



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

POLICY BRIEF

A Breakthrough in Central Asia: The Khujand Declaration

Author

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President Sadyr Japarov of the Kyrgyz Republic, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan, and President Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan signed the Treaty on the Junction Point of State Borders and the Khujand Declaration on Eternal Friendship, on March 31, 2025. Source: [President of the Republic of Tajikistan](#)

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A Breakthrough in Central Asia: The Khujand Declaration

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Introduction

Amid escalating trade wars and international tensions, positive news has emerged from Central Asia. On March 31, 2025, the leaders of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—Sadyr Japarov, Emomali Rahmon, and Shavkat Mirziyoyev—signed a significant tripartite agreement in the historic city of Khujand, Tajikistan. This agreement delineates the trijunction point of their respective borders. Additionally, the three Presidents endorsed the *Khujand Declaration of Eternal Friendship*, highlighting their commitment to collaboration and mutual respect.¹

This agreement represents a remarkable shift in the region's political landscape. Trilateral discussions about the borders have persisted for several decades; however, disputes about the exact location of the border junction have remained unresolved until March 2025. Representatives from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan convened in Dushanbe to complete the demarcation process.

This development follows an agreement reached on March 13, 2025, between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, aimed at settling their long-standing border conflict concerning a 980-kilometre shared border in the Fergana Valley. This accord coincided with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's first visit to Bishkek in nearly twelve years, during which both nations agreed to end years of animosity.² They also reached an agreement to reopen the Kairagach border checkpoint in the Leilek district and the Kyzyl-Bel checkpoint in the Batken district. Furthermore, flight connections that had been suspended since May 2021 were reinstated.

¹ "Leaders of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign pact on junction of countries' borders" TASS, March 31, 2025. <https://tass.com/world/1936531>

² "Historic Visit of Emomali Rahmon to Kyrgyzstan: A New Chapter in Tajik-Kyrgyz Relations" March 15, 2025 <https://mo.tnu.tj/en/historic-visit-of-emomali-rahmon-to-kyrgyzstan-a-new-chapter-in-tajik-kyrgyz-relations/>

Enclaves: The Legacy of Soviet-Era Boundaries

In the 1990s, disputes emerged due to inconsistencies in the borders established during the Soviet era. This led to significant challenges in the Ferghana Valley regarding the allocation of energy and water resources. The borders of Central Asia were drawn in the 1920s, when the Soviet Union created several republics by partitioning the territories of the historical Central Asian Khanates of Kokand and Khiva, as well as the Emirate of Bukhara. This process, known as National Territorial Delimitation (NTD), was based on ethnic considerations.

The primary objective of establishing these boundaries was to foster national identity and unity among diverse populations and to create economically and infrastructurally viable entities that aligned with the socialist ideals of the Communist regime. However, these borders were drawn without regard for the existing internal divisions within the Khanates.

Defining ethnic boundaries in the northern regions, which now include parts of southern Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, was relatively straightforward. However, the separation of the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva, as well as the division of the Ferghana Valley, posed considerable challenges.

The Soviet authorities largely neglected the complex ethnic and cultural dynamics of certain areas, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, which is historically significant as the birthplace of Babur, who established the Mughal Empire in India during the 16th century.

In the northern region, the Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan border extends for 1,324 kilometres, beginning at the tri-junction with Kazakhstan. This border creates a 'finger'-shaped territory of Uzbekistan situated between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It then proceeds southeast through the Pskem and Qurama Mountains before entering the Ferghana Valley.

From this point, the borders take on intricate and winding shapes that extend westward to the Tajik tri-junction. This section of the boundary crosses the densely populated Ferghana Valley, except for the northernmost part, which is characterized by mountainous terrain and a sparse population.

The Soviet authorities faced challenges in establishing borders along ethnic lines in the Ferghana Valley, where a diverse mix of Tajik, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Kyrgyz-speaking communities have coexisted since medieval times. During the delimitation process, areas inhabited by nomadic populations were

assigned to Kyrgyzstan, while settled regions were allocated to Uzbekistan. However, to facilitate economic growth, the Uzbek-majority town of Osh was transferred to Kyrgyzstan. Similar criteria were applied when allocating Andijan and Margilan to Uzbekistan, while Jalalabad was designated for the Kyrgyz Republic.

The Khojand region, along with the rest of present-day Tajikistan, was separated from the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in 1929. Kyrgyzstan was formed from the Russian SSR, becoming the Kirghiz ASSR in 1926.

