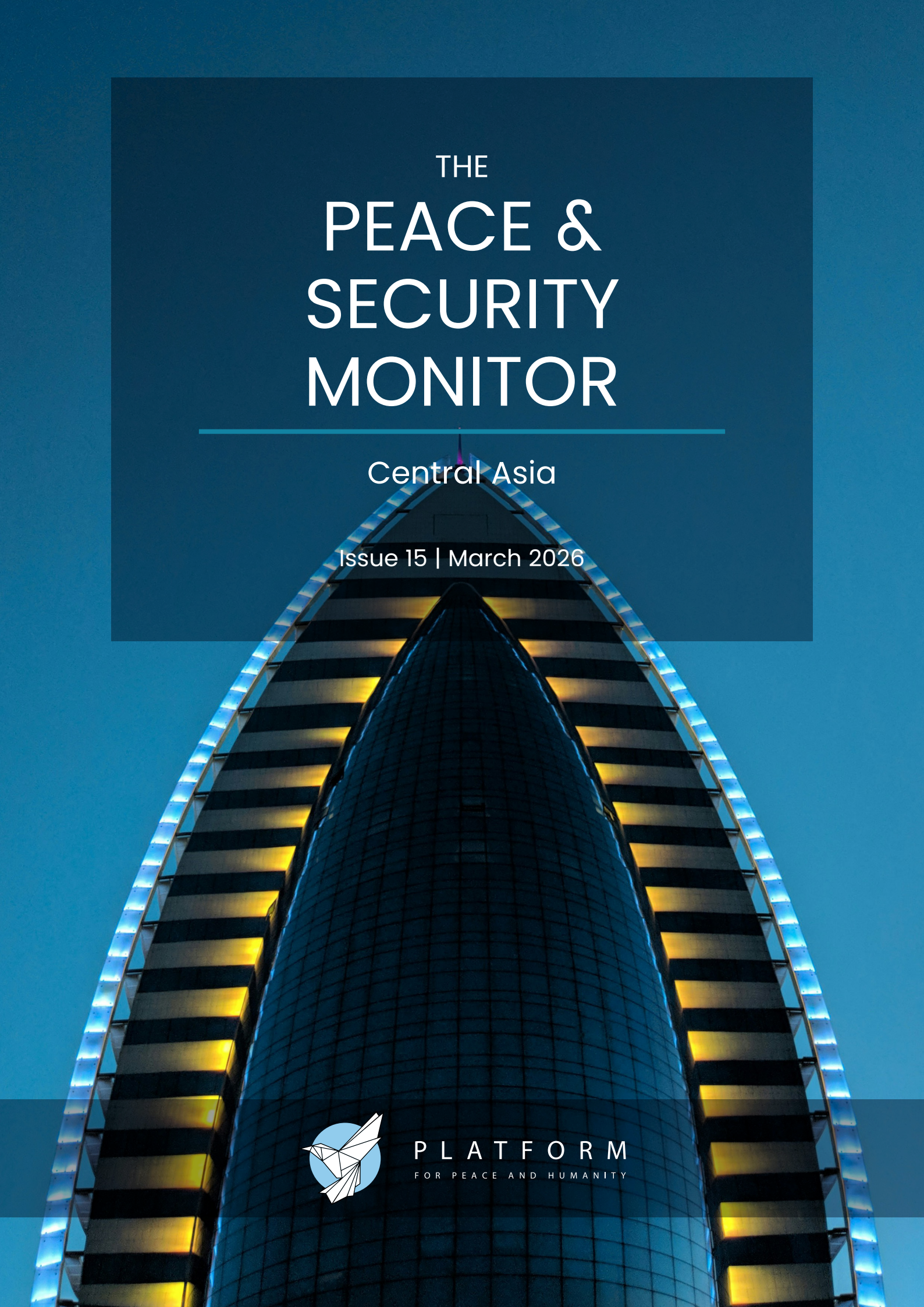

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Foreword

As we release the first quarterly Monitor of 2026, Central Asia has seen no single defining event in the past three months. Instead, pressures, strategic, economic, humanitarian, and institutional, are steadily tightening, reflecting a region adjusting to a less predictable world.

This edition covers developments only up to late February; later events, such as US-Israel armed actions against Iran or Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict, are not included.

Across the region, governments face a complex balancing act. Russia's war in Ukraine continues to reshape assumptions about Moscow's reliability and resources. China's steady expansion via commerce, infrastructure, and political influence is now entrenched. The United States' assertive, sometimes unsettling role adds both opportunities and uncertainties for smaller states prioritizing stability.

These dynamics affect internal conditions. Afghanistan's worsening humanitarian crisis influences regional security and aid calculations. Changes in mobility, from Russia's tighter migration rules to US visa bonds, reshape economic lifelines, social pressures, and perceptions of fairness. Rapidly expanding connectivity corridors bring opportunities, but also vulnerabilities that traffickers and criminal networks can exploit.

Underlying these challenges is the question of agency. Central Asia is becoming more assertive and outward-looking, yet constrained by external competition, internal vulnerabilities, and longstanding structural dependencies. Balancing major powers, security and openness, opportunity and risk, has grown more delicate.

This issue presents analyses illustrating a region in transition: cautious, adaptive, and increasingly strategic, yet facing a world less forgiving of ambiguity. In 2026, the key test for Central Asian governments will be turning diversification into resilience and connectivity into empowerment, without compromising sovereignty.

Navigating Norms: EU Conditionality in Central Asia's Connectivity Race

Gabriela Boloca

Key Takeaways

- Connectivity has become a modern arena of renewed geopolitical competition in Central Asia, where the EU's values-based Global Gateway model competes with China's speed-driven Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Russia's long-standing governance-neutral influence.
- EU conditionality faces structural limits in this environment. China and Russia offer alternative financing models that do not envisage governance and human-rights requirements, giving Central Asian governments credible options that weaken EU leverage.
- The challenge for the EU is not to dilute conditionality for competitiveness, but to operationalise it within connectivity projects. By strengthening the link between infrastructure investment and enforceable standards in procurement, labour protection, transparency, and the rule of law, the EU would reinforce its credibility and demonstrate that its connectivity model benefits societies and supports their modernisation.

Introduction

Connectivity has emerged in recent years as a central arena of geopolitical competition, utilised by major powers to secure strategic advantages, project influence and generate dependencies. In Central Asia, connectivity is emerging once again as a key site of renewed great power rivalry. As the EU advances its Global Gateway agenda, particularly the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC), it competes not only with Russia's traditional influence but also with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is in this context that European Commission President Ursula von Der Leyen tasked Jozef Síkela, Commissioner-designate for International Partnerships, with accelerating what the EU can offer to its partners and ensuring that EU funding is delivered more quickly and predictably.[1] Yet, Global Gateway projects are also expected to export the EU's regulatory and rights-based standards, with the aim of creating sustainable and value-based partnerships. This raises the question of whether conditionality can operate effectively in a rivalry-laden region where competitors offer infrastructure without political strings. Indeed, in Central Asia's competitive connectivity environment, EU conditionality does not disappear, but it is restructred: it becomes effective only when embedded in technical governance domains linked to economic modernisation, rather than in politically sensitive fields tied to regime survival.

This paper will delve into how the principle of conditionality is utilised in EU external action and its developments under the Global Gateway; it will then analyse the competitive financing landscape that characterises Central Asia, before concluding with practical recommendations on how conditionality can be more effectively implemented in the region and promote human rights and the rule of law.

Conditionality as a tool of EU External Action

The principle of conditionality is neither new nor exclusively linked to the EU. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) played a central role in shaping the concept, with the purpose of assuring the most efficient and sustainable use of its financial assistance and loan repayment by the beneficiary.[2] More broadly, the principle of conditionality provides that certain benefits are granted only if specified policies, reforms or conditions are fulfilled.[3]

In the EU, conditionality was first adopted as a tool of its external trade relations and development policy, making it a key element of European enlargement policy, and it is today also used vis-à-vis EU Member States.[4] In the context of the EU's external relations, ever since the 1990s this has taken the form of "human rights clauses". In 1991, the European Commission published a communication "*on human rights, democracy and development co-operation*", a first step in the establishment of the EU's approach to human rights conditionality in its relations with non-EU countries.[5] As these clauses are qualified as essential elements of the agreements, their violation may lead to the agreement being terminated or (partially) suspended.[6] While the EU has only rarely resorted to the option of employing "appropriate measures" in case of human rights violations, mainly under the Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, it has generally preferred to take restrictive measures within the framework of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). One such example concerns directly Central Asia, in the case of the use of force by Uzbek security forces in 2005, which the Council deemed to be excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate, opting to impose unilateral sanctions rather than formally suspending the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Uzbekistan.[7] Moreover, since the Lisbon Treaty, every EU trade agreement contains a dedicated Trade and Sustainable Development chapter, which refers to labour and environmental norms drawn from multilateral frameworks such as the International Labour Organization (ILO).[8]

EU-Central Asia relations have evolved steadily throughout the years, from an engagement first focused on energy and trade to a whole-encompassing strategic partnership. At present, the EU-Kazakhstan relations are governed by an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), which entered into force in 2020. The EPCA with Uzbekistan was signed in October 2025, while the EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was signed in June 2024. EPCA negotiations with Tajikistan were launched in February 2023 and have been concluded in 2024. EPCAs are aimed at creating more modern and diversified partnerships beyond "trade and aid" and are founded on the mutual respect for democratic principles and human rights. The conditionality principle therein is clearly illustrated by Article 1 of the EPCA with Kazakhstan, tying trade and investment cooperation to the respect of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law:

"Respect for democratic principles and human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the OSCE Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, and other relevant international human rights instruments, and for the principle of the rule of law, underpins the internal and international policies of both Parties and constitutes an essential element of this Agreement."[9]

While human rights clauses are necessary and an important legal basis to commit third countries to the respect of human rights and the rule of law, the EU's lack of enforcement and reluctance to terminate or partially suspend the agreements in which they are enshrined in cases of serious violations raises questions as to how to effectively ensure commitments are abided by. Additionally, at a time when the global rules-based order is increasingly under threat and major powers display selective compliance with international norms, the EU's approach to conditionality becomes a test of its normative credibility. The failure to operationalise enforcement risks weakening not only individual agreements but also the

EU's broader claim to act as a principled defender of international law and human rights. In this context, the principle of conditionality has progressively expanded beyond human rights clauses to encompass a broader set of governance, sustainability and regulatory standards. This evolution is particularly visible in the EU's Global Gateway strategy, launched in 2021, which offers partners values-based options for infrastructure development.

Under the Global Gateway, investments are tied to, among others, commitments to high standards of human, social and workers' rights, transparency, accountability and financial sustainability, and public procurement. In this sense, Global Gateway extends conditionality beyond the EU's traditional human-rights clauses to encompass broader governance and regulatory standards. Although the initiative was not explicitly conceived as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, it has been increasingly presented as a more sustainable and "democratic" partnership model. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen herself noted during an interview that numerous partners have begun to reassess Chinese infrastructure projects after encountering long-term debt with limited benefits to the population.[10] Within this framework, Central Asia has increasingly become a priority region, as evidenced by the announcement at the first-ever EU-Central Asia Summit of an additional €12 billion Global Gateway investment package.

Source: *European Council*

In this context, the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC) can be considered a flagship initiative, that according to the European Commission demonstrates "how Global Gateway investments are mutually beneficial – by developing hard infrastructure (rail, roads, ports, logistics centres) as well as the enabling environment (e.g. digitalisation, trade facilitation, interoperability)."[11] The TCTC seeks to develop a modern and efficient transport link between Europe and Asia with a transit time of under fifteen days, while enhancing connectivity,

Freight cars with containers are loaded onto a ferry ship to be transported across the Caspian Sea, in Kuryk, Kazakhstan, June 22, 2023. Photo by Jens Büttner/dpa via Reuters Connect

Yet, the human-rights implications of such connectivity projects are already visible. In 2023, the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre conducted a study on the human cost of the TCTC. Most notably, in relation to Central Asia, it identified multiple cases of labour-rights violations, governance and transparency concerns, and allegations affecting human-rights defenders and civil society.[13] The region's pressing need for infrastructure investment, combined with the EU's growing role as a major investor, therefore raises the important question of how effectively these risks are being addressed in practice. While progress on standards can be discerned, such as Kyrgyzstan's early ratification of ILO Convention 190 and its inclusion in labour legislation, core protections such as freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining under ILO Conventions Nos. 87 and 98 are not uniformly upheld across the region. The shrinking space for social dialogue and limited cooperation between governments and civil society further complicate efforts to translate formal commitments into tangible improvements. Moreover, investment attractiveness is a core issue tied to transparency and democracy issues. An OECD report noted that despite improvements in areas such as public procurement transparency in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and business integrity in Kazakhstan, overall progress in combating corruption remains limited. Additionally, it was noted that "all five countries are yet to introduce legal and institutional frameworks for much needed whistleblower protection, especially with respect to restricted civic space."[14]

In this context, trade has been identified as a key lever through which the EU can promote democracy and human rights, as highlighted by organisations such as Human Rights Watch.[15] Indeed, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are both beneficiaries of the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), a mechanism that provides trade benefits and is linked to the implementation of 27 core international conventions[16] on labour and human rights, environmental and climate protection, and good governance. However, limited compliance has been noted, for instance during 113th International Labour Conference Committee on the Application of Standards in relation to the implementation of the Labour Inspection Convention, 1947 (No. 81)[17]. During the latest round of bilateral Human Rights Dialogues between the EU and the Central Asian countries it was also noted the persistent

challenges, especially the shrinking space for fundamental freedoms.[18] If the EU fails to uphold the commitments embedded in its own instruments, it risks signalling that trade benefits remain unaffected by shortcomings in human-rights protection.

