

JOURNAL OF ———

JCAS

# CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES

**№ 23 (2) | 2025**

April – May – June

Founded in 2003  
Published 4 times a year

Astana  
2025

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Re-registration certificate No. KZ72VPY00088070 dated 23.02.2024.

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**The Journal of Central Asian Studies** is a peer-reviewed, open-access publication that is released quarterly in March, June, September, and December. The journal aims to support established and emerging researchers by providing a comprehensive platform for studying regional developments and international relations in Central Asia.

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Published by the **Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

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# CONTENT

№23 (2) | SUMMER 2025



## REVIEW ARTICLES

The Political, Security, and Economic Implications  
of Contemporary Afghanistan for Central Asia

**FAIZ MUHAMMAD ZALAND**

4

The Afghan-Pakistan Borderlands  
and Their Impact on Pakistan's Security

**MUKHIT ASSANBAYEV, MOHAMMAD TALHA  
& MUHAMMAD MURTAZA**

17

Soft Power Diplomacy:  
A Tool for the Advancement of the US strategy in Central Asia

**ZULFIYA TOREBEKOVA & GULDANA BAKTIYAROVA**

31

Central Asian Prism of The Belt and Road Initiative:  
Social Sustainability and Capacity Building Specifics

**JAVOHIR MASHARIPOV & ULUGBEK KHASANOV**

46

## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Love Thy Neighbor?  
Central Asia in China's New-Era Foreign Policy (2012–2024)

**PENGFEI HOU**

59

Determinants of European Union Foreign  
Direct Investment in Central Asia

**JINTAO YANG, BILAL AHMED MEMON & TEMUR MAKHKAMOV**

72



# THE POLITICAL, SECURITY, AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AFGHANISTAN FOR CENTRAL ASIA

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## Article History:

Received: 27 May 2025

Revised: 13 June 2025

Accepted: 16 June 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *In the wake of the Islamic Emirate's reestablishment in 2021, Afghanistan has encountered profound political unrest, heightened security issues, and a downturn in its economy. While these complications are primarily internal, their repercussions extend into Central Asia. This article examines Afghanistan's contemporary state through the lens of its neighboring Central Asian nations, including Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. It explores the perceived threats and emerging opportunities for strengthening economic and diplomatic relations, drawing on regional policy analyses, strategic documents, and security evaluations. The study argues that Afghanistan's geopolitical relevance to Central Asia has an underlying current, highlighting the necessity for a nuanced policy approach that balances risk management with proactive collaboration.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Afghanistan, Central Asia, connectivity, economic cooperation, governance, regional security, spillover, Taliban.*

## INTRODUCTION

The political transformations in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 have significantly changed the country's internal governance and security landscape, while also affecting neighboring Central Asian nations. Traditionally, a crossroads and buffer zone, Afghanistan holds considerable geopolitical and strategic importance for countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The sudden power transition, the collapse of the internationally recognized republican government, and the quick withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces have led to regional policy shifts concerning security, economic ties, and diplomatic relations (International Crisis Group, 2023; Barfield, 2023).

Central Asian states, many of which share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with Afghan populations, have responded with varying strategies to address the uncertainties emanating from Afghanistan. For instance, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach by maintaining limited diplomatic channels with the Taliban administration to safeguard trade and security interests (Kassenova, 2022a). Tajikistan, by contrast, has expressed sharp criticism of the Taliban's political exclusionism and remains wary of the ideological and security threats posed by potential spillovers across its southern border (Koehler & Zürcher, 2023). These divergent responses underscore the complexity of the regional landscape and the significance of national security doctrines, historical experiences, and domestic political calculations in shaping foreign policy.

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Afghanistan's internal challenges—ranging from a severe economic downturn, growing humanitarian needs, and institutional disintegration to the persistent threat posed by extremist groups such as Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)—have amplified regional anxieties (World Bank, 2023; UNDP, 2023a). For Central Asian countries, particularly those with weak governance structures and limited capacity to absorb external shocks, instability in Afghanistan is not merely a foreign policy concern but a matter of national survival. Issues such as cross-border terrorism, the drug trade, refugee influxes, and economic disruption are increasingly viewed through the lens of regional security complexes (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Simultaneously, Afghanistan offers possible avenues for regional collaboration, especially regarding connectivity initiatives, trade routes, and energy integration. Projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway and the TAPI (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) pipeline are still being considered, although they are clouded by uncertainty and risk (ADB, 2022a). This balance of risk and opportunity serves as the analytical foundation of this article. This study analyzes Afghanistan's evolving political, security, and economic conditions from the perspective of Central Asian states. It explores how these countries view the risks and opportunities their southern neighbor presents and whether their policies show a cohesive regional strategy or fragmented national interests. Using a regional security complex framework and drawing on primary documents, international reports, and expert commentary, the paper assesses Afghanistan's impact on Central Asia post-2021.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Analyzing Afghanistan's changing political, security, and economic landscape through the perspective of its Central Asian neighbors necessitates an interdisciplinary analytical framework that incorporates international relations, regional studies, and security theory. This article utilizes two key theoretical perspectives: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and Geopolitical Spillover Theory, along with insights drawn from constructivist approaches to foreign policy and identity development.

### 1. Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The RSCT, created by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), provides a fundamental perspective for examining the interconnectedness of security issues among neighboring states. This theory posits that security is concentrated in particular areas, where the safety of one state is closely linked to that of its neighbors because of historical, cultural, and strategic ties. Afghanistan and Central Asia illustrate this security complex: instability in Afghanistan transcends its borders, impacting the wider region.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) contend that external powers cannot solely guarantee stability within regional security complexes; instead, local dynamics are predominant. This is particularly significant in the Afghan-Central Asian context, where regional players such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan face challenges including cross-border militancy, refugee influx, and the potential for ideological radicalization. The RSCT framework illustrates that security perceptions in Central Asia are influenced not only by the internal developments in Afghanistan but also by the historical absence of institutional resilience in border areas.

## 2. Geopolitical Spillover Theory

Geopolitical spillover theory emphasizes how crises in weak or failing states can “spill over” into neighboring countries, generating a chain of disruptions, ranging from arms smuggling and terrorist infiltration to economic and infrastructural instability (Brown, 2006). Afghanistan, particularly after the 2021 Taliban takeover, is a classic case of geopolitical spillover. Central Asian states have reacted by militarizing border zones, enhancing surveillance, and in some cases seeking greater alignment with international security frameworks like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This theory also explains why countries like Tajikistan have taken a more securitized and cautious approach toward engaging with the Taliban, while others like Turkmenistan have opted for neutrality, attempting to insulate themselves from spillover through diplomatic hedging (Lemon, 2022).

## 3. Constructivist Insights on Regional Identity and Perception

While realist perspectives dominate much of the security discourse in Central Asia, constructivist theories offer helpful insights into how national identity, historical memory, and political ideology shape foreign policy decisions. For example, Tajikistan’s strong opposition to the Taliban is partially rooted in ethnic solidarity with the Tajik population in Afghanistan and the country’s own civil war experience (Tolipov, 2021). On the other hand, Uzbekistan’s engagement strategy reflects a constructivist shift in its foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev, emphasizing pragmatic regionalism and mutual economic gain over ideological confrontation (Kassenova, 2022b).

Constructivist analysis clarifies how Central Asian elites perceive Afghanistan differently, viewing it as either a threat or a partner in regional connectivity. Although not definitive, these perceptions significantly impact policy directions and strategic decisions.

In conclusion, RSCT, geopolitical spillover theory, and constructivist viewpoints offer a thorough framework for analyzing how Central Asian states perceive and react to the crisis in Afghanistan. These theories clarify the security-related worries, wider socio-political influences, and strategic considerations shaping the different regional policies.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in comparative political analysis and regional security assessment frameworks. As the research centers on perceptions, policies, and strategic orientations, qualitative methods provide the best approach for examining the intricate and dynamic relations between Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbors.

### *Research Design*

The descriptive-analytical research aimed at understanding how Afghanistan’s internal developments influence political, security, and economic strategies in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan. The study does not attempt to test a hypothesis through quantitative data but builds an interpretive narrative based on document analysis and secondary data.

## ***Data Collection***

Data were gathered from various secondary sources, including:

- A. Official reports from international organizations (e.g., UNDP, World Bank, UNODC, ADB).
- B. Policy briefs and analyses from think tanks and research institutes (e.g., Carnegie Endowment, International Crisis Group).
- C. Academic journals and books centered on Central Asian security, governance, and foreign policy.
- D. News and media outlets like RFE/RL for timely policy updates and regional responses.
- E. Government statements and communiqués from Central Asian ministries and regional cooperation entities.

## ***Analytical Framework***

This study utilizes Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) and Geopolitical Spillover Theory to analyze threat perception dynamics and regional responses. It also employs a constructivist perspective to examine how identity, history, and political narratives influence the unique policy behaviors of Central Asian countries regarding Afghanistan.

## ***Case Selection***

This study examines four Central Asian nations that share crucial geopolitical, cultural, or economic connections with Afghanistan: Uzbekistan (an actively involved neighbor), Tajikistan (driven by strong ethnic and ideological interests), Turkmenistan (following a neutral stance and energy diplomacy), and Kazakhstan (a regional player committed to a multilateral engagement approach). These examples were chosen through purposive sampling to illustrate different degrees of closeness, political alignment, and engagement strategies with Afghanistan.

## ***Limitations***

The lack of primary field data, such as interviews with policymakers or community members, limits this study. Due to the sensitive security and diplomatic subjects and restricted access to current in-country fieldwork following the Taliban's takeover, the analysis primarily depends on publicly available secondary sources. Furthermore, while the article offers comparative insights, it does not present a comprehensive evaluation of each country's policies; instead, it seeks to emphasize patterns and differences in selected cases.

## **AFGHANISTAN'S CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT**

Afghanistan's internal dynamics since the Taliban's return to power in 2021 have been characterized by institutional collapse, security volatility, and economic deterioration. This decline in governance and stability has profound implications for Afghanistan and its neighboring countries, particularly Central Asia. Issues such as the rise in cross-border threats and the influx of refugees are heightening anxiety about the spillover effects of Afghanistan's chaotic environment.

The International Crisis Group (2022) emphasizes that the Taliban's inability to foster a functional state apparatus has exacerbated existing tensions in the region. With a lack of effective governance, Central Asian nations remain on high alert as they fear the potential for increased militant activity along their borders. Political instability in Afghanistan often leads to governance challenges in Central Asian countries, compelling them to confront issues such as drug trafficking and terrorism that are deeply rooted in Afghan soil. The regional perception of the Taliban's return is thus marked by a sense of urgency, with Central Asian governments increasingly focusing on security partnerships and border management strategies to mitigate these risks.

These developments shape the domestic landscape and regional perceptions, as stability in Central Asia is closely linked to Afghanistan's internal turmoil. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2021), the rise of opiate production in Afghanistan under the Taliban poses dire threats to public health and security across the Central Asian region, linking the two in a cycle of instability and insecurity. This interdependence underlines how Afghanistan's situation continually influences neighboring countries, reinforcing the urgent need for international attention and engagement in addressing the crises stemming from Afghanistan's fallout.

In summary, Afghanistan's current trajectory poses significant challenges both domestically and for its Central Asian neighbors, necessitating a coordinated regional effort to address security and governance issues effectively.

### ***Political Landscape***

Following the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in August 2021, the Taliban reinstated the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), a theocratic regime lacking formal international recognition (International Crisis Group, 2023). The Taliban's leadership structure remains opaque and centralized, with power concentrated among clerical elites and figures from the Leadership Shura. Despite promises of inclusivity, ethnic minorities, women, and civil society actors have largely been excluded from decision-making processes (Giustozzi, 2023). The Taliban's governance style emphasizes ideological conformity over administrative efficiency. The dismantling of republican institutions and replacing civil servants with religious figures have contributed to the erosion of technocratic capacity within the government (Barfield, 2023). The absence of an effective constitution and significant political diversity diminishes the potential for long-term legitimacy and national unity.

### ***Security Dynamics***

While the Taliban have succeeded in consolidating territorial control, Afghanistan's security landscape remains fragile. A primary concern is the growing threat posed by the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K), which has carried out high-profile attacks targeting both Taliban officials and civilians, including minority groups such as Hazaras (UNAMA, 2023). IS-K's expansion is of particular concern to Central Asian countries, which fear cross-border infiltration and radicalization of their populations (Lemon, 2022). Moreover, the Taliban's ambiguous relationship with transnational militant groups—including the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) and elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—raises alarms in the region. Although the



Taliban have committed to not allowing Afghan soil to be used against neighbors, enforcement remains inconsistent (UN Security Council, 2023). In response, states like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have enhanced border security infrastructure and intensified military drills in cooperation with Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

### ***Economic Crisis***

Afghanistan is enduring one of the most severe humanitarian and economic crises globally. The suspension of international aid and freezing over \$9 billion in Afghan central bank reserves have caused the country's economy to plummet (World Bank, 2023). Over 90% of the population lives in poverty, and unemployment is rampant, particularly among women and young people (UNDP, 2023b). Although the Taliban have managed to sustain basic fiscal functions, such as tax collection and border trade, the economy is still stagnant. The informal sector, which includes opium farming and illegal trade, has grown, further undermining the chances of a formal economic recovery (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction [SIGAR], 2023). Furthermore, the absence of financial transparency and modern banking systems hinders investment and regional economic collaboration. For Central Asian countries, this economic instability is both a humanitarian issue and a potential threat to stability. The rise in migration, drug trafficking, and the breakdown of trade routes through Afghanistan jeopardize regional development objectives and heighten public security concerns.

### **CENTRAL ASIA'S STRATEGIC CONCERNS**

The reconfiguration of Afghanistan's political and security architecture has created a new set of strategic challenges for Central Asian states. These concerns revolve around three primary domains: transnational security threats, economic disruption, and political stability. Each of these dimensions carries historical weight, shaped by the experiences of the 1990s Afghan civil war, post-2001 Western intervention, and the evolving threat landscape in the region. First, the issue of transnational security threats is of paramount importance. Economically, the disruption caused by the shifting dynamics in Afghanistan has implications for trade routes and energy supplies. Central Asian states rely heavily on stable pathways for their exports, and the instability in Afghanistan threatens vital trade links. A study by the Asian Development Bank highlights how regional infrastructure projects have been jeopardized due to regional unrest, impacting the economic prospects of Central Asian economies (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Concerns over the Kush Tepa project further exacerbate these issues, as the potential for disruption in this key infrastructure initiative poses additional risks to energy security and economic collaboration in the region. A study by the Asian Development Bank highlights how regional infrastructure projects have been jeopardized due to regional unrest, impacting the economic prospects of Central Asian economies (Asian Development Bank, 2022).

Finally, political stability in Central Asia is deeply intertwined with developments in Afghanistan. The political landscape in Central Asian states often reflects their concerns about extremist ideologies spilling over from Afghanistan. Analysts suggest

that the authoritarian regimes in these countries have used the narrative of a threat from Afghanistan to justify domestic policies that limit political freedoms (RFE/RL, 2021). For Central Asian states, Afghanistan is simultaneously a risk vector and a potential partner in regional connectivity — a paradox that complicates policymaking. This multifaceted relationship underscores the necessity for nuanced approaches to engagement with Afghanistan, balancing immediate security concerns with the long-term benefits of cooperation in trade and regional integration (Crisis Group, 2021).

### ***Security Threats and Militancy Spillover***

The foremost concern among Central Asian governments is the potential spillover of militant violence and radical ideologies from Afghanistan. Since 2021, the Islamic State–Khorasan Province (IS-K) has expanded its operational reach, targeting both Taliban forces and civilian populations (UNAMA, 2023). Central Asian intelligence services fear that IS-K, alongside residual elements of groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), could exploit porous borders to recruit, train, and launch attacks across the region (UN Security Council, 2023).

Tajikistan shares a lengthy and mountainous border with Afghanistan and has been particularly vocal about the risks. In recent years, it has bolstered its military presence along the border, hosted joint drills with the CSTO, and constructed new security infrastructure with Russian support (Koehler & Zürcher, 2023). Uzbekistan, although adopting a more pragmatic engagement with the Taliban, continues to monitor cross-border security risks and has sought technical cooperation with both Russia and China to enhance surveillance and counterterrorism capacity (Kassenova, 2022c).

### ***Refugee Pressure and Humanitarian Burdens***

Another primary concern is the possibility of a mass influx of Afghan refugees due to worsening socioeconomic conditions and political repression. While Afghanistan has not yet experienced refugee flows on the scale of Syria or Ukraine, the risk remains significant given that more than six million Afghans are internally displaced or in need of urgent humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2023). Central Asian countries, most of which lack the institutional capacity or legal frameworks for large-scale refugee absorption, view this as a destabilizing factor.

Tajikistan has admitted a limited number of Afghan refugees, especially ethnic Tajiks, but lacks the resources for long-term integration. Uzbekistan has remained cautious, allowing temporary transit for Afghans with third-country visas but avoiding commitments to permanent resettlement (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Refugee management remains ad hoc, often constrained by limited international funding and inadequate legal infrastructure.

### ***Economic Disruption and Trade Blockage***

Afghanistan's economic breakdown has disrupted long-standing trade routes and reduced regional commercial activity. The Termez–Mazar-e-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar corridor, envisioned as a trade artery linking Central Asia to South Asia, has slowed

due to deteriorating security and logistical challenges (ADB, 2022b). In addition, the collapse of financial institutions in Afghanistan has made cross-border payments difficult, limiting private sector engagement and investment (World Bank, 2023). Alternative routes, such as a railway through Herat and Kandahar, are proposed to address these issues. This route could enhance connectivity and trade, facilitating easier access between Central and South Asia. However, the feasibility and security of this alternative would need to be carefully considered (Smith, 2023). Additionally, the collapse of financial institutions in Afghanistan has made cross-border payments difficult, limiting private sector engagement and investment (World Bank, 2023).

In 2025, the drug economy will continue to disturb regional stability greatly. Afghanistan remains the largest producer of opium globally, while the Taliban's attempts to impose a ban on poppy cultivation have proven mainly ineffective and inconsistent (UNODC, 2025). Central Asian nations, especially Tajikistan, have become increasingly crucial as transit hubs for narcotics heading to Russia and Europe, intensifying problems associated with organized crime and systemic corruption in the area (Eurasian Drug Monitoring Initiative, 2025).

### ***Political and Ideological Risks***

The ideological dimension of the Taliban's governance is of particular concern to secular Central Asian regimes. Governments in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, which maintain strong state control over religious institutions, fear that the normalization of Taliban rule could embolden domestic Islamist movements or provoke dissent (Tolipov, 2021). As such, most Central Asian states have been cautious in their diplomatic posture, maintaining minimal or conditional engagement while monitoring the Taliban's rhetoric and policy direction.

Moreover, the Taliban's exclusion of ethnic minorities from governance raises concerns among countries like Tajikistan, whose national narratives are closely tied to ethnic solidarity with Afghan Tajiks. These concerns, while partly symbolic, also reflect more profound anxieties about the erosion of secular nationalism and the possible return of transnational Islamist ideologies (Lemon, 2022).

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT**

Despite the prevailing concerns about Afghanistan's instability, Central Asian states also recognize the strategic opportunities that constructive engagement with Afghanistan may offer. These opportunities revolve around enhancing regional connectivity, stabilizing the security environment through diplomatic channels, and developing economic partnerships that serve mutual interests. While the risks remain high, proactive engagement grounded in realism and multilateralism could contribute to a more stable and integrated region (Kassenova, 2022a).

Increased engagement is vital in three key domains: infrastructure and trade connectivity, diplomatic dialogue and mediation, and targeted humanitarian and development assistance.

### ***Regional Connectivity and Infrastructure Integration***

Afghanistan's geographic position between Central and South Asia presents a long-standing regional trade and transit opportunity. Projects such as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline and the Trans-Afghan Railway aim to transform Afghanistan from a security buffer into a logistical bridge (ADB, 2022c). Uzbekistan, in particular, has championed Afghanistan's integration into Central Asia's transit infrastructure through the proposed Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar corridor, which would link Central Asia to Pakistani ports.

These projects offer long-term economic benefits: reduced transport costs, increased regional trade, and the creation of employment and infrastructure within Afghanistan. However, political uncertainty and security risks continue to delay implementation. Nonetheless, the continued involvement of Central Asian states in feasibility studies, diplomatic dialogues, and donor mobilization reflects a strong interest in leveraging these opportunities once conditions allow (World Bank, 2023).

### ***Energy Trade and Resource Cooperation***

Afghanistan's integration into the regional energy market represents another key opportunity. Countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan possess surplus hydropower during summer, while Afghanistan has significant unmet energy needs. The CASA-1000 project, which connects Central Asia to South Asia via Afghanistan, remains a potential model for such cooperation (World Bank, 2022). Despite security delays, continued investment in this project signals a regional commitment to building interdependence. Furthermore, Turkmenistan has maintained relatively stable relations with the Taliban, hoping to export its vast gas reserves through Afghanistan via the TAPI pipeline. These engagements underscore how even risk-averse states see energy diplomacy as a vehicle for influence and long-term gain (Lemon, 2022).