Border disputes in Central Asia have persisted since the Soviet period, as the demarcations made by authorities aimed to reflect the region's ethnic composition. However, these often resulted in significant ethnic groups being placed on the wrong side of the border.

The Ferghana Valley is significantly divided due to the arbitrary borders established during the Soviet era, which separate the three republics of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. This complex delineation has led to convoluted boundaries, resulting in the creation of numerous enclaves where national ethnic minorities reside in territories that do not correspond to their national affiliations. This situation has generated various challenges for the local population, affecting cross-border migration and resource utilization among different ethnic groups.

These enclaves, some of considerable size, are scattered throughout this historically sensitive region, making it susceptible to tensions and conflicts. Out of the eight enclaves situated within the valley, six are located in Kyrgyzstan's Batken region.

Uzbek Enclaves in Kyrgyzstan

In the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, there are four Uzbek enclaves: Sokh, Shohimardon, and Vorukh. Among these, Sokh and Shohimardon are the most significant and have frequently been at the centre of territorial disputes. All three enclaves have experienced ongoing tensions and even armed confrontations between neighbouring countries, playing a pivotal role in the political conflicts that continue to influence the relationships among Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Sokh, the largest of these enclaves, covers an area of 325 square kilometres and is home to over 80,000 residents, primarily of Tajik ethnicity. This enclave was transferred from the Kokand Khanate to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the 1940s, a decision that overlooked the area's ethnic demographics.

The presence of a Tajik-majority population within Sokh, which is administered by Uzbekistan but situated in Kyrgyzstan, has made it particularly susceptible to conflict, contributing to significant geopolitical tensions, especially during the 1990s when it became a focal point for Islamic extremism. Historically, Sokh was also a key site during the Basmachi uprising against Bolshevik authority from 1918 to 1924, highlighting the arbitrary nature of Soviet border delineation. Today, it remains a region marked by political and social complexities, shaped by its unique historical context and strategic importance.

The smaller enclaves – Sarvak, Kairragach, Qalacha, and Dzhangail – also hold geopolitical relevance. Chon-Kara, known as Qalacha, is a small village measuring approximately 3 kilometres in length. Despite its size, it plays a crucial role in the intricate web of borders and territories that characterize the Ferghana Valley.

Chon-Kara is located between the border of Uzbekistan and the Sokh exclave, establishing it as an important connector in the complex dynamics between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This village serves as a vital link to the Sokh exclave, which, while governed by Uzbekistan, is entirely encircled by Kyrgyz land. Chon-Kara exemplifies the geopolitical difficulties stemming from the border decisions made during the Soviet era, which continue to influence the region of Central Asia today. Jangyy-Ayyıl, also known as Dzhangail, is another small enclave, measuring 3 kilometres in width.

Furthermore, the Batken region in Kyrgyzstan is home to two Tajik enclaves, Vorukh and Kairragach, both of which have a longstanding history of contention. The enclave of Vorukh, surrounded by Kyrgyzstan, spans an area of 130 square kilometres and has a population exceeding 23,000. It is linked by road to the Isfara district in Tajikistan's Sughd region. Vorukh has been a significant flashpoint, where disputes over boundary lines have led to violent confrontations regarding land ownership, access to grazing areas, and the sharing of water resources. In contrast, Kairagach is one of the smallest enclaves, measuring only 2 kilometres in length, and is located at the southernmost point of the Batken province.

Tajik Enclave in Uzbekistan

The Tajik enclave of Sarvak, situated within Uzbekistan, is 14 kilometres long and 500 meters wide. Though it is one of the smallest enclaves in the area, it holds significant strategic value. The eastern part of the Ferghana Valley, which runs through the Tian Shan and Pamir Mountain ranges, presents

various connectivity challenges for travel to Khujand in Tajikistan. Since gaining independence, this region has experienced ethnic conflicts related to land ownership along ethnic divides.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the newly sovereign nations of Central Asia were compelled to confront the border issues they inherited. As borders were drawn and visa regulations enforced, tensions began to rise.

The Ferghana Valley is a shared territory among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, each possessing profound historical, economic, and strategic interests in the region. This area has become a primary source of contention due to its fertile land, essential transportation routes, and valuable natural resources. The arrangements regarding enclaves among these states have become complicated, resulting in frequent disputes over land and resources, which at times have escalated into ethnic violence.