A Competitive Landscape: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's No-Strings Model

The existing governance and human rights issues become even more significant when viewed against the broader connectivity landscape in Central Asia. While the EU links investment to labour, sustainability, governance and human-rights standards, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) operates largely without such requirements, prioritising speed of delivery, financing, and political non-interference. Recent geopolitical developments, particularly Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, had led some scholars to consider the start of a "new Cold War", one fought on the premises of infrastructure projects.[19] In this context, China is significantly involved in the TCTC, a not exclusively EU-driven project but a space where multiple actors, including China, Kazakhstan, Turkey and the EU, pursue overlapping economic and geopolitical interests.[20] China is actively involved in the development of the TCTC through the BRI. And ever since its establishment in 2013, BRI has been praised for enabling both investment and infrastructure financing simultaneously in low- and middle-income countries. However, BRI also comes with its challenges and issues. Limited transparency in contractual arrangements, opaque financing terms, and procurement practices that favour state-linked enterprises have raised governance risks in recipient countries. Environmental and social impacts, including the displacement of local communities and exclusion of local labour from material benefits, have also been documented across several BRI projects. In some cases, large inflows of external capital have exacerbated existing inequalities and created opportunities for corruption and illicit financial flows.[21] In this context, it is important to note that according to the study conducted by the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre "companies from China made up 42% of the infrastructure project contractors in Central Asia (eight companies)."[22] Thus, the absence of focus on governance, sustainability and human rights in BRI projects in practice can lead to, inter alia, limited avenues for impacted communities or individuals to seek redress in cases of violations and weakened labour protections, creating a deteriorated human rights environment where risks are exacerbated.

On the other hand, Russia offers another connectivity model in the region. Russia's presence in Central Asia is not determined by large-scale infrastructure financing but is mainly exerted through political, security and economic networks. Its connectivity model differs significantly: whereas the EU promotes regulatory convergence and China emphasises infrastructure-led growth with limited political conditions, Russia's model reinforces executive dominance and regime durability through security and labour-migration interdependence. Indeed, as noted by the Clingendael Institute in its report, despite the decreasing Russian influence in the region following the war in Ukraine and the strengthening of the five countries' multi-sectoral foreign policies, "Russia wields both hard and soft power through its historical, linguistic, and cultural connections, while also maintaining control over regional institutions, military presence, security apparatuses, diaspora populations, and economic dependencies."[23] This can be seen through Central Asian membership of Russian-led regional organisations, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as well as through military lenses since Russia continues to hold the largest military presence in Central Asia and migrant remittances which make up a large portion of Tajikistan's, Kyrgyzstan's and Uzbekistan's economies.[24] As Russia's approach is detached from governance and human rights considerations and commitments, for Central Asian governments this represents a

permissive environment in which external support can be secured without scrutiny over domestic practices. However, Russia's enduring cultural, linguistic, and historical influence continues to anchor the region to a colonial legacy from which Central Asian states have increasingly sought to distance themselves. Additionally, Russia's financing model also has direct implications on human rights since, by prioritising regime stability, security cooperation, and economic dependence over governance reform, it normalises restrictive approaches to civil society, media, labour rights, and political accountability.

Conclusions: Can Conditionality Survive in Competitive Connectivity?

Together, the Chinese and Russian connectivity models offer the opportunity for Central Asian governments to access infrastructure financing, security cooperation, and economic support without being required to undertake governance or human-rights reforms. This significantly constrains the EU's ability to rely on conditionality as an effective tool of normative influence in the region.

Nevertheless, the five Central Asian states are not merely passive recipients and have increasingly started to weigh benefits and risks, especially since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, the states' foreign policy diversification has been mainly impacted by concerns over Russia's territorial ambitions, which have prompted the governments to fear similar revisionist moves in regions with ethnic Russian populations. And while this has resulted in Central Asian states being closer to China, challenges to the latter's ambitions in the region still persist. This is due particularly to concerns derived from cases of over-borrowing and what is commonly called a "debt trap", anti-Chinese sentiments and a lack of trust, especially in Muslim-majority Central Asian states because of China's treatment of the Muslim Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.[25]

In this context, the EU's Global Gateway offers an alternative that takes into account territorial integrity and sovereignty of the countries it supports. However, what has clearly emerged in recent years is that EU conditionality will be accepted where it aligns with development goals, such as digital integration, ESG standards, and connectivity, while it will be rejected when it touches sectors that are intimately linked to regime stability or elite interests, such as media freedom, civil society, and labour regulation. The withdrawal of USAID has further exacerbated the issue and to some extent eroded the trust in Western aid, which can be deemed to be more volatile and inconsistent. Nevertheless, the EU should not forget its founding values and principles, and should not water down conditionality for competitiveness.

Policy Recommendations

With geopolitical competition in Central Asia increasingly unfolding through connectivity initiatives, the following recommendations aim to safeguard Central Asian states' sovereignty, strengthen human-rights compliance, and reinforce the EU's normative role through its conditionality framework.

The EU's primary objective should be to maintain consistency in its conditionality regime despite geopolitical competition. Diluting standards in response to China's and Russia's models would undermine the very normative advantage that distinguishes the Global Gateway.

To ensure this, the EU should:

- Embed mandatory human-rights and environmental due diligence in all TCTC contracts. The EU should require that all contractors and subcontractors involved in TCTC projects

comply with binding human-rights and environmental due-diligence standards, including grievance mechanisms accessible to local communities and workers. In this sense, an oversight mechanism is also paramount.
- Use GSP+ and trade leverage more assertively. The EU should increasingly link continued GSP+ benefits for Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to measurable progress in labour inspection, freedom of association, and protection of whistleblowers, ensuring that trade incentives remain tied to rights performance.
- Coordinate connectivity policy with anti-corruption and rule-of-law initiatives. The EU should stress more the link between infrastructure investment and anti-corruption. For instance, funding should be accompanied by technical assistance for anti-corruption bodies, labour inspectorates, and judicial institutions to ensure that standards can be enforced domestically.

Central Asian governments should:

- Use geopolitical competition to strengthen bargaining power. They should leverage the simultaneous interest of the EU, China, and Russia to negotiate higher standards in contracts, financing terms, and labour protections.
- Increase transparency in infrastructure and transport contracts. In particular, publishing procurement processes and contract terms would reduce corruption risks, attract higher-quality investors, and improve trust with international partners without requiring political reforms that threaten regime stability. In this sense, enhanced transparency and governance standards will attract investment, leading to economic benefits.
- Strengthen labour inspection and local labour participation along corridors. Improving enforcement of existing labour legislation and ensuring participation of local workers in infrastructure projects would reduce social tensions and align with commitments already undertaken under ILO conventions and GSP+. In this sense, increased cooperation with local civil society organisations is recommended, as they can act as oversight. Additionally, permitting civil society, trade unions, and local communities to monitor the social and environmental impact of connectivity projects can prevent conflicts, protests, and reputational damage without undermining political control.
- Treat connectivity as a governance opportunity, not only an economic one. Large infrastructure projects can be used to modernise procurement systems, anti-corruption practices, and regulatory frameworks in ways that improve state capacity and international credibility. This will similarly lead to increased investment attractiveness.

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Shifting Horizons: The Evolution of Central Asian Labor Migration Post-2024

A Two-Part Series on Legal Reform and Social Realities of Central Asian Migrants living in Russia

Leila Alemi

Part I: Navigating New Realities: Legislative Reforms and Administrative Barriers

Key Takeaways

- Following the 2024 Crocus City Hall attack in Moscow by ISIS-KP (Islamic State Khorasan Province), attributed to Tajik nationals, Russia has increasingly introduced restrictive migration laws that have altered the legal landscape for Central Asian labor migrants and created additional barriers for foreign families.
- The implementation of rigorous administrative requirements has significantly impacted the residency status and long-term stability of Central Asian labor migrants.
- Russia remains a major destination for labor migrants from Central Asian countries; however, mobility patterns are beginning to shift toward markets in Asia and the European Union as Central Asian migrants experience increasing legal obstacles and rising anti-migrant sentiment in Russia.

Context & Background – Central Asian Migration to Russia

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has been the main labor destination for foreign workers from Central Asian countries.[1] Substantially higher wages and better job opportunities have long drawn Central Asian migrants to Russia, as migrants often earn 2-3 times higher income.[2] Central Asian countries are now dependent on remittances from Russia given the history between the countries and the immense number of foreign workers from countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.[3] The IOM's *World Migration Report* (2024) found that Russia has been a substantial source of remittances to Central Asian countries for decades, making up over half of remittance flows to these countries, including Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and contributing 30-50% of GDP in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.[4]

The Russian government's enactment of stricter measures against migrant labor seems to defy logic given Russia's heavy dependence on migrant labor from Central Asia, especially since the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. Russia, once an attractive destination for Central Asian migrants facing dire economic conditions in their home countries, seem to be looking to other countries for migration. The IOM's *World Migration Report* (2024) reflects this change – finding that Central Asian mobility patterns "seem to be shifting" with a growing number of migrants choosing to migrate to Asia and the European Union.[5] This trend is predicted to accelerate in the coming years.[6] Nonetheless, the majority of migrants in Russia still come from Central Asia.[7] In 2024, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that the largest number of migrants in Russia come from Uzbekistan (23.3%), Tajikistan (16.7%) and Kyrgyzstan (10.4%).[8] However, the first half of 2025 saw a decrease of 150,000 Tajik migrants into Russia.[9]

In January 2026, *the Moscow Times* reported a 10% decrease on foreigners residing in Russia, falling from 6.3 million a year earlier to 5.7 million.[10] Alexander Perezhogin, the head of analytics at the Interior Ministry's migration service attributes this drop to a 25% decrease in the number of foreign children following the implementation of a new Russian language law[11], requiring children to pass a highly difficult language exam as a prerequisite to enroll in school starting the 2025 academic year.

Recent Legislative Changes Affecting Central Asian Migrants

Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens – "The Expulsion Regime"

The Russian Federation's *Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens* defines the rights and duties of foreign citizens residing in Russia in relation to state authorities and officials, and regulates their entry, stay, residence, work, movement and exit.[12] Amendments made to the *Law on the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens*, effective early 2025, introduced a formal "expulsion regime," maintained by Ministry of Internal Affairs officers.[13] This regime can designate a foreign citizen as a "controlled person," meaning someone who has lost the legal right to remain in Russia.[14] Legal grounds for being classified as a "controlled person" include the expiration of a temporary residence permit, work permit, or employment contract, or an enforced reduction of the period of temporary stay.[15] Upon being deemed a "controlled person" foreign nationals are subsequently added on a "registry of controlled persons."[16] This is a large nationwide database that includes all foreign citizens deemed to be unlawfully present, in other words, without legal status, in Russia.[17]

Being included on the "controlled persons" registry triggers severe restrictions on civil and economic rights. For example, controlled status limits an individual's freedom of movement, requiring police permission prior to changing one's residence, and a prohibition on leaving the municipality which one resides. [18] "Controlled persons" cannot open bank accounts, or conduct banking operations except for transferring money to complete mandatory payments, transfers to a controlled persons account, and cash withdraws under 30,000 rubles (approximately $390 USD) per month.[19] The law also excludes controlled persons from lawfully marrying in Russia, purchasing real estate and vehicles and registering them with the appropriate government agencies, and creating business entities or registering as an individual entrepreneur. [20] Furthermore, law enforcement officials can utilize surveillance technologies, including geolocation and facial recognition, to track and monitor persons on the "controlled registry" and to access locations where they are present without a court order.[21] Human Rights Watch ("HRW") warned that "[t]he broad powers granted to law

enforcement, coupled with limited judicial oversight, under this 'expulsion regime' make abuses highly likely."[22]

Alexander Grebenkin, Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation reported that as of November 2025, 750,000 foreign nationals were listed in the registry of controlled persons.[23] While the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs does not publish a breakdown by nationality of those listed on the registry, reporting from national governments and independent media provides insight into the composition of Central Asians on the list. At that time, over 150,000 Tajik citizens were reported to be included[24], around 160,000 Uzbek nationals had been removed after regularizing their status or leaving Russia[25], and approximately 128,500 Kyrgyz citizens had been added to the registry[26]. By January 2026, the number of Kyrgyz citizens declined to an estimated 34,800, reflecting the ongoing regularization of migrant status and departures from Russia.[27] These three groups together represent a substantial portion of the registry, which signifies the significant impact Russia's migration laws have on Central Asian migrants, while no publicly available figures currently exist for Kazakh or Turkmen nationals.

Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences Law

Amendments to the Code of Administrative Offences, which took effect in February 2025, shift decision-making power on the deportation of migrants, permitting Interior Ministry officials, like police officers, to deport migrants without judicial oversight.[28] These expulsion orders can be carried out immediately, preventing migrants from contesting the grounds of the order, even though Russian law allows a ten-day period to appeal after an order is issued.[29]

HRW spoke to an expert from a Kyrgyz NGO that provides support to Kyrgyz labor migrants, who explained that:

> "Before this, you had to have at least two administrative violations to be sentenced to deportation, and now any violation can make one subject to the "expulsion regime." This is without a trial or investigation; the police have the right to deport and prohibit entry to a labor migrant without any oversight…"

Military Service Requirement

Vladmir Putin issued an underpublicized decree (Decree No. 821) in November 2025 requiring foreign men pursing citizenship or permanent residency to sign a military contract.[30] Under this decree, as a prerequisite to apply for permanent residency, certain men are required to either provide a certificate from an enlistment office deeming them unfit for service, present a military contract for at minimum one year of service, or a contract for service with the Emergency Situation Ministry.[31] Similar rules apply for men seeking citizenship.[32] They must demonstrate either that they served in the military or Emergency Situations Ministry for at least one year, or provide proof that they were exempt from service.[33] This leaves many migrant men with two options, serve in the military or leave Russia.

