmental organisations, such as Hayot dar Oila, which is instrumental in providing legal and social services to women experiencing

domestic violence. Hayot dar Oila is supported and funded by the Spotlight Initiative, a global program of the United Nations—supported by the European Union to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls.[18]

However, the government has attempted to increase the availability of aid by establishing a National Hotline for Domestic Abuse in an effort to make aid accessible.

Moreover, there have been efforts to alter the police culture surrounding domestic violence and establish a protocol for handling cases. The Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence allows those who have been victims of domestic violence to file legal complaints against their abusers.[19] The law also grants the police the power to investigate cases based on eyewitness accounts. Abusers can finally be held accountable for their threats and actions, including after divorce. In an effort to enforce this legislation properly, the Ministry of Internal Affairs hired 14 female police officers and trained them, along with male police officers, on how to properly address domestic abuse cases.[20] They also hired police inspectors who specifically handle domestic abuse cases. This helps connect the community together which is vital for addressing and properly handling cases of abuse.



Attorney Christine Lin with training participants in Dushanbe (UCHastings, 2015)

Conclusion

Domestic violence is a major issue in Tajikistan that needs immediate action. Both the government and society need to enact major changes in order to reduce the rate of domestic violence. There needs to be more awareness of the dangers and harms that abuse has on the victims, their children, and society as a whole. Establishing a hotline for domestic abuse is a good start to bringing awareness to the issue, but more needs to be done. The most important thing is to criminalise domestic violence. This will show that domestic abuse will not be tolerated and will show victims that they deserve better. Furthermore, the international community needs to increase pressure on the Tajik government to increase funding for resources, enact protection measures, and create punishments for abusers. Solving the domestic abuse issue in Tajikistan will not happen overnight, but changes will happen if the Tajik government, citizens, and the international community all work together.

Recommendations

- It is necessary that funding for programs be increased. The state has not prioritised funding such services from the central budget. [21] Money needs to be allocated to educating the public on the severity of domestic abuse as it violates human rights. There also needs to be an education campaign on how to support victims who are struggling to adjust to life after escaping. Education is key in combatting this issue as it teaches the warning signs of abuse, resources for victims, and compassion. Education on the topic lowers the risk of becoming an abuser.[22]
- To reduce the stigma and lack of awareness about domestic violence, society needs to shift blame from the victim to the perpetrator. The government has failed to communicate a consistent public message of zero tolerance which reinforces the idea that women and girls should be “controlled.”

- The Tajik government should abide by the legal obligations that it has committed to, and the international community needs to ensure that all the obligations are being met. Tajikistan needs to be held accountable.
- It is necessary to criminalise domestic abuse and hold abusers accountable for their actions. As previously mentioned, all the laws that have been enacted to prevent domestic abuse, do not have provisions criminalizing it. This needs to be the next step, since not criminalising domestic abuse gives the impression that domestic abuse is allowed and normalised.

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Protections for people with disability in Central Asia

Maria Sole Brigati

Key takeaways

- All Central Asian countries safeguard the rights of people with disabilities in their legal frameworks. However, they have often failed to put in practice efficient policies to guarantee people with disabilities the same rights, opportunities and freedom as those enjoyed by the rest of society.
- In the last few years, governments in the region have adopted policies and began practical projects to ensure and promote the rights of people with disabilities.
- Most of these policies are having a positive outcome, and involve cooperation with international organisations, such as the United Nations.

Introduction

Most services and infrastructure in the five Central Asian countries are not accessible to people with disabilities, who are often isolated by the society and discriminated against. The lack of inclusive policies and proper services is arguably due to the definition of disability adopted by the region. All of them still embrace a medical definition of disability, which defines it as a medical condition originated by impairments. However, this description is now considered obsolete, and disabilities are seen not only as medical conditions, but also influenced by the social environment around people. This new way of looking at disability has been adopted by the United Nations and is rooted in a human-rights model. In the Convention on the Rights of Persons with

Disabilities (CRPD), the UN recognises that “disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”.^[1] Therefore, the UN stresses the importance of the human interaction and the environment barriers people with disability face when defining disability.

