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Central Asia

Issue 6

December 2023

Foreword

Notable events in Central Asia revolved around diplomatic breakthroughs,, natural disasters and ongoing human rights issues.

The historic CA5+1 meeting in New York with United States President Biden and the 5th Heads of State Meeting in Dushanbe have given Central Asia an opportunity to act with increasing cohesion as region from a political, economic and diplomatic perspective. The regions involvement with China's Belt and Road Initiative also provides an opportunity for the region to increase its importance through trade and influence. But it remains to be seen if the US will remain interested in the region over the long term and if regional cohesion can survive policy differences in respective capitals.

The devastating earthquakes in western Afghanistan and Pakistan and Iran's expulsion of Afghan refugees has made a bad humanitarian situation in Afghanistan even worse, The Taliban and international communities response to the earthquakes has been lacklustre and Pakistan and Iran are arguably breaching international law in their mass expulsions of vulnerable people. As winter hits Afghanistan, all parties need to address these issues in order to stop further human suffering.

From a human rights perspective, Central Asian governments continue to repress the rights of their majority Muslim communities under the guise of tackling Islamic extremism and to shore up their authoritarian systems of government. Press freedom is also under attack in Kyrgyzstan - once a shining democratic light in the region - which raises concerns about the future of democracy and media freedom throughout Central Asia.



Balancing relations: An analysis of the Central Asia–United States Leaders’ Summit

Chris Fitzgerald

Key Takeaways

- The meeting between United States President Joe Biden and the leaders of the five states of Central Asia represents a move by Washington to improve a relationship it has historically ignored and represents an important pivot.
- Central Asian governments appear receptive and enthusiastic as they seek to distance themselves from Russian dominance and see an opportunity to leverage relationships with both the US and China.
- While both parties see geopolitical and economic benefits in greater ties, human rights groups have raised concerns about a lack of focus on legitimate human rights concerns in Central Asia, including crackdowns on peaceful protest, media organisations and civil society groups.

Introduction

The United States has always had some form of relationship with Central Asia. For example, the US was one of the first countries in the world to recognise their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.[1] Since, the US’ interactions with the region have been limited, outside of gaining help in its former operations in Afghanistan from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.[2] But US foreign policy in the region has appeared to have changed, with the US recently taking a “historic” step towards a closer relationship with Central Asia.[3] President Biden’s meeting on 19 September with the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan at the United Nations in New York has being described by both parties as an opportunity to deepen the relationship.[4] The US is keen to expand diplomatically and counter Russian and Chinese influence. Central Asian states are interested in ties to the US to help solve local problems and counter problematic neighbours. But questions remain about the relationship. Is the US as committed as advertised while it is focused on China in the South China Sea and is Central Asia playing off all of China, Russia and the US in its search for security and economic prosperity. The developments and outcomes of the recent US–Central Asia summit will determine where the relationship is headed and what consequences it will have for the region.



Central Asian leaders with President Biden (Office of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023)

Outcomes of the CA5+1 Summit

The latest summit is not the first between the US and the Central Asian states. There has been a formal arrangement in place since 2015 where Central Asian foreign ministers have met with the US Secretary of State. The format has been used by US governments to effectively treat the

region as a combined entity and discuss foreign policy, economic cooperation, security issues and a deepening of diplomatic ties.[5]

But September's CA5+1 Summit has been billed as a significant change in the US relationship with Central Asia. President Biden's attendance – the first by a US president – is noteworthy, particularly because no US president has visited Central Asia and because this is the first time the leaders of all six countries have met.[6] Official statements from the meeting reflect the view that there is a desire from all parties to improve and strengthen the relationship. In an official statement, President Biden stated the six countries were “taking our cooperation to new heights”.[7] A joint statement echoed similar sentiments, stating that the leaders “recognize the new atmosphere of the partnership under the C5+1 framework” and that they “reaffirm the value of the format and commit to strengthen cooperation.”[8]



Flags of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, the United States and Uzbekistan at the CA5+1 Summit (Astana Times, 5 October 2023)

Security, borders and migration

The summit tackled several issues seen as important for both the US and Central Asia. This included discussions on security, trade and investment, regional connectivity, sovereignty and territorial integrity and reforms on governance and the rule of law.[9] More specifically, the summit discussed the need for security cooperation, including on issues like

Taliban-rule and ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, counterterrorism, border security and migration.[10] These are seen as priorities for Central Asian leaders, who are wary of spill over effects from instability in Afghanistan, such as the flow of refugees and spread of Islamic extremism, which Central Asia has long fought and repressed. This is equally a key concern for the US, who left Afghanistan in chaotic circumstances in August 2021, effectively leaving it to the Taliban. The US would prefer an approach where the region effectively solves its own problems. Assisting Central Asia with security is seen by Washington as a hands-off approach that avoids Afghanistan becoming a larger regional problem.

Economic opportunities

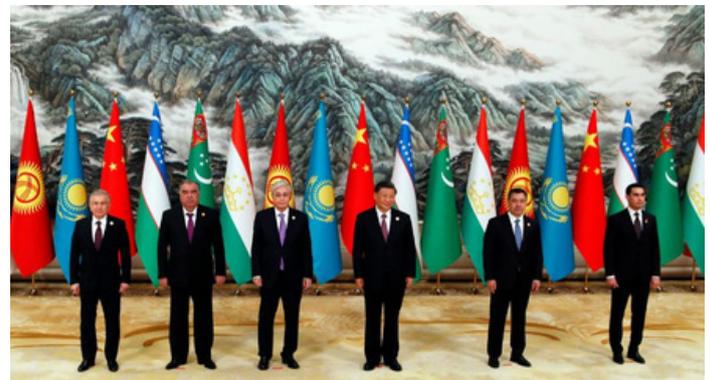
From an economic perspective, trade and opportunities for private investment were also discussed. This is of keen interest to both parties. In 2020, the US State Department reported the US private sector had invested more than \$31 billion in Central Asia and that the region was interested in attracting more. [11] Central Asian states also voiced their support for the need for water security, a transition to clean energy and proposed the creation of a ‘C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue’ that would facilitate investment in the region’s mineral wealth, including copper and lithium. [12] This would be welcome news to President Biden, who has pushed a clean energy transition in the US.[13] Both can be seen as a move by the US to become more economically engaged with a region increasingly seen as a link between Europe and East Asia and one that has been ignored by the US for decades. Washington appears keen to deepen economic engagement in a region traditionally tied to Russia. It also allows the US to take advantage of trade routes to the South, Southeast and East Asia that are currently dominated by China. Better US engagement from an economic perspective may also suit Central Asia. For example, it is consistent with the “multi-vector diplomacy” promoted by

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who has promoted his country as a hub of business, commerce and technological innovation.[14] This was also consistent with the a statement from the president of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, who said after during the summit that Central Asia was interested in US investment due to its “significant natural wealth, large reserves of energy resources and minerals and a skilled workforce”.[15]

Political opportunities

The US president also reaffirmed a commitment to the “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries under the UN Charter”. [16] This can be seen as a nod to Russia’s historical domination of the region and recent attempts by Central Asian countries to distance themselves from their northern neighbour. This has particularly been the case with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, who have expressed support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity after Russia’s invasion[17] and with no Central Asian state voting against UN General Assembly resolutions condemning the invasion.[18] This is supported by Eric Green, a former senior director for Russia and Central Asia at the US National Security Council, who has suggested Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has led to Central Asia seeking diplomatic ties elsewhere. Green stated that the meeting is a recognition of the “changing geopolitical environment in this region following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine” and that “this has prompted all countries, especially those bordering Russia, to reassess their political, economic and security postures, and I think there is an interest in diversification and balance”.[19] From a US perspective it is interested in taking advantage of Central Asia’s desire to seek partnerships elsewhere and sees it as an opportunity to convince regional leaders to not help Russia evade sanctions for its invasion. Both the US and European Union have been urging Central Asian governments to not help Russia since the latter’s invasion of Ukraine.[20] The US is also interested in bypassing Russia from a

trade perspective to open up lucrative trade routes to the east now that Russia is politically isolated.[21] Central Asia stands to benefit from this arrangement, with the region appearing willing to enhance its political and trade relationship with the west as a counter to Russian and Chinese influence. This was reflected in words from the Kyrgyz President, who stated that cooperation with the US was “one of the most important directions” for his country’s foreign policy and that “we advocate for a greater presence of foreign partners”.[22]



Central Asian leaders with Chinese President Xi Jinping at the China-Central Asia Summit in May 2023 (Radio Free Europe, August 2023)

Human rights

The importance of civil society, women’s economic empowerment and disability rights were also raised as important points by the US. [23] After the meeting, the White House stated that “President Biden advocated for continued support of civil society and women’s economic empowerment activities and encouraged a new C5+1 focus on mainstreaming disability rights across all sectors.”[24] This has disappointed international human rights organisations, which see these issues as important but safe areas of discussion for the US that do not hold Central Asian governments to account for concerns over human rights abuses. Before the meeting Human Rights Watch urged Biden to raise human rights issues in the region, stating the US should not its interest in Central Asia to “eclipse urgent human rights concerns”.[25] In particular, concerns

have been raised by human rights groups about crackdowns on peaceful protests in Kazakhstan in 2022 that resulted in arbitrary arrests, detention and the deaths of 238 people. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have also been accused of initiating restrictive laws on the media and civil society groups that have caused concern globally.[26] While the US sidestepping human rights concerns with prospective partners isn't new, it does point to a careful diplomatic approach where geopolitical and economic interests trump human rights, at least for the time being.

Conclusion

The CA5+1 Summit is undoubtedly a watershed in the relationship between the US and Central Asia. The US appears committed to deepen its political and economic relationship with the region for economic and trade benefits and because it may be able to gain influence in a region traditionally dominated by Russia and where China has significant economic and political clout. Statements from Central Asian leaders suggest they are equally interested. A closer relationship with the US allows the region to diversify both politically and economically. Economically, trade with the US is seen as beneficial and opens the region up to markets to the west. Politically, it allows the region to distance itself from Russian influence and hedge its relationship with China, which arguably wants to take the traditionally dominant place of Russia. But questions remain about whether the US will remain committed to the relationship over the long-term due to its current focus on the Israel-Hamas conflict and focus on China in the South China Sea and the impending election where isolationist Donald Trump looms large. China's existing role in the region may drive the US to continue investing in Central Asia from a political and economic perspective but it is vital that summits like the CA5+1 continue if the relationship is to evolve further.



President Joe Biden hosts a meeting with Central Asian presidents for the CA5+1 Summit at the US Mission to the United States in New York City (The Diplomat, 19 September 2023)

Recommendations

- The CA5+1 summit will be a success if actions follow the commitments made by President Biden. This means greater political and economic involvement in Central Asia over the long-term. This should include trade agreements, private investment and a continuation of foreign minister and president-level meetings and summits.
- While political and economic opportunities are important for the US, the Biden Administration should focus on legitimate human rights concerns in Central Asia and communicate to regional leaders that respecting human rights and international law is a vital part of the relationship moving forward.
- Central Asia should prepare for a scenario where US interest in the region is fleeting. A focus on multi-vector diplomacy - like Kazakhstan's - and maintaining diverse trade relationships is a good way of doing this.