Russian Language Proficiency Exam

Beginning April 2025, Russia launched a new educational law, requiring all migrant children to pass a Russian language test and present proof of legal residency as a prerequisite to enrolling in public school.[34] A month later, Russia's education and science supervision agency reported that out of 1,762 applications to enroll in the language test, only 19% of children were permitted to take the exam.[35] Of those 335 children who were admitted to register for the test, "only 44 children took it, and of them 27 completed the assessment and gained the necessary passing points; the rest failed."[36] Russian officials cited the

most common reasons for the rejection of applications as incomplete documentation, inaccurate information listed in applications and the lack of available spaces in schools.[37] Official Russian guidance permits children to re-take the exam three months later.[38] However, independent analysis reports describe the test as complex, even for native-level speakers.[39]

After the 2025 rules took effect, the demand for Russian tutoring among non-native speakers understandably surged, but many migrant and refugee families cannot afford these services, making state-provided language support crucial for children's language adaptation.[40] However, in Russia these types of programs are extremely rare.[41]

Recent testimonies from Tajik migrant families in Russia indicate that schools deny admission despite submitting all the proper documentation, citing the lack of available spots, leaving children out of school and unable to assimilate into society.[42] According to a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report in September 2025, an official from the Tajik Education Ministry confirmed that over 3,700 Tajik children who studied in Russian schools returned to Tajikistan due to the new education laws.[43]

Valery Fadeyev, head of the Presidential Council for Human Rights in Russia raised concerns over the exclusion of migrant children in schools with senior Uzbek migration officials, diplomats, and legislators, at a roundtable discussion on "Improving Migration Policy in the Context of Building a Single CIS Labor Market" in October 2025. Fadeyev stated that: "Several hundred thousand children, children of migrants, are not attending school. This is an unacceptable situation." Fadeyev urged Uzbek authorities of the need for early preparation of migrant children in learning Russian before moving to Russia.[44] He stood by the new educational law regarding Russian language testing, stating that a child who does not know Russian should study in their home country instead of struggling in school in Russia.[45]

Consequently, many migrant children face significant hurdles to accessing education in Russia, a right protected under Article 43 of the Russian Constitution and reinforced internationally by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Russia is a signatory.

Another federal law recently came into effect on January 28, 2026, which requires education authorities to share information regarding migrant children with the Interior Ministry.[46] Among other things, information regarding a minor child's results on the Russian language test, enrollment in schools, expulsion and information from the "controlled registry" will be exchanged between agencies.[47] Put simply, the law formalizes tracking of foreign children in the Russian school system.

Employment Limitations

Employment bans for migrants are increasing throughout Russia in 2026. On December 5, 2025, the federal government issued Decree No. 1955, which creates stricter annual quotas in 2026 for foreign labor across key economic sectors.[48] The Decree reduces the allowable share of foreign workers in the construction field from 80% to 50% and retains a complete ban on migrant work in the retail sale of tobacco and alcohol and pharmaceutical products.[49] In addition, the permitted share of migrant workers in transportation services is no more than 24% and 40% for forestry and vegetable growing industries.[50] Companies found violating these quotas will incur fines of approximately $10,400-$13,000 USD or suspension of business from 14 to 90 days.[51]

These are strictly the federal limits, as regions can and are creating even stricter restrictions on employment. For example, in Crimea, a complete ban on migrant work in all sectors except tourism and construction has been extended until 2026.[52] In addition, the Samara

region will impose even stricter regulations on migrant workers in 2026. According to a report by Russian owned news agency, *RIA Novosti*, the governor of Samara issued a new decree banning foreigners from undertaking employment in 120 positions.[53] This includes working as janitors, couriers, drivers, and in education, staffing agencies and scientific research.[54] In St. Petersburg, Governor, Alexander Belov, recently extended the city's total ban on migrants working as taxi drivers and delivery workers until the end of 2026.[55] In Moscow, starting in 2026, a complete ban will be imposed on labor migrants from holding labor patents in the entire food sector (including restaurants, food trucks, cafes and kiosks), in addition to healthcare, social services, culture and sports industries.[56]

A Tajik migrant in Russia, who spoke to *Deutsche Welle* on the condition of anonymity, explained his experience being a migrant in Russia:

> "I used to work in warehouses, drive taxis, and deliver for marketplaces in Russia. I arrived in 2016 after finishing school and found it like a second home, just with more opportunities. The situation has changed abruptly. Now I'm limited to construction. Every day there are new restrictions. It feels like we are no longer wanted here."[57]

Reports indicate that as of January 2025, 49 Russian regions have introduced bans or restrictive on migrant workers in working in specific jobs or fields.[58]

Amina Tracking Application

Starting September 1, 2025, Russian authorities launched a 4-year pilot test of *Anima,* a mobile tracking application that integrates location tracking, police oversight and biometric data collection of labor migrants.[59] The monitoring application is mandatory in Moscow and the surrounding Moscow region for all foreign workers from: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Citizens from Belarus are excluded, as well as minors, diplomats and their families.[60]

If foreign workers fail to regularly update their location via the application, they risk possible detention.[61] According to HRW, if the application stops updating, an individual is automatically added to the "controlled persons" registry, causing "rights-violating restrictions."[62] Reports indicate that many users experienced technical issues, including problems installing the application and inaccurate geolocation data linked to GPS scrambling.[63]

As of early February 2026, there have been no direct public statements by Central Asian leaders regarding the use of this application on their citizens.

Law expanding grounds to revoke citizenship

In July 2025, a federal law took effect that broadened the list of crimes as grounds for revoking citizenship acquired through naturalization.[64] The new law adds 17 offenses (to the already listed 64) as a means to revoke naturalized citizenship.[65] These additions include offenses typically used in politically motivated prosecutions, including crimes motivated by "political hatred," calls against state security and extremist symbols.[66]

Temporary Residence Permit Quotas

In addition to legislative reforms, the Russian government has restricted access to legal temporary residence for foreign nationals, significantly reducing the quota for permits. In 2024, 10,600 permits were available; this was halved to 5,500 in 2025 and now further reduced to 3,802 in 2026, a 60% decrease since 2024.[67]

Conclusion

Russia has long been an attractive location for Central Asian migrants, but this dynamic is increasingly shifting due to not only the conflict in Ukraine, but also the sharp increase in anti-migrant legislation that disproportionately affects Central Asian migrants. The introduction of more stringent administrative requirements and educational prerequisites post-2024 Crocus City Hall attack has created a more complex and negative environment for foreign workers and their families. As a result, we are beginning to see a shift as migrants start to choose jobs in the European Union and other parts of Asia instead. This may create a major turning point for the region, as the long-standing reliance on a single labor market begins to fade.

Policy Recommendations

- Formalize bilateral agreements with high-demand labor markets, including the EU, UK and Asia to provide safer migration alternatives for labor migrants
- Continue establishing specialized training centers to prepare labor migrants for employment abroad
- Collaborate with neighboring Central Asian countries to coordinate protections**,** share best practices, and advocate collectively for migrant rights in Russia
- Develop state-run applications that provide real time legal updates and emergency hotlines that can help migrants navigate the “controlled persons” registry
- Create dedicated employment and help centers to assist returning labor migrants with job placement
- Continue encouraging Russia to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families
- Urge Russia to suspend or reform the Russian language exam for migrant children to ensure compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Implement pre-departure Russian language courses for children of migrants to reduce barriers imposed by Russian language proficiency exam
- Establish remedial Russian language courses for migrant children who fail the Russian language exam, including scholarships or low-cost courses, tutoring or online courses, ensuring that all children have access to education

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Strategic Recalibration: How Russia's War of Aggression in Ukraine is Reshaping Central Asia

Francesco Pagano

Key Takeaways

- Russia remains a central security actor in Central Asia, but its ability to dominate the region has been weakened by the war in Ukraine.
- Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine is leading to realignment of Central Asian states.
- Central Asian states are exercising multi-vector strategies aimed at diversification, risk management, rather than firm alignment.

Recalibrating Influence in light of the War in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has placed the five Central Asian states in an increasingly delicate diplomatic position. While all continue to engage with Moscow, none have publicly endorsed Russia's use of force. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have gone further by reaffirming Ukraine's territorial integrity and providing humanitarian assistance. This cautious stance has led some analysts to argue that the war is weakening Russia's influence in Central Asia and encouraging regional governments to create greater distance from Moscow, reshaping geopolitical dynamics. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are increasingly affected by the conflict's indirect political, economic, and strategic spillovers, effects likely to intensify over time. Central Asia's strategic importance stems from its role as a key trade corridor, its abundant energy resources and critical minerals, and its centrality to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the post-Soviet period, Russia exercised predominant influence through historical ties, security arrangements such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and economic integration within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The war in Ukraine, however, has complicated Moscow's ability to sustain this dominant position, opening space for China to expand its economic and political footprint and for Central Asian states to diversify their external partnerships. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has strained its engagement in Central Asia, limiting the political, economic, and military resources available for the region.[1]

This reduced attention has weakened Russia's capacity to counter China's expanding presence. At the same time, the war has heightened anxieties among Central Asian leaders, particularly in Kazakhstan, about Russia's revisionist tendencies. Concerns over the security of regions with significant ethnic Russian populations, amplified by earlier rhetoric from Russian officials, have prompted several states to recalibrate their foreign policy alignments. Kazakhstan's deepening ties with China exemplify this trend; during a 2022 visit to Astana, President Xi Jinping explicitly reaffirmed Beijing's support for Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. China has been especially effective in capitalizing on the strategic space created by Russia's wartime focus. Through the BRI, Beijing has invested heavily in infrastructure projects, including pipelines, energy facilities, and transport corridors such as the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, which bypasses Russian territory. By 2020, China had overtaken Russia as the leading trade partner for most Central Asian states.

Russia's diminished capacity to supply military equipment has further enabled China to enter the regional arms market, with reports suggesting that Uzbekistan plans to replace aging Russian aircrafts with Chinese alternatives. China's officially neutral stance on the war in Ukraine and its emphasis on mediation have also enhanced its diplomatic appeal, allowing it to present itself as a more predictable and less confrontational partner than Russia. Financial leverage through loans, infrastructure ownership, and energy ties has further entrenched Chinese influence.[2]

Central Asia's geopolitical significance, shaped by its proximity to Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran, as well as its abundance of strategic resources, has also renewed U.S. interest in the region. Recent developments have prompted greater congressional attention to strengthening U.S. engagement with Central Asian states, with potential areas of cooperation being trade, collaboration on energy and critical minerals, regional connectivity, and security partnerships. In parallel, Central Asian governments are continuing to broaden their diplomatic and economic ties through engagement with the European Union and by strengthening relations with actors such as Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan.[3]

Russian Hegemony in Central Asia

Nevertheless, Russia has not been fundamentally weakened by the war in Ukraine. Despite the initial shock of comprehensive Western sanctions, the Russian economy has shown notable resilience, with growth rebounding through trade reorientation toward Asia. According to International Monetary Fund estimates, Russia's economy grew by 3.2 percent in 2024, outperforming several Western economies. This economic recovery, combined with sustained military capacity, has reinforced perceptions of Russia as a durable power among segments of Central Asian elites, particularly authoritarian leaders who remain skeptical of Western normative agendas related to governance and democratization.[4]

Moreover, Russia continues to maintain a strong and systemic presence in Central Asia, occupying a central role in the region's political, security, and economic frameworks, by leading key regional organizations, including the EAEU, the CSTO, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Through these institutions, Moscow exercises significant influence over regional economies, political elites, academic networks, and broader society. Russia also remains the principal security guarantor in Central Asia, maintaining a substantial military presence in three of the five Central Asian states and by playing a critical role in supporting regime stability. When mass protests erupted in Kazakhstan in January 2022, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev requested CSTO assistance, and approximately 3,000 troops, primarily Russian, were deployed as "peacekeepers;" although these forces did not engage directly in combat, their presence underscored Russia's capacity to protect incumbent elites and stabilize friendly governments.[5]

Russia's military footprint in the region is also extensive; it stations roughly 7,000 troops in Tajikistan and operates key facilities such as the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan, the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, and multiple radar and testing installations across Central Asia. The 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, Russia's largest overseas base, along with a leased facility near the Afghan border, highlights Moscow's long-term strategic positioning. Russia also dominates the regional arms market, supplying most Central Asian states, with the exception of Turkmenistan, with relatively affordable military equipment. Kazakhstan's participation in joint air defense units with Russia under the CSTO framework exemplifies this dependence. Given that regional armed forces and intelligence services rely heavily on Soviet or Russian systems, Moscow retains substantial leverage over their security sectors. These ties are reinforced through regular multilateral exercises involving CSTO members, particularly Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, further embedding Russian

military doctrine and operational practices within regional forces.[6]

Economically, Russia wields additional leverage through critical infrastructure and energy interdependence. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), which transports approximately 80% of Kazakhstan's oil exports to Europe, runs through Russian territory, granting Moscow the ability to regulate or disrupt the flows. Russia's role in the nuclear energy sector also provides potential influence; Rosatom is involved in projects in Uzbekistan and may participate in Kazakhstan's future nuclear power plans, raising concerns about Moscow's leverage over regional energy security. Lastly, through the EAEU, Russia remains a major supplier of essential goods to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, despite possessing substantial gas reserves, continues to rely on Russian imports during winter months, even as it seeks diversification through renewable energy initiatives. Should nuclear projects in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan proceed, Russia's influence over Central Asia's energy landscape could deepen further.[7]

Map elaborated by Author.