Enclave residents often find themselves cut off from their home countries, separated by several kilometres of foreign territory. This situation has led to a host of logistical, social, and geopolitical challenges as local populations struggle to maintain connections and access basic resources like healthcare, education, and trade. The once-united land of the Soviet Union has transformed into a patchwork of sovereign states, with enclaves at the heart of ongoing tensions.

The precise number of enclaves in the region remains uncertain, and previous attempts by the three nations to exchange enclaves have not succeeded. Negotiations among these countries have frequently been fraught with tension, at times resulting in border clashes. For example, in 2021 and 2022, there were heightened tensions in the Batken region. Reports indicated that the Barak enclave, located near Osh in Kyrgyzstan, was transferred back to Uzbekistan in return for land in the Ala-Buka district of northern Ferghana.

The ongoing disputes over water resources have persisted since independence 35 years ago, culminating in armed conflict in April 2021 and a brief war in September 2022. Several villages on both sides of the border were evacuated, and both nations faced accusations of war crimes.

Likely, the Soviets did not foresee these borders evolving into the international boundaries we see today. These territorial disputes continue to impact local communities and create difficulties for travellers in the region. The railway and road infrastructure established during the Soviet era traversed multiple Kyrgyz stations before re-entering Uzbek territory. Tajik citizens often have to

cross into Kyrgyzstan to reach their homeland overland. Residents from Tajikistan's northern Sughd region and the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region frequently travel to the Kyrgyz city of Osh to continue their journey home.

The Post-Soviet Crises

Many border regions in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia have been contested since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The situation is particularly complex in the various exclaves within the volatile Ferghana Valley, where the borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan converge.

Interstate tensions emerged quickly after the Kyrgyz-Uzbek riots in Osh in 1990. The presidency of former Uzbek leader Islam Karimov posed significant challenges, as he was notably resistant to engaging in dialogue with neighbouring countries. The situation was further complicated by instability in Afghanistan, which presented a considerable transnational threat to the region.

In 1999, Uzbekistan began demarcating and fortifying sections of its border, citing concerns over cross-border terrorism. An initiative to exchange land to connect exclaves to the 'mainland' failed, leading to ongoing friction along the border.

This interstate conflict has posed a significant challenge to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Russia, of which both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members. For many years, this has raised doubts about Moscow's ability to mediate effectively in the region, especially following Russia's intervention in Ukraine. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan both host Russian military installations and maintain strong ties with Russia. Tajikistan, with a population of 10 million, and Kyrgyzstan, with over 7 million, are among the poorest nations in the region. The civil war in Tajikistan during the 1990s, which saw Russian-backed government forces clashing with Islamist factions, resulted in tens of thousands of casualties.

In response to the conflict, Kyrgyzstan sought to acquire drones from Turkey, while Tajikistan persuaded Tehran to establish a drone manufacturing facility within its borders.

Despite these challenges, relations have improved in recent years, culminating in a border agreement signed in 2018 that delineated much of the boundary. In November 2022, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan finalized a treaty ratifying their border, and by May 2023, they approved specific border demarcations.

Following a violent clash in September 2022, negotiations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan gained momentum in 2023, resulting in the definition of 196 kilometres of the border, which accounts for nearly 90 percent of the disputed area. The total length of the border is approximately 9,000 kilometres.

The border issue is not the only concern; additional challenges include the management of transboundary rivers. Tajikistan has constructed the substantial Roghun hydroelectric facility, while Kyrgyzstan aims to develop its own large-scale dams. However, a significant diplomatic shift occurred in 2023, potentially influenced by Putin's involvement, leading both nations to revisit their border negotiations. Furthermore, they initiated the reduction of trade restrictions and intensified efforts to combat smuggling.

Uzbekistan's New Regional Diplomacy

Following the passing of Islam Karimov in September 2016, the relationship between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan began to improve significantly. Previously, Uzbekistan had closed its border crossings with Kyrgyzstan, leading to confrontations between Uzbek forces and Kyrgyz border guards, as well as attempts to seize Kyrgyzstan's Barak enclave by obstructing road access. In the 2000s, increased terrorist activities in Sarvan prompted the closure of the Tajik border with Uzbekistan. However, with the ascension of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as President of Uzbekistan, diplomatic ties with both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have strengthened.