### ***Diplomatic Engagement and Conflict Mediation***

Diplomatic bilateral and multilateral engagement can help normalize relations, manage risks, and lay the groundwork for inclusive governance in Afghanistan. Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have hosted regional summits, advocated for diplomatic recognition conditioned on human rights progress, and supported UN-led frameworks for dialogue (Kassenova, 2022a; UNDP, 2023c). Even if the Taliban remains unrecognized, engaging with Afghan civil society, municipal actors, and technocratic administrators can help preserve institutional memory and mitigate the long-term consequences of isolation.

Integrating Afghanistan into regional security discussions will likely affect Taliban governance and its interactions with neighboring countries. Participation in organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program may encourage the Taliban to implement more cooperative governance approaches, particularly focusing on counterterrorism, border management, and drug control (Khan, 2021; Smith, 2022). This could foster improved relations with regional allies and provide legitimacy, as joint efforts on mutual security issues may bolster the Taliban's local and international standing (Jones, 2020). Anticipated outcomes include: 1) Strengthened diplomatic ties with neighboring countries (Doe, 2023), 2) Greater economic collaboration through

improved trade and investment (Brown, 2022), 3) A transition towards more stable governance by tackling shared challenges (Lee, 2021), and 4) A possible reduction in extremist activities due to coordinated regional initiatives (Green, 2023).

### *Humanitarian Assistance and Capacity Building*

Given the scale of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis, Central Asian states can play a pivotal role in localized assistance, especially along border provinces. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have delivered humanitarian aid through land corridors, while Tajikistan has worked with international NGOs to support ethnic Tajik communities in northern Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2022). More strategically, Central Asian countries could contribute to capacity-building programs, particularly in public health, agriculture, and education. This "development diplomacy" can serve dual purposes: building goodwill and reducing the long-term drivers of migration, extremism, and state fragility (UNDP, 2023c).

### COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL ASIAN RESPONSES

Central Asian states have adopted diverse strategies in their response to Afghanistan's evolving political and security landscape under Taliban rule. These differences reflect variations in historical relationships, ethnic proximity, domestic political orientations, and national security doctrines. While all countries share concerns about spillover effects and regional instability, their diplomatic, economic, and security approaches differ substantially.

**Uzbekistan** has pursued a policy of pragmatic engagement. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has maintained open channels with the Taliban, focusing on trade, connectivity, and border security. This strategy is grounded in a broader regional vision that seeks to transform Uzbekistan into a logistical hub linking Central and South Asia (Kassenova, 2022b). Despite security concerns, Tashkent hosted high-level meetings with Taliban officials and pushed forward infrastructure discussions such as the Trans-Afghan Railway.

**Tajikistan**, by contrast, has maintained a confrontational stance. Dushanbe has refused to recognize the Taliban government and has frequently criticized its exclusionary policies, especially concerning ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan. The memory of Tajikistan's civil war, coupled with a strong emphasis on secular nationalism, has made the regime highly sensitive to Taliban ideology and the threat of Islamic extremism (Tolipov, 2021). Military fortification of the southern border and reliance on the CSTO for defense coordination are central to its policy.

**Turkmenistan** has opted for a policy of quiet diplomacy. Maintaining neutrality and refraining from public commentary, Ashgabat has engaged with Taliban officials primarily to protect economic interests, particularly the TAPI pipeline project (Lemon, 2022). Turkmenistan emphasizes border stability and energy exports over political or humanitarian concerns.

**Kazakhstan** has taken a cautious but balanced approach. While not engaging directly with the Taliban at a high level, Kazakhstan has focused on multilateral platforms like the UN and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to support Afghan humanitarian

needs and promote education and civil society resilience (UNDP, 2023b). Its role is more aligned with “soft power” diplomacy.

These varied responses illustrate the lack of a unified regional strategy toward Afghanistan. Instead, national interests, regime ideologies, and strategic calculations define engagement patterns. However, areas of overlap—particularly in economic connectivity and humanitarian assistance—provide a foundation for future regional cooperation.

**Comparative Table.** Central Asian Responses to Afghanistan (Post-2021)

Country	Diplomatic Stance	Security Strategy	Economic Engagement	Primary Concerns
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Pragmatic, open dialogue	Enhanced border monitoring	Infrastructure projects (railway, trade)	IS-K threat, regional isolation
<b>Tajikistan</b>	Hostile, non-recognition	Military fortification, CSTO drills	Minimal economic contact	Ethnic solidarity, terrorism, Taliban ideology
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	Quiet diplomacy, neutrality	Limited border surveillance	TAPI pipeline, electricity exports	Energy security, border stability
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	Cautious, multilateral	Intelligence coordination, low threat level	Humanitarian aid, education diplomacy	Refugee spillover, regional image

*Source: compiled by the author, April 2025*

## CONCLUSION

Afghanistan’s post-2021 transformation has fundamentally altered the regional security and diplomatic calculus for its northern Central Asian neighbors. While the Taliban’s return to power has brought an end to large-scale armed conflict within Afghanistan, it has simultaneously introduced new layers of uncertainty and risk for the broader region. This article examines Afghanistan’s contemporary political, security, and economic conditions through the lens of Central Asian states, highlighting the complex interplay between threat perception, historical memory, and emerging opportunities for engagement.

Central Asian countries, though geographically proximate and facing similar challenges, have responded to the situation in Afghanistan in markedly different ways. Uzbekistan’s pragmatic engagement, Tajikistan’s adversarial posture, Turkmenistan’s strategic silence, and Kazakhstan’s humanitarian diplomacy reflect a spectrum of national priorities and ideological orientations. These responses underscore the absence of a unified regional strategy, even as shared concerns—such as terrorism, migration, and economic disruption—demand coordinated approaches.

Despite these challenges, opportunities for constructive engagement remain. Afghanistan’s potential as a land bridge between Central and South Asia, its growing energy demands, and its humanitarian needs create avenues for regional cooperation. If realized, infrastructure projects like CASA-1000 and the TAPI pipeline could be confidence-building mechanisms that foster mutual interdependence. Moreover, Central Asia’s position as a relatively stable subregion allows it to function as a potential mediator in broader international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

In the future, Central Asian states would benefit from a more coordinated, multilateral policy framework that leverages regional institutions and external partnerships. Such an approach would mitigate the risks of Afghanistan's instability and harness the strategic opportunities a more stable and integrated Afghanistan could offer.

## FUNDING

No funding is taken to complete this research project; the author solely sponsors the research.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

FMZ: conceptualization, methodology, qualitative analysis, Investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing, visualization.

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# THE AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN BORDERLANDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PAKISTAN'S SECURITY

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**Article History:**  
Received: 15 May 2025  
Revised: 10 June 2025  
Accepted: 12 June 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *The Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands have a significant impact on the relationship between the two neighboring states, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as on Pakistan's security. This border zone, known as the Durand Line, is not just a line on a map. It is the zone of interaction, conflict, negotiation, and hybridity that has become a haven for "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan", one of the extremist and terrorist organizations operating here over the past two decades. Today, Pakistan finds itself in a challenging position due to the periodic infiltration of "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan" militants from Afghan territory and a renewed wave of violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, as well as in some other regions of Pakistan. The danger lies in the fact that the "Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan" utilizes Afghan territory to plan and execute operations within Pakistan.*

*The purpose of this article is to analyze how borders with cross-border ethnic, social, and economic networks are continually constructed, maintained, and contested through policies, violence, and social practices.*

*The theoretical framework is primarily grounded in the concept of borderlands theory and, to a lesser extent, in insurgency and counterinsurgency theories. It draws on a wide range of recent sources, highlighting the background and realities of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. The findings and insights, derived from a comparative and empirical content analysis of the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands, challenge traditional state-centric views and reveal how borderlands function as dynamic spaces of interaction, conflict, and identity negotiation.*

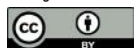
**KEYWORDS:** *Afghanistan, Pakistan, Afghan-Pakistan borderlands, violent extremism, terrorism, Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.*

## INTRODUCTION

The border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan not only embodies many characteristics of a borderland but is also complicated by the historical relationship between the two countries, the unique geographical landscape, and regional geopolitics. In today's context, the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland has become a significant source of security challenges for Pakistan. This is largely due to the active

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JOURNAL OF  
**CENTRAL ASIAN  
STUDIES**  
<https://jcas-journal.com>



presence of the Pakistani Taliban, “Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan” (hereinafter referred to as TTP), a radical religious organization primarily composed of ethnic Pashtuns. The TTP is concentrated in the northwest of Pakistan along the Afghanistan border and adjacent Afghan territory. There is substantial evidence suggesting that TTP militants have extensive ties with the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Additionally, the TTP functions as an umbrella organization, comprising around three dozen armed groups involved in attacks against Pakistan.

TTP’s methods include attacks and terrorist strikes against Pakistan’s security services, military units, and law enforcement agencies, as well as acts of intimidation against the civilian population.

The TTP’s publicly stated reasons for attacking Pakistani authorities include the implementation of Sharia law in Pakistan, the release of its members from Pakistani prisons, and the reduction of Pakistan’s military presence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which has long served as a base for the group. Additionally, the TTP seeks to restore the right to free movement and other privileges. The Pashtun tribes residing on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border have lost several rights and benefits following the merger of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province into the newly formed Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018.

TTP primarily operates in regions such as Waziristan and Swat and other districts and areas in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan. Whereas across the border in Afghanistan, TTP activities are concentrated in the provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, Khost, Paktia, and Paktika, which share a border with Pakistan. These areas provide strategic locations for the TTP due to their proximity to the Afghan-Pakistani border and the presence of supportive networks. The leaders of the TTP, as noted by former Pakistani envoy to Afghanistan Asif Durrani, reside in Kabul (Afghanistan International, 2024).

The Afghan government in Kabul has repeatedly assured that Afghan territory will not serve as a sanctuary for extremist and terrorist groups and will not permit them to use Afghan soil to launch attacks on neighboring countries. Nonetheless, Islamabad remains skeptical about these assurances, noting that there is a substantial discrepancy between the words and actions of the Afghan Taliban. This skepticism is fueled by ongoing security concerns and the historical context of cross-border terrorism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Boundaries are an attribute of statehood that defines a state’s territory and distinguishes it from the rest of the world. They serve as imaginary lines separating one state’s territory from another’s and delineate the limits of the state’s sovereignty and jurisdiction over its designated areas, thereby establishing the legal framework within which the state exercises its authority. According to Baud and Schendel (1997), boundaries appear on the political map and reproduce the state’s description and representation of itself, thereby shaping the country’s politics, economy, strategy, and security paradigm.

However, the term “borderlands” refers to the territory on both sides of the border between two states. As a space of unique political, economic, and cultural interaction,

borderlands often exhibit distinct characteristics. These may include the formation of competing identities, special economic zones, or a political status quo. Tariq et al. (2020) note that typically these circumstances do not always align with geographical and political realities. Therefore, the study of borderlands should be approached from multiple perspectives, including legality, geography, geopolitics, and other aspects of historical development.

According to scholars specializing in border security, such as Wermuth and Riley (2007), in the context of security paradigms border regions are particularly significant because they often serve as the origin of many security risks and challenges for a state. This is especially true when dealing with unstable, fragmented, or formal borders. Such borders frequently become a hub for illegal imports and exports, smuggling of goods and services, and cross-border crimes – such as drug trafficking and power abuse, illegal arms trade, and the movement of ammunition. These conditions collectively create an environment conducive to the development of transnational violent extremism and terrorism.

Thus, the borderlands theory places a special socio-political context at the center of research on instability and conflict in border regions. This approach highlights how the proximity to borders can create distinct social, economic, and political dynamics that contribute to tensions and conflicts. According to Baud & Schendel (1997), by examining these dynamics, one can better understand the complex interactions between bordering states, local communities, and external factors that influence the stability of these regions

In this regard, the Durand Line, established during the colonial period in 1893 to demarcate the state border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, serves as a critical example of how a border not recognized by the Afghan government encourages local tribes to engage in controversy with Pakistani authorities over crossing the border. This, in turn, leads to border conflicts between Kabul and Islamabad. Additionally, the Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border share a strong sense of common customs and traditions. In this regard, Tariq, in his previous work (2018), notes that “they maintain a way of life and social norms to which they adhere and enforce within their territory, despite coercive measures by the authorities of Afghanistan and Pakistan”.

Pakistan considers the Durand Line as a border with Afghanistan and considers it an internationally recognized border. Afghanistan does not recognize the international legal status of the border with Pakistan. At the same time, nomadic Pashtun tribes used to move between the two countries every year, along with members of armed groups, including TTP militants, who also crossed the Afghan-Pakistani border, which ran mainly through Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The historical background of the emergence of this line has led to the rise of an irredentist movement among Pashtun tribes on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, which transcends national boundaries. This circumstance allows the TTP to operate across the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands with relative ease. At the same time, the observed Pashtun irredentism in the Afghan-Pakistani border region, as Deleixhe et al. (2019)

state, is not a legitimate movement from the perspective of established international law norms regarding the inviolability of modern state borders. Since the end of the Cold War, a general consensus has formed globally on this issue. Exceptions include the situations in Kosovo and South Sudan, where the question lies on a different plane (Deleixhe et al., 2019).

In the discourse of insurgency and counterinsurgency theory, some researchers argue that the primary focus is on the strategies employed by extremist groups and the countermeasures taken by states (Jermalavičius, 2007). In the context of Afghanistan and Pakistan, this theory highlights the logic of conflict development, fueling not only ethnic irredentism but also violent extremism and terrorism. Due to the prolonged civil war in Afghanistan and the intervention of third countries, various militant groups, primarily the TTP, have established extensive networks spanning both countries. In this regard, Bakrania (2017) claims that these networks utilize ethnic connections and tribal affiliations to recruit fighters and plan operations, complicating efforts by state forces to effectively combat extremists and militants.

The approach of Pakistan's military to addressing these threats often involved treating certain groups as strategic assets in their geopolitical maneuvers within the framework of the West's military-political strategy in Afghanistan. This has significantly complicated efforts to combat cross-border violent extremism and terrorism (Gohel, 2023). The absence of a unified bilateral strategy between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the context of the changed military-political situation in Afghanistan after 2021 only exacerbates the situation, as both countries struggle with internal divisions and external pressure. Moreover, effective combat against cross-border violent extremism and terrorism requires not only improved bilateral cooperation but also a nuanced understanding of the socio-political landscapes of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a combination of theoretical frameworks and research methods to analyze the emergence of the TTP and its impact on Pakistan's security, particularly in the context of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands.

The study draws on several theoretical frameworks. One of these is the borderland theory, which offers a foundational understanding of local communities situated in unstable and securitized border zones. According to borderland theory, such communities develop within a constrained set of possibilities: they may submit to, adapt to, or resist the prevailing socio-political conditions.

The study also employs insurgent and counterinsurgent theories as supplementary tools. These theories partially address the complexities of transnational terrorism, providing additional insight into the dynamics at play.

As it was mentioned above, the theory of borderlands is well-suited to describe the Afghan-Pakistani border region, as it takes into account the nature of this socio-political space. Rather than focusing on questions of loyalty or disloyalty to Pakistani authorities, it views the area as a long-term process in which a new supra-ethnic identity

is being formed. In other words, local tribes find themselves in an intermediate state. Over time, this may lead to the emergence of competing identities.

This perspective challenges the commonly held thesis regarding the legacy of the British colonial administration, which supporters of Pashtun irredentism often cite. Consequently, the events of 1893, frequently referenced to argue that the border does not align with the sense of belonging of many local Pashtun tribes, are losing their relevance. While tribal ties, languages, and kinship networks remain strong and continue to operate freely on both sides of the border, this process also has its temporal limits.

Although the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands allow for ongoing interaction and movement, the consolidation of sovereignty will inevitably assert itself over time.

As for the applicability of insurgency theory to the study of the Afghan-Pakistani border problem, one must say the following. In the classical sense, this theory is appropriate for analyzing the Republican period of Afghanistan's history, when the Taliban on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border shared common goals and objectives and operated as a single organized force. It is in the period before the events of 2021 that insurgency theory helps explain the persistent instability in the region.

However, today, further development of insurgency theory is necessary, as the characteristics of the Afghan-Pakistan border have changed. Although this strip of territory still exhibits some insurgent features, its political situation and nature have evolved. Whereas in the past it served as a refuge for insurgent groups, today it has become a sanctuary for terrorist organizations such as the TTP, Islamic State of Khorasan (hereafter – ISIS-K), etc. It should also be noted that, instead of enjoying popular support, the TTP exerts unilateral coercion over local tribes.

Nevertheless, insurgency theory can be applied to a certain extent, as it emphasizes socio-economic motivations and political marginalization based on economic inequality, poverty, and feelings of exclusion from political processes, as drivers of conflict. In this regard, it is not simply a tale of resentment toward colonial legacies; rather, it concerns the factors that fuel the narratives exploited by the TTP. At the same time, the transnational nature of the terrorist underground has expanded to include groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS-K, and others, providing a broader framework for recruitment and legitimacy.

It is also worth highlighting the applicability of counterinsurgency theory, which pertains to state approaches, in this case, Pakistani, to securing the border with security forces, and to building fencing at the border, governance, and infrastructure. However, these state-led measures often fail due to the deterioration of relations between the Pakistan and Afghanistan governments. This is exacerbated by poor governance, corruption, and a lack of coordination between the military and civilian leadership.

The methodological approach also integrates comparative analysis and content analysis. These methods are employed to explore the comparative and content dimensions of the TTP's rise and its broader implications for Pakistan's security. Comparative analysis is utilized to contrast the TTP's activities with those of other militant groups in the region, as well as to compare the Pakistani government's response to the TTP with its

handling of other insurgencies. This approach highlights the unique features of the TTP's strategies, its regional influence, and its interactions with other militant organizations. Furthermore, comparative analysis is used to assess the government's counterinsurgency efforts and the varying levels of success in different regions of Pakistan, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Content analysis is also significant to this study as it is employed to systematically analyze official documents, reports, and various sources of secondary data. This method allows for the extraction and organization of relevant information regarding the TTP's formation, its strategies, and its expansion.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *The emergence of the TTP and its impact on the security situation in Pakistan.*

Around 2003, as part of the fight against Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, the international coalition forces led by the US and NATO significantly expanded their area of operation in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands. As a result of the military actions in the tribal areas, which include extensive regions of the Pashtun belt, significant Taliban groups were localized. Operating under different names and forms, but under the banner of fighting against the West and its allies in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, various militant groups expanded their influence by uniting with other extremist groups based in different parts of Pakistan.

Over time, this led to the emergence of a local movement known as the Pakistani Taliban movement. The trend reached its peak in December 2007, when the formation of the "Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan" (TTP) was officially announced, with Baitullah Mehsud as its leader. The same year, Maulana Hafiz Gul Bahadur and Maulana Faqir Muhammad were appointed as two deputies, with 27 Taliban militant groups pledging allegiance to the TTP leader and agreeing to submit to its centralized command (Siddique et al., 2010).

Initially, the area of operation for the TTP was the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). However, the indiscriminate drone strikes by the US in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands played a significant role in expanding the TTP's sphere of influence. As the number of drone strikes increased, it prompted the number of civilians killed and wounded. This significantly contributed to the growth of support for the TTP among the local population.

In many ways, these events served as a trigger for a broader confrontation between the TTP and the Pakistani government. In response to US actions and the involvement of the Pakistani military, the TTP was able to consolidate its position and expand its influence in areas previously controlled by traditional tribal leaders of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, as well as strengthen its position in the settled districts of the former North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, which, like the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, is now part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, it became clear "after the 2009 attack on a police academy in Lahore, Pakistan, that the TTP had a wide-ranging network throughout Pakistan" (Farley, 2021). Despite Pakistan's efforts to combat the TTP, the movement's militants continue to expand and spread across the country, exacerbating internal security challenges, including increased violence and political instability, which can further strain the country's economic recovery efforts.

The situation became particularly acute following the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan in 2021. The unexpected rise to power of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul provided significant ideological justification and motivation for the TTP's further activities, contributing to its revival. Additionally, the large arsenal of weapons left behind by the Americans gave new impetus to TTP militants, enabling them to launch active operations in neighboring Pakistan. For instance, it is reported that "US troops left behind military equipment and weapons worth approximately \$75 billion in Afghanistan. This included hundreds of pickups, cargo and transport trucks, mine-resistant vehicles, armored personnel carriers, as well as hundreds of thousands of rifles, pistols, machine guns, grenade launchers, rocket weapons, and night vision device" (Farley, 2021). It is more challenging to discuss the exact number of planes and helicopters left for the Taliban, as many were disabled or abandoned, according to military experts (BBC News, 2021). Additionally, a small number were flown out to neighboring countries.