Recent Trends of Balancing Russia and Broadening Relations

Central Asian states are not merely passive actors of great-power competition; they have leveraged the war in Ukraine to reinforce long-standing "multi-vector" foreign policies, balancing enduring security ties with Russia against expanding economic engagement with China, while cautiously exploring limited partnerships with Western actors. Kazakhstan has maintained formal neutrality while deepening economic cooperation with China, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have diversified energy exports toward Chinese markets to reduce dependence on any single external partner. Initiatives such as the United States' C5+1 summit in 2023 (the most recent was in November 2025) and expanded European Union outreach have provided additional diplomatic options. Ultimately, Central Asian resilience depends on sustaining internal stability and diversifying external relationships without provoking either Moscow or Beijing in an increasingly polarized geopolitical environment.[8]

The war has disrupted trade and remittance flows, contributing to inflation and economic instability across the region; sanctions have prompted the Central Asian states to reconsider their ties with other global actors, reflecting a broader reassessment of entrenched dependencies, accelerating efforts to diversify their economies, to enhance strategic autonomy, and to reduce reliance on any single external power. This adjustment

has produced a two-tier regional dynamic. Resource-rich states, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, possess greater capacity to pursue strategic independence, while resource-poor Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain more dependent on Russian security guarantees. Nevertheless, all five states share a common objective: broadening international partnerships while avoiding entrapment in Moscow's declining geopolitical orbit.[9]

Kazakhstan has emerged as the region's most sophisticated practitioner of multi-vector diplomacy; while formally aligned with Russia through the CSTO and the EAEU, it has drawn clear boundaries by declining to recognize the self-proclaimed independence of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions, by welcoming large numbers of Russians fleeing mobilization, and by strengthening economic and diplomatic ties with China, Türkiye, and the European Union. Kazakhstan has also taken the lead in developing the Middle Corridor, a multimodal trade route linking Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus, deliberately bypassing Russian territory to reduce dependence on Moscow. Kazakhstan has also cautiously expanded diplomatic engagement with Ukraine. At the UN General Assembly in September 2025, President Tokayev met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the first such meeting between a Central Asian leader and Ukraine's president since the war began, which followed by talks between the Uzbek and Ukrainian foreign ministers, with the final aim to articulate a more independent regional posture and, potentially, to position Kazakhstan as a facilitator for dialogue, even as neutrality remains the guiding principle.[10]

Uzbekistan, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has pursued a similarly assertive yet cautious path. Remaining outside both the CSTO and the EAEU, Tashkent emphasizes sovereignty while advancing an open, reform-oriented economic agenda. It maintains pragmatic engagement with Russia while cultivating parallel relationships with China, Europe, and the United States. In January 2026, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reaffirmed this balanced approach, expressing support for de-escalation, dialogue, and negotiated solutions to the Russia–Ukraine conflict while avoiding alignment with any party. Mirziyoyev's strategy reflects a broader regional posture: increasingly autonomous, diplomatically diversified, and attentive to national priorities.[11]

Historically defined by strict neutrality, **Turkmenistan** has also adjusted its external orientation. China has become the primary purchaser of Turkmen gas and a major investor in infrastructure, signaling a gradual eastward pivot. This shift underscores a broader regional trend: Russia is no longer the uncontested energy gateway for Central Asia.[12]

For **Kyrgyzstan** and **Tajikistan**, smaller and with less resources, Russia continues to play a central role. Millions of citizens work in Russia, and remittances account for a significant share of national income, and Russian military bases remain critical to internal and regional security. Nevertheless, both countries are quietly pursuing diversification through Chinese investment, partnerships with Gulf states, and expanded diplomatic engagement, aiming to reduce Moscow's dominance incrementally without jeopardizing short-term stability.[13]

Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov and Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev pose for a family photo during the Russia-Central Asia summit at the Kokhi Somon government residence in Dushanbe, Tajikistan October 9, 2025. Sputnik/Kristina Kormilitsyna/Pool

Continuity and changes in a shifting regional order

Russia's war against Ukraine has not produced a simple or uniform realignment in Central Asia. Although Moscow's economic resilience and entrenched security presence ensure that it remains a central actor, the war has weakened its uncontested dominance and heightened regional awareness of the risks associated with overdependence. Central Asian states have responded pragmatically, reinforcing long-standing multi-vector strategies rather than pursuing abrupt geopolitical shifts. Across the region, governments have sought to reduce exposure to sanctions, safeguard regime stability, and expand strategic options amid growing uncertainty. The future trajectory of Central Asia will depend less on any single outcome of the war in Ukraine than on the interaction of three forces: Russia's efforts to preserve influence despite overstretch, China's steady consolidation of economic power, and Central Asian leaders navigating between them. Whether the conflict ends in a negotiated stalemate, a frozen confrontation, or a Russian consolidation of territorial gains, the region is unlikely to revert to pre-2022 patterns of alignment.[14] In view of this:

- Central Asian government should continue deepening economic and diplomatic diversification gradually to enhance autonomy while avoiding destabilization.
- Strengthening regional cooperation on trade, connectivity and energy security to reduce external dependence and improve autonomy.
- Balancing short-term reliance on external security providers with long-term investments in institutional and economic resilience for sustainable stability.

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Central Asia and the New World Order

Philippa Sackett

Key Takeaways

- On 3 January 2026, the United States launched a military operation inside the sovereign state of Venezuela, culminating in the removal of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife. The international community largely reacted to the attack with shock and alarm. Central Asian leaders remained silent, however, making no public statement at all about the US' actions.
- This stance is symbolic of the Central Asian bloc's 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach, as part of which it attempts to balance multiple powerful allies. In recent years, the five Central Asian states have worked together to deepen political, economic and security ties with all major global powers. Beyond their long-standing partnership with Russia and deep economic ties to China, in 2025 the bloc made a concerted effort to strengthen collaboration with the US, signing major economic deals and supporting various American foreign policy actions.
- In an era increasingly defined by the erosion of the global rules based order and an escalation of violent expansionism, the US attack on Venezuela shows that the stakes at play for small and medium sized nations are rising rapidly. As it becomes increasingly difficult to balance international relations, Central Asia's significant untapped reserves of rare earth metals heighten the risk of the bloc getting caught in the crossfire of the world's military superpowers.
- The extent to which the Central Asian states are prepared to help the US compete with Russia, their longstanding protector, and China, their largest economic partner, remains to be seen. What is certain, however, is that the five Central Asian nations must tread carefully if they are to preserve their autonomy in the emerging new world order.

A New Year Dawns

On 3 January 2026, the world woke up to the news that the United States had launched a military operation inside the sovereign state of Venezuela, culminating in the removal of President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores. After the attack, US President Donald Trump announced that Maduro and Flores were to be tried for offenses related to drug trafficking, and that the United States would 'run' Venezuela during a transition period. "*This is America first; this is peace through strength*," declared Pete Jegseth, US Secretary of War[1], mirroring the language of the Trump Administration's new National Security Strategy.[2]

The international community largely reacted to US actions in Venezuela with shock and alarm. Latin American nations vigorously condemned the attack,[3] as did Russia and China, both long-term allies of Venezuela.[4] While public reactions in Europe were more muted, many leaders spoke out about the need to respect international law and seek political/diplomatic solutions.[5] International legal experts were quick to point out that President Trump's attack on Venezuela was '*plainly illegal*',[6] a serious breach of both US and international law. In the absence of prior authorisation from the UN Security Council and

with no real and imminent danger, the intervention is an unjustified act of aggression, at odds with the global 'rules based order'.[7]

In Central Asia, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan remained silent, making no public comment at all in the days following the attack. Rather than a diplomatic vacuum, analysts agree that their silence speaks volumes about the shifting sands of geopolitical power, the erosion of the international rules based order, and the complex considerations of energy and resource based geopolitics.[8]

The Delicate Balancing Act of Pragmatic Diplomacy

Central Asia's reluctance to speak out about events in Venezuela is strongly reminiscent of their public stance on Russian aggression in Ukraine.[9] This in turn reflects the delicate balancing act at the heart of the bloc's emerging 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach.

Nestled between Russia and China, Central Asia's land borders provide a natural link to these two modern superpowers. Historically, Russia is the bloc's longest-standing partner and protector, and for decades Central Asian leaders were considered to be solely within Moscow's orbit. In recent years, China has emerged as the bloc's largest trading partner, its economic grip tightened through a deliberate policy of expanded cooperation and large scale infrastructure investment. As if such a close relationship with two of the world's military superpowers was not enough, recently Central Asian leaders have been making a concerted effort to deepen political, economic and security ties with other major global powers, including the Islamic world, Japan, the EU and, of course, the US. While studiously avoiding overt criticism of their closest superpower allies, over the past twelve months the Central Asian states have participated as a unified region in a series of 'C5+1' format high-level meetings with many of these major players.

Since the return of President Trump to the White House, the core of Central Asian engagement with the US has shifted from a lacklustre commitment to democratic reform to an overtly business-centred rhetoric.[10] In 2025, relations between the US and Central Asia evolved significantly, culminating in a November summit in Washington, in which leaders of the five states met with Trump and the US business community to reaffirm their mutual interest in deepening cooperation.[11] While at the White House, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Central Asia's two largest states, finalized multi-million dollar commercial agreements with US companies, spanning the sectors of aviation, industrial cooperation, digital technologies and, most notably, energy and mineral resources.[12] On the sidelines of the summit, Kazakhstan announced its decision to join the Abraham Accords, thereby quietly redrawing the map of Eurasian diplomacy.[13]

U.S. President Donald Trump, Vice President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, and Senator Jim Risch (R-ID) attend a dinner with the leaders of the C5+1Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, in the East Room of the White House in Washington, D.C., U.S., November 6, 2025. REUTERS/Nathan Howard

The refusal of Central Asian states to follow Russia and China's lead and publicly condemn US action in Venezuela sends a strong signal about their reluctance to jeopardise their burgeoning relationship with the world's third military superpower. Two weeks on from the attack in Venezuela, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pressed the point further when they became early signatories to Trump's controversial 'Board of Peace.'[14] Clearly, the Central Asian states are trying to claim their own place on the world stage and shake off the image that they are outliers answerable only to Moscow or Beijing. Behind this rapprochement, however, we can be sure that Central Asian leaders are watching carefully as the ripple effects of the US' drastic tack in foreign policy continue to play out. Although to date the bloc has proved adept at balancing complex international relations, juggling three superpowers was never going to be easy, and recent shifts in global geopolitics are raising the stakes in their multi-vector gamble.

The Erosion of The Global 'Rules Based Order'

For many nations, the major concern about the Venezuela attack is not just that it happened, but what it might herald for the future. President Trump lost no time holding up the intervention as a warning to other Latin American nations,[15] and his explicit threats to Iran in the weeks following the attack demonstrate that his sights are not limited to the Western Hemisphere. In Europe, Trump's emphatic insistence that the US '*has to have*' Greenland has thrown the NATO alliance into disarray with its suggestion that even traditional allies are considered fair game when it comes to the US' expansionist ambitions.[16] As Russia's former president Dmitry Medvedev put it, "*Team Trump is tough and cynical in advancing its country's interests…The law of the strongest is clearly more powerful than ordinary justice.*"[17]

Around the world, experts point to recent US actions as the end of the modern 'rules based order'. While there is an argument that contemporary international law, born from the wreckage of World War II , has always been steeped in Western advantage,[18] over the past eighty years the global rules based order *has* been important, contributing to averting crises and saving lives.[19] Rooted in the Charter of the United Nations, international law sets out expectations and provides consistency even where it cannot guarantee certainty. When appropriately enforced, a rules-based order gives smaller nations protection from aggressors and recourse by which to hold the more powerful to account. If global institutions collapse and the world's military superpowers give up on even a semblance of compliance with a rules-based order, experts argue that the world will enter a new age of global imperialism [20] characterised by dominance through brute force.