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An analysis of the 5th Heads of State Consultative Meeting in Dushanbe

Marta Verano

Key takeaways

- The 5th Heads of State Consultative Meeting developed pragmatically, avoiding any mention of controversial political topics like Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Tajik-Kyrgyz border confrontation. Instead talks focused on economics, infrastructure and social and humanitarian cooperation.
- The development of trade featured heavily in the talks, as Central Asian governments seek to gain global competitiveness. For the first time, an agreement to develop the region's infrastructure with no third-party partners was established, taking advantage of the region's key position between Europe and Asia.
- The threat posed by instability in Afghanistan and water scarcity were the two main security concerns raised by Central Asian leaders. Statements on Afghanistan were vague and pragmatic due to differing relations with the Taliban. On water security, no new agreements were reached, despite it continuing to be one of the key topics for cooperation in the region.
- The meeting saw the establishment of a Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia to monitor implementation. This paves the way for Central Asian regionalism to become increasingly predominant and ensures the continuity of the outcomes reached during the meeting.



The five Central Asian Presidents plus the President of Azerbaijan at the Fifth Heads of State Consultative Meeting in Dushanbe. Source: Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Introduction

The meeting took place in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on 14 September 2023. The presidents of Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were present, and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev attended the Meeting as the guest of honour.[1] The Meeting was the fifth in a series of annual reunions that started in 2018, aiming to foster dialogue and improve regional cooperation.[2]

This year's meeting took place against the backdrop of what has been an eventful 12-months for the region. The presidents met for the first time since the deadly clashes in the border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2022.[3] In Afghanistan, two years after the Taliban takeover, the social and humanitarian crisis continues to worsen, posing a threat to stability in the region.[4] At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, now well into its second year, continues to challenge the region's external relations, trapped between the Russian sphere of influence and a newfound

interest from the West in establishing closer ties with the CA5.[5] As Central Asia continues to gain international importance, the meetings outcomes provide critical insights into the region's priorities and direction for the foreseeable future.



President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev greets Tajik President Emomali Rahmon (Azertac, 2023)

Avoiding politics? Central Asian pragmatism

Central Asia as a region has come to be known for maintaining its pragmatism in times of controversy. Particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the region has balanced an increasingly open stance towards the West, while avoiding a deteriorating relationship with their old ally in Moscow.[6] Central Asian governments have largely steered clear of making polarizing statements that could tip the region's favor in one direction or another. The meeting in question was no different. Throughout the meeting, the focus was on economics, infrastructural development, and social and humanitarian cooperation, with no political talking points on the agenda and barely any mention of pressing geopolitical issues.[7] The Tajik-Kyrgyz decades-long border dispute, which spurred some deadly clashes last year, in what has been termed "the worst conflict in Central Asia in years" did not feature on the agenda.[ii] Neither did the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the fallout from which the region continues to navigate two years on.[8][9]

However, in talks parallel to the meeting, Kyrgyz National Security Committee head Kamchybek Tashiev reportedly made a controversial statement regarding their border dispute with Tajikistan. The official suggested that Kyrgyzstan had found historical documents indicating that parts of Tajikistan used to be in Kyrgyzstan and stated, "if the neighbouring country (Tajikistan) does not withdraw its territorial demands, we will push (our findings) forward."[10] The statement was not well received in Tajikistan, where the Foreign Minister summoned the Kyrgyz Ambassador to discuss the controversial comments.[11] Back at the meeting, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov left the summit early, reportedly "due to his tight working agenda", which could be seen as a snub to Tajikistan.[12]

Towards trade, development and regional interconnectivity

Trade development was one of the main talking points throughout the meeting. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoev proposed the creation of a free trade zone by "eliminating barriers to mutual trade and creating common electronic platforms for customs administrations (...) as well as the launch of a regional e-commerce platform".[13] Kazakh President Qasym-Jomart Tokayev called for a plan to increase mutual trade turnover by removing existing barriers, reducing excessive protectionism, and establishing transparent and stable trade conditions.[14] These proposals speak to Central Asia's growing wish to position itself as a competitor in global markets.

In the context of furthering the region's economic development, a need for better interconnectivity was also brought up. As Kazakh President Khassim-Jomart Tokayev explained, the region's geographical distance from key world markets affects its competitiveness, as high transport costs increase the price of exports.[15] For this reason, the last few years have seen multiple advancements in this area, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Now more than ever, there is an appetite for alternative routes connecting Europe to Asia, bypassing Russia. The

Middle Corridor, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project, and the Belt and Road Initiative projects are all examples of infrastructure projects developed in the region in partnership with other countries.[16][17] As it stands, most of the region's key transport developments have been in collaboration with third parties. However, there have rarely been exclusive efforts by Central Asian countries to improve connectivity, which is crucial to a landlocked region. During the meeting, multiple statements regarding the importance of improving regional interconnectedness were made by the heads of state, and a first meeting of the transport ministers of Central Asian countries was organized, adopting a joint communiqué on cooperation in transport and logistics.[18]



The 5th Heads of State Consultative Meeting in Dushanbe (Azertac, 2023)

This constitutes a significant step in the emergence of Central Asia as a consolidated regional group, cooperating in projects to make the region as a whole more competitive and less dependent on other global powers. Taking advantage of its geographical position, the region is increasingly seeking to position itself as a leading logistics partner, cooperating within the group to develop its capabilities and value offering.

Security issues in the region

The topic of security also featured heavily on the meeting's agenda. In the context of the ongoing instability in Afghanistan, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon expressed his worry over the recent attempted border incursions by Jamaat Ansarullah, the Afghanistan-based Islamist extremist group.[19] He claimed that they had "aimed to commit a series of terrorist attacks in the capital and other regions of Tajikistan".[20] The heads of state highlighted the importance of an independent, united, and peaceful Afghanistan as a way to solve these problems. They restated their commitment to assist the Afghan people in overcoming the humanitarian and economic crises.[21] Barring the concerns raised by Tajikistan, the pragmatic statements made on this topic were mainly along the lines of previous comments made by the heads of state. Since their 2021 takeover, geographical proximity has motivated especially Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to foster some degree of diplomatic relations with the Taliban government.[22] The vague statements provided looked to once again avoid a polarizing stance regarding the Taliban. Differing positions vis à vis the Taliban are preventing the CA5 from forming a united front on the issue, with Tajikistan being the regime's most outspoken critic, and the rest of countries balancing some form of diplomatic relations with it.

Water security has too long been a worry for leaders in the region. Among persistent droughts and scarce water resources, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov proposed to launch a renewal of and improved cooperation within the framework of a 1998 agreement on the use of water and energy resources in the Naryn/Syr-Darya basin, which pertains to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.[23] The deal, over 25 years old, has seen compliance wane as resources have deteriorated. Climate change has also been a topic of concern that has seen the most regional collaboration.[24] Nevertheless, as conditions continue to worsen, a renewed, robust institutional framework for

sharing water resources is more necessary than ever.



The Middle Corridor among trade corridors connecting Europe and Asia. (World Bank, 2023)

New outlooks on Central Asian regionalism

Central Asian regionalism has seen a long history of unsuccessful attempts to establish deeper integration. During the 2022 Consultative Meeting, Kazakhstan started a discussion for a treaty aiming to bring the five states closer amidst an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape, as conflicts in the region and its surroundings continue to challenge them, while receiving increased attention from major world powers.[25] The ambitious initiative received signatures from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, but Tajikistan and Turkmenistan hesitated as they claimed they would sign the treaty after “undergoing domestic procedures”, which ultimately forced the treaty into oblivion.[26] While some watchers expected discussions to be taken up again this year, no mention of the treaty was made during the meeting. Instead, a more informal approach was followed, yet significant steps towards institutionalizing regionalism were taken.

Still, as a result of the meeting, five documents were signed by the heads of state: A Joint statement of the Heads of State, an Agreement on Strengthening the Interconnectedness of Land Transport in Central Asia, an agreement between the Central Asian countries on general directions

of youth policy, regulations on the Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings of the Heads of Central Asian States, and an Approved roadmap to support health and well-being in Central Asia for 2022-2025.[27]

Amongst these, the Regulation on the Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia stands out. The document establishes a cohort of national coordinators that will monitor the implementation of the agreements signed during meetings and come up with new proposals to further collaboration.[28] This shows a willingness to perpetuate regional collaboration by creating the mechanisms for the follow-up and continuation of cooperation.

Meanwhile, for the first time, a leader from outside Central Asia was invited to participate in the meeting. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev attended as an “honoured guest”.[29] In fact, CA5+1 summits, in which Central Asia as a consolidated group meet with a third party, are becoming increasingly common. Just days after the Fifth Heads of State Consultative Meeting and in the context of the 78th UN General Assembly, all Central Asian governments met with United States President Joe Biden.[30] In the lead-up to the meeting Central Asian governments also attended the third China-Central Asia summit and a meeting with European Council President Charles Michel.[31] The regular occurrence of these CA5+1 high-level meetings indicates a growing international interest in the region, but also an increasing wish on the part of the region to be recognized as a solid regional block.

And yet, the establishment of a regular appointment for all Central Asian countries to meet without the presence of an external ‘plus one’ is indicative of the region’s efforts to, slowly but surely, become more integrated, show a united front, and cooperate on issues that affect all of them.

Conclusion

In discourse and practice, Central Asia is becoming an increasingly consolidated regional block, showing a united voice and front in crucial issues that affect the region. Despite not mentioning pressing political topics, the meeting's focus on furthering cooperation for trade, infrastructure, climate change, and security indicates a growing will to tackle these issues together, overcoming tensions and fractures within the region. At the same time, some shy steps towards institutionalization have been taken, although there is still a long way to go. The countries' pragmatism continues to interject itself on the road to more drastic action, as they are unable to take a common stance on more sensitive topics, likely preventing deeper integration. For now, Central Asian regionalism continues to solidify with the Fifth Heads of State Consultative Meeting offering a promising outlook on the region's future.

- A more robust institutional framework will be necessary to deepen cooperation in the region. A good first step to take in the 2024 Consultative Meeting will be to reignite the debate surrounding the treaty proposed by Kazakhstan in 2022.
- As Central Asia becomes increasingly attractive to world powers like Europe, China, and the US, their ability to show a united front and maintain open dialogue regionally becomes more important than ever. It is essential that the Central Asian Heads of State continue to meet and collaborate when the opportunity arises in order to continue boosting the region's international positioning.



Representatives at the summit in Dushanbe (Azertac, 2023)

Recommendations

- The newly formed Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia will be a crucial instrument in the development of regional cooperation. They must follow through and ensure that the products of the meeting will come to fruition and have a meaningful impact.

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An overview of the October earthquakes in western Afghanistan and the humanitarian response

Sabrina Lavrut

Key takeaways

- Afghanistan experienced a series of earthquakes and subsequent aftershocks in October in the country's west. 1,480 people have died and 114,000 people need urgent assistance. Thousands of homes and non-residential structures have been damaged. The earthquakes have exacerbated an already acute humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.
- Women and children reportedly make up 90 per cent of fatalities, with both cohorts trapped in their homes due to Taliban restrictions on their movement. Both are disproportionately affected and exposed to harm because of their lack of rights and difficulty accessing humanitarian aid.
- Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Qatar were quick to respond to the earthquakes with offers of humanitarian aid and assistance to support affected communities. The Taliban have reportedly rejected aid from Pakistan due to strained relations.
- United Nations agencies have appealed for over \$53.5 million (US) to sufficiently aid and rebuild affected communities. However, the international community has so far only provided 33 per cent of the appealed funds.