In April 2021, the long-anticipated road linking Uzbekistan's Sokh enclave, which is situated within Kyrgyz territory, to the Uzbek mainland was reopened, facilitating the free movement of vehicles. This development followed a visit by Kyrgyzstan's newly elected President, Sadyr Japarov, to Uzbekistan in March 2021, during which both nations expressed their commitment to resolving outstanding border issues. The partnership between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been reaffirmed as strategic, serving as a new model for cooperation in Central Asia. Since that time, the border situation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has remained more stable.

Disputes Over Tajik-Kyrgyz Enclaves

Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have deteriorated in recent years, primarily due to issues such as cross-border drug trafficking, hostage situations, and conflicts over land ownership and water resources. Discussions between the security leaders of both nations have been ongoing for several months. While marking the border in the mountainous and sparsely populated

eastern regions has proven challenging, the demarcation along approximately 90 per cent of the 970-kilometre border has been more straightforward. However, disputes in the densely populated Ferghana Valley remain unresolved, particularly concerning roads and canals that traverse both countries. On February 6, 2024, legal experts from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan successfully settled another 3.71 kilometres of the border.

President Rahmon's visit to Bishkek in May 2013 occurred a month after clashes erupted among residents of border communities near the Kyrgyz village of Ak-Sai and the Tajik enclave of Vorukh. Although these incidents were limited to physical altercations, stone-throwing, and property damage—particularly to vehicles—they highlighted the underlying tensions.

Despite Rahmon's earlier visit to Bishkek and his meeting with then-Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev in May 2013, no significant progress was made in easing relations. In January 2014, the construction of a road by a Kyrgyz individual around the Tajik enclave of Vorukh led to an exchange of gunfire, during which Tajik border guards reportedly employed grenade launchers and mortars. The conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated, resulting in fatalities. In July 2019, a meeting between the Presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the Vorukh enclave failed to alleviate the ongoing tensions.

Armed Clashes

In April 2021, tensions escalated along various segments of the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, leading both nations to deploy heavy machine guns, mortars, and armoured vehicles.³ Tajikistan even utilized helicopter gunships to target specific regions in Kyrgyzstan. This armed conflict resulted in the deaths of 36 Kyrgyz individuals and left 154 others injured on the Kyrgyz side. In contrast, Tajik authorities reported 19 fatalities and 87 injuries among their citizens during the confrontations. This marked the first instance of prolonged military engagement between the two Central Asian nations.

In September 2022, intense fighting erupted once again between Kyrgyz and Tajik forces. Both sides used mortars and artillery, and by the end of the four-day skirmish, Kyrgyzstan had deployed some of its newly acquired Turkish military drones to strike targets in Tajikistan.

³ Kyrgyzstan: Border Conflict - Final Report, Operation n° MDRKG013." Reliefweb, February 2, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/kyrgyzstan/kyrgyzstan-border-conflict-final-report-operation-n-mdrkg013>

The border clashes in 2021 and 2022 resulted in the deaths of 81 Tajik citizens and 63 Kyrgyz citizens, with hundreds more sustaining injuries. Additionally, nearly 140,000 residents living near the Kyrgyz border were temporarily evacuated from affected areas.

In the aftermath, both nations made significant efforts to address the border dispute. In June 2021, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov visited Tajikistan to meet with President Rahmon. Since that meeting, both leaders have committed to prevent future tragedies and have agreed to work towards resolving the border demarcation issue.

Regular meetings between delegations from both countries began to discuss border delimitation. However, despite these diplomatic efforts, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two least affluent nations in Central Asia, also increased their military acquisitions. In March 2023, Kamchybek Tashiyev, the head of Kyrgyzstan's State Committee for National Security, announced that Kyrgyzstan had invested \$1 billion in strengthening its military capabilities since the conflict in 2021.

In December 2024, an agreement on border demarcation was reached, with Presidents Rahmon and Japarov signing it on March 13 in Bishkek. This culminated in the signing of a final protocol on February 21, 2025, when officials from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met to finalize the details of the delimitation and demarcation of the state border. It was announced that the Presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan would have their first trilateral meeting by the end of March 2025. Accordingly, working groups prepared the final documents before the summit of the heads of state. Both sides also signed agreements on the construction and use of highways, as well as on ensuring access to water management and energy facilities.