Central Asian leaders do not need to look far back in history to remember what it is like to face external interference by a brutish power. Even while they adeptly pursue their delicate foreign policy balancing act, they are naturally sensitive to issues of sovereignty and the sight of unilateral military action on the part of a major power they are courting must make them wary. [21] In an era in which Trump's USA joins Russia and China in an overt pursuit of crude territorial dominance,[22] even a pragmatic and flexible approach to international relations might not be enough to avoid becoming caught in the crossfire.[23]

Energy And Critical Minerals Based Geopolitics And The 'Resource Curse'

Beyond the evident complexity of balancing geographic proximity and deep historic and economic ties to two of the world's military superpowers with efforts to forge a political rapprochement with the third, the Central Asian states have another reason to be wary. It is no coincidence that Venezuela holds the world's largest oil reserves and significant deposits of gold and other critical minerals; behind the anti-narcotics rhetoric, the real incentive for the US' January attack was only ever thinly veiled.[24] Energy supplies and rare earth minerals, essential for modern technology, are at the heart of the competition that is reshaping modern global geopolitics.[25] And after Venezuela, Central Asia is emerging as a new frontier in the scramble to secure them. [26]

Even before the return of President Trump to the White House, the outbreak of war in Ukraine and rising concerns over China's control of rare earth markets was nudging Central Asia into the critical minerals spotlight. As a region, Central Asia contains significant untapped reserves of the minerals essential for the development of everything from modern communications to manufacturing, energy and defence. Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer of uranium, and it ranks third in the world for titanium production and seventh for zinc.[27] Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan hold the world's tenth and eleventh largest unmined gold reserves respectively, while the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan possess significant amounts relative to their geographical size. Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan also all boast substantial quantities of other critical raw materials. The Trump administration is openly mobilizing unprecedented resources to secure critical mineral supply chains and counter Chinese dominance of the market, and Central Asia's mineral potential is part of these plans.[28]

For the five Central Asian nations, this moment holds both promise and peril. The intensification of global interest in the region could create significant opportunities, bolstering trade and creating jobs - but it comes with significant uncertainty. Central Asia has always been careful not to jeopardise its longstanding strategic and economic ties with Russia and China. If Washington's engagement with the region, although presented in terms of benign, mutually beneficial investment, is fundamentally aimed at curbing

China's influence over the critical minerals market, then as the US pursuit of Central Asia's resources becomes more aggressive, a direct confrontation with China, another superpower known for weaponising economic engagement, seems unavoidable. Central Asia's significant mineral deposits could unwittingly push the bloc into the crossfire of this great power rivalry, an untenable position fraught with the risk of exclusion and fragility. Learning from Venezuela, the challenge facing Central Asian leaders is how to leverage their significant mineral wealth so as to build the region's strategic autonomy rather than undermine it.

Conclusion

In January 2026, Central Asian leaders chose not to speak out about the US attack on Venezuela, a clear sign that they are reluctant to jeopardise a blossoming cooperative relationship with the Trump administration. This stance is symbolic of the bloc's 'multi-vector' diplomatic approach, a deliberate attempt to cultivate new major allies while simultaneously safeguarding their relationship with existing protectors Russia and China. Although they have so far proved themselves adept at balancing multiple superpower partners, in an era defined by the erosion of the global rules-based order and escalation of violent expansionism, the stakes at play are rising rapidly. Central Asia's significant untapped reserves of rare earth metals heighten the risk that the bloc could get caught in the crossfire of great power rivalry. While the extent to which the Central Asian bloc is prepared to help the US compete with its traditional superpower partners Russia and China remains unclear,[29] what is certain is that the region must tread carefully in the months ahead if they are to ensure that their mineral assets remain a blessing rather than a curse.

Policy Recommendations:

- **Central Asian states should contribute to shoring up the global rules-based order:** In a fragile global context, the Central Asian nations must maintain their commitments to international institutions and band together with other small and medium states to defend international law, safeguard national sovereignty, and promote international cooperation. This can be done both by working through major international bodies such as the United Nations, and also by contributing to ad hoc coalitions or groupings designed for specific purposes, such as climate action and energy security.
- **Central Asian states should continue to enhance regional cooperation and joint policymaking, especially in relation to critical minerals:** In a rapidly evolving world in which mineral resources are increasingly shaping global geopolitics, the five Central Asian states must continue to work together as a region to balance major powers, seize strategic openings, and build strategic autonomy. Regional cooperation and joint policymaking in the field of critical minerals is essential. To increase negotiating power and leverage and strategically manage foreign involvement in their mineral sector, Central Asia needs a regional approach to mineral extraction, licensing, processing, and exportation. The bloc can better protect regional interests by working together rather than standing individually.
- **Central Asian leaders should reflect carefully on the potential threats facing their region in a new world order, and act accordingly:** In an era increasingly defined by violent expansionism and the weoponisation of economic policy,

Central Asian leaders should reflect carefully on the power and vulnerabilities conferred to them by their geographic position, existing resources, and current alliances, and find ways to limit threats and avoid destabilising confrontations. Where threats are identified, the Central Asian states must develop durable habits of coordinating policy, sharing risk and acting collectively to resist these threats and preserve their sovereignty and vital economic and security interests.

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The Humanitarian Crisis in Afghanistan and its Implications for Central Asia

Umedjon Majidi and Philippa Sackett

Key Takeaways

- The United Nations' Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Afghanistan projects that 21.9 million people – 45% of the Afghan population – will require humanitarian assistance in 2026. Over 17 million people are facing an acute hunger crisis and malnutrition is at its highest level in decades with 1.5 million children at risk of mortality.
- The humanitarian crisis is the culmination of a complex web of contributing factors, including decades of violent conflict, weak governance, structural economic vulnerabilities, climate change, massive population movement, and the all pervasive violation of women's rights.
- To support the millions of Afghans in urgent need of assistance, the UN estimates that USD 1.7 billion will be required in 2026. In the context of massive global aid funding cuts, however, it is clear that Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis will be drastically under-funded.
- The implications of this crisis for the wider Central Asia region are considerable, although various potential scenarios exist. Widespread hardship could breed instability, fuel migration and extremism, and unsettle an already fragile region. Alternatively, an unfunded crisis on this scale could force the Taliban to accede to international demands. In the most positive scenario, the crisis could reinforce intra-regional cooperation, providing Central Asian states with an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and bolster trade and economic relations.
- In any scenario, sustainable recovery will require continued humanitarian support together with meaningful reforms to boost private investment, create jobs, reverse harmful policies and improve governance. Without these changes, Afghanistan risks remaining mired in a cycle of crisis and dependency that will have devastating consequences on its people.

Introduction

On 30 December 2025, the United Nations published the latest Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Afghanistan. The plan projects that 21.9 million people – 45% of the Afghan population – will require humanitarian assistance in 2026.[1] In January, the UN's Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan reiterated this dire warning, expounding on the triple catastrophe that is unfolding in the country: a prolonged severe drought, the unprecedented return of millions of migrants, and an acute shortfall in international aid funding.[2] In a global context characterised by catastrophe, the crisis in Afghanistan is, the UN says, one of the very worst in the world.

An Afghan girl looks at the doctor as he measures her upper arm at the WFP-supported Qasaba Clinic, after an increase in malnutrition cases following the return of deported Afghans, in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 7, 2026. REUTERS/Sayed Hassib

The Path to Humanitarian Crisis

The scale of today's humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan reflects both the duration and the complexity of the path that has led to it. The August 2021 withdrawal of Western allied forces from Afghanistan marked a pivotal moment in the country's recent history, ushering in a new era of Taliban rule. While the Taliban's recapture of Kabul marked the formal end of a war that had been raging for twenty years, pockets of violent conflict persist in the country, especially along the border with Pakistan, where the relationship between the Taliban and their once close ally continues to sour.[3][4] Decades of protracted conflict have left their mark on the nation; tens of thousands of people have been killed and frequent episodes of extreme violence have widened gaps in Afghan society and carved deep-rooted grievances into the collective consciousness.[5]

Afghanistan under the Taliban is an Islamic state in which Sharia law is enforced through strict social and legal regulations. Civic space is limited and freedom of expression, assembly and access to justice are severely curtailed. Major protection risks exist under a very fragile rule of law.[6] Beyond the external pressures that they face, domestically the Taliban are struggling to transition from a militant group into an authority capable of reconciling ideology with responsible statecraft.[7]

Beyond these governance constraints, an entrenched economic vulnerability also contributes to the humanitarian catastrophe that is unfolding. Years of low investment have decimated public infrastructure, stifled modernisation and accelerated the deterioration of basic services, from health and education facilities to electricity and telecommunications systems.[8] Disaster protection and response mechanisms are virtually non-existent. Since 2021, Afghanistan's already weak and undiversified economy has been further undermined

by punitive international sanctions targeting the Taliban. In recent months, Kabul's suspension of trade with neighbouring Pakistan is depriving domestic revenue of hundreds of millions of dollars.[9]

As if this wasn't enough, modern-day Afghanistan is amongst those nations most affected by climate change; it ranks fourteenth on the global Climate Risk Index,[10] and in 2025 over 7 million Afghans (16% of the population) were estimated to be living in areas at high risk of climate shocks.[11] The country is already well into the third year of its worst drought in three decades.[12] Over the 2025-26 wet season, the situation is expected to get worse, with weather patterns already drier and warmer than they should be for the time of year.[13] Afghanistan is also prone to earthquakes; in August and November 2025, magnitude 6+ earthquakes struck the country, leaving tens of thousands of people without shelter.[14]

Together, conflict, climate change and disaster have led to massive displacement.[15] Beyond the 2.6 million refugees who have been granted asylum outside the country, an estimated 3.5 million Afghans have been internally displaced,[16] living away from their natural support systems and often dependent on external assistance. The past year has also seen a huge surge in the (mostly forced) return of migrants to Afghanistan; over 2.3 million people arrived back in the country in 2025 alone, the majority from neighbouring nations.[17] These returns are placing significant economic and social pressure on already stressed host communities[18] while simultaneously reducing the inflow of international remittances that have long been the mainstay of many Afghan families.[19]

Underpinning the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is the Taliban's institutionalisation of gender discrimination and the extreme violation of women's rights. Since 2021, women and girls are once again banned from educational establishments and workplaces. Their freedom of movement and ability to participate in public life is significantly curtailed, and their conduct regulated in myriad ways.[20] Amongst other things, these nefarious policies have reduced household income and food security, worsened health outcomes, and weakened community coping mechanisms.

The Humanitarian Catastrophe in 2026

Within the context described above, millions of poor households in Afghanistan are today living through a brutal winter. Many have already depleted their meagre lean season food stocks, with coping strategies stretched to breaking point.[21] The UN estimates that during the 2026 lean period (February to April), 17.4 million Afghans will face an acute hunger crisis - an increase of three million compared to last year.[22]

Large scale food insecurity is in turn contributing to a major nutrition crisis. Child malnutrition in Afghanistan is at its highest level in decades: 3.7 million children are affected, of whom an estimated one and a half million are at high risk of mortality if left untreated.[23] One million pregnant and breastfeeding women are in urgent need of nutrition support.[24] Aggravated by limited access to safe water and adequate sanitation, broader health indicators are also extremely concerning. Afghanistan is one of the deadliest countries in the world to give birth, with a pregnant woman dying of preventable complications every two hours. Diarrhoea, malaria, and measles are all prevalent, and recently, cases of polio and Crimean Congo haemorrhagic fever have been confirmed.[25] In the grips of the food security crisis, households are deferring health care for survival. With the closure of 422 primary health care facilities in 2025, the health system itself is overwhelmingly stretched.

Humanitarian actors highlight other concerns as well. Following two major earthquakes last year, tens of thousands of Afghans remain without viable shelter this winter. Signifcant population movements have heightened the risk of human trafficking and increased the

use of harmful coping mechanisms such as child labour and child marriage. Millions of vulnerable women are facing elevated gender-based violence risks.[26] Afghanistan has one of the highest levels of explosive hazard contamination in the world, with two-thirds of the country affected. Nearly one in four young Afghans is unemployed, and the education system is in a state of crisis, threatening the future of an entire generation.[27] Even in a best case scenario, Afghanistan's future is fraught with uncertainty.

Halima, 40, holds her child with a sachet of Plumpy'Nut, while sitting on a bench at the WFP-supported Qasaba Clinic after an increase in malnutrition cases following the return of deported Afghans, in Kabul, Afghanistan, January 7, 2026. REUTERS/Sayed Hassib

A Crisis Within a Crisis

To respond to the current humanitarian crisis and support the millions of Afghans in urgent need of assistance, the UN estimates that USD 1.7 billion is required in 2026. The crisis in Afghanistan is unfolding within another global crisis, however - that of massive aid funding cuts. The OECD estimates that global Official Development Assistance (ODA) fell 9-17% in 2025, with a further significant reduction expected in 2026.[28] The United States' overhaul of its foreign aid system, including the gutting of USAID, is the most visible contributor to this decline; in Afghanistan, the absolute value of the USAID cut alone is estimated to be USD 223 million, or 1.16 percent of GNI.[29] But the US is by no means the only nation cutting ODA; numerous other large bilateral donors - including the UK, Germany, France - have also announced significant aid cuts in the past year. As a result, Afghanistan is projected to lose resources equivalent to 5 percent of its national income in 2026.[30] Rather than a temporary glitch, the aid sector's financial crisis reflects a deliberate remodelling of global humanitarian policy that will not improve in the near future. In the context of such drastically decreased funding, it is already clear that Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, no matter how serious, will be majorly under-funded. The consequences, experts warn, will be significant and long-term.[31]

Implications of The Afghan Crisis on The Wider Central Asia Region

Although it is too early to predict definitively how a major unfunded crisis in Afghanistan will impact the wider Central Asia region, theories abound. The most pessimistic of these is that widespread hardship will breed instability, fuel further migration and extremism, and unsettle an already fragile region.[32] The Taliban themselves are warning that an abrupt end

to aid could heighten risks related to migration and terrorism, and that internal economic pressures could weaken their opium ban, renewing international flows of smuggled narcotics.[33]

While such cautionary notes from a regime that rarely expresses self-doubt must be taken seriously, more optimistic prognoses also exist. Some Taliban opponents actually welcome the aid crisis, arguing that this may succeed in forcing the regime to accede to international demands where sanctions could not.[34] At the very least, they say, a major unfunded crisis could level the political playing field inside Afghanistan.