Introduction

On 7 October, a magnitude 6.3 earthquake hit the western provinces of Afghanistan, resulting in entire villages being destroyed and

approximately 1,480 people killed.[1] This was followed by two strong aftershocks within 30 minutes measuring another 6.3 and 5.9 magnitude respectively.[2] The impact of these earthquakes on an already fragile Afghanistan has been severe, with around 29 million people already in need of humanitarian assistance following four decades of conflict, poverty and drought.[3] Since the first earthquake struck, countries in the region, humanitarian organisations and local and international organisations have vowed to send funding and aid to the region, but the response from the wider international community has been lacking. This article will provide an analysis of the impact of the earthquakes in the region and the humanitarian response by the Taliban and the international community.

Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis

Afghanistan has faced several problems for decades, a result of years of instability, conflict



The local response to the Herat earthquake (Al Jazeera, 2023)

and high levels of poverty. The withdrawal of United States–led international forces in August 2021, and the subsequent return of the Taliban, has made the situation in Afghanistan even worse.[4] The return of the Taliban led to the international community suspending development aid and Afghan assets, which led to an acute economic crisis.[5] This has led to it being the largest humanitarian crisis. The Centre for Disaster Philanthropy has stated the country faces a “very real risk of systemic collapse and human catastrophe”.[6] Before the earthquakes, more than half the population required humanitarian assistance due to rising poverty, food insecurity and the effects of drought. In 2023, approximately 17 million people faced acute hunger, with 6 million people experiencing emergency levels of food insecurity.[7] Afghanistan is also highly prone to natural disasters, seen with heavy flooding in July 2023 which destroyed homes and crops and left many injured, missing and dead.[8] The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that Afghanistan is also facing “its third consecutive year of drought”, [9] which in turn risks future earthquakes as drought can deteriorate existing fault lines. The recent earthquakes and aftershocks have exacerbated what is an already dire situation in Afghanistan and provide a timely reminder of the problems Afghans continue to face.

Impact of the earthquakes

The earthquakes and subsequent aftershocks have caused widespread damage in the west of Afghanistan. According to a preliminary report from OCHA, around 11,585 people were impacted and over 1,660 people were injured.[10] Two more earthquakes of 6.3 magnitude hit the region on 11 and 15 October [11] and three more shocks were felt on 23, 26 and 28 November with magnitudes of 4.7, 4.3 and 4.5.[12] The OCHA has reported that 48,000 households have been affected with 10,000 homes destroyed, leaving many without a home and just rubble to sleep on.[13]

Hospitals in the region have faced severe damage, leaving people without adequate healthcare and historical monuments, such as Herat’s Blue Mosque, have been destroyed[v] only months after being renovated.[14] OCHA has also reported that 1.6 million Afghans were affected with “high intensity shaking”, leaving more than 114,000 people in need of urgent assistance.[15] Furthermore, 4,700 families had been displaced,[16] with 13 villages destroyed by the earthquakes.[17] All figures are subject to change as humanitarian teams continue to assess the damage and whilst the country continues to face waves of aftershocks.[18]



Local Afghans attempt to clear rubble in Herat province (Doctors without Borders, 2023)

Women and children

Women and children have been disproportionately impacted by the earthquakes. According to UN Women, the vast majority of fatalities, 90 per cent, were from this cohort and also accounted for approximately 60 per cent of the injured and missing.[19]

The Taliban's policies, along with restrictive gender norms, are the reason women and girls were the most affected by the earthquakes. The regime has been extremely negligent towards the rights of women and has created an institutionalised exclusion of women, suppressing their rights.[20] Women have been denied their basic human rights such as in education and employment [21] and women have also been banned from public spaces and travel without a male chaperone, along with strict clothing restrictions.[22] A report from the Special Rapporteur for Afghanistan and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls in October expressed there is "grave, systematic and institutionalised discrimination against women and girls" which "is at the heart of Taliban ideology and rules which also gives rise to concerns that they may be responsible for gender apartheid".[23]

Women and children account for so many deaths because they are often unable to leave their homes and many women lost employment after the Taliban returned.[24] Girls have also been barred from school beyond sixth grade leaving them with no choice but to stay at home with their mothers.[25] For this reason, many women and girls were in their homes at the time of the earthquakes. Due to the poor economic situation, many of the men and male relatives of women went to Iran to find work and therefore, were not in the country at the time of the earthquakes.[26] Alison Davidian, The UN Special Representative for Women in Afghanistan, said in a message to the associated press on the 22 October that "when natural disasters strike, women and girls are

impacted the most and often considered the least in crisis, response and recovery" and "the earthquakes when combined with the ongoing humanitarian and women's rights crisis, have made the situation not only difficult for women and girls but deadly".[27]

Post-earthquake, Afghan women face hardships due to restrictive cultural norms and Taliban rules. Without homes, they can't share tents, access aid without male relatives, or leave homes due to a lack of religious clothing. UN Women notes this struggle, emphasizing the need for female aid workers.[28] Additionally, women responders in Herat's hospital report a shortage of menstrual products and underwear, adding to the challenges faced by women in the aftermath.[29]



People use construction machines and even simple tools like shovels and picks to remove the debris in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquakes (Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2023)

Women's freedom in the country has been restricted and the earthquakes have further exacerbated this issue, with many female-headed households suffering from homelessness, and lack of medical care, funding and aid. Furthermore, the deep psychological trauma in female communities is likely to increase with limited mental health services to help them. In October, Dr Khatera Azami, a nutrition counsellor at CARE Herat pleaded that

“thousands of traumatised women and girls in Herat need urgent psychosocial support (which) are just as urgent a need as healthcare services for affected communities”.[30]

UN Women interviewed Hanifa, an affected Afghan woman who was eight months pregnant when she fell hitting her belly during the earthquake. She recounts her experience revealing “the ground was shaking in a strange way, almost like waves crashing into me”, “I realised that I had severe bleeding, I tried to find someone to help me, but the air was so filled with cries and screams that there was little chance of hearing my voice”.[31] Hanifa managed to drag herself towards female neighbours as she started to go into labour and gave birth in the cold rain. Unfortunately, Hanifa lost her newborn moments later as there were no blankets or medical aid to protect her child from the cold. Her story is among thousands of other women in Afghanistan whose lives were faced with tragedy following the earthquakes.



Patients inside an MSF emergency tent at Herat Regional Hospital (Doctors without Borders, 2023)

Health

Hospitals, doctors and healthcare workers are struggling following the earthquakes. Multiple reports expressed concerns before October that millions of people in Afghanistan would have no food, healthcare or shelter this winter due to “critical funding gaps”.[32] Jan Egeland,

Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told Voice of America in August that “what is at stake in Afghanistan this winter is the lives of millions of starving women and children”. [33] From a healthcare perspective, 260 clinics went out of service in June due to funding gaps, leaving an estimated 2 million people without access to healthcare.[34] Making matters worse, the International Committee of the Red Cross ended the financial running of 25 Afghan hospitals in August due to funding constraints. [35] Healthcare facilities were also directly impacted by the earthquakes, with the Herat maternity hospital [36] and 40 other health facilities damaged.[37] The 650-bed Herat Regional Hospital is currently at full capacity, with limited resources and oxygen to treat patients. [38] The Taliban has yet to assume financial responsibility and effectively run Afghanistan’s health sector and this has left it vulnerable to disasters, like earthquakes. Instead, the country remains reliant on aid agencies to provide health care. For example, the World Health Organisation was active on the ground after the earthquake to provide healthcare services urgently to those in need, with 13 Mobile Health and Nutrition Teams deployed in the most affected villages.[39]

Humanitarian response

Domestic response

The earthquakes were difficult to initially respond to as the ground continued to shake for many hours and days with limited radio signal. A local journalist told the Afghanistan Analyst Network that “the phone networks were down and it was difficult to get any information in or out” and “it was only on the second day when news spread of the devastation that members of the public and the local authorities started”.[40] Due to the late arrival of aid and assistance, this contributed greatly to the high number of casualties as people were left trapped under the rubble. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid claimed that the group’s members arrived in the affected areas one hour following the 7 October

earthquake. However, this has been dismissed by local activists and volunteers.[41] Local aid coordinator, Rashid Azimi, stated there was no information available to residents and accused the Taliban of “very poor management of the disaster”.[42]

International response

The United Arab Emirates swiftly led the humanitarian response in Afghanistan, dispatching 35 teams with 1,000 members to Herat on 9 October.[43] The team of rescuers also reportedly provided water, sanitation, food and shelter with nurses to provide services for women. Collaborating with the UAE, the Taliban also claimed to have constructed temporary homes for winter preparation.[44] Islamic Relief, a humanitarian organisation, launched an emergency operation within 24 hours of the first quake.[45] Their efforts included providing cash to vulnerable groups, delivering 76,000 litres of water, distributing tents, and offering crucial psychosocial support for those grappling with trauma.[46] Kazakhstan also sent a team of rescuers, physicians and search dogs to Herat on 10 October.[47] Turkmenistan sent a humanitarian cargo plane carrying medical supplies, clothes and food with the support of the Charity for Needy Children Foundation.[48] On 2 December, a Qatari armed forces aircraft arrived in Herat carrying 50 tonnes of aid, basic food and shelter supplies provided by the Qatar Charity, the Qatar Fund for Development and the Qatar Red Crescent Society.[49]

However, not all the responses were straightforward. On 9 October, Pakistan's Prime Minister announced that medical aid would be sent to Afghanistan.[50] However, on 12 October, a Taliban official labelled his statement “irresponsible,” clarifying the aid from Islamabad wasn't requested by Kabul.[51] The Taliban declining Pakistan's aid reveals the strained relationship between the two countries, likely due to Pakistan's deportation of hundreds of thousands of Afghans. As of 6 December,

450,000 Afghans have been forcefully evicted from Pakistan.[52] This highlights the regional geopolitical complexities hindering the disaster response.

Relations between the Taliban and humanitarian organisations have also been strained, with donor commitments sharply decreasing.[53] Despite this, international organisations have made urgent appeals for funds which include the World Food Programme and UN Refugee Agency appealing for \$19 and \$14.4 million respectively.[54][55] UNICEF appealed for \$20 million to reach 200,000 people, including 96,000 children.[56] However, the response falls short, with only 33 per cent of the required amount secured to support affected individuals for the next six months.[57] So far, the United States has provided \$12 million [58] and the European Union 3.5 million Euros.[59]



The Red Cross responds to the earthquake with humanitarian aid (American Red Cross, 2023)

Conclusion

The October earthquakes have not only caused damage and human suffering but have exacerbated an already dire situation in Afghanistan. It has also highlighted that the Taliban is not equipped to adequately handle the recurring cycle of natural disasters and crises the country faces without external aid. Despite international organisations and some neighbouring countries providing relief on the

ground, there are simply not enough funds to reach those in need and provide food, healthcare and shelter. The aftermath of these events is long-term and ongoing support for the future is needed so individuals can rebuild their lives. It should also be said that support from the wider international community has been lacking and this reflects the difficulty the Taliban has at home and abroad. It is imperative that the international community and the Taliban recognise the need to solve the problems Afghanistan faces and collaborate to mitigate the impact of natural disasters and build resilient societies in their aftermath.