A Thaw and Conclusive Resolution

The accord aims to address the border dispute that arose amidst extensive efforts to enhance regional stability in light of the evolving global situation. The three nations face several shared challenges, including the impact of climate change, the need to establish trade routes, and the urgent necessity to counter the escalating threat posed by extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, which has a significant presence in neighbouring Afghanistan. Additionally, this agreement was influenced by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, which has negatively affected Central Asian countries by reducing remittances from Russia.

The tripartite agreement to resolve the borders of Central Asia, along with the signing of the Khujand Declaration of Eternal Friendship among the three nations, has garnered widespread acclaim globally, from Bahrain to China and Japan to Iran. As noted by the President of Uzbekistan, this agreement is expected to foster stability, promote economic integration, and enhance the international standing of the region as a secure area.⁴

Furthermore, there is a proposal to implement a regional visa for foreign travellers, similar to the EU's Schengen visa. The border agreement involving Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, along with the Khujand Declaration, underscores the importance of Central Asian diplomacy and the need for regional economic integration and enhanced security.

Despite these developments, scepticism regarding the agreement persists due to longstanding historical grievances. The region is ethnically diverse, and disputes over land and water resources contribute to ongoing instability. Additionally, external geopolitical factors have influenced the area, as major global powers – including China, Russia, and the United States – have vested interests that could significantly shape future developments. China has promptly praised the agreement, stating that it aligns with contemporary trends of peace and development, thereby facilitating regional peace, stability, development, and prosperity. This agreement presents an opportunity for China to collaborate with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and other Central Asian nations to advance its Belt and Road Initiative.

However, the issue of implementing border controls at five road-crossing points remains unresolved. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are not, which means these crossings need to comply with the EAEU's external border regulations.

The Presidents also signed the Khujand Declaration, emphasizing eternal friendship, and inaugurated the Friendship Complex monument at the border junction of the Sughd, Batken, and Ferghana regions. This complex is intended to symbolize "good neighbourliness, trust, and strategic partnership" among the allied nations. A similar Treaty on Eternal Friendship was established in 1997 between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan; however, its practical implementation has been lacking. The long-term effects of these agreements

⁴ "Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan sign landmark border agreement", March 31, 2025.
<https://kun.uz/en/news/2025/03/31/uzbekistan-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan-sign-landmark-border-agreement>

will depend on the government's ability to effectively execute and uphold its commitments to political and economic collaboration.

Nonetheless, this agreement signifies a notable shift in regional politics, as Central Asian countries increasingly demonstrate a willingness to resolve historical conflicts independently. Beyond its symbolic value, the region is actively promoting cooperation through initiatives like the CASA-1000 energy project, which connects Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, aligning with the broader goal of regional economic integration.

Political Trends in Central Asia

Central Asian nations are engaged in a challenging and complex process of nation-building that is still incomplete. A significant issue they face is the struggle to move beyond the political and economic frameworks established during the Soviet era. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have largely resisted political reform, successfully implementing various internal strategies to maintain their authority.

In contrast, Askar Akayev, the former President of Kyrgyzstan, was initially open to political and economic reforms. However, over time, he began to exhibit authoritarian tendencies and ceased to share power with his political rivals.

At the other end of the spectrum was Turkmen President Saparmurat Atayevich Niyazov, who served as President for life until he died in 2006 and was known as a highly repressive dictator. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, has shown some signs of liberalism but has fundamentally continued the policies of his late predecessor.

President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan held power for more than twenty years before his death in 2016. He consistently opposed any efforts to dismantle the old regime and resisted transformation or attempts to strengthen relationships with neighbouring countries. His tenure was characterized by considerable instability, largely due to the strong influence of political Islam.

Similarly, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev skilfully navigated internal politics and established mechanisms to secure political legitimacy, remaining in power for 29 years until his resignation in March 2019.

With the ascension of a new president in Uzbekistan, the country has experienced a significant shift, particularly in its efforts to enhance relations with neighbouring, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Tajikistan, on the other hand, continues to struggle with a challenging mix of poverty, authoritarian governance, and Islamic extremism, making it vulnerable to instability. President Emomali Rahmon stands out as the only leader in Central Asia who has maintained power for the past 35 years, a period that began shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As a result, except for Kyrgyzstan, the political landscape in the other nations remains uncertain. Over the past twenty years, Kyrgyzstan has undergone a tumultuous political transition. The most significant challenge has been the shift from a Soviet Republic to a parliamentary democracy. Since 2005, the country has experienced two major uprisings, a phenomenon not commonly seen in other former Soviet republics.