It is also possible to imagine that Afghanistan's deepening humanitarian crisis could positively impact intra-regional cooperation. The crisis provides an opportunity for Central Asian states to step up and demonstrate humanitarian leadership in the face of Western inaction - such as when Kazakhstan sent humanitarian assistance and medical teams to Afghanistan following the November 2025 earthquake.[35] With even a modest buffer of staple commodities, the Central Asian states could create a regional food security stablisation mechanism to mitigate hunger-driven displacement and market shocks across the lean season. Beyond direct assistance, the block is also strategically placed to provide essential logistical support to humanitarian supply chains, preventing winter shortages from translating into preventable mortality, and mitigating disorderly population movements by ensuring predictable, rapid transit through agreed border points and transport routes.

More prosaically, the crisis may provide nearby countries the excuse they need to deepen political and economic engagement with Afghanistan. Although none of the five Central Asian states officially recognises the Taliban, as part of their pragmatic 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach most do have some form of diplomatic relations with the regime.[36] From the Taliban's perspective, in a time of great vulnerability and with domestic revenue insufficient to offset declining aid[37] and an increasingly strained relationship with its traditional trading partner Pakistan, a strategic pivot towards Central Asia could offer a pathway to greater resilience. For the landlocked Central Asian bloc, meanwhile, Afghanistan offers a gateway to South Asian markets, as well as a potential economic partnership.[38] The Central Asian nations have several large-scale energy, trade and infrastructure projects in their sights, including the Trans-Afghan Railway, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, and the CASA-1000 electricity project. The most assertive of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan, is already Afghanistan's largest electricity supplier, with a bilateral trade relationship worth USD 1.1 billion in 2024. Although barriers to the burgeoning relationship do exist - from the Taliban's lack of international recognition to the high cost of overland transport and underdeveloped supply chains[39] - if the Central Asian states lean into Afghan markets as a means of shoring up the economy and mitigating the potential spillover of catastrophe, it could lead to an overall positive evolution in regional trade and connectivity.

Conclusion

With more than 17 million people facing acute hunger and child malnutrition at its highest rate in decades, Afghanistan is facing a significant humanitarian crisis. This crisis is not just a national tragedy but a regional stability test. With acute hunger rising, forced returns accelerating, and international aid financing shrinking, potential spillover pathways into Central Asia include irregular migration, trafficking, cross-border criminality, and heightened vulnerability to extremist recruitment. Afghanistan's future hinges on the ability of its de facto authorities and the international community to address the profound challenges it faces. The neighbouring Central Asian bloc is uniquely positioned to play an important role in this future. Sustainable recovery will require not only continued humanitarian support, but also meaningful reforms to boost private investment, create jobs, improve governance

and reverse repressive policies that exclude women and girls from public life. Without these changes, Afghanistan will remain mired in a cycle of crisis and dependency, with devastating consequences for its people.

Policy Recommendations

A pragmatic response to the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Afghanistan should prioritize measures that keep life-saving supply chains functioning while stabilising communities under stress, protecting vulnerable groups and reducing incentives for displacement, and bolstering long-term economic recovery. The Central Asian bloc can contribute to this in various ways:

1. **Establish a Central Asia–Afghanistan Humanitarian Corridor:** To prevent lean-season shortages from translating into preventable mortality and disorderly population movements, Central Asian governments should formalize 'green lanes' for humanitarian and essential civilian goods (food, winterization, medicines, WASH supplies) to ensure predictable, rapid transit through agreed border points and transport routes. These corridors should include expedited customs procedures, simplified transit documentation, and joint logistics coordination between customs and border services and humanitarian partners to resolve operational bottlenecks.
2. **Create a regional lean-season Food Security Stabilization Mechanism:** To mitigate hunger-driven displacement and market shocks, Central Asian states should work with humanitarian actors to develop a modest, rotating buffer of staple commodities (wheat/flour, cooking oil, and where feasible nutrition supplements) that can be released when early-warning indicators signal severe price spikes, pipeline breaks, or localized shortages. Clear trigger criteria and transparent distribution arrangements are essential to avoid market distortions.
3. **Operationalise a rapid 'Return & Reintegration Surge Package:** Central Asian states should work with donors and regional partners to establish a surge facility that activates when return numbers rise sharply. The package should prioritise reception capacity, emergency shelter/winterisation, documentation support, primary health care and vaccination, safe water and sanitation, child protection services, and short-term livelihoods (cash-for-work and community rehabilitation). Treating returns as a regional stabilisation issue—rather than solely an Afghan domestic burden—reduces onward migration pressures, limits trafficking exposure, and strengthens community cohesion in high-return provinces.
4. **Protect women's access to assistance and services as a core operational condition:** Because restrictions on women and girls directly undermine household income, food security, and health outcomes, humanitarians should advocate for practical access arrangements that enable female staff participation and women-led delivery channels—especially in health, nutrition, education support, and protection programming. Implementers should expand community-based outreach and feedback mechanisms to ensure humanitarian assistance reaches women and girls safely and consistently. This is not symbolic conditionality; it is an outcomes-based requirement that reduces mortality and strengthens local coping capacity.
5. **Invest in border-region resilience and protection systems in Central Asia:** Central Asian states should strengthen 'resilience-first' capabilities in districts most exposed to spillovers—without securitizing humanitarian action. Priorities include trafficking

and exploitation referral pathways, public health surveillance and cross-border coordination, and targeted social protection and seasonal employment measures to buffer communities against sudden shocks. A durable approach links humanitarian preparedness to community stability, reducing the likelihood that crisis dynamics in Afghanistan become drivers of social tension, criminal networks, or radicalization across the region.

6. **Ensure well planned exit strategies:** Donors reducing humanitarian support for Afghanistan should plan exit strategies carefully. This includes accelerating talks with the local authorities about economic recovery mechanisms that ensure the preservation of basic services.

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The New Financial Barrier: U.S. Visa Bond Requirements and Their Impact on Central Asia

Anna Sobko

Key Takeaways

- The January 2026 expansion of the U.S. Visa Bond Pilot Program imposes refundable bonds of up to USD 15,000 on travelers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, effectively pricing most citizens out of lawful U.S. travel.
- The bond amounts are economically disproportionate, particularly in Tajikistan where USD 15,000 equals nearly nine years of average income, creating a de facto elite-only mobility regime.
- The policy has generated diplomatic backlash and reputational costs, including public calls by senior Kyrgyz officials to reconsider visa-free access for U.S. citizens, signaling erosion of trust and parity.
- By restricting students, civil society, and young professionals, the policy undermines U.S. soft power and accelerates Central Asia's shift toward alternative partners with more accessible mobility regimes.

Introduction

In January 2026, the United States implemented a dramatic expansion of its visa bond pilot program, adding 25 countries to an existing list and imposing financial requirements that fundamentally alter the cost and accessibility of American travel for millions of people.[1] Among the most significantly affected are citizens of three Central Asian republics—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—who now face the requirement to post bonds of $5,000, $10,000, or $15,000 as a condition of obtaining tourist or business visas.[2] While the United States has traditionally positioned itself as a strategic partner for development and security in the region, the introduction of refundable bonds ranging from $5,000 to $15,000 for B-1/B-2 applicants introduces a formidable barrier. This policy shift represents more than an administrative adjustment; it constitutes a barrier that threatens to further diminish American soft power in a region already gravitating toward alternative partnerships with Russia, China, and regional powers.

The visa bond requirement arrives at a particularly inopportune moment for U.S.-Central Asia relations. Against a backdrop of already-restrictive visa policies—with refusal rates exceeding 60 percent for some Central Asian countries[3], this additional financial burden compounds existing barriers and sends a clear signal about American priorities. For citizens of countries where annual per capita income is $1,650 (Tajikistan, a bond that can reach $15,000 represents an insurmountable obstacle for all but the wealthiest applicants. The policy thus effectively restricts American travel to elite segments of Central Asian societies, precisely at a time when broader people-to-people connections could serve strategic American interests in countering Russian and Chinese influence.

The reaction across Central Asia, ranging from diplomatic protest to threats of reciprocal visa measures, suggests that visa policy, once treated as a technical instrument, has become a central symbol of political trust, dignity, and equality in U.S.–Central Asia relations.

US Visa Renewal by Priyanka Bahubali (https://flic.kr/p/Ss6LrV)

The Visa Bond Policy: Mechanics and Scope

The U.S. Department of State's visa bond pilot program, established through a Temporary Final Rule in August 2025, now covers nationals from 38 countries worldwide.[4] The program targets B-1/B-2 visa applicants, those seeking entry for business or tourism purposes from countries identified as having elevated visa overstay rates. For Central Asia, the implementation timeline differs: Turkmenistan was added on January 1, 2026, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined the list on January 21, 2026.[5] Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, notably, are not currently subject to the bond requirement, though both countries face their own visa challenges with Kazakhstan experiencing a 46.29% refusal rate and Uzbekistan leading Central Asia with a 64.41% refusal rate for B-1/B-2 visas in fiscal year 2024.[6]

The mechanics of the bond requirement operate as follows: applicants who successfully navigate the standard visa interview process and are found "otherwise eligible" for a visa receive notification that they must post a bond before their visa can be issued. The amount $5,000, $10,000, or $15,000 is determined individually by the consular officer based on factors that remain largely opaque to applicants.[7] The bond must be paid exclusively through the U.S. Treasury's Pay.gov platform, and payment does not guarantee visa issuance; consular officers retain discretion to deny visas even after bonds are posted, in which case the money is refunded.

Statistical Justification Versus Regional Reality

The stated justification for the bond program centers on deterring visa overstays. According to Department of Homeland Security data, Turkmenistan recorded an overstay rate of 15.89 percent in fiscal year 2024 for B-1/B-2 visa holders—representing 320 individuals out of 1,759 visas granted. Tajikistan's overstay rate was 7.57 percent, representing 140 people out of 1,772 visas issued. Kyrgyzstan, with the highest volume of visa issuances among the three countries at 9,625, recorded 643 overstays for an 8.39 percent rate. [8] These percentages, while elevated compared to some countries, translate into relatively small absolute numbers when compared to major sources of overstays: Mexico recorded 52,083 B-1/B-2 overstays in 2024, Venezuela 19,041, and Haiti 15,981. [9]

This discrepancy has been described by regional commentators as the "raw number fallacy," whereby percentage-based metrics obscure scale and context.

From a regional perspective, the imposition of the maximum USD 15,000 bond on countries producing relatively few overstays is perceived as a punitive response disproportionate to the underlying risk. Central Asian officials have noted that the policy does not appear calibrated to behavioral deterrence but rather to blanket risk categorization, undermining confidence in the fairness of U.S. migration governance.

Regional Media Narratives and Diplomatic Fallout

The Visa Bond Pilot Program (VBPP) expansion has elicited an unusually unified response across Central Asian media ecosystems, which are often fragmented along political and linguistic lines. Coverage in outlets such as *The Astana Times* and *Times of Central Asia* has framed the policy as a departure from partnership toward exclusion.[10]

In Kyrgyzstan, where political discourse remains comparatively open, the reaction has been particularly vocal. On January 8, 2026, Edil Baisalov, Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers, publicly called for diplomatic reciprocity, suggesting that Kyrgyzstan reconsider its visa-free regime for U.S. citizens if the bond requirement remains in place.[11] His statement resonated widely within Kyrgyz society, where visa-free access for Americans has long been portrayed as a symbol of mutual respect.

Although Kazakhstan is not currently subject to the VBPP, concern has also emerged there. Business associations and policy commentators have warned that regional consultants, researchers, and service providers may face indirect disruptions, weakening the functional coherence of the C5+1 framework (The Astana Times, January 8, 2026).[12]

The Socio-Economic Impact

The most profound implications of the VBPP lie not in diplomacy alone but in its socio-economic effects. Central Asia remains one of the poorest regions in the post-Soviet space, with widespread labor migration, unemployment, and income inequality shaping social dynamics.[13]

By requiring applicants to immobilize up to USD 15,000—often for months—the VBPP effectively concentrates international mobility among wealthy elites. In practice, this means that access to Western education, professional networks, and cultural exchange becomes limited to families with substantial liquid assets, frequently linked to political or economic power.

This concentration has several downstream effects. First, it reinforces domestic inequality by amplifying the advantages of already privileged groups. Second, it marginalizes civil-society actors, independent journalists, and NGO workers, who historically served as key conduits for U.S. soft power and normative influence. These groups rarely possess the financial liquidity necessary to meet bond requirements, making them disproportionately excluded.

Moreover, the VBPP introduces additional logistical burdens. Bonded travelers are often required to enter and exit through designated U.S. ports of entry, such as JFK or LAX, increasing travel costs and complexity. For applicants traveling from landlocked Central Asian states, these requirements further amplify the financial and psychological barriers to lawful travel.

Governance, Security, and Social Fragility

The socio-economic exclusion produced by the VBPP intersects with broader regional vulnerabilities. In Tajikistan, for example, persistent poverty and unemployment are widely recognized as risk factors for social instability and radicalization.[14] By restricting lawful mobility and exposure to international opportunities, the policy may inadvertently exacerbate the very conditions it seeks to mitigate.

From a governance perspective, limiting access to international education and exchange undermines the development of human capital and reform-oriented elites. Over time, this may contribute to greater inward orientation and reliance on alternative external partners whose mobility regimes are perceived as more accessible.