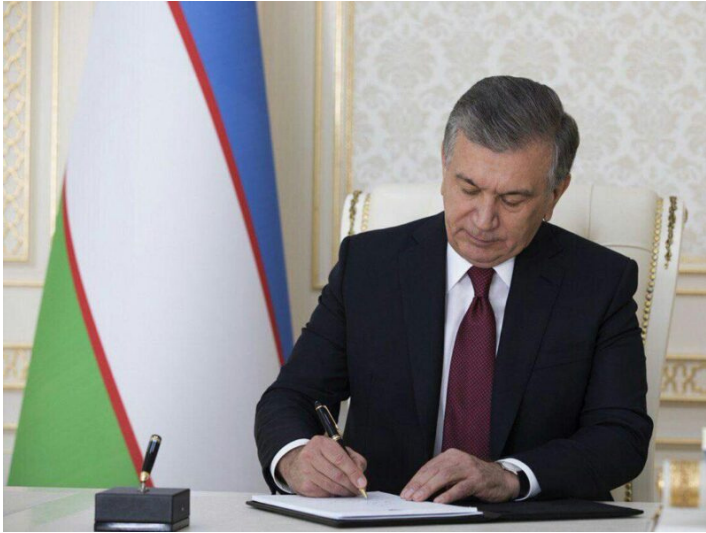
Over the past 15 years, all Central Asian countries have signed the CRPD^[2], obligating them to be more inclusive towards people with disability and remove barriers to their active participation in society. While their definition of the problem is still unchanged, all the countries have recently developed policies to create greater equality and justice between their citizens and to conform to principles of the CRPD.

This report will explain the current situation for people with disability in each Central Asian country. This will include legal frameworks, general norms and principles adopted by each country and the latest actions taken.

Uzbekistan

In December 2019, official statistics reported that there were 693,900 people with disabilities in Uzbekistan, around the 2.1% of the population.^[3]

The Uzbek legal system has two main laws on the protection of people with disability. The first one, adopted in 1991 and amended in 2008, is called “On Social Protection of Disabled People” and guarantees that people with disabilities have the right to access public infrastructure,



President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev ratifies the CRPD on May 29, 2021 (Picture: Xalq So'zi; on Dilmurad, 2021)

education, rehabilitation, social protection and employment.[4] The second is “On the Rights of People with Disabilities” and introduces basic principles for ensuring the rights of people with disabilities, such as the respect of their independence, dignity and freedom, as well as the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

In 2009, the Uzbek government signed the CRPD and ratified it in 2021, which obliges the state to “ensure and promote the full realisation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all persons with disabilities without discrimination of any kind.”[5]. However, while these policies and the signing of the CRPD are positive steps towards an inclusive and less discriminatory society, the Uzbek government still needs to do more.

In a qualitative study conducted by Yusupov and Abdukhalilov in 2022, 21 people with disabilities living in Tashkent, affirmed to not being able to enjoy their rights as normal citizens due to institutional, attitudinal and environmental barriers. Such barriers prevent them from being independent and lead to social exclusion.

In terms of institutional barriers, people with disabilities have higher levels of unemployment, with only 7.1% in work. This is partly due to the Uzbek legal framework on the matter, which, according to the people interviewed by Yusupov and Abdukhalilov, demotivates employers to hire

people with disabilities.[6] While the legal framework provides people with disabilities some benefits in employment, such as working less hours per week while gaining the same salary, there is no incentive for the employer to hire people with disability. This is a similar problem in the education sector. Children with disabilities do not attend the same schools as other children, and instead go to specific institutes for children with special needs. This division causes them to grow up separate from the rest of the children, making more the difficult their introduction within the society.[7]

People with disabilities also face attitudinal barriers. In Uzbekistan, no training or education is provided to inform citizens on disabilities and this lack of education and awareness has prevented the eradication of discrimination and has instead strengthened prejudices. For example, children with disabilities are considered not able to receive the same level of education and adults with disability are believed to be incapable of working.[8]

Uzbekistan has strong environmental barriers against people with disabilities. In 2020, the Public Council under the Tashkent khokimiyat, the city administration, affirmed that in the Uzbek capital more than the 85% of public transportation and infrastructure are not adapted to the necessities of people with disabilities.[9]

In an effort to remove these environmental barriers, Uzbekistan and the UN launched the 2-year Joint Programme on Rights of People with Disabilities in May 2022.[10]. The Programme focused on leaving no one behind and it aims to “build a sustainable, inclusive and transformative future where everyone can realise their potential” by making the government “work directly with people with disabilities”, as declared by the UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan.[11]

Finally, Uzbekistan was elected a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council for 2021–2023. This is a great opportunity for the government to prioritise the implementation of

policies that improve the lives of people with disability, strengthen their legal protections and ensure their active participation in society.[12]



UNDP Uzbekistan (UNDP, 2023)