Kyrgyzstan has adopted a parliamentary democracy; however, the foundations of democracy and the rule of law are still in their early stages. The current coalition government is fragile, and there are several ongoing issues, including ethnic tensions in the southern regions. At present, none of the incumbent presidents appear to face substantial opposition, although the fundamental political and economic characteristics of these nations are similar to those in West Asia. Furthermore, unlike the situation in West Asia, both Russia and China have effectively shielded Central Asian governments from collapse, as demonstrated by Uzbekistan's stability following the 2005 Andijan crisis and Kazakhstan's resilience after the 2011 Zhanaozen events. Even the crises in Kyrgyzstan have been managed effectively, preventing them from escalating beyond a certain point.

A significant transformation toward a more religiously oriented society is currently underway in the region, despite its secular background. Islamic movements are gaining traction in Tajikistan and southern Kyrgyzstan, particularly in Osh and Batken. While most Muslims in Central Asia adhere to traditional and moderate Islamic practices, extremist groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have established a notable presence, occasionally causing significant disturbances. Although both the IMU and HuT faced challenges after the events of September 11, 2001, they have been regaining influence, largely due to developments in Afghanistan.

The Ferghana Valley, marked by poverty and religious conservatism, has played a crucial role in shaping regional dynamics. Ethnic Uzbeks in this area, who tend to be more religious than the nomadic Kyrgyz, have been instrumental in fostering domestic opposition within Kyrgyzstan. Notably, power dynamics in

Kyrgyzstan have shifted from the predominantly Russian-speaking northern regions to the southern Kyrgyz clans.

Overall, Islamic movements in Central Asia are largely driven by external influences. Many of these groups have received direct support from terrorist organizations operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Aside from minor developments in Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, the political landscape in Central Asia has largely remained stable. Given the fragmented and vulnerable nature of internal democratic forces, most external powers have chosen to avoid actions that could destabilize regimes led by leaders from the Soviet era.

Concerns about the rise of Islamic radicalism have overshadowed aspirations for a democratic shift in Central Asia. Most experts agree that the situations seen in countries like Afghanistan are unlikely to be replicated here, as extremist and fundamentalist forces tend to thrive in politically unstable environments. Central Asia risks becoming a haven for terrorist activities, particularly for established groups such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). These groups have significantly strengthened over the years, receiving substantial support from external entities, including al-Qaeda. The IMU continues to undergo training in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Islamic organizations have gained traction in the Ferghana Valley. Some Western nations view these Islamic movements as part of the democratic process in the region. However, organized violence in the Valley, especially ethnic conflicts in and around the Osh region, has reignited tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, reminiscent of conflicts that erupted in the 1990s and 2010.

In Uzbekistan, the popular Islamic movement led by Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) has given rise to several militant factions actively pursuing the goal of overthrowing the government. Historically, Uzbekistan has responded harshly to Islamic opposition groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which have consistently sought to incite political turmoil within the country.

The strategic balance of power in the region has fluctuated over time, as major powers have maintained conflicting interests that lead to both cooperation and rivalry. With the United States having withdrawn its military presence, the region is primarily influenced by Russia and China. China has surpassed Russia in terms of economic influence in Central Asia, although it is making efforts to ensure Russia remains involved through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

To some extent, the appearance of democracy has helped redirect public frustration. However, pro-Islamic rhetoric and discourse within the Kyrgyz Parliament are starting to shape governmental policies. In contrast, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have experienced minimal influence from extremist movements. Nevertheless, the uneven distribution of wealth from oil exports has begun to foster public dissatisfaction, leading to protests in the streets. In 2011 alone, a series of significant explosions and terrorist incidents attributed to Islamists resulted in the deaths of at least 30 individuals in Kazakhstan.

In 2022, riots in Kazakhstan resulted in over 164 fatalities, with 103 deaths occurring in Almaty, the largest city, where some of the most intense confrontations between demonstrators and law enforcement took place.⁵ Reports indicate that more than 160 individuals lost their lives during several days of unrest, leading to nearly 6,000 arrests in Central Asia's largest nation. The situation was eventually brought under control after the intervention of Russian-led forces.

The state's previously covert efforts to combat extremism have now become more visible. Kazakhstan has strengthened its relationships with the Muslim world, while Turkmenistan has developed closer ties with Iran and the Gulf region. Although Uzbekistan has firmly opposed extremist influences, its society is becoming increasingly Islamized, suggesting that religion may soon play a pivotal role in the country's political landscape.