TTP now periodically conducts attacks against Pakistani military, police, intelligence officials, and civilians in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province using Western weapons. Representatives of Pakistani political parties and civil activists have also faced persecution for refusing to cooperate with the TTP. Local business communities and traders have been subjected to extortion. Almost all individuals cooperating with local authorities have found themselves targeted by the militants.

Moreover, the TTP's activities have expanded beyond their traditional stronghold of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Northwest Tribal Areas into several districts and cities in the already volatile neighboring province of Balochistan. The insurgency by Baloch separatist groups, which are nationalist and secular in nature, has fluctuated over the past two decades. Insurgent groups, including the Baloch Liberation Army, the Balochistan Liberation Front, the Balochistan Republican Guard, and others, have been fighting against the Pakistani government. They have periodically made their presence known through attacks on central government officials and Chinese interests in the country, accusing the central government of unfairly appropriating Balochistan's rich gas and mineral resources. Severe economic problems have exacerbated these grievances. Balochistan is Pakistan's largest and least populated province, yet it remains the country's poorest province, with approximately 70% of the population living below the poverty line (Niaz, 2024).

Since 2023, there have been increasing reports of TTP militants infiltrating the city of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, as well as the cities of Chaman and Qilla Saifullah, which border Afghanistan. Additionally, TTP activities have been noted in Kalat and the Zhob district, located near Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. This expansion reflects the TTP's strategic efforts to establish a broader presence in Balochistan, beyond its traditional strongholds (Ur Rehman, 2023).

According to security experts, the TTP is seeking to establish strong connections with Baloch militant groups to form a united front against Pakistani security forces. The TTP has reportedly recruited two groups from the Quetta and Kalat districts in Balochistan. The Baloch groups themselves have remained silent about TTP operations in their territory, which highlights their common interests in countering Pakistani security forces or their reluctance to engage in open confrontation with the TTP (Akhter, 2024).



According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) database, a non-profit organization that specializes in collecting and mapping data on armed conflicts worldwide, 2024 saw a significant increase in armed activities by Baloch separatists, with levels of activity doubling compared to 2023. This surge in violence was partly driven by intensified attacks leading up to national and provincial elections. Separatists enforced a boycott by targeting polling facilities during the voting process. The largest series of attacks occurred on August 25-26, 2024, in which more than 70 people, including 23 civilians, were killed (Shaikh, 2024).

The high level of violence persisted throughout late 2024, reflecting the enhanced armed and organizational capabilities of Baloch groups. This violence was characterized by an ethnocentric dimension, as it primarily targeted Punjabi workers, highlighting the complex nature of the conflict (Pandya & Shah, 2024). There has also been a notable increase in attacks on Chinese nationals working on projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative. These attacks have heightened security concerns and strained relations between China and Pakistan, with China pressing Pakistan to enhance security measures for its citizens and projects in the region (Pandya & Shah, 2024).

It is worth noting that the TTP has had a presence in Balochistan before, which can be attributed to the province's strategic location at the crossroads of borders with Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan and their unstable tribal regions. Historically, the TTP's presence was confined to the Pashtun areas of Balochistan. However, there has been a recent increase in interactions between the TTP and Baloch separatist groups, marking a shift in the dynamics of the conflict. Security experts believe that the TTP is expanding its presence in Balochistan to prevent the Islamic State in Pakistan Province (IS-P), a splinter group of IS-K, from filling the jihadist space. The primary motivation for this expansion is strategic: maintaining a foothold in Balochistan provides the TTP with an alternative safe haven within Pakistan. This is particularly important as Islamabad pressures Kabul, and it serves as a useful insurance policy for the TTP during challenging times. Balochistan's vast territory and low population density make it an attractive sanctuary for the TTP, offering ample hideouts and potential resources (Basit, 2023).

At the same time, the situation in Balochistan is exacerbated by the generally weak governance that characterizes peripheral border regions, which affects the country's overall security and economy. This allows insurgents to use porous borders and kinship ties to take refuge in neighboring countries (Ansary, 2020).

Thus, the growing activity of the TTP in Balochistan has potential long-term implications for the overall trajectory and composition of the conflict in Balochistan. At the same time, to strengthen its position in the province, the TTP has been provoking Baloch groups in various ways by issuing statements about the numerous challenges facing Balochistan.

***Current Situation: From Ceasefire Attempts to the Construction of a Fence on the Afghan-Pakistani Border.*** TTP and the Pakistani government have repeatedly declared ceasefires. One of the most recent ceasefires, brokered by Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani in the fall of 2022, was broken after Pakistani Prime



Minister Shahbaz Sharif (who replaced Imran Khan in April 2022) rejected the call of Afghan Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar. The latter called on the Pakistani authorities to release all Afghan citizens from detention facilities in Pakistan. By November 2022, the militants unilaterally announced the resumption of operations against the Pakistani authorities.

In the spring of 2023, a significant infiltration of TTP militants into Pakistan from Afghanistan was documented. In a message circulated on social media, the extremists threatened the authorities that if the Pakistani army initiated punitive actions against the TTP, the militants would launch targeted attacks on government members and top officials.

Personal threats against Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, who leads the Pakistan People's Party, and other officials had a notable impact. Despite the challenging security situation in the country, the Pakistani authorities did not undertake a large-scale military operation to neutralize the TTP and its extremist networks.

Overall, attacks by the TTP against Pakistani law enforcement agencies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province have increased significantly in frequency and intensity since the Afghan Taliban regained power. In 2023, a total of 1,215 terrorist attacks were recorded, compared to 858 in 2022 and 903 in 2021 (Janjua et al., 2024).

The TTP attacks have surged by nearly 70 percent over the past two years, primarily targeting law enforcement and military forces in the provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. This escalation has resulted in the deaths and injuries of hundreds of Pakistani troops (Afghanistan International, 2024). According to the Global Terrorism Index, in 2025, TTP emerged as a terrorist group, with a 90% increase in attributed deaths (Global Terrorism Index, 2025).

The deteriorating security situation along the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, exacerbated by the escalating intensity of TTP attacks against Pakistan in 2023, has prompted the Pakistani government to strongly criticize the Afghan authorities. Throughout 2023, Pakistani officials, through various channels, urged the Afghan government to stop sheltering the TTP, demanding that Kabul either take action against terrorists using Afghan soil to launch attacks in Pakistan or extradite them to Islamabad. "A key message from Pakistan's Acting Prime Minister Anwar ul-Haq Kakar at the time was to press the Afghan authorities to take decisive action against the TTP" (Ariana News, 2023).

Simultaneously, Islamabad periodically conveyed to Kabul that the possibility of Pakistan conducting a targeted operation on Afghan territory to neutralize TTP militants could not be ruled out.

Meanwhile, as noted above, crossing the border in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands has traditionally been a component of the seasonal migration process of Afghan Pashtun nomads. The Pashtun tribes, settled on both sides of the border, continued to live as they had for decades, largely disregarding the border.

At the turn of the 20th-21st centuries, following the invasions of Afghanistan by Soviet and then American and NATO forces, as well as in the years that followed, the unauthorized movement of Afghans across state borders remained relatively unchanged and stable. Under these conditions, the groundwork was laid for illegal activities such as smuggling of goods and services, drug trafficking, illicit arms trafficking, and other unlawful endeavors.

In the early 2000s, as American drones began to dominate the Afghan-Pakistani border area, the security situation became increasingly complex. This period marked the emergence of open confrontations between the Afghan Taliban and Pakistani authorities for the first time, which served as a primary catalyst for the rise of TTP in the region. The unique status of the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands, combined with its rugged terrain, enabled the TTP to establish a strong presence in this challenging environment.

New realities prompted Islamabad to consider constructing border fortifications along the Afghan-Pakistani border, an idea first announced in September 2005. This proposal led to an escalation of tensions on the border at the time. Following objections from Kabul, Pakistani authorities initially shelved the plan. However, Pakistan repeatedly revisited its intention to fence the border, only to postpone it each time due to the resulting escalation of tensions. This cautious approach was understandable given the sensitive nature of the issue.

As it was mentioned above, the Durand Line has not been officially recognized by Kabul, and the dispute over its legitimacy between Afghanistan and Pakistan has persisted for over a century. Consequently, Afghanistan views the construction of border fortifications as an attempt by Pakistan to solidify the disputed border. This issue is particularly contentious along the mountainous and poorly controlled sections of the 2,640-kilometer border between Afghanistan and the Pakistani provinces of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan (Mohanty, 2024).

In the spring of 2017, Pakistan initiated the active construction of a fence along its border with Afghanistan. On April 25, 2023, at a press conference, Major General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry announced that 98% of the work on fencing the 2,611-kilometer Pakistan-Afghan border had been completed. He also noted that 85% of the proposed forts had been installed along the border to restrict the movement of terrorists (Mohanty, 2024).

The fencing project has been a significant part of Pakistan's efforts to enhance border security and reduce cross-border terrorism. Despite Afghan opposition, Pakistan has continued with the project, citing national security concerns (Samaa-News, 2024)

On the other hand, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, religious tensions between Shia and Sunni tribes are not uncommon, often escalating into land disputes and clashes between them. The Kurram district, located about 200 kilometers from Peshawar, the administrative center of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, has long been a site of intertribal conflicts. In September and October 2024, clashes between local tribes resulted in the deaths of 20 and 11 people, respectively. In November 2024, seven incidents of religious violence were recorded, including two terrorist attacks and five clashes, leading to 115 fatalities and 137 injuries (Inayatullah, 2024).

While Pakistan's construction of border fortifications along the Afghan border remains a contentious issue between Islamabad and Kabul, the complex geography of the region is a primary factor contributing to periodic flare-ups in the Afghan-Pakistan borderlands. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has become a hub for terrorist and insurgent groups. Simultaneously, there is a lack of coordination between the central and provincial governments in sharing information and assigning responsibilities for countering security threats. Furthermore, inadequate oversight from Afghan authorities exacerbates the situation.

Table 1 highlights the most important aspects of the analysis, focusing on the origins, expansion, growth of influence, and challenges posed by TTP.

**Table 1.** A summary table of the content analysis on the emergence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its impact on Pakistan's Security

Aspect	Findings
<b>Context and Formation</b>	The TTP emerged in 2007 as a unified faction of various militant groups under Baitullah Mehsud's leadership, amid the Afghanistan-Pakistan border conflict.
<b>Initial Area of Operation</b>	Initially based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and later expanded to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and beyond.
<b>U.S. Drone Strikes Impact</b>	Increased drone strikes led to civilian casualties, fueling local support for the TTP and expanding its influence.
<b>Growth and Consolidation</b>	TTP expanded after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, using the Taliban's resurgence for ideological support and operational bases.
<b>Strategic Expansion</b>	Since 2023, there have been increasing reports of TTP militants infiltrating the Balochistan province
<b>Weapons and Resources</b>	The TTP benefited from military equipment left by the U.S. in Afghanistan, strengthening its operational capabilities.
<b>Impact on Security</b>	TTP intensified attacks across Pakistan, with significant casualties and an increased destabilization of the political and economic situation.
<b>Government Response</b>	Pakistan's government has used mostly military and fewer intelligence efforts to counter the TTP, but regional sanctuaries in Afghanistan hinder effective control.
<b>Recent Threat Level</b>	In 2023, a total of 1,215 terrorist attacks were recorded, compared to 858 in 2022 and 903 in 2021.
<b>Current Threat Level</b>	In 2025, TTP emerged as a terrorist group, with a 90% increase in attributed deaths.

*Source: conducted on the result of the analysis (Siddique, et al., 2010; Farley, 2021; Janjua, et al., 2024; Global Terrorism Index, 2025; Ur Rehman, 2023).*

Thus, in the short and medium term, the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands can be characterized by a complex ethnic and cultural structure, which further complicates control and security enforcement in the region. Tribal ties that cross the border create favorable conditions for illegal migration, arms and drug smuggling, as well as the covert movement of militants. These factors exacerbate instability and hinder the coordination of joint actions between the two countries, which in turn contributes to the persistence of a zone of lawlessness and extremism.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands has facilitated the long-standing presence of the TTP in this region. However, the current resurgence of TTP activities in Pakistan is linked to the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan in 2021. This development provided the TTP with legitimacy and ideological momentum to intensify terrorist attacks against Pakistani authorities. Simultaneously, the absence of strong and trusting relations between Islamabad and Kabul, coupled with a significant trust deficit between the two governments, creates favorable conditions for the TTP to actively target the neighboring state.

Simultaneously, Pakistan has become increasingly critical of its own government's policy towards Afghanistan. Experts in the country acknowledge that the Afghan dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy requires significant revisions. Consequently, calls to reevaluate Pakistan's approach towards Afghanistan are growing louder. The Pakistani establishment appears to be reassessing its Afghan policy, which could lead to reduced engagement and a withdrawal from active support and assistance to Afghanistan at the regional and international levels. Currently, bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Afghanistan remains at an all-time low.

Thus, the ongoing dysfunction in relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan in the short and medium term will remain a pressing issue for both countries. Resolving this issue is a necessary condition for normalizing bilateral Afghan-Pakistani relations.

Future research based mainly on borderlands theory and partly on insurgency and counterinsurgency theories could be valuable in addressing the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands issue. A deeper investigation would contribute to understanding this issue as one rooted in cross-border cooperation, hybrid governance, and flexible approaches that move beyond rigid state borders. The given research encourages reimagining these regions not as peripheries to be controlled, but as central spaces of interaction and shared governance. Exploring the factors that shape cross-border cooperation, hybrid governance, and flexible governance models between Afghanistan and Pakistan could help identify new alternatives for resolving the borderlands issue.

## FUNDING

None.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

MA: conceptualization, validation, writing of the methodological section, the discourse analysis of the study, discussion section; MT: access to region-specific data and mass media; MM: participation in the discussion section.

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# SOFT POWER DIPLOMACY: A TOOL FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE US STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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**Article History:**  
Received: 30 March 2025  
Revised: 22 May 2025  
Accepted: 26 May 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *The United States has tactically used educational diplomacy in Central Asia, leveraging academic engagement as soft power and promoting democratic values. This analysis investigates the impact of U.S.-funded educational projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, examining how these initiatives have influenced changes in higher education reform, academic mobility, and governance. It discusses the gaps and the sustainability of these efforts by considering the geopolitical factors driving U.S. actions in the region, particularly the rising influence of China and Russia.*

*The analysis adopts a mixed-methods research design to accomplish these objectives, combining document analysis of policy and project evaluations from various countries.*

*The findings confirm that US programs have improved education systems and promoted democratic values. However, the long-term sustainability of these initiatives remains uncertain due to geopolitical boundaries, financial constraints, and competition from other foreign actors.*

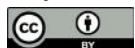
**KEYWORDS:** *soft power, educational diplomacy, academic mobility, governance, geopolitical influence.*

## INTRODUCTION

The role of education and its contribution to social development in Central Asia and the regions of the former Soviet Union take on even greater importance as these countries transition from centrally planned economies to market economies. This shift presents significant development opportunities but also poses considerable challenges. In the 1990s, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan made efforts to comprehensively reform their educational systems to modernize them according to international standards, alongside political stability and economic growth (Pomfret, 2014). However, these reforms were, and continue to be, implemented within the context of international geopolitical relations shaped by the policies and interests of dominant countries, particularly the U.S., Russia, and China (Zakiyeva, 2024).

As these countries have navigated post-Soviet transformations, the role of education as a tool for national identity, cultural reconstruction, and economic modernization has become

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increasingly significant. Furthermore, this transformation has been heavily influenced by external factors, including geopolitical strategies and international partnerships.

For the United States, Central Asia represented a region where educational programs not only served to improve regional development but also helped promote Western interests such as democracy, market economic systems, and academic freedom. In this context, US educational diplomacy helped balance the influence of Russia and China in the region (Bremmer, 2018). Through various diplomatic and academic channels, the US has sought to position itself as a partner in the modernization of Central Asia, promoting a future vision aligned with Western ideals of democracy and governance. The primary objective of these activities has been to establish lasting partnerships with future decision-makers and policymakers in this part of the world and promote values associated with American ideals and interests. However, regarding the expansion of these policies, sustainability remains a concern due to political challenges, financial limitations, and the prevailing global environment (Tastanbekova, 2024).

This research examines the outcomes of American educational initiatives in Central Asia, focusing on higher education, governance, and regional cooperation. Additionally, it seeks to understand the geopolitical rationale for US involvement in the region and how it has influenced the nature and outcomes of American educational diplomacy. Furthermore, it aims to evaluate how these educational efforts have shaped Central Asia's engagement with broader international frameworks, focusing on how educational diplomacy intersects with political and economic goals. It will also assess the sustainability of these efforts in light of ongoing political, economic, and geopolitical challenges.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In the late 20th century, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, which refers to a nation's ability to influence international events through attraction and persuasion instead of coercion (Nye, 1990). Soft power is exercised through cultural diplomacy, political engagement, and economic cooperation, with education serving as a significant tool in this process. As soft power, education enables countries to expand their global influence by shaping international perceptions, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering lasting diplomatic relationships.

Although "soft power" is frequently mentioned in academic and policy discussions, it is often used inaccurately. Nye (2004, 2008) points out that soft power should be understood as separate from related ideas like public diplomacy, which involves official attempts to engage with foreign audiences, and educational diplomacy, which specifically deals with efforts to foster international understanding and interaction through academic and cultural initiatives. For this study, educational diplomacy is defined as the strategic application of education via academic exchanges, partnerships between institutions, cultural programs, and scholarships to fulfill foreign policy aims and enhance mutual understanding between countries. This definition clarifies the distinction between educational diplomacy and broader concepts such as cultural diplomacy or public relations.

Kaneva (2012) examines how narratives of national identity are conveyed on an international scale through cultural and educational diplomacy. Roselle et al. (2014) introduce the idea of "strategic narratives," stressing how countries craft stories to



mold global perceptions and exert influence. Chitty (2017) underscores the importance of universities and educational systems in shaping international views and promoting national values.

This section explores the changing function of education as a tool of soft power, evaluating its influence on foreign policy, cultural diplomacy, international relations, and national growth. Furthermore, the review addresses the challenges and inconsistencies in the research. It highlights successful strategies to leverage education for the projection of soft power, suggesting a framework for its effective implementation.

### ***1. The Globalization of Higher Education***

Globalization refers to integrating international perspectives within educational frameworks, especially in higher education. By promoting academic exchanges, enhancing intercultural understanding, and building global networks, the globalization of education plays a vital role in enhancing a nation's soft power. Knight (2004) suggests that globalization allows nations to demonstrate their leadership in the creation and sharing of global knowledge.

This process involves academic and cultural elements, with educational institutions playing a pivotal role in fostering international cooperation and understanding. Marginson (2007) argues that the globalization of higher education, particularly in Asia, reflects a strategic response to educational demand and geopolitical positioning. Countries like Singapore and Malaysia have established top-tier universities to attract foreign students, elevate the quality of their education systems, and improve their global stature. These initiatives are integral to national strategies for projecting cultural diplomacy and attracting international partnerships (Marginson, 2007).

Knight (2015) clarifies this perspective, suggesting that internationalization serves not only as a strategic direction but also as a competitive tool for exerting global influence. Robertson and Dale (2013) investigate the impact of international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank on national education systems, highlighting the reinforcement of global policy norms that align with soft power goals. Cantwell and Maldonado-Maldonado (2009) analyze the neoliberal transformation of higher education, illustrating that universities are progressively becoming instruments of market-oriented foreign policy initiatives.

As Deardorff (2009) notes, institutions offering cross-border education can extend national influence by exporting educational practices and values without direct economic or political intervention. This strategy enables countries to project soft power through intellectual exchanges and the creation of international networks, without coercive measures (Deardorff, 2009).

Additionally, globalization has resulted in the development of hybrid educational models that combine local and global curricula, resulting in novel forms of knowledge diplomacy that underpin larger geopolitical strategies (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

### ***2. Quality of Education and Use of Reputable Institutions***

The global reputation of a country's educational institutions is crucial to its ability to project soft power. Nations like the United States and the United Kingdom have leveraged their top universities to expand their influence. Leading universities, such as Harvard, Oxford, and Cambridge, are not only centers of academic excellence but also serve as global ambassadors for their countries. These prestigious institutions attract students, faculty, and researchers, contributing to the nation's global image and fostering international goodwill (Deardorff, 2009).

According to Altbach and Knight (2007), the academic rankings of universities directly correlate with a nation's international reputation and soft power. Countries that invest in world-class higher education can attract international students, who serve as informal ambassadors for their host nations. Thus, the internationalization of education through the promotion of top-tier academic institutions enhances a country's global influence (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Horta (2018) further emphasizes the importance of research output and the quality of higher education. Nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia benefit from the international recognition of their higher education systems, particularly from top universities whose contributions to academic research and knowledge dissemination solidify their global influence. The research output and academic innovations produced by these institutions not only drive scientific progress but also enhance the country's global standing (Horta, 2018).