Kyrgyzstan

According to the National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, there are approximately 198,000 people with disabilities registered in the country, around the 10.5% of the entire population.[13]

In 2011, Kyrgyzstan signed the CRPD and ratified it in 2019, obliging the government to ensure and promote the rights of people with disabilities.[14] [15] As part of this commitment, in October 2020, the government began an initiative to educate citizens about disabilities to help decrease prejudice and discrimination. The government has also moved to increase the participation of people with disabilities in social and political organisations by creating special positions for this cohort and educating them on their legal rights.[16]

Domestically, the Kyrgyz government safeguards the rights of people with disabilities within its legal framework. Article 16 of the Kyrgyz Constitution guarantees the equal worth and dignity of all individuals, states equality before the law of everyone and affirms the non-discrimination principle. Article 134 of the Penal Code criminalises the violation of citizens' equality and the right to work and have equal opportunities is established by Article 9 of the Kyrgyz Labour Code. Law No. 38 "On the Rights and Guarantees of Persons with Disabilities"

affirms the protection of people with disabilities' rights, including their participation in society, and their right to work and be educated.[17]

Policy-wise, the government has attempted to address attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities. The Ministry of Labor and Social Development ordered to develop the course "Coverage of disability topic", which aims to provide journalists, bloggers and influencers the necessary professional background to cover the topic of disability without fostering prejudices. [18]

In 2020, the government cooperated with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the mapping company 2GIS and the Red Crescent volunteers to support the creation of an interactive map of the capital Bishkek. The map identifies all disability-friendly structures and public infrastructures which can be accessed by everyone.[19]

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In the same year, the government declared disability inclusion a priority area until 2040. In-line with this objective, the "Accessible Country" programme was approved in February 2023 and will last until April 2030.[20] The programme aims to optimise medical expertise and rehab systems for people with disabilities and create a more inclusive system to access education, work, public infrastructure and transportation.[21] The Kyrgyz Ministry of Labor, Social Welfare and Migration stated that it was "confident that the approval of the State Program 'Accessible Country' and its implementation will help create equal conditions for access to work, justice, healthcare, and education for all categories of citizens." [22]

Like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan will take part into the United Nations Human Rights Council from this year onwards. This is a good opportunity for the government to strengthen the human rights of people with disability and continue to implement relevant programmes [23].



UNDP Kyrgyzstan (UNDP, 2021)

Kazakhstan

According to the Kazakh Interior Ministry, more than 705,000 people with disabilities live in the country, meaning around the 4% of the entire population.[24]

Legally, the rights of people with disabilities are protected by Law 39 “On Social Protection of Disabled Persons in the Republic of Kazakhstan”, which guarantees equal opportunities and treatment to people with disabilities, as well as their integration within the society.[25]

Kazakhstan signed the CRPD in 2008 and ratified it in 2015. However, it has failed to meet its obligations. Kazakhstan has been criticised by the UN, which, in 2017 noted that people with disabilities were still excluded by society and more action was needed in the educational, legal capacity and political fields.[26]

To rectify this, the government approved the National Plan for Ensuring Rights and Improving Quality of Life of Persons with Disabilities in 2019 and it is planned to last until 2025.[27] The Plan aims to put in practice 64 measures concerning improvement of rehabilitation and social services, accessible education and employment

and to decrease of environmental and attitudinal barriers.[28] The implementation of the Plan has seen improvements in many parts of the country. For example, the government produced and delivered electronic wheelchairs for people with limited mobility and intervened on the national health system to unify the prices of health services and to guarantee equal access. The government has also paid particular attention to education and employment for people with disabilities. At the end of 2020, more than 334 schools increased their level of inclusivity by admitting children with disabilities.[29]

In a similar policy to Kyrgyzstan, the government has also developed a mobile app to map all accessible infrastructure. This is as important step in addressing environmental barriers that people with disability face in Kazakhstan.[30]

In December 2022, during a meeting of Kazakh commissioners, the Vice-Minister of Labor and Social Protection Sagindykova declared that “the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection is making every effort to ensure the realisation of citizens’ rights. We have begun work on the creation of an institution to protect the rights of, in particular, people with disabilities.”[31]

Kazakhstan was also elected a member of the Human Rights Council for 2022-2024. Like Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, this represents an opportunity to protect and improve upon the rights of people with disabilities.[32]

Turkmenistan

In Turkmenistan there is no reliable data on the number of people with disabilities. However, in 2015, the government stated there were 9,809 people with disabilities, less than 0.18% of the population.[33]