- The international community and the Taliban need to collaborate to mitigate the impact of natural disasters. This includes improving disaster preparedness and response mechanisms.
- The Taliban's treatment of women and girls remains a concern. The movements chances of better support from the international community – including recognition of the regime – hinges of its ability to treat this cohort as per their human rights. Providing girls with educational opportunities and women with wage-earning jobs will also go a long way to ending the humanitarian and economic crises in Afghanistan.



IOM responds to the earthquakes (IOM, 2023)

Recommendations

- There is a need for long-term support and rehabilitation for those affected by the earthquakes. This could include initiatives by the Taliban – in partnership with aid organisations – to rebuild infrastructure, houses and providing long-term psychological support.
- There is a need to increase aid and funding to provide essential services such as food, healthcare and shelter to those in affected communities. More international organisations and countries need to contribute and intervene whilst considering the social climate as women and children continue to suffer due to restrictive cultural norms.

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Examining islamophobia in Central Asia: An international legal perspective

Saher Husain

Key takeaways

- Islamophobia produces false narratives about Muslims, which are then used to validate public and state-backed discrimination, hostility, and violence against them. It has severe repercussions on the fundamental human rights of people who practice the Islamic faith, notably affecting their freedom to practice without prejudice or persecution.
- Despite Central Asia being a predominantly Muslim region, and having adopted a secular or neutral governance model, the five Central Asian countries struggle with Islamophobia and demonstrate limited dedication to fulfilling their international responsibilities in reality.
- Religious laws in the region continue to empower governments to impose stricter control upon religious groups and practices, tolerating only the state-approved versions of Islam. Such stringent measures not only curtail the freedom to practice one's faith, particularly of Muslims, but also pose obstacles in meeting the standards set forth by international agreements.

Introduction

Muslims around the world face discrimination and hatred due to their religious beliefs and practices. Although there is no international legal definition established, the term 'Islamophobia' can be used to define the fear, prejudice and hatred towards Muslims, both online and offline, leading to hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism targeting symbols and markers of being a Muslim. [1]

This hatred has been increasing over time. A 2021 report from the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Ahmed Shaheed found that "Institutional suspicion of Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim has escalated to epidemic proportions." [2] More recently, and since Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, there has been a surge in islamophobic hate crimes around the world. [3][4] This has been confirmed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, who recently condemned the global sharp rise in Islamophobia and anti-Semitism since October 7. [5]

As the international community grapples with the surge in islamophobic hate crimes and discrimination, it is important to zoom in on the specific dynamics within Central Asia, where islamophobia is common and perpetrated by both governments and people. Being a predominantly Muslim region, Central Asian



Worshippers outside a mosque in Central Asia (Al Jazeera, 2021)

what is permissible. This law is restrictive as it grants the state excessive control over religious practices enabling them to punish what they arbitrarily deem wrong, and this control is not in line with the internationally permitted standards. [18]

Due to this, the government is able to practice excessive control and surveillance over religious practices. In March 2023 an Imam was jailed for eight years for privately teaching Islam to 12 men.[19] There have been other instances in April 2023 where Muslims have been fined heavily for teaching Quran privately.[20] Salimpur, a human rights defender stated that “President Emomali Rahmon is afraid of religion and particularly Islam. He is afraid that he can lose his authority if Islam is more taught and honoured than him. The regime keeps arresting and imprisoning any Muslim man who has the slightest influence on others or who teaches Islam to others. President Rahmon is fighting Islam under the slogan of fighting 'extremism' and 'terrorism'.”[21] Muslims have been targeted by the police for public observance of religious practices, like wearing a hijab or having a beard, and others have been also detained and sentenced for long periods of time without any fair public trial for following any banned Islamic groups.[22]

Such arbitrary laws and imposition of heavy sanctions and penalties on Muslims are



Schoolgirls protest against having to take off their hijab to enter school in Turkestan (RFE/RL, 2018)

islamophobic in nature and a violation of their right to freedom of religion. Following her country visit, in April 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea urged Tajikistan to adapt and reshape its laws and practices on freedom of religion.[23] Ghanea stated that “the spectrum of the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief falls alarmingly short of the scope of guarantees in international human rights law, as the country is bound by, under the ICCPR and other international human rights instruments.”[24]

Muslims in Tajikistan deserve their right to practice their religion peacefully without any restrictions. The current laws and practices enable the growth of islamophobic sentiments. In its annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reported Tajikistan to be “country of particular concern” because of the government’s tight hold on religious practices, particularly against Muslims.[25] There is a need for Tajikistan to amend the present law, removing the excessive state control over the freedom in consonance with the international standards. This can be done better with consultation and collaboration with experts, civil society organisations, and international bodies to gather recommendations.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan guarantees its citizen freedom of religion through Article 22 of its Constitution.[26] The Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations, however, limits the freedom to only registered religious groups, approved based on the state’s discretion. This allows for the state to target certain groups over the other.[27]

Laws and practices of the country have been discriminately targeting Muslims. The authorities have brought around 143 administrative prosecutions in 2022 punishing organisations and individuals, mainly Muslims, for exercising freedom of religion or belief, and this has continuously increased in 2023.[28] For instance, at least 43 Muslims have been punished for

posting religious messages and texts online without the government's permission in 2022 alone.[29]

Moreover, girls wearing a headscarf are prohibited from attending public schools.[30] On this, in earlier 2023, Gulmira Birzhanova, a lawyer and co-founder of Legal Media Centre, stated that "Kazakhstan is a secular state under the Constitution. But if the state performs iftar pompously in Akorda, while prohibiting girls from wearing hijabs, it's not the right approach of the state." [31] Demonstrating the government's arbitrary application of the laws against Muslim citizens, thereby making it anti-religious rather than secular policies.

USCIRF reported Kazakhstan to be in the "special watch list" pursuant to the country's engagement in severe violations of religious freedom, particularly against Muslims, in 2022. [32] The Kazakh government has failed to fulfil its international obligations. The government should revise its islamophobic policies and laws that restricts the citizens' right. The law and policies should be repealed, and the arbitrary administrative punishments for various religious offences must be abolished. This might involve creating oversight mechanisms to ensure fairness and equity, as well as providing education and training for those involved in enforcing these policies to promote understanding and sensitivity toward religious diversity.

Uzbekistan

Article 35 of Uzbekistan's Constitution guarantees its citizens the right to profess or not profess any religion.[33] However, the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations provides government with the authority to regulate religious practices and determine which organizations are permitted to engage in religious activities.[34]

The situation in Uzbekistan has been unfavourable as Muslims have been targeted for the practice of their faith. In the recent years, arrests, detentions and interrogations of practicing Muslims have increased.[35] For example, in April 2023, a religious blogger was sent to prison for 15 days for speaking against any un-Islamic practices.[36] Human Rights Watch (HRW) has reported that the Uzbek government has been increasingly targeting Muslims for having "religious extremist" content. [37] Mihra Rittmann, senior Central Asia researcher at HRW, recently stated that "the Uzbekistan authorities still consider legitimate expression of religious sentiment or belief 'extremism,' and peaceful religious communities and individuals are paying the price." [38]

Ilkham Umarakhunov, an expert on Islam in Central Asia said that there is a "big gap between what the international community wants to see and what the government is prepared to do in terms of religious freedom. In Uzbekistan, religion is still seen more from the point of view of security rather than freedom." [39] Moreover, USCIRF reported Uzbekistan to be in the "special watch list" pursuant to the country's engagement in severe violations of religious freedom in 2022.[40]



"The role of religious figures in disseminating the concept of Kyrgyz Zharany" event organized with the support of the UNDP in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (Religion.gov.kg, 2022)

The right to freedom of religion is absolute and cannot be curtailed based on the government's discretion unless absolutely necessary. The islamophobic actions taken by the government against the Muslims in the guise of countering extremist activities do not fall within the exceptions provided within Article 18 of ICCPR. It is imperative that the government focuses on fulfilling its international obligations by providing its citizen's their right unrestricted. There is a need to revise counter-extremism strategies to avoid discriminatory practices, and implement policies that protect religious freedoms while addressing security concerns in a balanced manner. This includes fostering a climate of tolerance by investing in education to promote understanding and establishing transparent mechanisms to address grievances.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion under Article 12, however, the 2016 Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations imposes serious restrictions on religious practices and literature allowing for more state control over religious practices.[41] [42] The restriction imposed via such legislation has disproportionately affected Muslims. In August 2023, police increased interrogations of devout Muslim women and men wearing hijab and other religious clothing, including those who started praying recently among the young.[43] Additionally, the police raided homes of Muslims in mid-August, seizing religious literature arbitrarily, and detaining imams giving Islamic lessons to children.[44] This has been done in the excuse of stopping any extremist or terrorist activities, despite the conduct of Muslims involved being peaceful.[45]

Such arbitrary interrogations, and imposition of heavy sanctions and penalties disproportionately affecting Muslims are Islamophobic in nature, thereby violating their right to freedom of religion. USCIRF reported Turkmenistan to be "country of

particular concern" because of the government's tight hold on religious practices, particularly against Muslims.[46] Turkmenistan needs to amend laws, removing the excessive state control over religious practices as the restrictions imposed have not been done in consonance with the internationally permissible standards. Engaging with international bodies, encouraging dialogue between government officials, religious leaders, human rights activists, and legal experts can foster understanding and consensus on the need for changes in laws. Establishing mechanisms to monitor the implementation of amended laws and ensuring accountability is necessary.



Worshippers in a mosque in Uzbekistan (Radio Free Europe, 2021)

Kyrgyzstan

Article 34 of Kyrgyzstan's Constitution[47] guarantees its citizens freedom of religion. The Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Organizations regulates religious activities and mandates that religious entities must register to engage in religious activities within the bounds of legality set by the state.[48] Muslims are unfairly targeted by the government, which exercises arbitrary control through the power given through legislation. In August 2023, the security services shut down mosques and Islamic

schools subsequent to the mass inspection of religious institutions specifically targeting Muslims, by citing extremist concerns along with other concerns including building code violations. [49][50] The state has also imposed restrictions on religious materials used by non-violent groups who practice Islam independently to prevent “extremism”.[51] This shows that the government condemns and restricts any practice that differs from its version of Islam. Such application of laws targeting Muslims can majorly contribute to fostering Islamophobic sentiments. The government is breaching its international obligations as Islamophobia increases and religious freedom continues to shrink in the country. USCIRF report did not mention Kyrgyzstan suggesting that it has comparatively been doing better than its neighbouring countries in the region, though it is still far from successfully implementing and achieving its international commitments.[52] Legal reforms; reviewing and amending existing laws is required to ensure alignment with international standards. There is also a need for establishment of mechanisms for accountability within the government to monitor and prevent islamophobic discriminatory actions against Muslims. Educational events aimed at both officials and the society, that can be facilitated with the help of international organisations, are imperative in establishing an environment that embraces Islam as an inclusive component of society, fostering tolerance and respect.