Hazelkorn (2015) offers a critical examination of the ways in which governments utilize global rankings as tools for national branding and the enhancement of prestige. Mohrman et al., (2008) illustrate China's approach to creating "world-class universities" as a component of its broader soft power strategy, demonstrating that government funding in elite education is a strategic means of exerting influence.

It is crucial to differentiate between international reputation and the results of soft power. Although prestige draws in students, its efficacy as a tool for soft power hinges on how these experiences are converted into lasting connections and influence (Nye, 2004; Pan, 2013).

### ***3. Strategies for Encouraging International Student Mobility***

International student mobility plays a significant role in projecting soft power. Programs such as exchange initiatives, study abroad opportunities, and scholarships create avenues for nations to engage with international students, cultivate goodwill, and build cultural bridges. Nye (2004) recognizes international student exchange programs as key tools for projecting soft power, emphasizing their role in fostering long-term diplomatic ties and influencing international perceptions of host countries.

Wojcik et al. (2015) examine the growing importance of student mobility in educational diplomacy, arguing that countries use foreign student programs to establish enduring relationships that yield political, cultural, and economic benefits.

Findlay et al. (2012) conducted an empirical analysis of the factors affecting students' choice of destination, indicating that the perceptions of national prestige and cultural

accessibility are significant influences. Verbik & Lasanowski (2007) illustrate how countries compete to attract international students by promoting education as a lucrative export sector. Bhandari & Blumenthal (2013) argue that global educational partnerships are now crucial components of state-level diplomatic efforts and economic development plans.

The United States has effectively utilized its Fulbright Program, which brings global leaders to its academic institutions, creating a vast network of alumni who often become advocates and decision-makers in their home countries (Wojciuk et al., 2015). Similarly, Australia has positioned itself as a leader in international education through initiatives like the Endeavour Scholarships program (<https://new.expo.uw.edu/expo/scholarships/endeavor>). These initiatives are specifically designed to draw students from developing nations and have significantly contributed to shaping Australia's international reputation and political clout (Byrne & Hall, 2011). In addition, the growth of English language courses in Australia offers a strong foundation for showcasing the country's educational and cultural assets while attracting overseas students and reinforcing its influence in international education (Byrne & Hall, 2011).

It is also important to note that mobility alone is not sufficient; the effectiveness of these exchanges depends on the integration of returning students into leadership roles within their home countries, a phenomenon observed in alumni networks supported by the Fulbright Program (Bu, 1999).

#### ***4. Connections Between Foreign Policy and Educational Initiatives***

Educational diplomacy is an essential component of international strategy, with many nations incorporating educational programs into their broader geopolitical plans. For instance, China has utilized its Confucius Institutes as a strategic means to advance its language, cultural heritage, and values. These institutes serve as instruments of cultural diplomacy, allowing China to enhance its soft power by establishing educational partnerships worldwide and influencing perceptions through cultural exchanges (Sun, 2023).

Rumbley (2013) explores the intersection of education and foreign policy, arguing that educational initiatives often serve as instruments for broader geopolitical goals. Countries like China and the United States utilize scholarship programs to foster goodwill and expand influence in strategically important regions. By offering scholarships to students from countries of political or economic significance, these countries aim to enhance their soft power while promoting diplomatic relations (Rumbley, 2013).

Castles (2007) underscores the long-term benefits of international student flows, which help establish diplomatic, cultural, and economic ties between countries. The strategic use of educational programs has thus become an integral component of national foreign policy, further demonstrating the role of education in advancing soft power objectives (Castles, 2007).

Yang (2010) provides an in-depth analysis of China's Confucius Institutes, presenting them as an aspect of soft power in foreign policy. Melissen (2005) situates educational diplomacy within the larger framework of "new public diplomacy," emphasizing that

persuasion and mutual understanding take precedence over propaganda. Nye (2008) revises his soft power theory to incorporate the impact of the digital age and the increasing role of non-state actors, such as universities.

Educational diplomacy is especially important in areas of contention like Central Asia, where rival powers—including the U.S., China, and Russia—leverage education as a means of exerting geopolitical influence (Laruelle, 2020). Grasping this rivalry is essential for evaluating the efficacy and durability of American efforts.

### ***5. Experiences of Students in Host Nations***

The experiences of international students are integral to the success of education as a tool of soft power. Positive experiences in the host country lead to stronger diplomatic ties, as students return home with a deeper understanding of their host country's culture, values, and political systems. This, in turn, contributes to the host nation's reputation and enhances its soft power.

Atkinson (2010) emphasizes the importance of student satisfaction in shaping attitudes and perceptions. A positive educational experience encourages students to become informal ambassadors for their host countries, strengthening international relationships and laying the foundation for long-term diplomatic ties. Moreover, Knight (2008) emphasizes the significance of cultural integration and support services for ensuring students feel valued and appreciated in their host nations. By cultivating a friendly and inclusive atmosphere, countries can optimize the economic and diplomatic advantages of international students (Knight, 2008).

Leask (2009) contends that the outcomes of intercultural learning are determined by how educational institutions integrate global engagement into their curricula instead of just depending on the existence of international students. Marginson (2016) investigates how international students function as catalysts for global change, forming hybrid identities and maintaining transnational connections. Brown and Jones (2013) emphasize the emotional and psychological elements that impact student experiences, which subsequently shape long-term perceptions of host nations.

Additionally, studies show that adverse experiences—like discrimination, lack of adequate support services, or bureaucratic obstacles—can undermine soft power advantages and harm a nation's global reputation (Anderson, 2022).

The review indicates that when education is strategically aligned with national objectives, it can serve as an effective means of exercising soft power. Nations that globalize their higher education systems, encourage cross-border student exchanges, and maintain the quality and reputation of their educational institutions enhance their influence worldwide. Through educational diplomacy, countries can foster enduring relationships and cultivate goodwill, laying the groundwork for international collaboration and peace. By implementing the strategies outlined in the existing literature, nations can successfully utilize education to boost their global presence and promote a more interconnected world.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilizes a qualitative methodological approach to examine American educational efforts in Central Asia. The methodology consists of the following elements:

### ***Data Gathering***

Primary sources: Official documents from the U.S. government, such as reports from the Department of State and USAID, program evaluations, and resources from American educational institutions engaged in Central Asia. These materials offer direct insights into the objectives of programs, implementation methods, and documented results.

Secondary sources: Scholarly articles on education policy in Central Asia, geopolitical analyses of the region, and research on international educational diplomacy. These sources place primary data within larger theoretical and geopolitical contexts.

### ***Comparative Assessment***

A thorough comparison of U.S. educational programs in the five Central Asian nations - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan - is performed. This assessment concentrates on program goals, strategies, and outcomes, emphasizing differences that arise from varying political and social environments. The influence of regional institutions, especially the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), is also examined to evaluate their distinct roles in U.S. soft power.

### ***Critical Discourse Examination***

Program documentation and public communications are analyzed to uncover the narratives and framing techniques employed in American educational diplomacy. This scrutiny illustrates how educational initiatives are crafted to endorse U.S. values and mitigate competing regional influences.

### ***Validation of Empirical Evidence***

Data triangulation is used to enhance the accuracy and reliability of findings by cross-referencing program documents with independent evaluations, academic critiques, and analyses from regional experts.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS**

Due to local educational reform demands and geopolitical circumstances, American educational involvement in Central Asia has undergone significant changes over the past few decades. Several U.S.-funded initiatives, from various agencies and non-governmental organizations—including the Department of State, USAID, and others—have aimed at promoting democracy, improving education quality, and enabling faster international exchanges (Department of State, USA, 2024a). These initiatives form the bedrock of a comprehensive educational strategy to strengthen U.S. influence in Central Asia, a strategically important region between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Ozawa et al., 2024).

The countries in Central Asia have experienced varying results from these activities due to differing political contexts. The relatively open political environments in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have allowed them to engage in U.S. policies more centered on liberal

arts education, university establishment, and reform in higher education. Educational activities in these countries have improved university rankings, joint research, and academic standards (Sharimova et al., 2023). In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where government control over education is more deeply ingrained, U.S. efforts have focused heavily on computer literacy classes, curriculum development, and vocational training. These efforts have successfully broadened access to modern-day skills training and improved technical education. Due to the country’s highly authoritarian government, Turkmenistan has a limited scope for educational activities. Still, programs like FLEX have facilitated academic and cultural exchanges (U.S. Department of State, 2024b).

**Table 1.** A Comparison of American School Programs in Central Asia

State	American Educational Initiatives	Objectives	Key Results
Kazakhstan	UniCEN, Education USA, and Fulbright Programs	Research cooperation, curriculum reform, and academic mobility	Higher academic ranking and broad research collaboration
Kyrgyzstan	U.S. Exchange Programs (UGRAD, Fulbright), American University of Central Asia (AUCA)	Leadership development, and liberal arts education	Greater involvement of civil society and AUCA as a regional leader
Uzbekistan	Fulbright program, English Access Microscholarships, and USAID Education Reform Project	Internationalization, English instruction, and early educational reform	Increased enrollment of students in American institutions and better university administration
Tajikistan	U.S.-Tajikistan Academic Collaboration, Digital Learning Projects	Higher education modernization, digital learning, and teacher preparation	Enhanced faculty competencies and e-learning infrastructure

*Source: compiled by authors based on reviewed literature*

The focus on academic partnerships and exchanges between American and Central Asian universities, which seek to promote understanding and build lasting relationships, is a defining characteristic of U.S. educational diplomacy in Central Asia. Initiatives like EducationUSA, the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), and the Fulbright Program (<https://us.fulbrightonline.org>) have become vital venues for boosting academic mobility and developing the region’s future leaders (USAID, 2020). Through these exchanges, Central Asian students gain exposure to Western governance paradigms, such as democracy and human rights, which could influence their future contributions to the political, economic, and social development of the region.

While these initiatives have been effective in promoting soft power and educational reform, their results have also been shaped by the broader geopolitical landscape. The region's geopolitical significance has drawn interest from both Western and non-Western countries, competing for dominance in the political, economic, and educational realms. The dynamics among competing foreign powers - specifically the United States, China, and Russia - have been pivotal in influencing how American educational initiatives are perceived and their longevity, a topic this study will further investigate.

Nonetheless, there is no assurance that U.S. educational efforts will have a persistent impact. Even with promising outcomes, numerous obstacles persist. The effectiveness and durability of U.S. programs are frequently compromised by political instability, budget limitations, and local resistance to external intervention.

The economic realities in many Central Asian nations exacerbate these difficulties, as educational reforms may be subordinated to more pressing political or economic issues. Additionally, shifts in regional geopolitics, such as China's growing influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, introduce new factors that could jeopardize U.S. efforts (Ozawa et al., 2024).

To ensure the survival of educational diplomacy in the face of these changing political, economic, and geopolitical challenges, the research will continue to explore these issues and offer strategic recommendations. Additionally, the study will examine how U.S. educational programs could foster greater regional collaboration, counterbalance authoritarianism, and contribute to the broader objective of Central Asian democratic consolidation.

Additionally, this research uses the concept of "soft power" to differentiate between influence gained through attraction (such as cultural connections and educational prestige) and that stemming from strategic motivations or coercive measures. Unlike economic assistance, educational initiatives like Fulbright focus on fostering affinity and mutual understanding, essential components of the soft power framework (Nye, 2004).

## DISCUSSION

The significance of education as a soft power instrument in the geopolitically vital region of Central Asia has received growing attention in recent years. Positioned strategically at the junction of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Central Asia has become a battleground for global powers - especially the United States, Russia, and China - to enhance their influence. As indicated in the literature review, soft power, as formulated by Joseph Nye (1990), allows nations to shape international relations and global perceptions through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercive measures. Education has emerged as one of the most formidable instruments in the exercise of soft power, enabling countries to project influence by molding minds, promoting cultural exchanges, and building enduring diplomatic relationships. U.S. educational initiatives in Central Asia are a fundamental component of America's broader geopolitical approach to assert influence in the region and counter the increasing presence of Russia and China.

The results highlight the dual role of education as both a soft power instrument and a geopolitical strategy in U.S. foreign policy regarding Central Asia. This segment connects the interpretation of the findings to the three main research aims: (1) to analyze the execution and variation of U.S. educational programs throughout Central Asian countries; (2) to assess their contribution to the enhancement of American soft power; and (3) to examine their durability in the context of regional geopolitical rivalry.

### *a. Countering Russian Influence*

Russia's educational and cultural diplomacy in Central Asia is closely linked to its historical connections with the region as part of the Soviet Union. Russia has leveraged



educational initiatives, such as scholarships, cultural exchange programs, and partnerships through organizations like Rossotrudnichestvo, to bolster its cultural and political foothold. The literature review indicates that education as a soft power tool is particularly potent when it promotes a country's values, ideals, and cultural identity among foreign populations. In this light, Russia's educational initiatives in Central Asia act as mechanisms to maintain its influence over former Soviet republics. As Koval et al. (2022) argue, Russian scholarships have historically facilitated educational connections with Central Asia, ensuring the region remains tied to the Russian language and political sway.

In response, the United States has strategically employed its educational programs to present an alternative narrative. The U.S. approach is distinctly shaped by Western values, such as democracy, individual rights, and academic freedom, contrasting sharply with the more state-controlled educational model promoted by Russia. Nye (2004) emphasizes that educational exchanges serve as a critical tool for fostering long-term diplomatic ties and cultural bridges between nations. Programs like the Fulbright Program, which offers academic exchanges to scholars worldwide, play a key role in this effort by bringing Central Asian students to the U.S. and sending American educators to Central Asia. The American University of Central Asia (AUCA) further amplifies U.S. soft power by providing a platform for promoting critical thinking, liberal arts education, and democratic principles. As Wojciuk et al. (2015) note, these programs contribute to shaping the long-term perceptions of the host country's students, who, upon returning home, serve as informal ambassadors of U.S. ideals, including freedom of expression, rule of law, and human rights.

Moreover, Altbach and Knight (2007) discuss the significance of prestigious academic institutions in shaping a country's global image and boosting its soft power. U.S. universities such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford are globally recognized as leaders in research and academic excellence. Through partnerships with Central Asian universities, they enhance the U.S. global influence. As a consequence, educational programs in the United States not only provide access to quality education but also generate the cultural significance needed to challenge Russia's more authoritarian approach to education.

### ***b. Addressing China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)***

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), spearheaded by China, represents one of the most extensive efforts in contemporary history aimed at broadening China's influence in Central Asia, particularly through investments in infrastructure and the promotion of the Mandarin language. As outlined in the literature review, China's educational strategy, which includes the establishment of Confucius Institutes, showcases the use of transnational education as a soft power strategy. These institutes, which instruct in Mandarin and advocate for Chinese culture, serve as a form of educational diplomacy that helps to cement China's cultural presence in the region.

However, the United States, as Deardorff (2009) points out, employs a contrasting approach through its educational diplomacy programs, which emphasize academic freedom, critical engagement, and liberal arts education. The U.S. offers Central



Asian students and scholars access to educational models that foster creativity, independent thought, and intellectual autonomy—qualities often lacking in China's more state-controlled educational offerings. This divergence between U.S. and Chinese educational diplomacy is also evident in the USAID Higher Education Partnerships in countries like Uzbekistan, which focus on curriculum reform, academic independence, and fostering global competitiveness. By emphasizing the value of open-ended inquiry and student-driven learning, these initiatives provide an alternative to China's focus on economic development and state-centered education (Sharimova et al., 2023).

In terms of language programs, while China promotes Mandarin through its Confucius Institutes, the U.S. continues to position English as the global lingua franca, which is highly attractive to students and professionals across Central Asia. As Marginson (2007) highlights, English-language education not only opens doors to global academic and professional opportunities but also serves as a vehicle for global influence. The U.S. English language programs (<https://elprograms.org>) are a critical component of this strategy, as they help Central Asian students access a vast body of academic research, knowledge production, and international discourse predominantly conducted in English. In this way, U.S. educational initiatives also facilitate the establishment of academic networks and cross-border collaborations, reinforcing the United States' position as a global leader in higher education.

### ***c. Promoting Soft Power and Regional Stability***

A significant takeaway from the literature review is that educational diplomacy is not only a means of exerting influence but also plays a vital role in fostering long-term stability in the region. As noted by Wojciuk et al. (2015) and Knight (2008), educational exchanges are crucial for a stable international order by enhancing cultural understanding and establishing diplomatic connections between nations. The United States, through its initiatives, has strategically aimed at shaping the future leadership in Central Asia by investing in youth. Programs like FLEX and EducationUSA specifically focus on young people and early-career academics, establishing a groundwork for pro-Western ideologies. These results correspond with the strategic aim of promoting democratic values. However, the extent of change differs depending on the situation: AUCA flourishes in Kyrgyzstan, whereas initiatives in Turkmenistan are largely tokenistic due to governmental constraints.

Such emphasis on youth engagement ties into broader foreign policy objectives. As Castles (2007) and Rumbley (2013) emphasize, international student mobility fosters diplomatic relationships and economic ties far beyond the students' time abroad. By preparing the younger generation for future leadership roles, the U.S. helps create a cohort of individuals likely to advocate for market-driven economies, democratic reforms, and open political systems once they return to their home countries. This generation of students imbued with a deeper understanding of American ideals, will likely become influential figures in their nations, facilitating a more stable, democratic Central Asia aligned with U.S. values.

Moreover, Horta (2018) discusses the importance of research output in shaping a country's global standing. As the U.S. continues to sponsor academic research and knowledge

dissemination in Central Asia, it contributes not only to the region's intellectual capital but also to its global integration. This process aids in the development of democratic governance structures, market economies, and civil society—all of which are essential for the long-term stability of Central Asia and for the broader geopolitical interests of the United States.

## **GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO SUSTAINABILITY**

Despite the successes of U.S. educational programs, several challenges persist. As highlighted in the literature review, one of the most significant barriers to the sustainability of these programs in Central Asia is the political environment. Many Central Asian governments, particularly in more authoritarian states like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are resistant to outside influence, especially from the West. As Pomfret (2014) and Bremmer (2018) argue, these governments are often wary of programs that may challenge their political control or promote ideals that contradict their state ideologies. This resistance can manifest in limited academic freedoms, restrictions on foreign-funded educational programs, and censorship, which can undermine the effectiveness of U.S. educational initiatives.

Financial instability also poses a significant challenge. The funding of educational programs by agencies like USAID is subject to fluctuating domestic political priorities in the United States, which can impact the long-term viability of these programs. As Ozawa et al. (2024) note, the geopolitical landscape is in constant flux, and shifting political priorities can result in inconsistent funding for key initiatives. Furthermore, many Central Asian governments face economic volatility, which often leads to underfunded or overburdened educational systems that struggle to implement the necessary reforms to accommodate foreign educational programs and partnerships. These challenges highlight the difficulty in maintaining a sustained and stable impact of U.S. educational programs in the region, particularly when the local political climate is uncertain or hostile toward foreign influence.

Additionally, there are concerns regarding the perceived effectiveness of soft power in influencing long-term change. Critics of U.S. educational diplomacy in Central Asia argue that while American educational programs may attract students and promote an image of U.S. ideals, they do not necessarily result in a deep transformation of the political and social structures within the region. Huntington (1996) and Zakaria (2003) suggest that despite educational exchanges, political systems in Central Asia are often resistant to Western liberal models, and the educational experiences gained abroad may not always translate into political or economic reforms at home.

This highlights a disconnect between soft power strategies and tangible political transformation, particularly when regional governments may be skeptical or resistant to outside influence. While soft power can mold perceptions and promote mutual understanding, it does not inherently bring about institutional change or reform, especially when local elites are reluctant to embrace democratic or open-market frameworks (Scholte, 2005).

## **REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND SOFT POWER: CREATING LASTING RELATIONSHIPS**

U.S. educational programs in Central Asia remain a crucial asset within the larger framework of regional collaborations. By prioritizing the establishment of long-term relationships with Central Asian nations, the U.S. fosters opportunities for cooperative efforts on global matters such as security, trade, and human rights. This aligns with insights from Gilpin (2001) and Keohane & Nye (2001), who stress that soft power goes beyond immediate influence, focusing on nurturing lasting relationships that can offer long-term strategic advantages. Educational programs that advance cross-cultural understanding and encourage intellectual exchanges foster mutual respect between the U.S. and Central Asia, establishing a foundation for stronger partnerships across various sectors, including economic growth and geopolitical collaboration.

Moreover, these educational exchanges may contribute to a more unified regional identity within Central Asia, which might be advantageous in countering external pressures from nations like China and Russia. According to Meyer (2010), educational diplomacy can help establish shared values and mutual understanding among countries, which can encourage enhanced regional cooperation and stability. By creating an environment where Central Asian nations feel empowered to engage with the global community, U.S. educational initiatives aid in diminishing regional divisions and promote peaceful conflict resolution.