Recent Developments: February 2026 Policy Signals

Concerns about the VBPP have intensified following developments in early February 2026. On February 2, the U.S. Department of State issued guidance on "Immigrant Visa Processing Updates for Nationalities at High Risk of U.S. Public Benefits Reliance," signaling the potential expansion of enhanced scrutiny across additional visa categories.[15]

Strategic and Policy Implications

The visa bond pilot program is still in its early implementation phase, having been established in August 2025, and insufficient time has passed to generate comprehensive empirical data on its broader geopolitical effects. However, based on established patterns from similar restrictive visa policies implemented by other countries, there is reasonable cause for anticipatory concern about potential long-term consequences. If lawful access to the United States becomes prohibitively expensive through bond requirements, students and professionals will increasingly turn toward alternative destinations such as China, Turkey, or Gulf states, where entry conditions are perceived as more predictable and affordable. Should this pattern emerge and persist over multiple years, these individual choices could gradually reshape networks of academic collaboration, professional exchange, and person-to-person ties in ways that shift regional influence and normative alignment away from the United States. While such outcomes remain speculative at this stage due to the program's recent inception, the risk trajectory warrants monitoring, once such networks are redirected and institutionalized elsewhere, they may prove difficult to reverse even if the bond policy is later modified or discontinued.

From a strategic standpoint, the VBPP risks accelerating Central Asia's gradual shift toward alternative political and security architectures, including deeper engagement with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Mobility regimes matter not only economically but symbolically: they shape perceptions of openness, trust, and alignment.

Conclusion

The Visa Bond Pilot Program represents a pivotal moment in U.S.–Central Asia relations. While designed as a technical migration-control instrument, its socio-political effects extend far beyond border management. By constructing a wealth-based barrier to mobility, the policy risks undermining equality, civil-society engagement, and long-term peace-building objectives.

This policy trajectory occurs at a moment when Central Asia's future orientation remains genuinely contested. Russian influence persists through historical ties and visa-free mobility. Chinese engagement expands through infrastructure investment and educational exchange. Regional powers cultivate cultural connections with accessible

visa regimes. The United States maintains important interests in Central Asia—energy security, counterterrorism cooperation, democratic development but struggles to translate these interests into sustained engagement that competes effectively with alternative partnerships.

The contrast between American rhetoric about partnership with Central Asia and the reality of increasingly restrictive visa policies creates credibility challenges that extend beyond immigration matters. When the United States proclaims support for Central Asian development, democracy, and integration while simultaneously erecting barriers that prevent Central Asians from experiencing America firsthand, the contradiction undermines diplomatic efforts and fuels skepticism about American commitments.

Adjusting visa policy to better balance security concerns with strategic engagement represents a relatively low-cost investment in regional relationships with potentially significant returns. The question is whether American policymakers recognize visa access as deserving of deliberate strategic calibration, or continue to treat it as a purely domestic matter disconnected from foreign policy goals. The evidence from Central Asia suggests that the current approach serves neither security nor strategic objectives optimally: high barriers exclude legitimate travelers while failing to prevent determined violators, all while channeling regional mobility and intellectual development toward American competitors.

Visa policy is never neutral. In regions marked by fragility and geopolitical competition, it functions as a tangible expression of values and priorities. Whether the VBPP becomes a temporary experiment or a permanent feature of U.S. immigration law will significantly shape the future trajectory of U.S. engagement with Central Asia.

Policy Recommendations

To mitigate the negative consequences of the VBPP while preserving legitimate compliance objectives, several policy adjustments merit consideration:

- Creating bond exemptions for university-admitted students, conference participants with verified invitations, and established business professionals would facilitate exchanges that directly serve American interests while maintaining scrutiny for higher-risk applications. As an alternative, accredited universities and recognized institutions should be permitted to act as guarantors for students and researchers, reducing individual financial burdens.
- The Department of State should publish clear criteria governing bond determinations to prevent perceptions of arbitrariness or corruption. Providing clear guidance about how bond amounts are determined and creating limited appeals mechanisms would reduce perceptions of arbitrary decision-making. Applicants currently receive bond requirements with little explanation of the factors considered, creating frustration and suspicion.
- The program should be subject to regular, publicly reported impact assessments, including diplomatic and human-rights effects.
- Rather than applying uniform bond requirements, a more nuanced approach could adjust bond amounts based on applicants' demonstrated financial resources and ties to home countries. Bond amounts should be indexed to the average GNI of the applicant's country, ensuring proportionality and fairness.

Endnotes

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Connectivity as an Enabler of Human Trafficking Ecosystems in Central Asia

Gabriela Boloca

Key Takeaways

- Connectivity corridors are not merely neutral infrastructure, they are governance spaces. In Central Asia, multiple external actors, including China under BRI, the EU through Global Gateway, and Russia, are investing simultaneously, accelerating connectivity faster than governance reforms, which increases the likelihood of corridors being exploited for human trafficking and related illicit activities.
- Weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited civil society oversight in Central Asian states can amplify the trafficking risks associated with rapidly expanding transport and digital corridors.
- High remittance reliance, ongoing migration flows, and climate-induced displacement further increase the pool of vulnerable populations that traffickers may target along connectivity corridors in the region.

The relationship between connectivity and trafficking in persons in Central Asia is largely under explored. However, corridors concentrate flows of goods, people, finance, and information through specific nodes, such as border crossings, logistics hubs, recruitment channels, and digital platforms. These nodes become critical governance points. Indeed, if oversight, transparency, and institutional coordination are weak, the same features that make corridors economically efficient make them operationally attractive for trafficking networks. In Central Asia, transport and digital connectivity corridors are rapidly expanding, including for example the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor (TCTC) and the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, transforming the region into a strategic transit hub between China, Russia, and Europe. In 2025 in particular, momentum increased with the signing in June 2025 of the Treaty of Permanent Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation with China, which has institutionalised cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI),[1] and intensified cooperation with the EU under the Global Gateway and the Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties, thanks to the first-ever EU-Central Asia Summit in April 2025. In this context, it becomes essential to analyse and tackle the pathways that are inadvertently created thereby facilitating human and drug trafficking as well as a number of related issues such as corruption, precisely because what distinguishes the current moment is not merely the existence of corridors, but the speed and geopolitical density of their expansion. Multiple external actors, including the EU, China , and Russia, are simultaneously investing in transport, logistics, and digital infrastructure, increasing cross-border flows at a pace that strains institutional capacity. This acceleration heightens trafficking vulnerabilities in a context where governance reforms are not only not able to match the speed of development but are increasingly facing political resistance, making the embedding of governance, monitoring, and anti-trafficking safeguards from the outset a critical component of investment projects.

This article argues that modern transport and digital connectivity do not merely create economic opportunities, but also unintentionally build the logistical, social, and governance conditions in which trafficking networks can operate more efficiently. It will first explore how

connectivity corridors intersect with trafficking dynamics, before analysing governance vulnerabilities and concluding with policy recommendations.

Source: The Republican Study Committee Faith in Awareness: Waco. (rsc-pfluger.house.gov)

Introduction to the nexus between Connectivity and Trafficking in Persons

Connectivity is understood as the development of physical, digital, financial, and regulatory linkages that facilitate the movement of goods, people, capital, and information across borders. In Central Asia, connectivity primarily manifests through transport corridors, such as rail, road, and port infrastructure, digital infrastructure expansion, trade facilitation reforms, and cross-border energy and logistics integration. While connectivity is commonly framed as an economic tool, at the same time it impacts governance environments and mobility systems.

Connectivity does not create human trafficking in and of itself. However, the broader effects on increased connectivity create structural vulnerabilities. Specifically, increased connectivity typically leads to lower transaction costs, which make it easier, cheaper, and faster to move people, goods, or information. It also increases mobility density, meaning that more people are moving through more routes more frequently. These changes create a set of predictable logistical patterns, which can be exploited by traffickers for their activities, including to organise, conceal, and transport victims or illicit goods more efficiently. In other words, while connectivity is not a causal factor in human trafficking itself, it shapes the environment in which trafficking networks can operate and grow, increasing the opportunities for exploitation across multiple forms of trafficking.

Recently, UNODC[2] reported that victims of human trafficking have significantly increased around the globe, with forced labour and child exploitation rising sharply. UNODC data shows trafficking is increasingly transnational, involving victims of 162 nationalities across 128 destination countries.[3] This demonstrates how modern trafficking relies on mobility

networks that often mirror legal trade and transport routes. The rapid expansion of infrastructure projects also increases demand for labour, including temporary and migrant workers, resulting in the creation of an environment in which forced labour as a form of trafficking becomes easier for traffickers to exploit.

Although precise quantitative data directly linking connectivity projects to trafficking levels remains limited, the relationship has begun to receive analytical attention. For instance, the World Bank's research on enhanced regional connectivity in Nepal found that increased road connectivity as a factor leading not only to new economic opportunities, but also to human trafficking through indirect and hidden rather than explicit links, with related labour migration, inflation, and increased real estate prices acting as compounding elements. A significant argument concerned the emphasis on environmental assessments of development projects and the absence of social impact assessment therein.[4] This is highly relevant also in the case of Central Asia. In relation to the TCTC, for example, the European Commission conducted a study on sustainable transport corridors connecting Europe with Central Asia,[5] which failed to consider in depth the social risks that accelerated connectivity may lead to. This gap risks institutionalising vulnerability rather than mitigating it.

A similar structural dynamic is observable in Central Asia. In its 2026 observations concerning Kyrgyzstan, the ILO noted "that both the Government and the FPK recognize that despite these measures Kyrgyzstan remains a country of origin and transit for trafficking in persons for the purposes of sexual and labour exploitation and, to a lesser extent, a country of destination."[6] In a context of expanding regional corridors and enhanced regional integration, this reinforces the understanding that improved connectivity can amplify trafficking risks.

Additionally, if one compares the Middle Corridor route and transregional trafficking flows mapped by UNODC, a significant spatial convergence is revealed. The Middle Corridor, stretching from China through Central Asia, the Caspian, the South Caucasus, and into Europe, is clearly aligned with documented trafficking routes. This illustrates why connectivity infrastructure cannot be treated as neutral when it comes to trafficking in persons. The overlap is indeed more than geography; it reveals how connectivity infrastructure and illicit mobility systems are shaped by similar incentives and structural conditions, which in turn demands a governance response that treats corridors not just as trade routes but as potential pathways of exploitation.

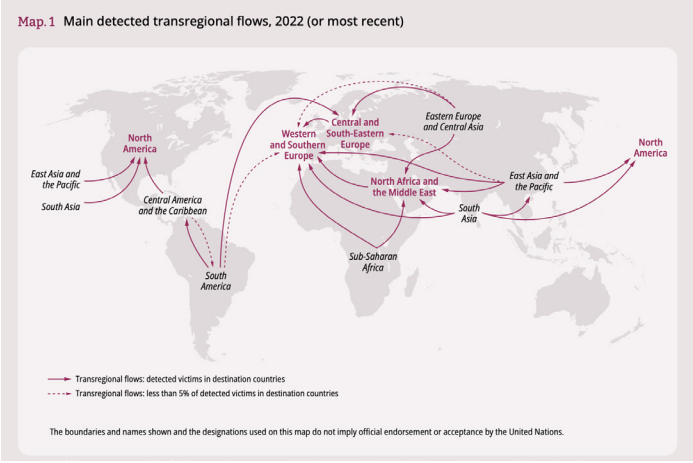

Figure 1: Main detected transregional flows, 2022 (or most recent)

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data

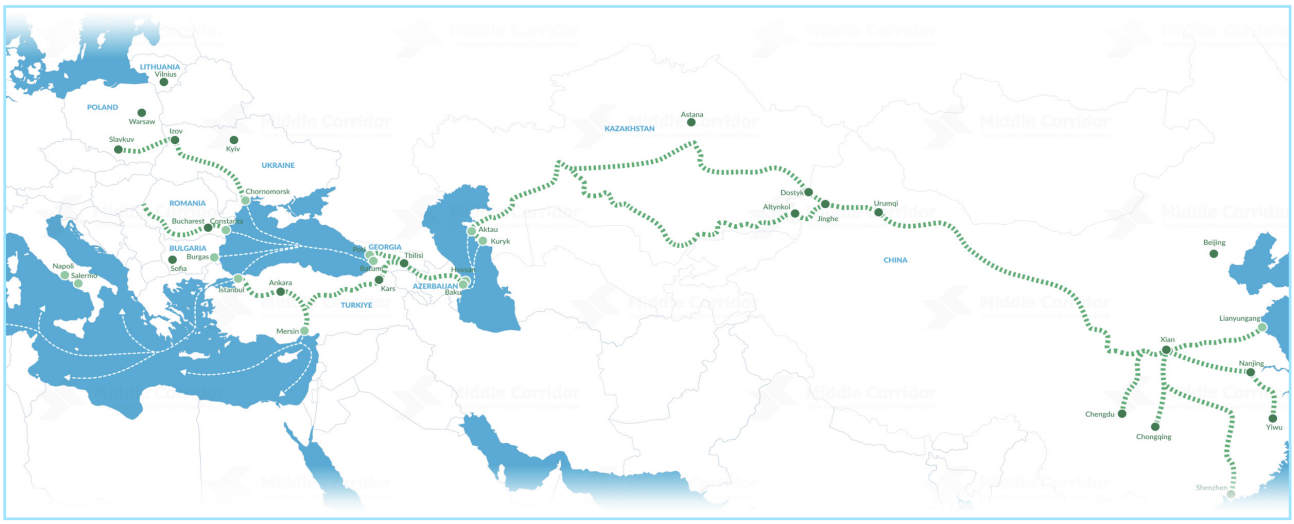

Figure 2: The logistics trade path of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor.