A mosque in Uzbekistan (Radio Free Asia, 2021)

Conclusion

Central Asian countries have shown a lack of respect for religious freedom when it comes to Muslims. Legislation has been arguably used for islamophobic purposes and governments have used excessive intervention to target, repress and punish Muslim citizens. This needs to change. While every government in Central Asia has concerns about Islamic extremism, they all equally have serious international legal obligations when it comes to freedom of religion. Government policies and practices disproportionately affecting Muslims can also lead to further alienation, difficulty in seeking and accessing assistance or services.

The prevalence of Islamophobia within Central Asian region also intersects with the larger international dialogue on the subject. The region's experiences with discriminatory practices, marginalization, and stereotyping of Muslims contribute to a broader narrative that often associates Islam with negativity or distrust. These local instances become part of a larger global conversation that influences how Muslims are perceived beyond the region's borders; as is seen in how related international incidents recently have impacted local sentiments in other countries all over the world.

Recommendations

- Central Asian governments need to promote and protect the right to freedom of religion. It should also be proportionate to the achievement of a legitimate objective on the basis of a clear legal provision. Governments should refrain from implementing discriminatory restrictions on religious or cultural symbols specifically targeting Muslim men and women. The countries should respect their obligations under international law and ensure improvement of the freedom of religion laws to tackle the existing Islamophobia.

- Civil society organisations can launch advocacy campaigns, engage in dialogues with policymakers, and initiate legal actions to combat discriminatory policies against Muslims. These organisations should also include Muslims in initiatives to address and counter government-driven Islamophobia. By doing so, the organizations can amplify the voices of affected individuals, advocate for policies promoting inclusivity.
- The international community can and should employ diplomatic pressure by considering sanctions or consequences for discriminatory actions, and amplify condemnation. This is a method of effectively pressuring governments to refrain from targeting Muslims and work towards fostering a more inclusive and tolerant society.
- Central Asian countries have not published any statistics on Islamophobia. This requires action, as a lack of data delays any effective government policy response – if governments are indeed interested – to tackle such hate crimes. It also suggests that the public is not aware of their rights and how they can invoke the same in-front of relevant authorities. Central Asian countries should prioritize accurately reporting and documenting Islamophobic hate crime incidents. Data is essential for developing better policy recommendations aimed at preventing such crimes effectively.

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Central Asia and the Belt and Road Initiative

Naomi Napuri

Key takeaways

- Participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has arguably led to significant economic growth, trade expansion, and infrastructural improvements across Central Asia.
- Central Asia's pivotal position in the BRI framework has amplified its geopolitical importance, which has led to increased diplomatic ties with China and trade with Europe and Asia.
- BRI-driven infrastructure developments have improved regional connectivity but face persistent hurdles in funding, regulations, and coordination, impacting the completion of these project, a major component of the BRI.
- While the BRI presents economic opportunities, Central Asian countries still face challenges like funding disputes and regulatory complexities. These require collaborative regional solutions for long-term success.

Introduction

The BRI, launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, has sparked a transformation in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have all experienced positive impacts from their involvement in the initiative.

The importance of understanding Central Asia's engagement in the BRI lies in its implications for

regional economies, infrastructural advancements, and diplomatic relationships. Through this exploration, the report aims to dissect the multifaceted experiences of these nations within the BRI, delineating the economic changes, infrastructural developments, and diplomatic collaborations that have characterized their journey.



Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks at the round table during the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, Shaanxi province, China, 19 May (Reuters, 2023)

From trade volumes and infrastructure projects to diplomatic agreements and challenges faced, this report aims to offer a comprehensive overview of the impact, successes, and challenges encountered by these Central Asian countries within the ambit of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Kazakhstan

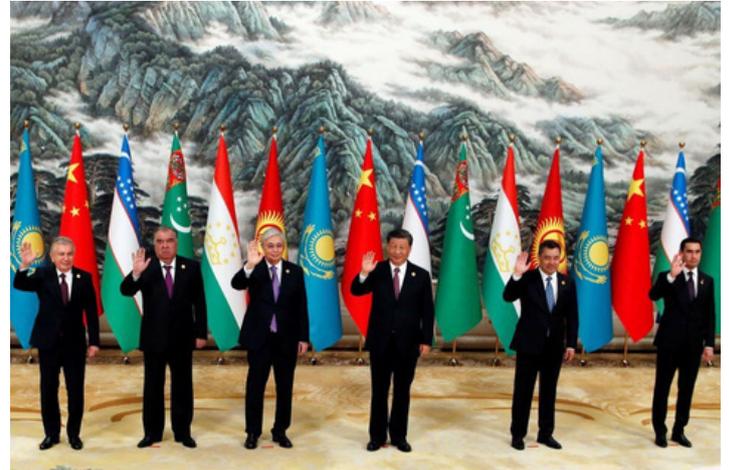
Kazakhstan initially engaged with the BRI at its inception in 2013.[1] A decade later, Kazakhstan's

involvement in BRI projects continues. The government established an international logistics base in Lianyungang in 2014, situated near the China-Kazakhstan border, which further facilitated Kazakhstan's trade with China. The base has also expanded Kazakhstan's imports and exports with Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia. In 2022, the total trade volume reached an impressive \$70.2 billion, with a substantial 45 per cent attributed to trade exclusively between Kazakhstan and China.[2]

During a two-day forum hosted by China in October 2023, which saw the participation of numerous global leaders, including President Tokayev, discussions centred around the BRI.[3] After a private meeting between Tokayev and Xi, the two countries signed several agreements, such as a memorandum of mutual understanding on exchange and cooperation in economic development and the agreement on developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route.[4] Tokayev also offered to create a partnership network with China, including ports, logistic centres, postal hubs and joint production of transport ships.[5] At the meeting, Tokayev stated that "Kazakhstan is ready to become a reliable air brigade and convenient harbour for the world's leading airlines, ensuring sustainable passenger and cargo trafficking".[6] Tokayev also mentioned how the BRI project benefited China and Kazakhstan, stating that "the project can effectively respond to the most complex challenges of our time amid global economic turbulence."[7]

In addition to fostering bilateral trade, the relationship strives to extend its reach by actively promoting cultural exchanges with China. After participating in the third BRI forum in October 2023, Tokayev visited Xinjiang, where he met with Communist Party leader Ma Xingrui to discuss expanding trade and tourism between Kazakhstan and the Xinjiang region.[8] Xinjiang, which borders Kazakhstan, accounted for over 40 per cent of China's trade with Kazakhstan in

the first half of 2023. Aiming to promote tourism between the countries, Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry announced a 30-day visa-free travel agreement with China effective 10 November, 2023.[9]



Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimukhamedov and Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Reuters, 2023)

Kyrgyzstan

As an early BRI participant, Kyrgyzstan has substantially benefited from its involvement. The focal point lies in the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan-China gas pipelines, traversing Kyrgyzstan's territory[.10] The construction of roads along these routes could potentially amplify Kyrgyzstan's trade prospects with neighbouring countries.

While the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway could be beneficial for Kyrgyzstan, there have also been challenges. The multi-billion-dollar project is facing financial problems from Kyrgyzstan's side, with the government having problems financing the project. President Sadyr Japarov, in visits to the United States and Germany in October 2023, encouraged investors to participate in the project.[11] Gennady Bessonov, the Secretary-General of the International Coordinating Council for Trans-

Eurasian Transport, stated that although the project is fully prepared, the three countries involved have not reached a mutual agreement regarding financing.[12] Bessonov also stated that “it’s worth noting that Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan currently face financial constraints that hinder their ability to finance the project independently. Although China possesses the capability to undertake the construction unilaterally, the railway project does not currently occupy a position of top priority for them”.[13]

It is important to note that for Kyrgyzstan, there may be better options than asking China for a loan to cover the project’s costs. As stated in 2021 by President Sadyr Japarov, debt is a significant threat to a country’s foreign sovereignty.[14] The railway project is estimated to cost 4.5 billion dollars for Kyrgyzstan’s part.[15] A loan to cover the 4.5 billion would then add to the \$2 billion dollar debt that Kyrgyzstan already has with China.[16] Considering Japarov’s view on debt, accumulating a \$6.5 billion dollar debt with another country is not ideal for Kyrgyzstan.

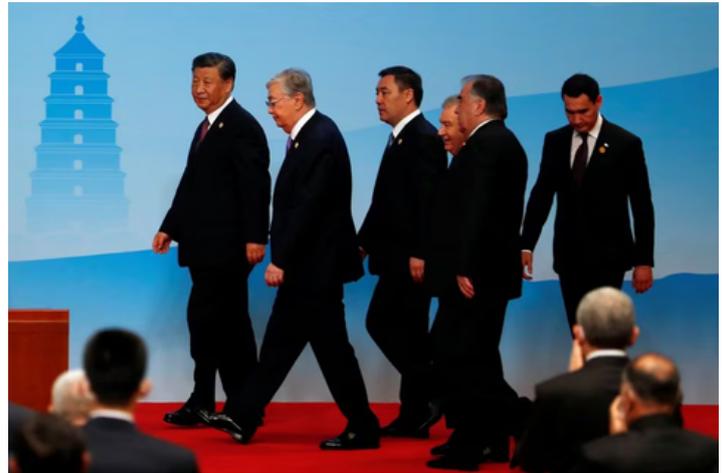
As for the Third Belt and Road Forum held in October 2023, Kyrgyzstan was represented by the Minister of Energy, Taalaibek Ibraev, and the State Customs Service Chairman, Smat Isabekov. In the event, Kyrgyzstan signed three agreements with China.[17] The cooperation projects section agreed on the strategic promotion of cooperation projects of logistic channels and international trade with Kyrgyzstan.[18]

Tajikistan

Tajikistan’s impact on regional economic and developmental aspects is limited as it is the poorest of the five Central Asia countries. But it has significance in security affairs. Situated next to China and bordering Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the country’s strategic position holds importance.[19] Tajikistan shares a border with Afghanistan to the south, making it a vital player in the region’s dynamics.

The intricate relationship between Tajikistan and Afghanistan presents China with compelling reasons to evaluate their interconnection carefully.

On the sidelines of the third BRI Forum in October 2023, Tajikistan and China signed an agreement to hold “anti-terror drills” biennially.[20] The agreement focuses on improving how different groups work together to lead special anti-terror teams as one of its main goals.[21] This can be circled back to the extension of the BRI ports in the Indian Ocean region.[22] As Afghanistan faces significant terrorist threats, securing the infrastructure passing through the country is crucial. Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan and having recently engaged in security agreements with China, finds it logical to collaborate with China on security matters, given their shared concerns and geographical proximity.



Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyzstan’s President Sadyr Japarov, Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Tajikistan’s President Emomali Rahmon and Turkmenistan’s President Serdar Berdimukhamedov arrive for the joint press conference of the China–Central Asia Summit in Xian (Reuters, 2023)

The BRI faces many geopolitical and political conflicts in the Middle East and Central Asia, posing security threats to the Xinjiang region. Xinjiang is crucial for developing several BRI projects.[23] However, Xinjiang has had issues with ethnic separation and extreme religious

views. These problems are often linked to differences in ethnicity or arguments about borders between China and its neighbours in the west. Thus, security issues in the area may gain much attention from China. This highlights the importance of Tajikistan in security matters concerning Xinjiang and Afghanistan due to Tajikistan's strategic location.



The rail links from China to and through Central Asia. The proposed segment across Kyrgyzstan, from Kashi to the Uzbekistan border near Tashkent is in political limbo (Schiller Institute, 2017)

Turkmenistan

During his discussions and speeches at the Third BRI Forum, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, the Chairman of the Halk Maslakhaty of Turkmenistan, highlighted the resemblance between Turkmenistan's strategy, "Revival of the Great Silk Road" and China's "One Belt, One Road." [24] He emphasised that both approaches prioritise equality, consider the partners' interests, seek mutual benefit, and respect the diversity of cultural and spiritual values. [25]

To realise this vision, both countries recognised the potential benefits of an international transport corridor through Turkmenistan. [26] Berdimuhamedov highlighted Turkmenistan's transit potential, envisioning an expansive corridor in China, traversing Central Asia, accessing the Caspian Sea via Turkmen ports, and linking the Caspian, Black, and Baltic Sea

regions. [27] He emphasised the corridor's versatility, suggesting its use in both directions, connecting to the Asia-Pacific region and South Asian countries. [28]

In a meeting with Rashid Meredov, Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister, and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, both stated that Turkmenistan is a crucial partner in the construction of the Belt and Road. [29] Meredov also expressed that Turkmenistan supports and participates in the BRI. He also said that Turkmenistan hopes to coordinate efforts alongside China to revive the silk road with the BRI. [30] To accomplish this, President Xi said both countries must improve bilateral trade and expand cooperation in health and medical care, sports, tourism and culture. [31] A step in this direction was taken as both sides signed various bilateral documents, one of which included an agreement on economic and technical cooperation. [32]

Uzbekistan

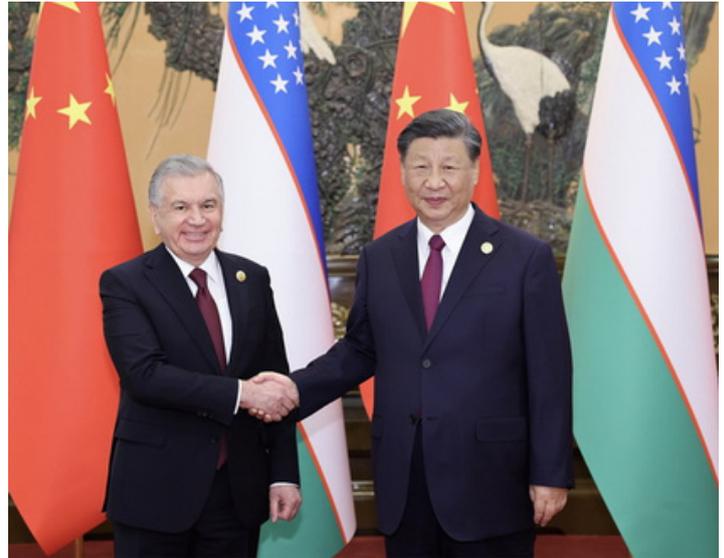
The BRI has provided opportunities to help diversify Uzbekistan's transportation network and expand the landlocked country's export markets. [33] Chinese official statistics show that trade between China and Uzbekistan amounted to \$9.78 billion in 2022, up 21.8% from 2021. [34] China is Uzbekistan's largest trading partner and one of its primary sources of foreign investment. [35]

The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad is a critical project within the BRI. It's designed to facilitate passenger and freight transportation along this route and could help Uzbekistan's export numbers. [36] Same as Kyrgyzstan, financing its part of the construction is a problem for Uzbekistan. Estimates vary between 3 billion and 5 billion dollars for the overall cost of the railway. [37] Despite the project's readiness, there needs to be more consensus among Beijing, Bishkek, and Tashkent regarding funding for these large projects. [38] Ongoing funding

disagreements are an ongoing problem and have caused delays. Notably, both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan currently have financial limitations that hinder their capability to finance the railway project.[39] While China could undertake the construction alone, the railway project isn't now a top priority for China due to its limited potential and lack of access to Europe . [40] It is noted that the benefits of the railway would be mainly to China, as Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan imports from China are more significant than China's imports from both countries[41]. Considering this, the railway construction investment may not be worth it for Uzbekistan if its exports don't benefit much.

Speaking at a forum during the third BRI Forum, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev affirmed the country's commitment to deepen green cooperation with BRI partner nations.[42] He also highlighted the broad support for BRI and its significance in fostering global participation and trust.[43] Mirziyoyev emphasised Uzbekistan's dedication to achieving BRI goals, particularly within the Green Silk Road initiative framework. [44] He proposed various strategies for advancing green development, including formulating comprehensive plans, enhancing scientific collaborations, supporting eco-friendly investments, reducing trade barriers for environmentally friendly products, and prioritising cultural exchanges to lay the groundwork for a sustainable future.[45]

Mirziyoyev's vision centres on leveraging the BRI to promote green initiatives and international cooperation toward a more eco-conscious end. [46] For Uzbekistan, it is essential to pursue a greener development, considering how climate change affects the country. Earthquakes and flooding can impact the local community and disrupt the country's activities. Highlighting the importance of going green is Uzbekistan's way of asserting itself and its interests as a participant of BRI.



Xi Jinping Meets with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in October (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2023)

Conclusion

The BRI has made a big difference in Central Asia. It has helped boost the region's economies through increased exports. However, the experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan underscore the complex interplay of successes and challenges within the framework of the BRI. These experiences reveal how it affected their economies, enhanced infrastructure, and shaped their relationships with China. Each country's journey with the BRI has led to different outcomes, like increased trade and cultural exchanges, altering the region's dynamics.

New agreements were signed for collaboration under this initiative during the mid-October 2023 BRI forum. However, major BRI projects in Central Asia have faced funding challenges. This highlights the need for thoughtful approaches and adaptable strategies to address the diverse impacts and difficulties arising from participation in the BRI. While offering opportunities for growth and cooperation, the BRI also underscores the importance of managing potential issues, like debt burdens, associated with large-scale projects in the region.

Recommendations

- Strengthening collaboration among Central Asian countries is crucial for maximising the benefits of the BRI. Establishing regional agreements and frameworks can streamline trade processes, improve connectivity, and foster a more integrated approach to infrastructure development.
- While China remains a significant economic partner, Central Asian nations must diversify their economic ties. Exploring partnerships with other countries and international organisations can mitigate overreliance on a single trading partner and enhance resilience against economic uncertainties.
- Establish regional forums or mechanisms that facilitate collaboration among participating countries to address shared risks and challenges arising from BRI projects. This could involve creating joint risk assessment frameworks, information-sharing platforms, or financial risk mitigation strategies to manage uncertainties collectively.

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Press freedom violations in Kyrgyzstan: An analysis of recent events

Ruchi Singh

Key takeaways

- Press freedom is under attack in Kyrgyzstan. The Central Asian country is witnessing a democratic backslide as authorities severely constrain media organisations and journalists to silence criticism and dissent. This is direct targeting of media organisations and journalists who are reporting the truth about government figures, taking a critical approach to government decision making or highlighting instances of corruption.
- Attacks on media organisations and journalists include harassment by government officials and targeted legislation against the press. This has become increasingly explicit, with a demand for media organizations to toe the government line or be attacked or disbanded.
- The government of Kyrgyzstan has legal obligations when it comes to ensuring a free press. In the absence of independent reporting, international human rights groups and the international community more broadly need to remind Bishkek of these obligations.

Introduction

Democracy in Kyrgyzstan is deteriorating, exemplified by escalating repression of media organisations and journalists by the Kyrgyz government. Press freedom forms the basis of democracy as it ensures the dissemination of information and a critique of government decision making. Kyrgyzstan, considered to be

the only relatively democratic country in Central Asia, has traditionally seen a free media. However, with the current government's recent repressive actions to violate the independence of the journalists and media organisations, this has resulted in a violation of press freedom. This is evident with Freedom House's recent classification of Kyrgyzstan as "not free" having reduced its score from 35 points in 2021 to 26 in 2022.[1] Independent media organisations continue to be restricted or closed down by the government, with Bishkek increasingly trying to curtail the freedom of media through a series of very restrictive legislative measures and cases against independent journalists and media outlets. This includes the government enforcing the Law on Protection from False Information to block news sites and force online news outlets to remove content. The courts have also issued prison sentences to journalists and social media users who criticized the government online. This article will provide an analysis of the ongoing and arguably worsening attacks on press



freedom in Kyrgyzstan to provide a picture of how the government is clamping down on independent media. (Human Rights Watch, 2022)

freedom in Kyrgyzstan to provide a picture of how the government is clamping down on independent media.

Background

Since gaining independence in 1991, Kyrgyzstan's journey has been one of political turbulence. This was evident in the 2005 Tulip revolution, where mass protests against corruption and authoritarianism led to the ousting of then President Askar Akayev.[2] But despite any democratic gains from 2005, successive governments have attacked independent media organisations and journalists as a way to control information and stifle any legitimate criticism of government decision making. This has included the harassment, intimidation of journalists, prompting many to impose self-censorship in order to navigate complex political sensitivities and to keep their jobs.[3] More broadly, the country arguably took a more autocratic turn with the ascension of President Sadyr Japarov as in 2021. Since being elected, Japarov has changed the constitution and implemented reforms that have made Kyrgyzstan less democratic and more authoritarian.[4]

Like his predecessors, Japarov has attacked press freedom. Despite this, under the current government, the situation with freedom of speech is deteriorating with the independent mass media being put under tremendous pressure by various means. The state continues to adopt laws that constitute a threat to freedom of speech and expression. Under the guise of combating the spread of false and unreliable information on social networks, the authorities developed and adopted a new law in August 2021 in the Kyrgyz Republic titled 'On Protection from Inaccurate (False) Information'.[5] This law provides the opportunity to administratively close any resources deemed undesirable by the authorities within 24 hours. Sadyr Japarov and his entourage continued to demonstrate intolerance towards the representatives of the independent media and the alternative views

voiced in the mass media. The state is making no effort to combat impunity for attacks and pressure on journalists.



Participants in a free speech rally in Bishkek (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2022)

From an international legal perspective, Kyrgyzstan is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, signing the treaty in 1994.[6] This obligates Kyrgyzstan to create and provide a safe environment to promote freedom of speech and freedom of the press as well as to remove obstacles to the exercise of these rights.