## CONCLUSION

This research confirms that education serves as a key component of the U.S. soft power strategy in Central Asia, intended to encourage leadership, drive institutional reform, and enhance regional cooperation. By advocating for liberal arts education, facilitating academic exchanges, and fostering institutional collaborations, U.S. initiatives seek to instill pro-democratic values and bolster ties with the West. Initiatives like Fulbright, FLEX, AUCA, and EducationUSA have elevated educational standards and broadened career opportunities for students in Central Asia.

As demonstrated by scholars like Nye and Koval, educational diplomacy serves as an essential means for the United States to exert its influence in the region. By facilitating educational exchanges, fostering university collaborations, and granting scholarships, the U.S. provides a counterbalance to the authoritarian frameworks advanced by Russia and China, while concurrently promoting diplomatic relations, regional stability, and cultural interactions. The effects of U.S. educational diplomacy are diverse: they not only influence the perspectives of those who participate in U.S. educational initiatives but also aid in the long-term progress of a region that holds significant importance in global geopolitics.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the challenges associated with these programs. Political resistance, financial challenges, and the difficulties of converting educational experiences into political change pose considerable obstacles to the viability and success of U.S. soft power in Central Asia. While educational initiatives help build foundations for lasting relationships and mutual comprehension, they must be integrated into a more comprehensive strategy that encompasses diplomatic, economic, and security measures. Only by understanding the relationship between elements of soft and hard power can the United States effectively utilize its educational diplomacy in Central Asia.

As the geopolitical landscape evolves, it is likely that U.S. soft power in the area will also need to adapt. The increasing influence of China through initiatives such as the Belt and Road, along with Russia's persistent exertion of regional power and cultural diplomacy, may complicate U.S. efforts. Nevertheless, continuing to invest in educational initiatives that promote academic freedom, democratic values, and economic innovation will be crucial for enhancing American influence in Central Asia and ensuring the U.S. remains an attractive partner for nations in the region. The strategic importance of Central Asia will only grow within the context of the global power landscape, underscoring the need for a sustained and nuanced approach to educational diplomacy.

To preserve its status as a global leader in education, the United States should emphasize collaborative strategies, including regional educational initiatives and multilateral exchange programs. With a strategic foothold in one of the world's most dynamic and geopolitically significant regions, it can also uphold its soft power influence throughout Central Asia. These endeavors will aid in cultivating a more prosperous, democratic, and stable Central Asia—one better prepared to confront the challenges of modern geopolitics—and align with broader diplomatic aspirations.

## FUNDING

None

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

ZT: conceptualization, methodology, review & editing; GB: writing and investigation.

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# CENTRAL ASIAN PRISM OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CAPACITY BUILDING SPECIFICS

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## Article History:

Received: 7 May 2025

Revised: 18 June 2025

Accepted: 23 June 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *As traditional international institutions decline in effectiveness, states increasingly adopt pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policies. Nowhere is this shift more evident than in Central Asia, where historical legacies, geographic constraints, and economic imperatives necessitate adaptive strategies. This article explores how Central Asian states are redefining their national development and foreign policies amid shifting global dynamics, with a focus on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It argues that BRI participation enables infrastructure development, industrial diversification, and job creation while reinforcing regional cooperation. Ultimately, the findings demonstrate that BRI engagement helps these states enhance their geopolitical balancing strategies and assert agency in an increasingly multipolar world.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Central Asia, social sustainability, capacity building, infrastructure development, economic growth, employment and skills transfer, industrial development.*

## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century's unravelling of multilateral norms has accelerated a global pivot toward pragmatic nationalism, compelling states, particularly in contested regions, to recalibrate their strategies for survival and growth. Central Asia, a historically contested space between Russia, China, and regional powers, epitomizes this shift. Combining resource wealth and demographic potential with acute vulnerabilities, such as landlocked geography and institutional fragility, the region's states are increasingly aligning their foreign policy with developmental sovereignty. By merging infrastructure diplomacy with developmental rhetoric, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offers a dual promise: immediate investment for connectivity and long-term frameworks to address structural deficits like industrial under capacity and youth unemployment.

Nevertheless, Central Asia's engagement with the BRI transcends economic calculus. This article argues that regional elites instrumentalize the initiative to consolidate domestic legitimacy, using BRI-linked projects to justify industrial modernization and job creation while balancing great-power pressures. However, such reliance on external platforms risks trading one dependency for another, even as it fosters unprecedented regional cooperation.

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JOURNAL OF  
**CENTRAL ASIAN  
STUDIES**  
https://jcas-journal.com

## LITERATURE REVIEW

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has profoundly reshaped Central Asia's development trajectory through infrastructure investment, trade expansion, and industrial cooperation. While proponents highlight its potential to overcome regional connectivity barriers and stimulate economic growth, critics question whether BRI projects genuinely foster social sustainability, equitable employment, and long-term capacity building.

Chinese scholars like Wang Yiwei (2016) frame the BRI as a transformative model of "inclusive globalization" arguing that infrastructure projects address Central Asia's historical "landlocked disadvantage" (Liu Weidong, 2018). Case studies of the China-Kazakhstan logistics corridor and Uzbekistan's railway upgrades (Goulard, 2021; Umarov, 2022) demonstrate improved regional trade flows. However, Cooley and Laruelle (2021) counter that many BRI megaprojects, such as Kyrgyzstan's highways or Tajikistan's hydropower dams, operate as enclaves with weak linkages to local economies, limiting multiplier effects.

A key critique centers on BRI's limited job creation for Central Asians. While Chinese state media highlights employment opportunities (Xinhua, 2019), fieldwork by Kassymbekova (2023) in Kazakhstan reveals that Chinese firms often import labor and materials, relegating locals to low-skilled roles. Similarly, Balasubramaniam et al. (2022) note that Uzbekistan's nascent industrial zones show potential for entrepreneurship but lack systemic skills transfer. The World Bank (2023) confirms that BRI-related employment remains concentrated in construction and extraction, with minimal upward mobility. Rising anti-Chinese sentiment in Kazakhstan (Dave, 2018; Satpayev, 2023) further underscores tensions over labor displacement and opaque hiring practices.

The BRI's environmental record in Central Asia has drawn sharp criticism. Peyrouse (2023) and OSCE (2024) document how Chinese-led mining and energy projects in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have triggered protests due to ecological damage and land dispossession. Weak governance exacerbates these issues, as BRI contracts frequently bypass local environmental regulations (Crude Accountability, 2020). Meanwhile, ADB (2023) suggests that China's recent "Green BRI" pledges, such as solar investments in Uzbekistan, could mitigate backlash if paired with transparency and community consultation.

In conclusion, the BRI has undeniably reshaped Central Asia's infrastructure landscape, but its socioeconomic impacts remain uneven. While Chinese narratives emphasize connectivity and win-win cooperation, Central Asian scholars (Kassymbekova, 2023; Satpayev, 2023) and Western analysts (Peyrouse, 2023; World Bank, 2023) stress the risks of dependency, environmental harm, and missed opportunities for inclusive development. Moving forward, the BRI's success in the region will hinge on stronger local partnerships, enforceable labor and environmental standards, and meaningful integration with national capacity-building strategies.

## METHODOLOGY



This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights. Economic indicators, including employment rates, industrial output, and FDI inflows, were collected from the World Bank, national statistics, and international institutions. Qualitative data were derived from policy documents and academic literature.

## THE REGIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BRI

Central Asian countries, strategically positioned along vital trade routes, serve as critical land bridges in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This role is increasingly crucial as China seeks diverse transportation avenues to mitigate bottlenecks and delays inherent in traditional maritime shipping and to enhance supply chain resilience.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as the region's largest and most economically influential nations, stand out as pivotal transit hubs within the BRI network. Kazakhstan, notably, acts as a cornerstone for the extensive China-Kazakhstan-Europe rail corridor. This corridor has seen significant expansion, with efforts continually boosting its capacity. By 2024, freight train services between Kazakhstan and China reached a record high of 32 million tons, marking a substantial increase. In the first quarter of 2025, traffic through the Khorgos border, a key gateway, saw a 28.5% rise in China-Europe trains ("Kazakh-China Rail Cargo Transportation," 2025). This robust growth underscores Kazakhstan's reinforced position as a vital logistics hub, handling an increasing volume of goods traversing Eurasia. Initiatives like the construction of a third railway checkpoint at Ayagoz-Bakhty are underway to further expand rail capacity with China. Moreover, Kazakhstan is making significant domestic infrastructure investments, including the construction of second tracks along the 836-kilometer Dostyk-Moiynty section, expected to open by June 2025 and projected to increase capacity fivefold.

Crucially, Kazakhstan is also vigorously developing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), or Middle Corridor, offering a vital alternative, particularly in light of recent geopolitical shifts. In 2024, cargo transportation along the TITR surged to 4.5 million tons, a 62% increase from the previous year, and container shipments saw a remarkable 170% increase to 56,500 TEU containers. Kazakhstan is actively investing in its Caspian ports (Aktau and Kuryk) to bolster this route, aiming to transport 5.2 million tons of goods and 70,000 TEUs via TITR in 2025 ("Volume of Container Transportation," 2025).

Uzbekistan is also emerging as a key logistical and industrial hub. The long-awaited China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, with an estimated cost of \$8 billion, is set to commence construction in July 2025 and aims for completion by 2030 ("The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway," 2025). This railway will significantly shorten the China-Europe rail journey by 900 kilometers, reducing both transit time and costs. Uzbekistan is also actively involved in diversifying its trade routes, including its participation in the Middle Corridor. In 2024, cargo transit via the Caspian Sea between Uzbekistan and Europe reached 1.1 million tons, a 55% increase from 2020 ("Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan," 2025). Uzbekistan is further enhancing its transport infrastructure by modernizing key airports and developing logistics hubs in cities like Tashkent, Termez, and Navoi. As of January 2025, nearly half of



Uzbekistan's railway network (2,404.8 km) is electrified, marking a 23.8% jump in electrification compared to the previous year, with efforts ongoing towards complete electrification ("Uzbekistan's Railways," 2025). These collective and diversified efforts solidify Central Asia's indispensable and evolving role in facilitating global trade and connectivity under the BRI.

### ***Energy Corridor and Natural Resources***

Central Asia holds vast deposits of oil, gas, coal, and minerals, which are essential for meeting China's ever-growing demand for raw materials and bolstering its energy security strategy. Kazakhstan, for instance, is a global leader in uranium production. In 2024, Kazakhstan produced approximately 23,270 tonnes of uranium, accounting for over 40% of the world's supply (World Nuclear Association, 2025). Looking ahead, Kazatomprom, the national atomic company, expects 2025 production to be between 25,000 and 26,500 tonnes of uranium, solidifying its dominant position (JSC National Atomic Co. Kazatomprom, 2025).

Turkmenistan holds some of the largest natural gas reserves globally, particularly in the super-giant Galkynysh gas field, which is pivotal to China's energy diversification strategy. Independent British company Gafney, Cline & Associates estimates the reserves of Galkynysh at more than 27 trillion cubic meters of gas ("New Industrial Flow," 2025). In 2024, Turkmenistan's natural gas production exceeded 77.6 billion cubic meters (Türkmen-Gaz, 2025).

The energy relationship is concretely demonstrated by key infrastructure projects. The China-Kazakhstan oil pipeline, initially operational from Atyrau to Alashankou, has a current capacity of 14 million tons per year, with plans to expand it. In 2023, CNPC and KazMunayGas signed a deal to expand the Kenkiyak-Kumkol section from 10 to 15 million tons, and Kenkiyak-Atyrau from 6 to 12 million tons, further integrating Kazakh oil into China's energy supply (Samruk-Kazyna, 2023).

The Central Asia-China gas pipeline, operational since 2009, is another cornerstone. This massive pipeline network, comprising Lines A, B, and C, links Turkmenistan with China, passing through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, and has a combined total capacity of 55 billion cubic meters of gas annually. Since its commissioning, the pipeline had delivered over 500 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China as of November 2024 (Kun.uz, 2024). While Line D, aimed at adding another 30 billion cubic meters per year capacity, has faced delays, there are indications from PetroChina that its construction could resume in 2024, significantly increasing overall delivery capacity to 85 billion cubic meters per year upon completion. This extensive energy corridor underscores Central Asia's indispensable role in China's long-term energy security and diversification efforts (M. Bakri Mat and Amna Khalid, 2024).

### ***Security and Stability in Xinjiang***

Central Asia's strategic importance for China extends significantly beyond mere economic factors, encompassing vital security interests directly linked to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Located in China's western periphery, Xinjiang shares extensive borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Given the

region's strategic significance as a gateway to Central Asia and its potential for fostering cross-border economic ties, China views the stability of its western frontiers as an absolute critical national security priority. Consequently, China has made substantial investments in both infrastructure and security cooperation within Central Asia, leveraging economic cooperation as a means to stabilize its border regions with Xinjiang and mitigate the impact of any regional instability.

China's engagement with Central Asia is deeply intertwined with its multi-faceted efforts to secure Xinjiang's development and prevent the spread of unrest, separatism, or extremism, often referred to as the "three evil forces" (SpecialEurasia, 2024). By meticulously integrating Xinjiang with Central Asia through robust infrastructure projects, including highways, railways, and pipelines, China aims to promote sustained regional economic growth. The underlying premise is that economic prosperity and improved living standards will naturally help to stabilize Xinjiang's complex socio-political environment and reduce the perceived appeal of extremist ideologies.

Recent developments underscore this inextricable link. The Second China-Central Asia Summit, held in Astana in June 2025, significantly emphasized enhanced regional security governance, with a strong focus on countering terrorism, separatism, and extremism. During this summit, the six countries (China and Central Asian states) affirmed their commitment to jointly combat these threats, pledging to address issues such as cross-border infiltration of terrorist forces, drug smuggling, transnational organized crime, and cybercrime (XinhuaNet, 2025). This cooperation is designed to ensure the smooth and stable progress of BRI projects and collectively respond to evolving security challenges.

Furthermore, China actively participates in and often leads security initiatives within multilateral frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) is a key platform through which China and Central Asian states conduct joint counter-terrorism exercises and intelligence sharing. In October 2024, a Chinese Criminal Police University delegation trained Tajik Ministry of Internal Affairs representatives in critical areas such as crime scene investigation, counter-terrorism, and anti-money laundering, showcasing direct capacity-building efforts. Tajikistan, for example, has participated in numerous joint military exercises with China between 2002 and 2024, specifically focusing on border security and counter-terrorism operations (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2025). This ongoing security collaboration highlights China's strategic investment in maintaining regional stability as a direct extension of its domestic security concerns related to Xinjiang.

### ***Geopolitical Leverage and Risks***

Central Asia's strategic centrality provides its states with substantial leverage in their foreign relations, a concept often termed "multi-vector foreign policy"(Laruelle, 2018). This approach allows Central Asian countries to engage with a diverse array of global powers, meticulously balancing their relationships with China, Russia, and the West. This balancing act enables the region to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics, secure diversified investments, and pursue national interests without excessive alignment with

any single bloc. Evidence of this strategy is seen in the frequent high-level diplomatic engagements Central Asian leaders undertake with various partners, including the "C5+1" platforms with the US, EU, Germany, and others, alongside their deep ties with China and Russia.

In 2024, for instance, leaders from Central Asian states undertook numerous foreign visits, demonstrating their commitment to multi-vector diplomacy. Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev made 23 foreign trips, including state visits to Italy, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Singapore, France, and Hungary, alongside participation in forums like the SCO Summit in Astana and the UN COP29 Climate Conference. Similarly, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev conducted 18 international visits, including state visits to China, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, and participation in the SCO and CIS summits (National News Agency of Uzbekistan, 2024).

### ***Economic Dependence and Influence***

China has emerged as Central Asia's primary trade partner, surpassing Russia in economic influence. In 2023, trade between China and Central Asia reached \$89.4 billion, reflecting a 27% increase from the previous year (Chinadaily.com.cn, 2025). This impressive growth trajectory continued into 2024, with the total trade volume between China and Central Asian countries reaching a new high of \$94.8 billion, representing an increase of approximately \$5.4 billion from 2023 (Kazinform, 2025). This surge is projected to hit \$100 billion in 2025, with over 10,000 joint ventures and projects underway. Kazakhstan remains the largest trading partner for China within the region, accounting for nearly half of this total. In 2024, bilateral trade between Kazakhstan and China hit a record \$43.8 billion. Uzbekistan also saw substantial trade with China, reaching \$13.7 billion in 2024 (The Astana Times, 2025).

### ***The Rising Influence of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS)***

The Organization of Turkic States (OTS), which includes Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan as full members, with Hungary, Turkmenistan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) as observers, is strategically establishing itself as a unified economic and cultural entity. The organization actively fosters intra-regional commerce, infrastructure development, and digital connectivity while promoting cultural and linguistic commonalities among its members. The OTS provides a platform for member states to deepen cooperation based on shared linguistic, cultural, and historical ties (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.).

The OTS aims to become a more cohesive and independent economic bloc within Eurasia, offering a complementary rather than conflicting dimension to existing partnerships. Its strengthening reflects a desire among Turkic states to enhance their collective influence and reduce reliance on traditional external powers. Trade between OTS countries has seen marked growth, reaching \$58.17 billion in 2024, a significant increase from \$38.3 billion in 2023 (SpecialEurasia, 2025).

Consequently, Central Asian countries must carefully manage their deepening economic ties with China while simultaneously leveraging platforms like the OTS. Their multi-vector foreign policy is vital in this context, as they actively seek to

diversify partnerships with other global actors like the EU, the US, and Gulf states, and strengthen regional blocs like the OTS, to retain autonomy and strengthen their negotiating position amidst a complex global landscape.

### ***Infrastructure Projects***

Among the most prominent infrastructure projects bolstering Central Asia's role in global trade are the Khorgos Gateway in Kazakhstan and the Angren-Pap railway in Uzbekistan. These initiatives have significantly improved trade routes and reduced transportation costs across the Eurasian landmass.

The Khorgos Gateway, located at the Kazakhstan-China border, stands as one of the largest dry ports in the world and plays a central role in facilitating trade between China and Europe. This pivotal logistics hub significantly reduces transportation time for goods by bypassing congested sea routes, firmly positioning Kazakhstan as a key transit nation for Central Asia and the broader Eurasian Economic Union. The port continues to see remarkable growth in traffic. In 2024, Khorgos's overall freight volume surged to 13.727 million tons, marking a 17.1% year-on-year increase (Gilmantruck.com, 2024). While specific annual TEU (Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit) figures for the entire dry port can vary, its capacity is continually expanding. Looking to 2025, the growth trend continues: in the first quarter alone, 2,375 freight trains passed through the Khorgos border, representing a 28.5% increase from the same period in the previous year, with the transported cargo volume reaching 3.336 million tons, up 26% (Transport Corridors, 2025). This sustained expansion and strategic location underscore Khorgos's increasing importance in global trade corridors. Beyond direct transit, Khorgos is also becoming a key conduit for specialized cargo, with China's used car exports, for instance, surging through the gateway to Central Asian markets in 2024.

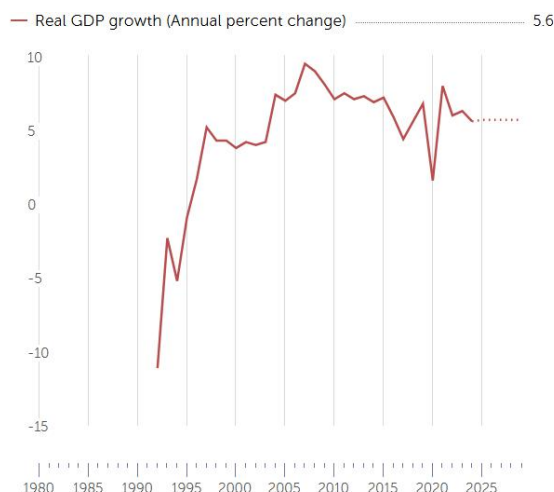
Similarly, the Angren-Pap railway in Uzbekistan, a major BRI initiative, serves a critical role in connecting the densely populated eastern regions of Uzbekistan (the Fergana Valley) with the capital, Tashkent, and the rest of the country. This nearly \$2 billion project, completed in 2016, includes the 19.2-kilometer Qamchiq Tunnel, the longest railway tunnel in Central Asia (XinhuaNet, 2016). The railway has not only dramatically reduced travel time between these key regions by up to 50% but has also opened new avenues for trade within the region. It eliminates the need to transit through neighboring countries like Tajikistan, significantly cutting costs and transit fees. The Angren-Pap railway plays a vital role in facilitating the export of Uzbek goods to China and other international markets, enhancing Uzbekistan's integration into regional and global trade networks. Uzbekistan Railways continues to invest in its network, with a focus on electrification, further boosting efficiency and capacity across its key lines, including those connected to the Angren-Pap route.