Legally, people with disabilities are protected by the 2013 Code on the Social Protection of the Population. This law focuses on limiting as much as possible discrimination in the fields of education, employment, access to health care

and rehab, and provision of state services [34]. The Law on Education and the Law on State guarantees equal education for all children and stipulates that children with disabilities must have access to education provided by the same institutes attended by children without disabilities.[35] Finally, the Labor Code of the country explicitly declares that there should be no discrimination against people with disabilities in employment.[36]

In September 2008, Turkmenistan ratified the CRPD. However, in 2011 the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights declared it was “concerned that the provision of social assistance and welfare benefits for persons with disabilities was inadequate in the country.” This suggests the government was slow in enacting legislation, policies and programmes to assist people with disabilities since the ratification.[37] Starting from 2020 and until 2025, UNICEF has supported the government “to achieve the overall result that by 2025, all boys and girls in Turkmenistan, especially those with disabilities, equitably enjoy quality inclusive education and learning opportunities that develop their competencies and foster their well-being.”[38] To do this, UNICEF “will increase policy advice and technical support to the Ministry of Education”.

Additionally, in 2018, the government started promoting work access and possibilities for people with disabilities by supporting the

convergence of the public and the private sector. The included cooperating with the UN and the NGO Yenme, which supports socially vulnerable people, including people with disabilities.[39]

These attempts at enacting policies and programs to improve the lives of people with disabilities suggests the government of Turkmenistan is taking steps in the right direction. However, there is still much more work to do in safeguarding the rights of this cohort and removing barriers to inclusion.

Tajikistan

In Tajikistan there are approximately 150,000 people with disabilities, 1.6% of the entire population.[40]

Legally, the Tajik government safeguards its citizen, including people with disabilities, through Law 675, which ensures social protection and equal opportunities within society.[41] Another is Article 25 of the Law on Social Protection, which stipulates that the government must reduce environmental barriers to allow people with disabilities to access all the public infrastructure. [42] Articles 35 and 41 of the Tajik Constitution stipulate the rights to work and to get education for everyone, including people with disabilities.

However, Tajikistan has been criticized for having an inadequate legal framework and policy initiatives for people with disabilities. In 2018, research conducted by the International Partnership for Human Rights highlighted people with disabilities still faced social stigma, environmental barriers, and working and educational inequalities on a daily basis.[43] Consequently, in 2018 the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women encouraged “the State party to ratify the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”.[44] The CRPD was signed by the Tajik government in March 2018.



During the festival, over 150 people with disabilities and family members took part in a wide variety of adaptive sports (UN Turkmenistan, 2022)

In 2018, UNICEF, government agencies and civil society groups implemented a national campaign on disability inclusion within Tajikistan called “Each One of Us is Able”. The campaign aimed to promote social awareness of disability, discourage discriminatory attitudes towards children with disabilities and teach children with disabilities their rights and responsibilities.[45]

On 2 March, the Tajik government, together with the UN, organised a meeting with citizens with disabilities to understand their needs.[46] This included discussing the priorities of persons with disabilities, reviewed the existing legislation and policies, and providing recommendations to the government on changes as well as additional measures needed to improve them.[47]



Ashgabat Turkish Center in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan (UNDP, 2022)

Conclusion

In Central Asia, people with disabilities continue to face social stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation.

The challenges people with disabilities continue to face in the region is arguably in contravention to the domestic laws in all of the five countries as well as their obligations under the CRPD. However, some of the countries have made efforts to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities, such as implementing National Plans and cooperating with the UN and its agencies.

Overall, government policies and programmes provide hope that, in the near future, there may be an increase of quality of life for people with disabilities’ by promoting their participation in society, employment and education. There is also hope that spreading information on the problem may finally eradicate social stigma and prejudices.

Recommendations

- Central Asian countries need to embrace a broader definition of disability, namely they should switch from the medical one to the human-rights based one. Indeed, the human-right based definition is essential to identify all the citizens living with a kind of disability and to provide them the medical, social and legal help they need.
- Central Asian countries need to adhere to their international legal obligations as per the CRPD. They need to put more effort into ensuring and promoting the realisation of people with disabilities’ rights and freedoms.
- Central Asian governments should cooperate with the UN and its agencies to determine consistent policy positions on disability. To do so, they could strengthen national governments’ capacities through works coordinated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ and Regional Office for Central Asia.
- Since Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Central Asian region could easily get international support for the implementation of human rights centred programs.

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contact: office@peacehumanity.org

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