Press freedom violations of independent media organisations

On 22 August 2023, the Prosecutor's Office of the city of Bishkek filed a motion to shut down Kloop Media (Kloop), a human rights media outlet, in the Oktyabrskiy and Pervomaiskiy district courts of Bishkek. Kloop first garnered praise for its swift and transparent coverage of the April 2010 political revolution in Kyrgyzstan. Founded in 2007, the organisation remains committed to upholding core tenets of journalism like independence, impartiality, honesty, and accuracy in its reporting. Kloop strategically employs investigative journalism to methodically document human rights violations and provide an in-depth examination of nuanced issues like

corruption, armed conflicts, and abuse of power. The primary reason cited by the Prosecutor's Office for seeking the closure of the organisation is that Kloop allegedly engaged in activities, particularly media activities, that exceeded the scope outlined in the charter of the human rights organization. Following the publication of the article on 22 August, Sadyr Japarov criticised the piece, asserting that media outlets like Kloop "bring only harm and no benefit to Kyrgyzstan". [6]

In September 2023, Kloop again faced criticism for reporting allegations that opposition politician Ravshan Zheenbekov was tortured by the national security agency GKNB. The Ministry of Culture demanded the deletion of the story, threatening to block access to Kloop's website. Anna Kapushenko, the head of Kloop, responded to the charges by stating that "there is no law prohibiting online media outlets, if they are not registered as media, from publishing information. We will be contesting it." At the time, Kapushenko vowed to fight the Kyrgyz authorities' moves to shut down the foundation.[8] Hearings on the case have continued since October, with no definitive outcome as yet.[9]

In another example of attacking media organisations, on 27 April 2023, the Lenin District Court in Bishkek ruled that the media outlet Azattyk Media – the Kyrgyz service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – should be closed. This was due to a disputed video that covered the September 2022 border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.[10] The video allegedly violates the government law 'On the Mass Media' which forbids the 'propagation of war, violence, and cruelty, national, religious exclusivity, and intolerance towards other peoples and nations. [11] This sent a chilling message, and human rights groups perceive these actions as part of a broader attempt to silence dissent and restrict media freedoms through legal harassment and website blocking, undermining transparency and democracy in the country.

Marie Struthers, Amnesty International's Director for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, said at the time that "the closure of Radio Azattyk is not only an act of censorship targeting one media outlet; it is a major blow to freedom of expression in the country. The Kyrgyzstani authorities have taken a further step towards silencing critical coverage of events in the country and muzzling journalists." [12]



Kloop media (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023)

The issue began in October 2022, when President Japarov blocked Azattyk Media's websites for two months over the same issue.[13] This was followed by a lawsuit on 9 February 2023 by the Minister of Culture in response to claims made against Azattyk Media under Article 23(c) of the list of information not subject to public dissemination as per the Law of Kyrgyzstan. Media organisations, independent journalists and human rights groups perceived these actions as part of a broader attempt by the government to silence dissent and restrict media freedoms through legal harassment and website blocking, undermining transparency and democracy in the country.

However, in welcome news, a Bishkek court ruled in July that the decision to shut down Azattyk was annulled, a decision the government ended up supporting. Dr Jeffrey Gedmin, acting president of Radio Free Europe responded to the decision stating that the decision was a result of

“concerted advocacy and support from the international community” and that Azattyk would “continue to reach its audiences with trusted reporting”.[14]

Evidence shows that – over the past two years – media organisations have been targeted by the government for attempting to hold it to account. These repressive steps actively undermine freedom of expression and the public's access to credible information. It should be strongly and unequivocally condemned by the international community as it falls foul of Kyrgyzstan's obligations under international law.



President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov speaks at a plenary session of parliament where new ministers are sworn in on March 9, 2022 in Bishkek (Radio Free Europe, 2022)

Harassment and intimidation of journalists

Bishkek is also cracking down on independent journalists and bloggers. Prominent rights defender and journalist Bolot Temirov's case encapsulates the mounting dangers of journalism in Kyrgyzstan. Temirov is a human rights defender, investigative journalist and the founder of Temirov Live, a YouTube channel where he reports on cases of state corruption. Over the years Temirov has faced threats and harassment from the government in his attempt to promote democratic and reforms that combat corruption and increase transparency.

In November 2022, the Bishkek City Court found Temirov guilty of document fraud, resulting in the government expelling the human rights defender and journalist and deporting him to Russia. He is currently residing in a secret location somewhere in Europe, where he sought refuge in March.[15] This is despite Temirov being born in Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz citizen. Temirov has been prohibited from re-entering the country for the next five years and has disputed the charges and findings against him, claiming they are politically motivated. On 12 September 2023, the Supreme Court rejected a cassation complaint on the judgement against the Temirov, meaning he is still unable to enter the country.[16] The government has further obstructed Temirov by freezing his YouTube channel's donation accounts, which has impaired his ability to continue operating as an independent, critical voice online.[17]

International human rights advocates have been critical of Temirov's treatment. Juliet Sorensen, a clinical professor of law associated with the Center for International Human Rights condemned the decision, stating "the arbitrary arrest and deportation of Mr. Temirov is a procedural abuse intended to punish and intimidate a brave journalist." [18] Temirov's case symbolises the regime's broad censorship and punishment of dissenting voices that provide accountability reporting in the public interest. This encapsulates an undeniable climate of rising intimidation for journalists who confront entrenched interests and fading democratic freedoms under the current leadership.

On 6 May 2023, Dilbar Alimova, the founder and chief editor of PolitKlinika, was summoned by Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security for questioning regarding an article published by her outlet. Despite lacking clear reasons for the interrogation, authorities demanded her immediate return to Bishkek. The article in question reportedly focused on a letter allegedly written by the speaker of Kyrgyzstan's parliament to the prosecutor-general.[19]

Concurrently, PolitKlinika faces a lawsuit filed by Kyrgyz state broadcaster EITR on 20 February seeking substantial damages over a video report that alleged false claims about government borrowing.[20] This ongoing legal battle poses a potential threat to the outlet's existence. Moreover, Alimova and PolitKlinika have reported experiencing coordinated online harassment, believed to be orchestrated through social media accounts associated with employees of state media.[21] These incidents collectively suggest a broader and concerning effort to discredit and undermine independent journalism through both legal and digital means in Kyrgyzstan.



Bolot Temirov in a Bishkek courtroom in September (Radio Free Europe, 2022)

Conclusion

Kyrgyzstan is undergoing massive repression of media freedom and freedom of expression. There have been multiple instances of government-sponsored attacks on independent media organisations and journalists and there appears to be an explicit aim to stifle dissenting perspectives of decision making within the media landscape. The recent state-led targeting of Kloop and the forced exile of the esteemed investigative journalist, Bolot Temirov, reflect the systematic attacks faced by independent journalism within the country.

Successive Kyrgyz governments have made efforts to control information through restrictive laws, manipulation of narratives, and crackdowns on dissent.[22] The goal seems to

be to suppress opposition voices by constraining free media. While Kyrgyzstan has arguably never been free nor a haven for free speech, recent government efforts point to a regressive approach that further threatens a free press and democratic values more broadly.

The government appears consumed with controlling the narrative and insulating itself from scrutiny. It is vital that Kyrgyzstan respect press freedom by allowing organisations and journalists to act with freedom and offer critical commentary on government decision making. This would be consistent with Kyrgyzstan's obligations under international law. Otherwise, further deterioration of media organisations and journalists will only weaken democracy and Kyrgyz society, which is of benefit to nobody in the country.

Recommendations

- The Kyrgyz government need to adhere to its international legal obligations and respect press freedom. This includes withdrawing any punitive and restrictive legislation against the media and stop its attacks on organisations and independent journalists. This includes its obligations under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and secure freedom of speech and information.
- The international community should strongly condemn violations through high-level statements, targeted sanctions on officials responsible for media clampdowns, and sustained diplomatic pressure. Vocal criticism and consequences may influence government behaviour.
- International organisations like the United Nations and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe should urgently investigate recent violations and intimidation of journalists by dispatching special rapporteurs to Kyrgyzstan. Their independent reports could spur further action.

- Human rights groups should launch expanded global advocacy campaigns on behalf of journalists like Bolot Temirov, who face threats, detention, and exile in retaliation for critical reporting. Spotlighting embattled journalists can protect them.

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The expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran

Ayesha Asim

Key takeaways

- Afghan refugees are the world's third-largest displaced population, trailing only Syrian and Ukrainian refugees. In 2023, at least 6.1 million Afghans were hosted in different countries. Most reside in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran.
- Both Pakistan and Iran have made recent attempts to expel their Afghan populations, citing terrorism concerns and a lack of support from the international community. Pakistan has expelled or facilitated the movement of more than 400,000 Afghans back to Afghanistan. Iran has expelled thousands and is reportedly looking to increase expulsions.
- This comes at a bad time for Afghanistan, with the country still reeling from humanitarian and economic crises that have driven millions into poverty. The Taliban also continues to severely restrict the human rights of women and minority groups and target journalists, human rights defenders and former government officials.
- The return of thousands of Afghans not only threatens to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis, but it sends most people back into a situation of economic hardship and starvation and others into harm's way by the Taliban.

Introduction

Afghanistan continues to suffer through an extensive humanitarian crisis and an enormous

decline in human rights since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. More than 24 million people require humanitarian assistance and most of the population lives in poverty.[1] In response to the Taliban takeover and the subsequent issues the country has faced, millions of Afghans have fled to neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, joining the countless others who have arrived in both countries since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.[2] While many of these people are legitimate refugees, many haven't been or cannot get registered and properly seek asylum in Pakistan or Iran.[3] These people are protected under international law as refugees and their inability to enjoy their rights in either country has left them vulnerable.



As Afghanistan's economy collapsed, its citizens left the country en masse (Al Jazeera, 2022)

This has come to a head recently, with Pakistan and Iran both announcing plans to deport millions of undocumented Afghans back to Afghanistan. Pakistan has cited terrorism concerns and Iran has complained about a lack of support from the international community. Both have also seen their relations with the Taliban deteriorate. In recent months, Taliban

fighters have engaged in separate lethal cross-border battles with Iranian and Pakistani forces. [4] These forced expulsions are likely to contribute to Afghanistan's severe humanitarian crisis, making a bad situation worse. Many Afghans also face persecution at the hands of the Taliban government. Forcible deportations of Afghan migrants, many of whom send remittances to their families, are also likely to cause financial difficulties for several families.



Afghans queuing to leave Pakistan (Amu TV, 2023)

With expulsions from Pakistan already underway, this article will analyse the decision by Islamabad and Tehran, discuss the international legal obligations of both governments and the consequences to Afghans and Afghanistan.

Reasons to flee Afghanistan

Afghans have been displaced from their country of origin for decades. Afghanistan has suffered through decades of conflict, poverty food shortages, and pandemics. In August 2021, the United States-led force hastily withdrew from Afghanistan, leading to the fall of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021. The return of the Taliban causes many Afghans to flee into Iran and Pakistan. Since 2021, more than 1.6 million Afghans have fled the country, bringing the total number of Afghans in neighbouring countries to 8.2 million, making it one of the world's most protracted refugee situations.[5]

The Taliban's return heightened Afghanistan's instabilities. Their return and the withdrawal of international funding led to an acute humanitarian crisis that has caused further displacement. In 2023, a record 28.3 million people require humanitarian and protection support, a significant increase from 24.4 million in 2022 and 18.4 million in early 2021.[6] Further, 20 million people suffer from acute hunger, with 6 million at emergency levels.[7] This has had a specifically catastrophic effect on women and children, who have been disproportionately affected.