### ***Uzbekistan's 2030 Strategy***

Uzbekistan's strategic trajectory is firmly set by its Development Strategy for 2030, approved in 2023. This ambitious plan builds upon earlier roadmaps, aiming to transform Uzbekistan into a "Welfare State with a Market Economy" and achieve upper-middle-income status by 2030. The strategy's core pillars are sustainable economic growth, environmental conservation, and enhanced social services, with audacious

targets including doubling GDP and per capita income. A strong emphasis is placed on improving citizens' living standards through significant investments in education, health, and critical infrastructure.

**Graph 1. GDP Growth in Uzbekistan (1980–2025)**



*Source: IMF, April 2024*

In 2024, Uzbekistan's economy demonstrated robust performance, with a real GDP growth rate of 6.5%, building on 6.3% in 2023. This growth was primarily fueled by strong private consumption, which accelerated to 7.5%, and a substantial 27.6% increase in real investment in fixed capital, largely driven by non-centralized investments and foreign direct investment (FDI) (World Bank, 2025). According to the Central Bank, FDI in Uzbekistan reached an impressive \$11.9 billion in 2024, representing a more than 50% increase from the previous year (Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). The country's nominal GDP reached approximately \$115.0 billion, reflecting ongoing structural reforms and improved investor confidence (Kun.uz, 2025). GDP per capita rose to around \$3,094, marking a real-term increase of 4.4% compared to the previous year (Kun.uz, 2025). Meanwhile, the inflation rate moderated slightly to 9.63% in 2024, down from 9.96% in 2023, indicating the effectiveness of monetary tightening measures (FocusEconomics, 2025). With a population of approximately 37.17 million (as of end 2024), Uzbekistan continues to position itself as a key economic player in Central Asia, balancing rapid growth with social and institutional development (World Bank, 2025).

Key priorities in the Strategy 2030 include:

- **Human Capital Development:** The strategy aims to drastically improve skills, with targets such as training 1 million youth in vocational and digital skills annually. Efforts are ongoing, with pilot programs showing promising results. For instance, there was an 18% increase in digital literacy among vocational students between 2021 and 2024. This improvement is attributed to greater access to e-learning platforms and digital workshops (Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction of the Republic

of Uzbekistan, 2024). UNESCO is also supporting initiatives to strengthen digital competencies among Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) educators, with workshops held in March 2025.

- Infrastructure and Industrial Zones Expansion: There is a strong focus on expanding infrastructure and industrial zones across all 14 regions of Uzbekistan. As of 2024, Uzbekistan operates 23 Free Economic Zones (FEZs), including major ones like Angren and Navoi. These zones, often supported by Chinese co-investment, target diverse sectors such as light industry, pharmaceuticals, and logistics. For example, joint technology parks are successfully operating, and new projects are being developed in green energy, chemicals, and metallurgy within these zones.
- Promoting Technology Transfer through PPPs: Uzbekistan is actively promoting technology transfer through joint ventures and public-private partnerships (PPPs). In 2025, nearly \$4.5 billion worth of PPP projects have been launched in sectors like road construction, energy, and water supply (Newsline.uz., 2025). Foreign companies, including Chinese firms like BYD (which opened an electric vehicle factory in July 2024 in partnership with UzAuto Motors), are playing a vital role in advancing these goals (President.uz. (n.d.)). Joint training centers between Chinese firms and Uzbek vocational institutes are also emerging, though still in nascent stages, fostering direct skill and knowledge transfer.

### ***Kazakhstan's Industrial Development***

Kazakhstan is actively pursuing industrial diversification to reduce its historical reliance on hydrocarbons, a strategic imperative now formalized in its National Development Plan, adopted in August 2024. This ambitious plan sets a target to double the country's GDP by 2029, with an average economic growth pace of 6-7% envisioned (Kazinform, 2024). The plan prioritizes robust growth in non-oil sectors, including manufacturing, agriculture, logistics, and information technology (IT), aiming to foster a more diversified and resilient economy. Manufacturing, for instance, demonstrated significant progress, achieving 5.1% growth in the first half of 2024, solidifying its position as a primary economic driver. Looking ahead, Kazakhstan has ambitious plans to launch 190 industrial projects worth an estimated \$3 billion in 2025 (GlobeNewswire, 2025). These new initiatives will primarily focus on high-value-added sectors such as metallurgy, machine building, and the chemical industry, to boost local production and diversify the export portfolio.

Central to this diversification strategy are Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The Khorgos Dry Port, built with significant Chinese support, exemplifies this approach. It is not merely a critical transit hub connecting East and West along the Belt and Road Initiative, but also the cornerstone of a larger SEZ designed to attract investment, foster local manufacturing, and develop advanced logistics services. The expansion of these zones continues to be a priority. In May 2025, Kazakhstan established the new Korkyt Ata SEZ in the Kyzylorda Region, covering 550 hectares and designated with "port SEZ" status (Kazinform, 2025). This strategic move aims to leverage its proximity to the "Western Europe – Western China" international transport corridor for industrial growth. Furthermore, the government granted "port SEZ" status to five other existing zones (Ontustik, Astana-Technopolis, Saryarka, Alatau, and Aktobe) in May 2025,

underscoring the ongoing commitment to these zones as vital tools for attracting investment, introducing advanced technologies, and diversifying the national economy.

While these initiatives demonstrate strong government commitment, the sustained effectiveness of SEZs in genuinely promoting local firms and ensuring broad-based economic benefits remains a continuous area of focus. Challenges highlighted in earlier assessments, such as potential reliance on foreign contractors and the need for rigorous regulatory enforcement to ensure fair competition, are continually being addressed. However, the renewed emphasis on private sector growth, coupled with ongoing improvements in the investment climate and a reduced state footprint as outlined in the 2024 National Development Plan, aims to create a more dynamic and equitable environment for local businesses to thrive within these strategic economic hubs, ultimately contributing to Kazakhstan's long-term industrialization goals.

### ***Debt Accumulation and Financial Exposure***

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and increasingly Turkmenistan have become significantly indebted to China. Over 40% of Kyrgyzstan's external debt is owed to the Export-Import Bank of China (IMF, 2024). Similarly, China is Tajikistan's largest single creditor, holding about 30-34% of its total public and publicly guaranteed external debt (IMF, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

In Turkmenistan, the situation is even more pronounced, with an estimated 80% of its total external debt reaching around \$12.2 billion in total debt to China by 2024, primarily for gas infrastructure projects (AidData, 2025).

In contrast, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan maintain more diversified debt portfolios. While Uzbekistan's total external debt amounted to \$64.1 billion at the end of 2024 (Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025), only approximately \$3.8 billion of its debt was owed to China in the first half of 2023 (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). Kazakhstan, the region's largest economy, had an external debt burden of \$164.7 billion as of January 1, 2025 (National Bank of Kazakhstan, 2025), of which about \$9.2 billion was owed to China as of January 1, 2024 (Carnegie Endowment, 2024). Although the absolute figures are substantial, the relative share of Chinese debt in these economies is markedly lower, reflecting broader access to international credit markets and a more balanced creditor mix. The prevalence of Chinese loans in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has fueled ongoing concerns over so-called "debt-trap diplomacy", a narrative suggesting that China might leverage unsustainable debt levels to extract strategic concessions or secure control over critical infrastructure. While this notion has gained traction in media and political discourse, scholars such as Cooley and Laruelle (2021) argue that the risks are often overstated in the Central Asian context. They emphasize that the greater dangers lie not necessarily in Chinese intent, but in structural weaknesses within the recipient countries: opaque contract terms, elite-driven decision-making, and a lack of parliamentary or public oversight. These factors heighten the vulnerability of state institutions and may lead to the alienation of key national assets, including energy infrastructure, transportation networks, or natural resource concessions.

In sum, while not all Central Asian nations are equally exposed to Chinese debt, the concentration of liabilities in certain states, combined with governance and transparency challenges, presents a nuanced but significant risk to regional stability and sovereignty.



**Table 1.** External Debt & China’s Share (2022–2024)

Country	Total External Debt (USD)	Debt to China (USD)	% of Debt to China
Uzbekistan	\$60.2 billion	\$3.8 billion	6.3%
Kyrgyzstan	\$4.5 billion	\$1.8 billion	40%
Tajikistan	\$3.6 billion	\$1.62 billion	45%
Kazakhstan	\$160 billion	\$9.2 billion	5.8%
Turkmenistan	\$10 billion	\$8 billion	80%

*Source: World Bank. (2024). International Debt Statistics 2024.*

**CONCLUSION**

Countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have made notable strides in integrating Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments with their broader national development strategies. Uzbekistan's Development Strategy for 2030 and Kazakhstan's National Development Plan, adopted in August 2024, both aim to enhance local capacity, human capital, and export diversification, reflecting a deliberate effort to align foreign investment with national priorities.

Despite these successes and the significant infrastructure advancements, concerns persist over the socio-economic and environmental impacts of large-scale BRI projects. These include issues such as potential labor displacement due to reliance on foreign labor, environmental degradation from large-scale construction, limited skills transfer to local workforces, and the broader implications of economic dependence on a single external power.

For the BRI to truly serve as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development in Central Asia, three critical conditions must be met:

First, recipient governments must enhance transparency, local participation, and regulatory oversight. This involves making project agreements publicly accessible, ensuring meaningful engagement with local communities, and enforcing national labor and environmental laws rigorously. Greater transparency, for example, could help address concerns about the equitable distribution of project benefits and risks.

Second, Chinese stakeholders should deepen localization efforts through vocational training, knowledge transfer, and inclusive project design. This means moving beyond merely completing infrastructure projects to actively building local capacities. Investing in local supply chains, employing and training local workers, and transferring technological know-how are crucial for long-term sustainable development and ensuring that projects genuinely benefit the host countries.

Third, there must be a shared commitment to long-term social and environmental sustainability. This necessitates integrating robust environmental safeguards, conducting thorough impact assessments, and establishing effective grievance mechanisms into all major projects from conception to completion. Addressing issues like water resource management in a climate-vulnerable region and protecting biodiversity are paramount for the well-being of local populations.



Ultimately, the success of the BRI in Central Asia will depend on whether it can move beyond simply building physical infrastructure to become a genuine platform for regional development, cooperation, and resilience. This involves strengthening not only vital trade routes but also the social fabric, human capital, and sovereign capacities of its partner nations, ensuring a mutually beneficial and sustainable future for Central Asia.

## FUNDING

The authors report no financial or non-financial support from individuals or organizations not listed as co-authors.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no competing interests to disclose.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

JM: formal analysis, investigation, resources, data curation, writing – original draft, visualization; UK: conceptualization, methodology, validation, writing – review & editing, supervision, project administration.

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# LOVE THY NEIGHBOR? CENTRAL ASIA IN CHINA'S NEW- ERA FOREIGN POLICY (2012–2024)

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**Article History:**  
Received: 22 March 2025  
Revised: 13 May 2025  
Accepted: 13 May 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *Central Asia is critical to China's security and development. Although China repeatedly underlines the necessity and urgency of establishing a good neighborhood with Central Asian countries, it has not released any strategies and specific policies, at least not explicitly. This article examines Central Asia's sui generis in China's new-era neighborhood diplomacy from 2012 to 2024. It contends that China's foreign policies have evolved so subtly that Central Asia has been prioritized comparatively. With the aim of building a good neighborly relationship in mind, China has stepped up its engagement in Central Asia under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative, culminating in the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023.*

**KEYWORDS:** *China, Central Asia, foreign policy, BRI, neighborhood.*

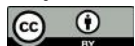
## INTRODUCTION

China has further enhanced its relations with Central Asian countries after the 2013 China-Central Asia Summit, aiming to “foster a new cooperation paradigm featuring high-level complementarity and mutual benefit” (Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Taking the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a new starting point, China committed to “elevating regional collaboration to the next level” (Gautam, 2023). If the decade-long China-Central Asia relationship during Xi's presidency culminated in the China-Central Asia Summit in 2023, it behooves us to investigate the paradigms of past interactions (or the lack of them) before building a new one. This article attempts to do so, arguing Central Asia has a *sui generis* position in China's neighborhood diplomacy.

Since China shares land borders with 14 countries of different sizes and development levels, it would be oversimplified to reduce its neighborhood policies to the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In this regard, Yan Xuetong (2015), in interpreting China's foreign policy priorities, contends that China should put a holistic neighborhood before the US. Although the tyranny of geography helps explain why China prioritizes neighborhood policies (Zhang, 2016), from nowhere can we inquire about its nuanced neighborhood policies. A more complex relationship is the reality should we closely scrutinize China's foreign policies.

As an analytical concept, the *neighborhood* can be defined geographically and *ad hoc*. Geographical neighborhood connotes spatial proximity, including countries and regions adjacent to one another; those that can be reached via land and/or maritime

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corridors fall into the category of great neighborhood (Dazhoubian 大周边) (Qiu, 2015). Ad hoc neighbors are contingently constructed since a neighborhood constitutes “a category of social relation crucial to the maintenance of the sphere of the political” (Reinhard, 2005, p. 26).

Owing to Central Asia’s geographical proximity to China, scholarly works on the China-Central Asia relationships mainly focus on their geopolitical and geo-economic implications. While Central Asia’s in-betweenness has kept the great game in the region alive (Blank, 2012; Fingar, 2016), its abundant reserves of fossil fuels have rendered the international scramble for resources more competitive (Freeman, 2018; Liao, 2021). Moreover, Central Asian countries are increasing their weight since the demand for critical raw materials is growing drastically. For instance, the EU planned to export critical raw materials from the region by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Kazakhstan at the end of 2022. Be that as it may, Central Asian countries, as China’s neighbors, have also gained a normative dimension under the aegis of the BRI since China has integrated them into a culturally defined space by reinvigorating the legendary concept of the *Silk Road*.

Although it is tempting to trace China’s neighborhood policies to the 1950s, when the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence were advocated, the article takes the early 1990s as an analytical departure point. That said, China’s neighborhood policies can be roughly divided into two periods by the reference point of Xi’s presidency in 2012, namely 1990–2011 and 2012–2024. Although the two periods share similar aims of underlining stability, China’s neighborhood policies in the new era have leaped to a new and more nuanced level. This article explores China’s new-era neighborhood policies toward Central Asia from 2012 to 2024.

Instead of using the singular form, the article employs the plural *neighborhood policies* owing to neighboring countries’ diversity and their policy implications for China. In this aspect, although Central Asian countries are diverse individually, this article examines them collectively since they share similar geopolitical and geo-economic significance in China’s neighborhood policies; reducing Central Asia to individual countries in discussing energy security, economic development, and terrorist threats leads to analytical confusion. Central Asia enjoys a special status, perhaps unparalleled by others, in China’s neighborhood policies. To explore its sui generis, this article analyses top Chinese officials’ speeches and memoirs, complemented by information released by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and state-owned media, such as People’s Daily and China Daily.

The article proceeds in four sections. The first section examines the concept of neighborhood in International Relations. Although widely discussed by anthropologists, it has been less debated in International Relations since the discipline, long dominated by realists, has not taken this relationality seriously. The second section investigates the continuities and changes in China’s neighborhood policies. Although China prioritizes neighborhood engagement in outlining foreign policy principles, the principles are ambiguous. It necessitates us to review the evolution of China’s neighborhood policies. The third section elaborates on Central Asia in China’s new-era neighborhood policies. Although China has not released tailor-made strategies to engage in Central Asia,

analyzing official documents and speeches reveals thematized paradigms. The last section briefly concludes this article.

### NEIGHBORHOOD AS AN IR CONCEPT

A neighborhood, delineated by fixed border lines, creates a unique crossing space for contacts and/or conflicts. As an oft-used anthropological concept, neighborhood emphasizes the relationality of communities organized by races, ethnicities, and nations. According to Qin Yaqing (2018), social actors, instead of behaving individualistically, practice relational rationality. If so, a relationally perceived neighborhood problematizes three mainstream International Relations theories whose limitations are worthy of a brief examination.

Realists deliberately neglect the neighborhood, promoting atomized states, absolute gains, and coercive power in the anarchical international system. Although not all neighboring countries would degenerate into the “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” security dilemma (Adler, 2010), unilaterally increasing defense budgets triggers military races, particularly between border-sharing countries. In other cases, big powers triumph over small ones in asymmetric neighborhood relationships. Given this, even if power positions between neighboring countries are in constant motion (Zhang & Saxer, 2017), inherent power gaps can hardly be filled quickly.

Unlike realists’ blindness, neoliberalists, hymning to market forces, value neighbors should the latter follow. They can contribute to market capitalism since a neighboring country can either be a new market or source of raw materials. Nevertheless, a neoliberal neighbor can hardly be so if they are not economically complementary. In other words, states with homogenous economic structures and export paradigms will likely result in conflicts. This can somewhat explain the current reciprocal ties between China and Russia. As Xi (2013, p. 301) pointed out, “each as the other’s largest neighbor, China and Russia enjoy a high complementarity in development strategy.”

Constructivists believe that a neighborhood is engineerable since the norms that define it are fluid. Therefore, neighborhoods can be formulated ad hoc out of political needs by employing cultural factors engrained in social fabrics. According to Zhang and Saxer (2017), although the concept of neighborhood is often anchored on spatial fixities, the relationship per se is subject to contingent interpretations. By saying so, the statist act of defining a neighborhood is politically selective. Whereas a conventional neighborhood is premised on geographical proximity, the constructivist one can be rhetorically relevant. For instance, the EU has delineated Central Asia as a “distant neighbor” even though they are geographically far away.

Although geographical proximity between Central Asia and China dictates a realist and neoliberal analysis, this article applies a constructivist lens. With no intention to disregard the conventional geopolitical and geo-economic tenets, a constructive view allows us to investigate the concept of neighborhood by integrating cultural elements. Otherwise, cooperation and conflicts in international politics cannot be fully understood unless we explain them in specific cultural settings.

Constructivists acknowledge that identities and interests are mutually enhanced. Relevantly, relational theories, epitomized by Qin's (2018) works, "argue that agents develop their properties not in isolation but as the result of the ties they maintain with others" (Cooper & Schulz, 2023, p. 2). Neighborhood relationships can be more conveniently constructed and kept with the assistance of ritualized artifacts, including those accidentally found at archaeological sites or purposefully built for connectivity. Therefore, cultural heritage aside, infrastructures are increasingly crucial in defining neighborhood relationships. For instance, whereas border walls and barbed wires separate countries, a denser network woven by roads and bridges often implies a closer relationship.

A neighborhood can be constructed and consolidated by invoking fictive kinship based on ethnicity, nationality, and humanity. To a degree, the European Union (EU) has managed the otherwise ferocious conflicts in the region by promising economic prosperity. Nevertheless, when the resources of Europeanism spread thin, nationalism was revived and even radicalized. The neighborhood is vulnerable in a time of crisis. In other cases, neighboring countries obsessed with historical hatred and mired in forged rivalry can hardly maintain cordial ties. Among others, three Northeast Asian countries, namely, China, Japan, and South Korea, are cases in point.

In discussing neighborhood policy in international politics, Chinese scholars advocate Tianxia-ism, advocating that unneighborly love can exist regardless of long distance (Tianya ruo bilin 天涯若比邻). Although the all-inclusive Tianxia, directing to a world society (Zhao 2006), sounds too ideal to be true, any vision that can jump out of the otherwise ossified statist paradigm is better than no vision. Tianxi-ism, according to Li Shenzhi (quoted in Zheng, 2019, p. 149), is anchored on cultures, not nation-states. Given this, it is no surprise that under Xi's presidency, China proposes to build "a community with a shared future for mankind."

### CHINA'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICIES: CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

Western scholars are inclined to explain China's neighborhood policies by wearing realist or neoliberal glasses. Although providing insightful interpretation, parsimonious theories can be equally distorted without examining the policies' continuities and changes and the rationales behind them. As Wu Lin (2016) reminds us, analyzing the driving force behind China's neighborhood policies should overcome the Western either-or approach. Although the US factor is a critical variable affecting China's neighborhood policies (Lampton, 2005, p. 307), we cannot overly exaggerate it since neighboring countries' autonomy has been taken seriously in China's policymaking. More importantly, domestic interests reign, and foreign policies are made first and foremost by taking neighboring countries into consideration.

China paid particular attention to neighborhood diplomacy in the early 1990s. In the CCP's 15th Congress, erstwhile President Jiang Zemin underlined that China needed a long-lasting, peaceful environment for development and envisioned new security perspectives with neighboring countries. Although China strived to create such an environment, territorial conflicts with neighboring countries were too thorny to resolve.