Source: middlecorridor.com/en/route

Against this backdrop, taking a closer look at how increased intra-regional connectivity may facilitate exploitation becomes critical. Central Asia is a perfect case study, in this sense, as the arena of major transport corridor projects, including the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, and the road expansions linking Central Asia to South Caucasus. While these projects are economically advantageous, reducing transit time and costs, they cross areas characterised by high migrant outflows, weak labour protections, and persistent corruption risks, creating fertile land for exploitation.

According to the UNODC, in Central Asia in 2022, 59% of detected victims were trafficked for sexual exploitation while 29% for labour exploitation.[7]

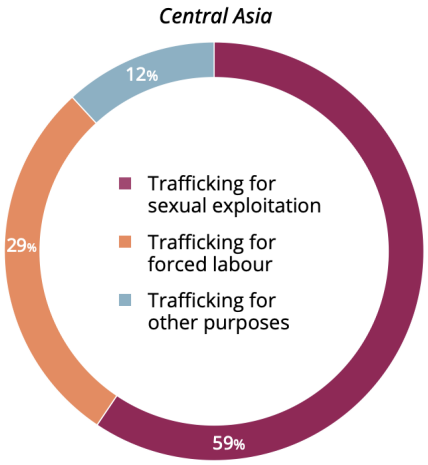

Figure 3: UNODC's analysis of the share of detected victims of trafficking in Central Asia, by form of exploitation, 2022 (or most recent) based on data on sex and age of 313 victims detected in 4 countries in Central Asia.

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data

In terms of share of traffickers reported in court cases, the majority consisted of organised crime-business type (Figure 4), while a negative trend was recorded in the number of persons convicted in Eastern Europe and Central Asia compared to 2019 (Figure 5).

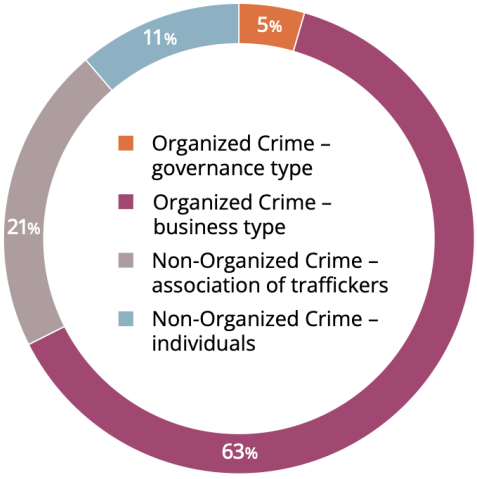

Figure 4: UNODC's analysis of the share of traffickers reported in court case summaries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, by type of structure

Source: GLOTIP collection of court case summaries

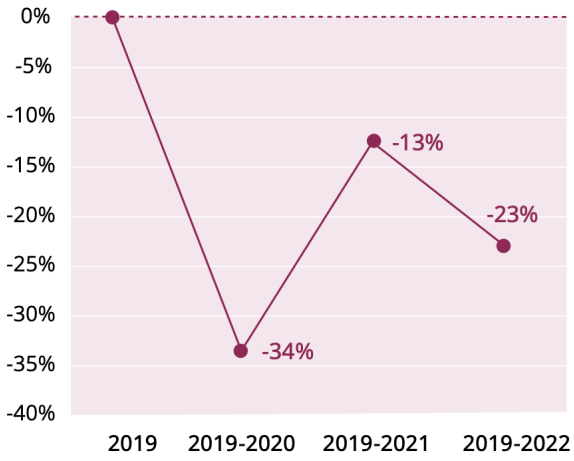

Figure 5: UNODC's analysis of the trend in the number of persons convicted in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, base year 2019

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data

Structural Vulnerabilities in Central Asia

Central Asia's vulnerability is compounded by several factors. First, the region relies heavily on remittances. Indeed, IOM recently reported that the region recorded the highest annual growth rate (+22%) in terms of remittance inflows,[8] noting that remittances are used mainly for daily living expenses, "underscores their growing role not only as a critical lifeline for households but also as a key enabler of economic resilience, poverty reduction and potentially sustainable development in the region."[9] In Tajikistan, for example, remittances accounted for 49% of GDP in 2024.[10] Secondly, climate change is projected to displace approximately 3.6 million people in Central Asia by 2050, further intensifying migration flows.[11] These factors make the region structurally vulnerable and, combined, they increase the supply of vulnerable workers willing to accept risky migration opportunities.

Corruption further acts as a critical operational and structural enabler for trafficking along transit routes. Operationally, corruption at border crossings and migration services allows traffickers to move victims across borders undetected. Structurally, weak public

procurement, limited labour recruitment oversight, and low labour standards compliance create opportunities for exploitation and abuses to go unnoticed within legitimate economic and trade activity. As large-scale connectivity projects often involve complex subcontracting chains, private recruitment intermediaries and cross-border labour flows, due diligence and transparency in public procurement are critical to prevent the creation of environments allowing traffickers to operate undisturbed. It is noteworthy that the 2025 Corruption Perception Index (CPI) scores for the five Central Asian countries remained well under the global average of 42, with Kazakhstan leading the region (38), followed by Uzbekistan (31), while Tajikistan (19) and Turkmenistan (17) remain among the lowest scorers.[12]

Digital connectivity adds another layer of vulnerability, especially as infrastructure development is accompanied by a surge in worker mobility. In this sense, digital platforms frequently serve as the recruitment interface that feeds into physical corridor movements, linking online deception to offline exploitation routes. In particular, the online advertisement of victims constitutes the most visible dimension of technology-enabled trafficking and offers one of the few opportunities for detection and intervention. The internet's combination of anonymity, scale, and low cost allows traffickers to advertise victims widely while minimising exposure to law-enforcement scrutiny.

However, beyond online advertisement, expanding digital connectivity enables traffickers to conduct recruitment, communication, payment, and control remotely, often across borders. Weak regulation of online platforms, limited cyber-investigative capacity, and low digital literacy among vulnerable groups in the population create an environment in which digital tools amplify traditional trafficking methods.

Thus, in the context of an expanding physical connectivity such as the one characterising Central Asia, digital connectivity multiplies traffickers' reach while reducing their exposure to law enforcement. This issue has already been identified in the region and responses to address it can be discerned. For example, Tajikistan has taken steps to strengthen its response to human trafficking and migrant smuggling through training on digital evidence, such as the one organised by UNODC in May 2025, in collaboration with the European Union as part of the EU-funded PROTECT initiative: Improving Migration Management & Migrant Protection in Selected Silk Route Countries (2023-2026).[13] This indicates that national authorities are becoming aware that digital footprints, electronic communication, and digital platforms are increasingly part of how trafficking occurs and how it must be investigated and prosecuted, which reflects both the challenges and necessary governance responses in digitally connected environments.

Governance Conditions and Emerging Risks

These dynamics are no longer hypothetical. For instance, according to Kazakhstan's Ministry of Internal Affairs, 134 human trafficking-related crimes were recorded in the first six months of 2025.[14] Such figures underline the urgency of analysing how enhanced connectivity may inadvertently exacerbate trafficking ecosystems.

All five Central Asian states have formally criminalised trafficking in persons, adopted national action plans, and acceded to international treaties, such as the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol), which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks is constrained by structural governance challenges and the level of practical implementation, institutional

coordination, and victim protection mechanisms varies between the states.

Despite some progress, the identification of victims remains weak, largely because procedures are cumbersome and frontline officials often lack the training needed to recognise indicators of trafficking. As a result, trafficking cases are frequently misclassified as irregular migration or simple fraud, depriving victims of access to protection services and, in some instances, treating them as offenders rather than individuals in need of assistance. At the same time, civil society organisations are essential for raising awareness, detecting cases, and supporting victims, yet they operate with limited resources and are seldom formally integrated into national anti-trafficking frameworks or decision-making processes.[15] Indeed, the narrowing space for independent monitoring compounds the issue. Restrictions on civil society organisations, investigative journalism, and trade unions reduce the likelihood that trafficking-related abuses linked to construction sites, logistics hubs, or digital platforms will be exposed.

Developments in Kyrgyzstan are perhaps most illustrative: recent legal and constitutional changes have concentrated authority in the presidency, reverting to a presidential system, and tightened control over NGOs and media, weakening external scrutiny over state agencies.[16] The media law enacted on 6 August 2025 requiring all media to register with authorities and the approval by President Japarov of penalties for spreading false information raises concerns over potential instrumentalisation of the provisions and signals a violation of freedom of expression.[17] Indeed, the definition of false information may be construed in such a way to punish those who report on abuse of power, blocking one of the strongest forms of societal check on corruption.

This contrasts with recent developments in Kazakhstan, where an extensive constitutional reform has been initiated by President Tokayev. Framed as a modernisation and simplification of the political system, it proposed, inter alia, a unicameral Parliament, the establishment of an office of the Vice President and of the People's Council of Kazakhstan as a new consultative institution, whilst reaffirming the presidency as the center of the state system and strengthening legal safeguards and procedural rights, such as the prohibition of ex post application of laws.[18] In particular, while the shift to a unicameral legislature may streamline and speed legislative processes, notably it may also lead to the marginalisation of minority views and weaker scrutiny over the executive branch, unless appropriate and strong safeguards are created. This becomes especially significant in relation to preventing trafficking and abuses, as institutional simplification risks weakening the required checks for effective anti-corruption enforcement, labour oversight, and migration governance which are central to the challenge. It is also noteworthy that media independence is severely limited in the country, as reported by Freedom House in its 2025 country report[19], mirroring the issues present in Kyrgyzstan.

These differing institutional trajectories illustrate how both restrictions on civic space, as in Kyrgyzstan, and institutional reforms aimed at modernisation and simplification, as potentially in Kazakhstan, can produce similar governance vulnerabilities when appropriate safeguards and oversight opportunities are absent. In both cases, weakened scrutiny over the executive branch, limited space for civil society monitoring, and reduced media oversight diminish the likelihood that trafficking-related abuses linked to connectivity projects will be detected and addressed.

Recognising these risks, several international and regional initiatives have sought to strengthen border management and anti-trafficking capacity in Central Asia. The EU-funded Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), for example, supports

improved border controls, training of officials, and cross-border cooperation. Other international organisations such as OSCE, IOM, UNODC, and ICMPD play an important role in supporting regional responses through technical assistance, capacity-building programmes, and platforms for policy dialogue. For instance, most recently a regional anti-corruption training was held in Uzbekistan, gathering more than 200 officials from the region as part of the EU-UNDP regional project "Enhancing Accountability and Transparency in Public Procurement and Asset Declaration".[20] Notably, the project aims at equipping officials with tools for asset declaration, whistleblower protection, and beneficial ownership transparency. In a trafficking context, corruption vulnerability is potentially reduced, which is typically used by traffickers, especially in relation to labour recruitment in infrastructure projects. Strengthening these governance tools can mitigate risks along corridor projects by exposing illicit financial flows, supporting whistleblowers, and enhancing transparency in recruitment and contracting practices, thereby limiting opportunities for traffickers to conceal exploitation within legitimate economic activity.

However, to increase the effectiveness of such initiatives, enhanced technical capacity must be accompanied by good governance conditions within recipient states. Indeed, trafficking risks are heightened when there is a mismatch between the speed of infrastructure expansion and that of developments related to governance and protection mechanisms. What distinguishes the current moment in the region is that connectivity projects are accelerating faster than governance capacity. New railways, roads, logistics hubs, and digital infrastructures are being built at a speed that outpaces the ability of institutions to monitor labour conditions, inspect worksites, regulate recruitment agencies, and police online platforms. As a result, trafficking risks should be understood not as unintended side effects, but as foreseeable governance externalities of rapid connectivity expansion in environments where oversight and institutional capacity lag behind infrastructure development.

Policy Recommendations

Addressing trafficking in persons requires a coordinated approach that spans infrastructure funders, governments, and regional organisations.

Partners and funding suppliers, including the EU under Global Gateway, China under the Belt and Road framework, international financial institutions, investors, and private contractors, should:

1. Embed anti-trafficking safeguards directly into project design and contracting, including mandatory screening at major transit hubs, labour recruitment monitoring and contractor due diligence. This ensures that corridor routes are regularly assessed for trafficking risks.
2. Make these safeguards binding conditions of participation for contractors and subcontractors, coupled with accessible grievance mechanisms that allow affected communities and workers to report abuses safely and effectively.
3. Ensure that future connectivity assessments systematically integrate social risks analysis, including labour exploitation and trafficking vulnerability indicators, at the project design stage. With particular regard to the EU and Member States, embedding such safeguards would align infrastructure expansion with the EU's human rights commitments and prevent governance gaps from becoming exploitation corridors.

Central Asian governments should:

1. Accelerate anti-corruption reforms, particularly concerning border crossings and migration services, to reduce the opportunities traffickers exploit.
2. Enable monitoring by civil society, trade unions, and independent journalists, strengthening oversight and transparency in connectivity projects.
3. Simplify victim identification procedures and provide training for border, labour, and law enforcement officials to distinguish trafficking from irregular migration or fraud, ensuring that victims are properly identified and protected.
4. Promote digital and media literacy among the population, equipping citizens with the knowledge to recognise trafficking risks, particularly in online recruitment and digital advertising.

Regional and international organisations, such as OSCE, UNODC, IOM, ICMPD, should:

1. Promote cross-border cooperation and data sharing, enabling the mapping of trafficking flows, coordination of joint interventions, and prevention of duplication of efforts.
2. Intensify support for capacity-building, technical assistance, and training programmes for law enforcement, migration authorities, and civil society actors to improve detection, prevention, and protection efforts.

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