At the same time, Afghanistan has been hit by recurring catastrophes, including droughts and earthquakes, which has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis. The worst earthquake to impact Afghanistan in the last twenty years struck in June 2022, killing at least 1,000 people and injuring many more. Long-lasting conflict, high levels of displacement, the adverse effects of COVID-19, natural disasters, and growing destitution have all driven the Afghan population to breaking point.[8]

The Taliban has also repressed the rights of many Afghans and persecuted several groups, including women and girls and minority groups. [9] This has led to many seeking safety abroad and thousands did so in August 2021 fearing attacks by the Taliban. This has led to a situation where Afghans have fled Afghanistan and now face a situation where it is unsafe to return for both humanitarian reasons and because they face punishment or persecution at the hands of the Taliban.

Pakistan

Pakistan is one of the world's most significant refugee-hosting countries and has hosted Afghan refugees for decades. Since the Soviet occupation of 1979-1989, and the subsequent civil war, Pakistan has hosted approximately 4 million Afghans.[10] According to the Pakistani government, an additional 600,000 Afghans have sought refuge in the country since the

return of the Taliban.[11] From a legal perspective, Pakistan hasn't signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This means Pakistan technically isn't obligated to meet its requirements, which includes protecting and processing asylum seekers.[12]

However, Pakistan has arguably tried to process refugees. Islamabad established the 'Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees' in 1980 and is responsible for the execution of government policies regarding Afghan refugees. It is funded by both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Islamabad. [13] Despite this, while Afghans in Pakistan are allowed to travel unhindered, they are granted few other rights and face problems having their asylum claims processed. According to Islamabad, it has processed and accepted over 878,604 Afghans since 2017. The process included providing identification credentials in the form of Afghan Citizen Cards, which allow Afghans to remain in Pakistan legally but on a temporary basis. However, the vast majority of Afghans in Pakistan are undocumented, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to government decisions on refugees.[14]

Recently, Islamabad's policy position on Afghans has changed. On 3 October 2023, Pakistan's government announced that mass deportations of refugees, mostly Afghans, would start on 1 November. So far, hundreds of thousands of Afghans have either been forcefully expelled across the border or have voluntarily done so after threats and harassment.[15] More than a million Afghans face the same fate as the expulsions continue. On making the announcement, Sarfraz Bugti, Pakistan's acting interior minister, declared that the country is "putting its house in order" in reference to the expulsion orders. Bugti also stated that "Pakistan is the only country hosting four million refugees for the last 40 years and still hosting them" and that "anyone wishing to remain in our nation must do so lawfully." Further, Bugti also stated that, considering the Taliban consider

Afghanistan at peace, Kabul should "help their countrymen to settle themselves." [16] According to the International Crisis Group, Pakistan has been imprisoning large numbers of undocumented Afghans and transferring them directly to the border since 1 November.[17] The UNHCR has reported that over 400,000 people have been forced back or voluntarily crossed into Afghanistan through Pakistan's border crossing points since the announcement.[18]



Afghan refugees at a camp in Torkham, Afghanistan after Pakistan expelled them (Al Jazeera, 2023)

Officials in Pakistan have cited security concerns as the reason for their decision to pursue mass expulsions. Bugti has claimed that 14 of the 24 suicide bombings in Pakistan this year had been carried out by Afghan nationals.[19] Moreover, a sizable proportion of illegal immigrants work in the informal sector. This involvement exacerbates the difficulties associated with tax collection, resulting in a loss of potential revenue for the government.[20] While providing a means of subsistence, the informal economy operates without regulatory oversight, frequently under conditions that violate labour laws and standards. The presence of a large illegal immigrant population adds to the already overburdened public services in Pakistan, such as healthcare, education, and housing.[21]

Due to the current economic conditions of Pakistan, Islamabad argues it has become

difficult for Pakistan to host Afghan refugees without additional assistance from the international community. In addition, Pakistan's security concerns do need to be taken into account. Pakistan's Prime Minister reflected this when he stated that "since the Taliban regained power in Afghanistan the overall number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan has increased by 60 percent. The attacks have killed 2,267 people in the country." [22] The argument from Islamabad is that Afghans are a threat to national security.

The Taliban have responded angrily to the decision. On 3 November 2023, Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Muhammad stated "we urge the Pakistani government to refrain from committing acts of cruelty against the Afghans and from seizing their possessions and properties, as these actions are not by any legal framework." [23] Nevertheless, the Taliban's acting commerce minister said he had asked Pakistan to help return the assets of expelled Afghans and discussed ways to overcome Afghanistan's stalled banking sector transactions during a four-day visit to Islamabad in November. [24]

The decision by Pakistan has been condemned by the broader international community and human rights and humanitarian organisations. Amnesty International responded to the decision by stating that "the government of Pakistan must immediately halt the continued detentions, deportations, and widespread harassment of Afghan refugees". [25] Human Rights Watch also condemned the move, stating that the expulsions violate Pakistan's obligations as a party to the UN Convention on Torture and under the customary international law principle of non-refoulement, which forbids countries returning people to harm in their countries of origin. [26] Further, the UNHCR has urged Pakistan to halt the deportation of undocumented Afghan refugees during the harsh winter season. [27] In an official statement, Ravina Shamdasani of the UNHCR stated that "we are very worried that those who

are deported face a whole host of human rights violations including torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, severe discrimination, and lack of access to basic economic and social needs". [28]



Afghan nationals rest at a camp after returning from Pakistan at the Torkham border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan, November 14, 2023 (Reuters, 2023)

Pakistani authorities deported 1,769 undocumented Afghan migrants on 20 December, according to local media reports. This number reflects a continuation of similar deportation figures from previous days. As it currently stands, a total of 441,893 undocumented Afghans have been forcefully or voluntarily repatriated from Pakistan to Afghanistan. [29] However, in welcome news, Pakistan announced last month that it had suspended the expulsion of Afghan refugees and those with expires residency documents until 31 December. [30] This may signal that Pakistan has felt the pressure from the international community to not send Afghans back to harm.

With the help of the international community, Pakistan continues to host both legitimate refugees and undocumented Afghans. But – in its decision to expel thousands of Afghans – Islamabad should not treat refugees as a political football and ensure that their fundamental human rights are respected, including not sending people back into harm's

way. Pakistan is bound by the principle of non-refoulement which “prohibits states from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return, including persecution, torture, ill-treatment or other serious human rights violations”.[31] The principle of non-refoulement forms an essential protection under international human rights, refugee, humanitarian and customary law [32] and it is also mentioned in the Convention against Torture, which Pakistan is a signatory. The forcible evacuation of vulnerable people – such as women and people from minority ethnic groups – is particularly alarming whether from a legal or humanitarian point of view, as is the seizing of returnees' their possessions. This violates the basic human rights of Afghan Refugees and Pakistan being a signatory to ICCPR and other Human Rights Instruments is obliged to take care of Afghan refugees.



A worker from the National Database and Registration Authority speaks to Afghan citizens while verifying their identity cards of Afghan nationals (Reuters, 2023)

Iran

Iran also hosts a significant number of Afghan refugees and has done so for decades. It is estimated that 2.6 million Afghans live in Iran and between 500,000 and 1 million people fled across the border after August 2021.[33]

For some time, Iran has been deporting Afghans back to Afghanistan. In February 2023, Iran expelled around 43,000 Afghans due to the absence of legal residence documents.[34] More recently, The Iranian government appears to be reconsidering its policies on hosting Afghans. Tehran has claimed that it receives little financial assistance from the international community and has “frequently expressed alarm at the large number of undocumented Afghans on its soil”.[35] Further Iran has frequently blamed Afghans – often without foundation – for insecurity and unemployment in Iran.”[36] These justifications and Tehran’s deteriorating relationship with the Taliban seems to have led to a change in policy. According to Afghan refugees and migrants, the September 27 announcement has resulted in an increase in abuse directed at members of Iran’s sizeable Afghan community, including harassment and assault.[37]

Since the announcement, the number of Afghans leaving Iran voluntarily has more than doubled, from 1,500–2,000 to 3,000–4,500 per day since September. An estimated 89,000 Afghans returned from Iran in August 2023, 46,000 voluntarily, and 43,000 deported due to a lack of valid documents.[38] The UNHCR has appealed to all nations – including Iran – to stop the forced expulsion of Afghans given the “highly volatile situation” in Afghanistan and has continued to “advocate with the government of Iran”.[39]

Iran is a signatory to the Refugee Convention, legally obligating it to take in and process refugees and not return them to harm.[40] The Iranian government’s policies towards its Afghan population violate these legal obligations. By sending Afghans back to a humanitarian crisis and persecution by the Taliban, Iran is arguably breaching the principle of non-refoulement.[41] Moreover Iran has not met its obligations to refugees, such as the right to housing, work, and education while displaced in order to live a dignified and independent life.[42] However, instead, it appears Tehran is no longer willing to

accept more Afghans and has started deporting those without valid papers. Whether the steady stream of those expelled will turn into a flood remains to be seen. Criticism of Pakistan's approach may make Iran wary of expelling higher numbers of Afghans in the near future.

Conclusion

Refugees are a global issue, and the international community – along with Pakistan and Iran – have a clear responsibility to protect the rights of refugees. However, international standards on refugee protection recognize that a large-scale inflow of refugees can cause serious practical as well as economic challenges for host countries and that in such cases, it is the international community's responsibility to support these countries in providing refugees with the support and safety to which they are entitled. The international community should work to equitably share the costs of refugee protection and deal with the crisis in Afghanistan so that refugees can return safely if they wish to do so. Although Pakistan is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, it should – at the very least – slow down the process of deporting Afghan refugees as they face security, humanitarian and economic threats at the hands of the Taliban. Moreover, with help of the international community and international organizations, Pakistan should help Afghans obtain residency or movement to a third country. Resettlement to foreign nations is an important protection instrument and a solution for refugees who face immediate or specific dangers, as well as populations in long-term situations. Providing resettlement possibilities allows states to share responsibility with asylum-seeking countries that accept large numbers of refugees.

The same goes for Iran, which is a signatory to the Refugee Convention. It is obligated to host Afghan refugees and provide them with better living standards. Tehran should therefore meet these commitments by hosting Afghan refugees and providing them suitable rights and pathways to have their asylum claims heard quickly. For

both states, inflammatory rhetoric and xenophobic claims against refugees should cease and any policy should be consistent with international law and human rights.



Afghans forcefully deported from Iran cross into Herat (Radio Free Europe, 2023)

Recommendations

- The International Community should strive to establish an accommodating and long-term alliance for the resettlement of all refugees. This approach should initially focus on Afghan refugees to develop processes and public support for the system.
- The international community must use its influence with the Taliban to promote respect for fundamental human rights in Afghanistan and to ensure that all Afghan refugees have the protection they need until they can return to their homes in Afghanistan in safety and dignity.
- Pakistan and Iran should halt the deportation of Afghan Refugees and frame more favourable sustainable integrated cooperative policies with Afghanistan for the promotion of peace in the region.
- Moreover, Pakistan and Iran must implement policies consistent with international standards that facilitate and encourage asylum seekers to file asylum claims and provide refugees with a fair and satisfactory asylum procedure.

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