Good borders are pivotal to good neighborhoods (Walzer, 2011). Be that as it may, territorial disputes, should they be rooted in the process of post-colonial state-building, can hardly be resolved when both sides hold irreconcilable opinions (Zhang, 2006). As a result, despite the border conflict with India still fermenting, China has successfully managed the thorny territorial disputes with Russia, signing the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. Border issues with Central Asian countries were addressed under the aegis of Shanghai Five (and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation from 2001) in the 1990s.

Anything leading to an unstable neighborhood incurs a high cost to China's security and economy (Tsygankov, 2005). With this in mind, China strives to achieve national rejuvenation by carrying out neighborhood diplomacy strategically (Xi, 2019a). If the 1990s Asian financial crisis had directed China's attention to Southeast Asia and led to regionalism, exemplified by the ASEAN+3 (Choi, 2009), China has been applying constant vigilance on Central Asia since a stable neighborhood contributes to "a modern socialist country in all respects" (Xi, 2022). In other words, unlike periodic financial crises, perennial ones resulting from terrorist attacks and secessionist activities require policy consistency and a cordial neighborhood. According to Fu Ying (2018), erstwhile Chairperson of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee (2013–2018), China, different from the 1970s–80s practices, turned to regional platforms, such as ASEAN, for security.

In 2003, erstwhile Prime Minister Wen Jiabao proposed "pursuing the policy of bringing harmony, security and prosperity to neighbors" (Mulin Anlin Fulin 睦邻安邻富邻). Regardless of the vicissitudes of regional and international politics, China still clings to the above tenet in adjusting neighborhood policies. In the furtherance of the above principles, Dai Bingguo (2016), Director of the Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group (2005–2013), in discussing China's policy in the Asian Pacific in his memoir, claimed that China has no intention in pursuing hegemony in Asia.

Since a peaceful neighborhood is pivotal to modernization (Sun, 2005), Xi (2014c, p. 395), at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, underlined that "China's peaceful development begins here in Asia, finds its support in Asia and delivers tangible benefits to Asia." Therefore, it is no surprise that he (Xi, 2015, p. 287) considers building a peaceful and prosperous neighborhood China's "unshrinkable responsibility," stating that "China has always placed its neighborhood at the top of the diplomatic agenda." To do so, China aims to prevent neighboring conflicts from being spilled over and integrate neighboring countries into the BRI. Only stability premised on domestic solidarity and economic prosperity for Beijing can lead to long-term stability. Otherwise, externally sustained peace and prosperity proved ephemeral. Given this, Xi, in laying out the goals of China's neighborhood policies in 2013, committed to "mak[ing] our neighbors more friendly in politics, economically more closely tied to us, and we must have deeper security cooperation and closer people-to-people ties" (quoted by China Daily, 2013).

China's holistic foreign policy starts from those nearby. Likewise, different issues areas have priority degrees in China's policy repertoire. Therefore, after viewing itself as a significant regional player (Wu, 2016), China began to address unconventional security



concerns, such as water, energy, and ecology. Alongside the mindset change, China, to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, has shifted from a reactive to an active foreign policy stance, rhetorically replacing the strategy of hiding strength and biding time (Taoguang Yanghui 韬光养晦) with that of forging ahead relentlessly (Fenfa Youwei 奋发有为).

Beijing is more confident in implementing its policies than ever, committing to bringing a new type of international relations to the world stage, which features mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation (People's Daily, 2024). Xi (2017a) explicitly claimed at the 19th CPC National Congress that the new era “will be an era that sees China moving closer to center stage and making greater contributions to mankind.” Similarly, Xi (2019b, p. 547) stated, “China today is more than the country itself; it is very much a part of Asia and the world.”

Interestingly, while a low-profile China was criticized for its unwillingness to undertake international responsibility, the ambitious one provoked suspicion and fear and raised the awareness of those worried about the turbulence of regional and global order (Gardner, 2017; Shin & Lee, 2022). Besides repeatedly refuting the above claims, Beijing has learned to disregard the perceptively biased concerns. In the calling for sitting tight on the fishing boat despite the rising wind and surging waves (Renpinfenglangqi Wenzoudiaooyuchuan 任凭风浪起 稳坐钓鱼船), China is in transit from an agenda-taker to an agenda-maker. Among others, the BRI is an ambitious undertaking aiming to draw neighboring countries and those beyond into China's global economic projects. Culturally interpreting the infrastructure-led BRI, Tim Summers (2016) views it as an international political practice based on cultural heritages.

Although the pace of Chinese investment has been variously slowed by potential recipient countries in the name of national security or environmental disruption (Zheng, 2021), Chinese companies have steadily increased their engagements in neighboring countries. Chinese state-owned companies initially spearheaded China's Go Out policy before being elevated to the strategic and comprehensive level by the BRI. By saying so, we should not interpret it as a policy U-turn since China had already accomplished the strategic shift piecemeal after the 2008 financial crisis. If anything, the financial crunch helped display the comparative advantages of the Chinese model, exacerbating the debate between the Beijing consensus and the Washington consensus. Although the Chinese authority is wary of utilizing the concept of Beijing consensus, the Chinese way of development at least offered neighboring countries alternatives to escaping neoliberal predicaments, wherein global capital would “fatally destabilise the entire national economy” (Chang, 2012, p. 71). Speeding up infrastructural connectivity under the aegis of the BRI squarely serves to this end (Xi, 2019a). In the furtherance of this enterprise, China launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in 2015, which was deemed “the first overt challenge to the Bretton Woods system” (Howorth, 2016, p. 391).

Scholars regularly take 2010 as a turning point for China's international status after Chinese GDP rose to 2nd in the world. In this context, after the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, China under Xi's presidency formulated new guidelines for China's neighborhood policies, which characterize “friendship,



sincerity, reciprocity and inclusiveness” (Qin Cheng Hui Rong 亲诚惠容) by treating all neighboring countries as equals (Xi, 2014b, p. 326). Rhetorically, China employed the concept of partnership rather than alliances to construct a new form of international relations. Xi, at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, called for pursuing partnerships with neighboring countries and proposed building Asian security (Xi, 2014c). Given this, Shi et al. (2019) write that one feature of China’s new-era neighborhood diplomacy is constructing a new strategic framework in the 21st century by calling it partnership diplomacy. Unsurprisingly, Beijing repeatedly underlines win-win cooperation. Xi (2014a, p. 301), in a 2013 speech given in Moscow, stated that “[b]y growing stronger through development, China will bring more opportunities, rather than threats, to the rest of the world.”

To sum up, a closer inspection reveals that China’s new-era neighborhood policies have shifted from a holistic to a differentiation view, exemplified by regularly held subregional dialogues, including the China-Central Asia Summit. Wu Lin (2016) debates that one feature of China’s neighborhood policy maturity is how Beijing can envision different strategies to manage its otherwise diverse neighbors.

### CENTRAL ASIA: BEDFELLOW WITH DIFFERENT DREAMS?

Western scholars are inclined to divide neighborly love into the identitarian and non-identitarian kinds by following the self-other nexus. According to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009, p. 182), identitarian love is the “love of the same” based on a common history or a shared future. Therefore, theoretically, non-identitarian love would be less intense and less likely to result in policy consensus since it is, at first glance, an oxymoron.

Nevertheless, consensus can be rebuilt should we establish a new common ground, such as China’s revival of the Silk Road. Seeking common ground by leaving aside differences (Qitong Cunyi 求同存异) has been highly praised and repeatedly practiced in Chinese political culture. As far as Central Asia is concerned, China’s engagement has made nuanced changes. From a refrained attitude in the early 1990s to a relatively conservative attitude in the early 2000s (Wu, 2016), China has increased its engagement with Central Asian countries.

Quoting the Chinese proverb that neighbors are dearer than distant relatives, Xi (2014d, p. 316), in his 2013 speech given at Nazarbayev University, Xi stated that China “takes improving these relations [with Central Asian countries] as a foreign policy priority.” Despite the above, China’s engagement with Central Asian countries is not without caution. As Xing Guangcheng and his colleagues (2016) observed, color revolutions and the like, periodically occurring in Central Asia, would inspire secessionists to the feasibility of a “peaceful revolution.”

Democratization without stable political orders can hardly be sustained (Zheng, 2021). Nevertheless, democracy has many forms. Whereas the logic of the Western Pareto’s improvement cannot guarantee all entities’ interests, China keeps in mind all stakeholders’ co-development, to which Zhao Tingyang (2022, p. 85) speaks of Confucian improvement. Relevantly, China’s new-era foreign policy emphasizes building a community with a shared future for mankind. Since it is the “love of the

other, and not self-love, grounds the self” (Oppenheim, 2007, p. 47), neighboring regions have been prioritized since China’s foreign policies are made by following a holistic and harmonious approach. Thus far, China has proposed to build communities of shared destiny with ASEAN in 2013, Mongolia in 2022, and Central Asia in 2023, among others.

Central Asia is pivotal to China’s security and development. Despite this, security is premised on development (Fu, 2018). Otherwise, security without development can hardly be sustained (Xinhua News Agency, 2022). For one thing, security concerns emanating from secessionists and terrorists cannot be well managed without Central Asian countries’ commitment and participation. In a time of uncertainty, neighborhood implies threats that do not necessarily come from state actors since non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, are more than active in the international arena by developing transnational branches. When a powerful secessionist movement grows, neighboring countries can hardly be left undisturbed since conflict spills over (Horowitz, 1985, p. 281). Not less concerned are implicitly referred foreign forces, including the US and the EU, by China (Hou, 2023). Should we read between the lines, Central Asia is where the above disruptive forces are spawned.

For another, Central Asia, lying between the EU and China, is gaining increasing importance alongside the waning influence of the northern corridor (via Russia). Since the alternative routes from China to the EU are limited, the burgeoning trade volume has elevated Central Asia to a more significant role. Besides, Central Asia has abundant resources. For instance, Kazakhstan is rich in oil and uranium, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are known for their abundant natural gas reserves.

Either way, it is reasonable and rational for China to release the infrastructure-theme BRI, promising “to provide more public goods to its Asian neighbors through connectivity, and welcomes them to board China’s train of development” (Xi, 2017b, p. 543) and commit to building an economically prosperous Central Asia. Regardless of Central Asia’s particular weight, China has not released any strategies for Central Asia, at least not explicitly, as has been done by the EU in 2007 and 2019. Meanwhile, no paradigmatic route has been tailor-made despite the repeated emphasis on good neighborhood. Thus said, although it is convenient to assert that Beijing’s neighborhood policies speak louder than deeds, a pragmatic view helps to understand the unparadigmaticness since China’s neighboring policies aim to achieve a win-win outcome, complying with the Confucian doctrine that the benevolent always care for others (Renzhe Airen 仁者爱人).

Shared interests and concerns bring neighbors close to each other. For China, connecting the European market via Central Asia is strategically important; likewise, Central Asian countries aim to diversify their trade by all means. Paul Collier (2007, pp. 56-57) says, “If you are coastal, you serve the world; if you are landlocked, you serve your neighbors.” Albeit oversimplified, it can explain why land-locked Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan tried and are still trying to reach a broad market through the Lianyungang port in Eastern China.

Besides shared interests, Central Asian countries and China have similar concerns about ethnic secessionism, religious extremism, and international terrorism (Pan, 2002). Given this, it is no surprise that China prioritizes engagement with Central Asian countries, sticking to the good-neighborliness policy. In particular, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are prioritized neighbors since their shared borders with China are porous and, hence, potential access for East Turkistan's permeation (Wu, 2016).

Besides bilateral engagement, China underlines regional approaches. As Pan Guang (2013, pp. 27-28) writes:

With China's rapid economic growth, particularly with the further development of China's western region and its accelerating demand for energy, Central Asia is becoming more and more significant strategically for China. The SCO has enabled China to build security, political, economic, and cultural ties with the region as never seen before, which creates conditions for China to play an active and constructive role in the region. Cooperation within the multilateral framework makes it possible for China to avoid frictions with its neighbours while preserving and pursuing its own national interests.

Regardless of their differences, China has established economic connections with Central Asian countries under the aegis of the BRI. More importantly, the BRI has no plan to replace the existing international system. At least, the financing models that it employs "are redolent of existing practices rather than novel ones" (Summers, 2020, p. 149), which, in a way, can explain why China released it by reviving the ancient Silk Road concept. Irrespective of the precise nature of their relationships in the past, all actors are deemed equal groups in the cultural imaginaries. Besides that, China has added new content to its neighborhood policy, such as ecological issues. Chinese and Central Asian cities, alongside BRI corridors, released the Urumqi Declaration in 2014, committing to sustainable development to enhance inter-city cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

The article investigates Central Asia in China's new-era neighborhood policies. Although no explicit neighborhood policies have been tailor-made for Central Asia, China, with anti-secession and economic development in mind, has pragmatically integrated Central Asian countries into BRI and the community with a shared future for mankind. This has particularly underlined the region's stability under Xi's presidency.

The article examines the region's twofold complexity by focusing on Central Asia's uniqueness in China's neighborhood politics. One refers to Central Asian countries' complexity emanating from religious and ethnic diversity; the other relates to external powers' engagements, which are often periodical and unpredictable. Compounding the complexity is Central Asian countries' divergent interests in responding to external powers. Central Asia is an arena where great powers compete for influence. Taking the US for instance, Washington "pledges to help the Central Asian states defend their sovereignty against their more powerful neighbour" in the 2017 National Security Strategy. Qiu Huafei (2015) observes that the neighboring Central Asian countries are highly adroit in utilizing the US factor to balance regional power equilibrium. As early as 1994, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan joined the Partnership for Peace, a NATO program deemed an alliance between member states and other states.

Although it is worthy of investigation, the article has only explored the complexity of China's neighborhood policies toward Central Asia in a holistic manner, leaving another three equally crucial actors, including provincial governments, military corps, and state-owned companies in Xinjiang, silent, which, however, is not the case. In one way or another, the three entities have affected and are still influencing China's neighborhood policies. As Tim Summers (2016, p. 1633) observes, "the ideas and practices of linking up China's western border provinces with neighboring economies have been an idea at the provincial level since the 1980s". Correspondingly, border provinces are inclined to interpret the central government's policies to their maximum interests and have agendas in managing neighborhood affairs. On rare occasions, the unique interests of border and coastal regions can even conflict with those of the central government (Wu, 2016).

China and Central Asian countries declared they would work together for a China-Central Asia community with a shared future after the 2023 Xi'an Summit. If such a move has symbolically brought China closer to Central Asian neighbors, it still takes time to tell how it will be put on the ground. In particular, a community will be debilitated without instruments to manage crises, such as the 2022 Kazak unrest. Aboulafia (2010) reminds us that being good neighbors in a community means doing no harm and implies the willingness to assist those in need.

## **FUNDING**

The article was written with the support of the Social Science Fund of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (No. 2023BGJ049).

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This draft was presented at the conference on "Looking Eastward: Demystifying Central Asian Relations with Asia," organized by Nazarbayev University in April 2024.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

PH: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, validation, writing-original draft, writing-review and editing.

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# DETERMINANTS OF EUROPEAN UNION FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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## Article History:

Received: 11 April 2025

Revised: 21 May 2025

Accepted: 21 May 2025



**ABSTRACT.** *This article explores the key factors that impact the foreign direct investment of the European Union in Central Asia. The study analyzes a panel data set of five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan - between 2013 and 2022 to examine the correlation between EU FDI and seven critical factors. The study shows that market size is negatively correlated with EU FDI flows to Central Asia, whereas the labor force is positively correlated. However, natural resources, trade openness, infrastructure, corruption, and political stability are not significantly associated with EU FDI in Central Asia. The study suggests that EU investors seek to take advantage of the region's abundant and low-cost labor rather than focus on natural resources or other commonly assumed factors. The findings have vital implications for policymakers and businesses operating in Central Asia, highlighting the importance of addressing market and labor force challenges to attract EU FDI.*

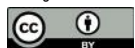
**KEYWORDS:** *foreign direct investment, European Union, Central Asia, determinants.*

## INTRODUCTION

Foreign direct investment (FDI) is widely regarded as a significant source of capital inflows and an important contributor to economic growth for both developed and developing countries. In particular, developing nations recognize FDI as a key factor in driving their economic development (Ashurov et al., 2020). The Central Asian region, consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, has been gaining increased attention as a potential investment destination. The region boasts vast natural resources such as oil and gas, relatively untapped markets, and a strategic location that makes it an attractive prospect for investors (Cohen & Grant, 2018; Metaxas & Kechagia, 2016). Despite this potential, the level of foreign investment in Central Asia (CA) remains relatively low compared to other Asian regions (UNCTAD, 2022). Therefore, increasing FDI in the region is crucial to its economic progress.

One of the most significant FDI contributors in the region is the European Union (EU) (Ashurov et al., 2020). Since the 1990s, the EU has been increasingly involved in the

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region, driven by shared interests in prosperity, connectivity, energy, and security (EEAS, 2022c). The EU Central Asia Strategy, adopted in 2007, was updated in 2019, aiming to foster resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation, particularly through Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) between the EU and Central Asian countries (CACs) (Council of the EU, 2019). As of November 2022, more than 42% of the total FDI stock in Central Asia originates from the EU, while the US, Russia, and China contribute 14.2%, 6%, and 3.7%, respectively (EEAS, 2022b). The EU is considered a partner of choice in the region's effort to diversify its economic relations, and there remains significant potential for collaboration between the region and the EU in areas such as economic growth, connectivity, energy, and security (EEAS, 2022a, 2022b). This demonstrates the great attractiveness of Central Asia for EU FDI, which also represents a huge potential for investment-facilitated economic development in this region.

Notwithstanding the attractiveness of CA for EU FDI, the determinants of EU FDI in the region are rarely discussed, and a systematic and holistic study of EU FDI in CA is still lacking. Considering the existing close ties between the EU and CACs in terms of FDI and the promising prospects for future cooperation, understanding the determinants of EU FDI in CA is crucial for the economic development and prosperity of this region. In this regard, to fill this gap, this study aims to determine the significant macro influencing factors that drive or repel EU FDI inflows to CA, based on the consideration that the EU is a single market with a common set of laws & regulations and commercial policy that govern FDI (EC, no date) and CA is a region with similar cultural, political, and economic characteristics. Furthermore, the research question is determined as what are the determinants (influencing factors) of EU FDI in CA? This study adds to the existing literature by identifying the significant macro-level factors that influence EU FDI in CA, and it is the first study to examine the determinants of EU FDI in the context of CA. This study is expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers, investors, and researchers interested in understanding how to increase the level of FDI in CACs. This research will be conducted using a panel data regression analysis, which allows for the analysis of multiple time-series data for multiple countries, making it well-suited for studying the determinants of EU FDI inflows to CA.

The article is structured in the following way: Section one gives the theoretical background of FDI determinants, reviews relevant empirical studies, and proposes hypotheses. Section two describes the data, model specification, and methodology. Section three presents and discusses the findings. The last section summarizes and concludes this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

This literature review aims to provide a brief review of existing theoretical frameworks of FDI determinants and develop hypotheses based on previous empirical studies.

A single universal theory explaining the determinants of FDI does not exist. Given the significance of FDI, numerous theories on the determinants of FDI have been developed. Based on the seminal contribution of Hymer (1960) to the theory of internationalization, Buckley and Casson (2016) explain firms' motivation to engage in FDI by exploring

internal firm-specific advantages within the home country, rather than relying on local factor endowments in foreign markets. Following this, Dunning (1977) created the classical and widely used model (OLI paradigm) for FDI determinants, which outlines the four FDI motives of market-seeking, efficiency-seeking, resource-seeking, and strategic asset-seeking. He also explains the three advantages of ownership (O), location (L), and internalization (I) that multinational corporations (MNCs) hold when investing overseas. This model has been widely used in previous studies to explore the determinants of FDI in various countries and regions (Drogendijk & Blomkvist, 2013; Okafor et al., 2015; Varma et al., 2015). The internalization theory developed by Rugman (1980) explains that MNCs promote FDI if the FDI transaction costs are less than the market transaction cost. According to the Differential Rate of Return (DRR) assumption, FDI is the outcome of capital transfers from low-rate to high-rate nations (Faeth, 2009). Location theory suggests that the four factors of resource endowment, availability of strategic assets, geographic proximity, and agglomeration economies can attract FDI (Cheng & Kwan, 2000; Kang & Jiang, 2012). Institutional theory and the resource-based view have been used to justify the importance of government policy and infrastructure in attracting FDI (Cho & Ha, 2009). According to Agarwal (1980), Brewer (1993), and Pajunen (2008), the traditional theories that focus on economic factors alone do not fully explain the determinants of FDI inflows. These scholars suggest that institutional factors, which include economic, legal, political, and social factors, play a significant role in attracting FDI. According to Korsah et al. (2022), various theoretical frameworks can be categorized into four groups: the perfect market theory, imperfect market theory, other FDI theories, and theories that rely on other variables. Tocar (2018) classified the existing determinants of FDI into economic factors, infrastructure, technology, institutional-political factors, specific risk, human factor, legal integration, spatial factor, entrepreneurial matters, and cultural and para-cultural factors. In addition to the traditional theories discussing FDI patterns, several empirical studies examining the determinants of FDI in CACs have been conducted. Accordingly, the research hypotheses are developed as follows:

### ***Natural resources***

Previous studies have generally shown a positive correlation between natural resources and FDI (Anarfo et al., 2017; Asif & Majid, 2018). Regarding FDI flows from the EU to CACs, according to the Astana Times (2020) in Kazakhstan, a significant portion of the EU FDI in CA was directed towards the growth and maintenance of the region's primary oil and gas fields, as well as its related transportation infrastructure. This indicates the resource-seeking nature of EU investments in the region and the significant attractiveness of the region's natural resources for EU FDI. In addition, Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022) revealed that natural resources are one of the main determinants of foreign investors' decisions to locate FDI in CA. It can be inferred that the favorable natural resource endowment of CA creates a significant attraction for FDI flows to the region. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

*H1:* EU FDI flows to CA are positively correlated with natural resources.

### ***Market size***

Market size is widely considered to be positively correlated with FDI in the existing literature on FDI flows to CACs. Ashurov et al. (2020) found that the FDI contributors in the region, including the EU, were mostly attracted by the available economic opportunities in the region (e.g., GDP, a widely used indicator of market size), while the USA was primarily based on security control considerations rather than economic opportunities. Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022) found a positive correlation between market size and FDI flows to CACs. Metaxas and Kechagia (2016) found that Uzbekistan's market size is one of its main attractive factors for FDI. Azam (2010) found a positive effect of market size on FDI flows to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. These findings indicate that countries with larger markets tend to attract more FDI. Thus, we hypothesize the following:

*H2: Market size positively influences EU flows to CA.*

### ***Labor force***

Existing literature indicates that the labor force has a positive impact on FDI flows (Nistor, 2015; Zheng, 2009). In the context of CA, Ashurov et al. (2020) found a positive correlation between the labor force and FDI flows to the region. Additionally, Lee and Kim (2022) found a significant positive correlation between the labor force and FDI in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. These findings suggest that the availability of the labor force is an influential element in attracting FDI to the region. Thus, we expect:

*H3: The labor force in CA has a significant positive impact on EU FDI inflows.*

### ***Trade openness***

The impact of trade openness on FDI flows to CACs is controversial in existing empirical studies. Ulzii-Ochir (2019) extended the scope of research from the five countries in this region to landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) that additionally include Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Mongolia, and used the ordinary least square (OLS) method to find that trade openness has a positive effect on FDI. Liargovas and Skandalis (2012) found that trade openness is positively correlated with FDI inflows to developing economies. However, Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022) used the Panels Corrected Standard Errors (PCSEs) linear regression method and found a significant negative association between global FDI and trade openness of CACs. Considering the overall downward trend of both EU FDI flows to CACs and the trade openness of the region over the past decade (Eurostat, no date; World Bank, no date), the following hypothesis is proposed:

*H4: Trade openness in CA is positively correlated with EU FDI inflows.*

### ***Infrastructure***

Infrastructure has been generally found to contribute to attracting FDI inflows to CACs in previous empirical studies. Ulzii-Ochir (2019) argued that infrastructure quality has a positive impact on global FDI flows to LLDCs. Additionally, Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022) found that there's a positive correlation between global FDI flows to CACs and infrastructure in the region. Indeed, despite the fact that CACs still have a long way to go to improve their infrastructure, they have invested heavily in improving their

infrastructure over the past two decades, which has provided a measure of a boost to the region's economic development (World Bank, 2021). Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

*H5: Infrastructure correlates positively with the EU FDI inflows to CA.*

### ***Corruption***

Corruption in the host country is generally considered to have a negative impact on FDI inflows, given that it leads to increased transaction costs and uncertainty in doing business. (Al-Sadig, 2009; Hamdi & Hakimi, 2020). Nevertheless, Cuervo-Cazurra (2006) found that the level of corruption in the host country has a negative impact on FDI inflows from home countries with strict anti-corruption laws (e.g., the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions), whereas high levels of corruption in the host country do not necessarily deter FDI flows from highly corrupt home countries. In the context of CA, Mamytova and You (2018) discovered that corruption in CACs negatively affects the inflow of FDI. Therefore, there is reason to believe that corruption is negatively associated with EU FDI flows to CAC. Thus:

*H6: Corruption level in CA has a negative impact on the level of EU FDI inflows.*

### ***Political stability***

Political stability has been generally found to have a negative impact on FDI inflows in previous empirical studies. According to Lucas (1990), political risk is a significant factor that restricts capital flows. Developing nations often have high political risk exposure, leading to increased FDI inflows in politically unstable countries. Ahmad Jafari et al. (2011) found that political stability has a negative impact on FDI in Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) countries. Ulzii-Ochir (2019) found that political instability has a positive impact on FDI in LLDCs, which includes CACs. In addition, several empirical studies have demonstrated the negative association between political stability and FDI (Asiedu, 2002; Schneider & Frey, 1985). However, political stability has also been found to be a positive factor in attracting FDI. For example, Rashid et al. (2017) found that political stability is the most influential FDI attraction variable for the top 15 most competitive countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Considering the overall decreasing trend of EU FDI flows to CACs in the period 2013-2019, with the improving trend of the overall PV.EST indicator level in the region, thus:

*H7: Political stability in CA has a negative impact on the level of EU FDI inflows.*

## **DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to determine the influencing factors of EU-28 FDI in CACs (i.e., Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) using a panel data analysis. Table 1 presents all variables with their measurements and sources used in this study.

**Table 1.** Variables with measurements, sources, and references

	Variable	Label	Measurements	Source
<b>DV</b>	EU FDI	FDI	Net EU FDI inflows	Eurostat
<b>IVs</b>	Natural resources	NR	Total natural resources rents (% of GDP)	World Bank Database
	Market size	MS	GDP (constant 2015 US\$)	World Bank Database
	Labor force	LF	Labor force, total	World Bank Database
	Trade openness	TO	Trade-to-GDP ratio	World Bank Database
	Infrastructure	INF	Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people)	World Bank Database
	Corruption	COR	Corruption perceptions index	Transparency International
	Political stability	PS	Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism: Estimate (PV.EST)	World Bank Database

*Source: compiled by the authors*

This study covers annual data of the EU-28 and five CACs for the period 2013-2022 from the Eurostat, World Bank database, and Transparency International. The net EU FDI inflows (million euros) are used as the dependent variable (DV), while natural resources (NR), market size (MS), the labor force (LF), trade openness (TO), infrastructure (INF), corruption (COR), and political stability (PS) are used as independent variables (IVs). Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of variables used in this study.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
EUFDI	50	-74452000	2.532e+09	-7.403e+09	1.395e+10
NR	50	11.327	6.466	1.329	27.493
MS	50	6.516e+10	6.944e+10	6.678e+09	2.366e+11
LF	50	6009604.3	4503024.7	2032680	13613027
TO	50	67.249	25.753	29.192	134.027
INFR	50	117.157	24.943	70.384	175.057
COR	50	25.18	5.34	17	38
PS	50	33.519	9.957	13.27	55.924

*Source: compiled by the authors*

Considering all hypotheses and variables, the estimate equation model is developed as:

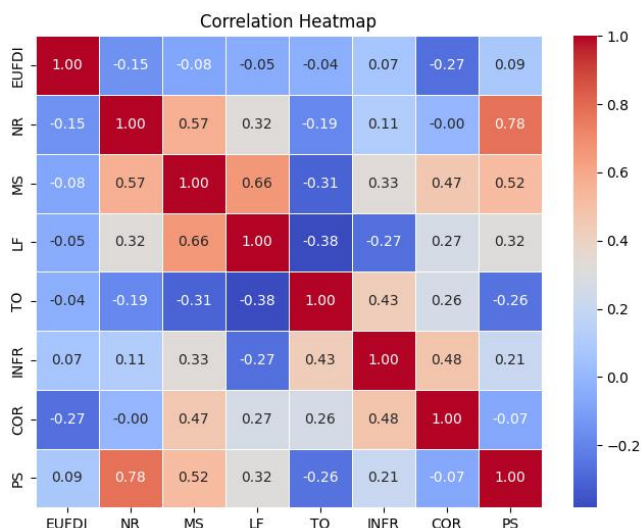
$$FDI_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 NR_{it} + \beta_2 MS_{it} + \beta_3 LF_{it} + \beta_4 TO_{it} + \beta_5 INF_{it} + \beta_6 COR_{it} + \beta_7 PS_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where:  $FDI_{it}$  = Net FDI inflows of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $NR_{it}$  = Total natural resources rents (% of GDP) of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $MS_{it}$  = Real GDP (constant 2015 US\$) of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $LF_{it}$  = Labor force of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $TO_{it}$  = Trade-to-GDP ratio of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $INF_{it}$  = Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $COR_{it}$  = Corruption perception index of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $PS_{it}$  = PV.EST of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $\varepsilon_{it}$  = Disturbance term of country  $i$  at time  $t$ ;  $\alpha$  = Intercept;  $\beta_1$  to  $\beta_7$  = Estimated coefficients of the independent variables.

Since a high correlation between independent variables may lead to multicollinearity, a correlation matrix is used to show any correlation between the variables. As per

Figure 1, the correlations of the IVs are within a reasonable range ( $<0.8$ ). Thus, multicollinearity does not seem to be a substantial issue in this study.

**Figure 1.** Correlation matrix of variables



*Source: compiled by the authors*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Hausman test determines whether a fixed-effect model or a random-effect model is more appropriate for estimation. As shown in Table 3, the p-value of the Hausman test (Prob > chi2) is 0.024, which means that the null hypothesis is rejected, because the difference in coefficients is systematic, indicating that the Fixed Effects (FE) model is more appropriate.

**Table 3.** Hausman test results

Test: $H_0$ : difference in coefficients not systematic	
Chi-square test value	11.26
Prob>chi2	.024

*Source: compiled by the authors*

Table 4 shows the main results of the regression of the EU FDI using the fixed-effect model. The coefficient column shows the estimated coefficients of the equation, and R2 (0.452) indicates that the model explains 45.2% of the variance in EU FDI inflows to CACs, which is a moderate level of explanatory power.

**Table 4.** Regression results of the fixed-effect model

Variables	Coefficient
NR	-120000000.000
MS	-0.227**
LF	12019.978**

TO	-28700000.000
INF	-41200000.000
COR	-177000000.000
PS	1010000000.000
Constant	-43300000000.000**
Observations	35
R2	0.452

**Note:** \*, \*\*, and \*\*\* indicate significance at the 10, 5, and 1% level

*Source: compiled by the authors*

### ***Natural resources***

The results show that the coefficient for NR (-120000000.000) is negative but not statistically significant, so natural resources are not significantly associated with EU FDI in CA. Therefore, H1 is not supported. This suggests that the search for natural resources is not the main motivation for EU investors in the region. The countries in the region with more natural resources do not necessarily attract more EU FDI. The result is in contrast with the findings of Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022). Policymakers in this region should, therefore, promote investment in non-natural resource sectors, such as manufacturing, services, and agriculture, to attract more EU investment. Moreover, EU investors should diversify investment portfolios to reduce reliance on natural resources-based sectors and explore other industries with growth potential. While the region is rich in natural resources, the results suggest that it is not the main motivation for EU investors, and that other factors, such as market size, may be more important.

### ***Market size***

The results show that the coefficient for MS (-0.227) is negative and statistically significant, indicating that a one-standard-deviation increase in market size is associated with a 0.227 standard-deviation decrease in FDI. The results suggest that an increase in the region's market size decreases the amount of FDI inflows from the EU, which is contrary to the initial hypothesis H2. This finding suggests that larger market sizes do not necessarily create greater attractiveness for EU investors. It is possible that larger markets may also imply greater competition and higher costs for businesses operating in these markets, which could offset any potential benefits of a larger customer base. This finding is inconsistent with several previous empirical studies (Ashurov et al., 2020; Azam, 2010; Kasimov & Saydaliev, 2022; Metaxas & Kechagia, 2016), which have generally found a positive relationship between market size and FDI flows to CACs. However, the finding by Doytch and Eren (2012) that market size has a negative impact on FDI flows to Eastern Europe and CACs is somewhat consistent with this result, although it uses a different proxy for market size and has a different range of host destinations for FDI flows. In this regard, policymakers in this region may need to re-evaluate the steps they take to boost the accessibility and size of their markets to attract EU investors. Instead of solely focusing on expanding the market, they should prioritize implementing measures that can reduce costs and simplify the process of doing business in the area. Furthermore, EU investors should be aware of the complex relationship



between market size and FDI when assessing investment opportunities in CACs. Before making any investment decisions, they should conduct a comprehensive market analysis that factors in competition, market saturation, and regulatory environment. By adopting a more comprehensive approach, EU investors can maximize their potential for profit and revenue growth in the region while minimizing risks.

### ***Labor force***

The results show that the coefficient for LR (12019.978) is positive and statistically significant, indicating that a one-standard-deviation increase in labor force is associated with a 12019.978 standard-deviation increase in FDI. The results suggest that an increase in the region's labor force leads to higher levels of FDI inflows from the EU. Therefore, H3 is supported. This finding reflects the perception of CACs as labor-abundant economies with relatively low labor costs, making them attractive locations for EU firms seeking to reduce their production costs and increase their competitiveness. This result is in line with the findings of Ashurov et al. (2020) and Lee and Kim (2022) who argue that there is a positive correlation between these two factors. Therefore, Policymakers in this region should continue to prioritize measures to improve the education and skill levels of the labor force in CACs to meet the demands of EU investors. This could involve implementing education policies and programs that focus on skill development and upgrading of workforce knowledge. By developing a skilled and educated labor force, CACs can increase their attractiveness to EU investors and potentially secure more FDI in the long term. EU investors should also take note of the positive relationship between the labor force and FDI in CACs when evaluating investment opportunities in the region. They should consider the availability of a skilled & educated labor force as a key factor when making investment decisions and invest in training & education programs to develop the necessary workforce if needed.

### ***Trade openness***

The results show that the coefficient for TO (-28700000.000) is negative but not statistically significant, so trade openness is not significantly associated with EU FDI in CA. Therefore, H4 is not supported. This finding suggests that trade openness is not a key consideration for EU investors investing in CA, and it challenges the commonly held belief that greater trade openness leads to increased FDI inflows. The lack of a significant correlation between EU FDI and trade openness in CACs could be related to the region's low level of economic diversification. CACs are heavily dependent on natural resources, such as oil and gas, and often have a limited range of export products. This may limit the potential for increased trade and investment with the EU. This finding does not support Ulzii-Ochir (2019) and Kasimov and Saydaliev (2022), who found a significant correlation between FDI inflows and trade openness of CACs. Thus, policymakers in CA should prioritize trade liberalization policies to enhance the attractiveness of the EU as a destination for FDI. This includes reducing trade barriers, such as tariffs and non-tariff barriers, and negotiating trade agreements with key partners to enhance market access. Besides, EU investors should not assume that greater trade openness necessarily leads to increased FDI inflows in CA. Instead, they should consider the region's level of economic diversification and potential for growth

in non-resource sectors and take advantage of trade agreements and free trade zones to expand market access and improve competitiveness.

### ***Infrastructure***

The results show that the coefficient for INF (-41200000.000) is negative but not statistically significant, so there is no significant correlation between EU FDI and infrastructure in CACs. Therefore, H5 is not supported. This finding suggests that infrastructure in CA has a weak role in attracting FDI inflows from the EU. Despite efforts to improve infrastructure, CACs still face significant challenges, such as inadequate transportation networks, limited access to electricity and water, and low internet connectivity. As a result, the impact of infrastructure on FDI inflows may be less pronounced in CA compared to more developed regions. This finding is not consistent with previous studies (Kasimov & Saydaliev, 2022; Ulzii-Ochir, 2019) that found a significant correlation between these two factors. In this respect, policymakers in this region should invest in improving transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure to enhance the region's attractiveness to EU investors. For EU investors, they may need to evaluate infrastructure on a case-by-case basis and consider investing in infrastructure development projects to improve the investment climate in the region.

### ***Corruption***

The coefficient for COR (-177000000.000) is negative but not statistically significant, so the region's corruption level has a limited effect on EU FDI inflows, and corruption is not significantly associated with EU FDI in CACs. Thus, H6 is not supported. This finding suggests that corruption is not as significant a factor in driving EU FDI inflows to CA as previously thought. In this case, corruption is a less important consideration for EU investors compared to other factors (e.g., market size) that could impact the potential return on investment. This finding is not consistent with previous studies (Cuervo-Cazurra, 2006; Mamytova & You, 2018). In this regard, policymakers in this region should take measures to tackle corruption, including improving transparency and accountability, improving the business environment, and increasing confidence in the region's potential for investment. In addition, although the study found that corruption is not a significant factor influencing FDI inflows, EU investors should still be aware of the potential risks and challenges associated with corruption in CACs and they should prioritize due diligence and transparency when evaluating potential investments and consider implementing strong corporate governance policies.

### ***Political stability***

The coefficient for PS (1010000000.000) is positive but not statistically significant, indicating that the region's political stability has a limited effect on EU FDI inflows. Therefore, H7 is not supported. This finding suggests that political stability is not a significant factor in discouraging EU FDI flows to the region as previously thought. This finding is not consistent with some previous studies that suggest a positive relationship between political instability and FDI inflows (Ahmad Jafari et al., 2011; Asiedu, 2002; Lucas, 1990; Schneider & Frey, 1985; Ulzii-Ochir, 2019). However, it is worth noting that the area has undergone significant changes recently, as some authorities have endeavored to improve the business environment and draw foreign

investment. Consequently, the influence of political turmoil on FDI inflows may have dwindled over time. Although political instability seems to have no significant impact on FDI inflows, policymakers should still prioritize enhancing political stability since it's a crucial factor in overall economic advancement. This encompasses refining administration, lowering corruption, and tackling other socio-economic difficulties that may fuel instability. EU investors must also be mindful of potential hazards linked with political instability in the region and mull over implementing sturdy risk management and corporate governance policies.

## CONCLUSION

This study aims to determine the significant macro-influencing factors that drive or repel EU FDI inflows to CACs, focusing on natural resources, market size, labor, trade openness, infrastructure, corruption, and political stability. The panel data analysis with the fixed-effect model is used to examine panel data of five CACs (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) for the period of 2013 to 2019. The results show that natural resources, trade openness, infrastructure, corruption, and political stability are not significant factors influencing EU FDI inflows to CA. The study provides evidence to support the importance of the labor force in attracting EU FDI, which has been consistently identified as a key factor in previous research (Ashurov et al., 2020; Lee & Kim, 2022). The findings suggest that the CACs' abundant and relatively low-cost labor force is a strong attraction for EU companies seeking to reduce production costs and improve competitiveness. However, the market size is found to be negatively correlated with EU FDI inflows, suggesting that larger markets may imply greater competition and higher costs for businesses operating, which could offset any potential benefits of a larger customer base.

Based on these findings, several policy recommendations for policymakers in CA and EU investors are proposed. Policymakers in this region should prioritize promoting investment in non-natural resource sectors, prioritize the implementation of measures that reduce costs and streamline business processes, address labor force challenges, promote trade openness, improve infrastructure, address corruption, and enhance political stability. For EU investors, they may focus on diversifying investment portfolios, prioritizing pre-market entry market research, investing in education & training programs, taking advantage of trade agreements and free trade zones, investing in infrastructure development projects, conducting thorough due diligence, and implementing robust risk management systems.

The limitations of the study include limited annual data and a relatively small sample size, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. For example, data on fixed telephone subscriptions, an infrastructure measure commonly used in previous studies (Kamal et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2017), is missing in large numbers from some of the five CACs, and Mobile cellular subscriptions (per 100 people) is thus chosen for this study. Additionally, other factors that may influence EU FDI in this region, such as regulatory quality or cultural differences are not considered. Nevertheless, the findings of this study provide valuable insights for policymakers and investors seeking to understand the dynamics of EU FDI inflows to CA. Further research is needed to explore the underlying mechanisms that drive EU FDI inflows to the region and to

identify potential policy interventions that could enhance the attractiveness of CA as a destination for foreign investment.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the factors that drive EU FDI inflows in CACs. The findings challenge some commonly held assumptions and highlight the importance of market size in attracting foreign investors' investment decisions in CACs. These insights have important policy implications for both governments and businesses interested in promoting FDI in the region. Overall, this research makes a significant contribution to the field by shedding new light on the factors that shape EU FDI inflows in CACs and providing a foundation for future research.

## FUNDING

This research was supported by a Marie Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange scheme within the H2020 Programme (grant acronym: Central Asian Law, no 870647).

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

JY: writing – original draft, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, software, data curation, conceptualization; BAM: writing – original draft, investigation, methodology, formal analysis, software, conceptualization; TM: writing – review and editing.

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