Regional Conflicts

As previously discussed, conflicts between states and ethnic groups have intensified over issues related to water, energy, and connectivity. Historically, border incidents have become commonplace, particularly as Uzbekistan has deployed armoured tanks near the Sukh enclave. Tensions have escalated following the suspension of gas supplies, the closure of a railway segment, and a sudden increase in transit tariffs imposed by Uzbekistan on Tajikistan.

Tajikistan's initiative to construct the Roghun hydroelectric dam on the Vakhsh River faces strong opposition from Uzbekistan. Furthermore, Uzbekistan has expressed significant resistance to Kyrgyzstan's plans to develop the Kambar-Ata mega hydroelectric projects with support from Russia. The former

⁵ Stobdan, Phunchok. "Trouble in the Eurasian Heartland: Central Asia's largest nation, Kazakhstan is pushed to the brink", Delhi Policy Group, January 17, 2022.
<https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/turmoil-in-kazakhstan.html>

President of Uzbekistan had warned about the potential for war if hydropower dams were established upstream on the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

Relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have also deteriorated over the years, particularly following the ethnic riots in Osh in June 2010. The two nations have ongoing disputes regarding land, enclaves, borders, and water resources. Energy shortages have further strained relations, with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan threatening to withdraw from the Central Asian electricity grid, established during the Soviet era, due to significant power shortages. These issues require long-term resolution.

The dynamics in Central Asia are consistently influenced by political developments occurring in other post-Soviet nations. Many events in this region have been linked to the so-called "Coloured Revolutions" in countries such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. In Kyrgyzstan, Western-funded NGOs played a crucial role in the ousting of President Akayev in 2005 and President Bakiyev in 2010. Similarly, Islam Karimov prohibited various foreign-funded NGOs, particularly the Soros Foundation, accusing them of inciting public discontent into a formidable movement.

Reports indicate that political figures with established criminal ties have played a significant role in instigating unrest, particularly in Kyrgyzstan. Over the years, the influence of criminal networks associated with the drug trade has expanded in the region, with some individuals attaining considerable power. Many of these drug lords have gained immunity by being elected to parliamentary positions.

In light of recent developments, particularly amid the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis, Central Asian governments are wary of Russia's renewed geopolitical assertiveness and concerned about the potential for a Ukraine-like upheaval to spread throughout the region. The events in Crimea and Donbas have instilled a sense of insecurity, if not outright fear, regarding their sovereignty. Concurrently, these regimes lack a strategy to counter the Western push for democracy, relying instead on close alignment with Russia. Notably, both Russia and China have thus far shielded these regimes from collapse. Russia maintains its military presence in Central Asia, while China has shown significant interest in supporting regional autocrats for both ideological and economic reasons.

Larger nations like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan seem to feel constrained by the recent economic and strategic alignment between Russia and China, especially in light of the events in Ukraine. As a result, they are seeking a more diversified

environment to safeguard their sovereign interests, demonstrating a desire to strengthen their relationships beyond just Russia and China.

Challenges in Central Asia have prompted strong reactions from all major powers. To ensure their survival, regional governments have employed various strategies, often leveraging their relationships with different powers to secure the most favourable political and economic agreements. While Western nations have called for international oversight regarding the serious human rights abuses committed by these regimes, both Russia and China have chosen to support regional leaders in their efforts to suppress opposition groups.

This shift in regional politics is significant, as Central Asian countries increasingly show a willingness to address historical conflicts independently. Beyond its symbolic importance, the region is actively promoting cooperation through initiatives like the CASA-1000 energy project, which connects Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and aligns with the broader goal of regional economic integration.

Implications for India

The recently established tripartite agreement between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan presents a positive outlook for India, though Central Asia has not received significant attention from us.

More than three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the strategic environment in Central Asia seems to be evolving swiftly. Over time, Russia has been gradually losing its dominance in the region, while China's extensive engagement is reshaping the regional dynamics.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has posed a considerable security challenge for the nations of Central Asia. The Western sanctions placed on Russia have hindered all Eurasian routes, disrupted supply chains, and had a profound negative effect on the economies of Central Asian countries that are closely linked to Russia. As a result, these nations have faced significant economic difficulties, while China is capitalizing on the ensuing crises. They have had to navigate a delicate diplomatic situation in their reactions to the Ukraine conflict. Despite assurances from Putin, the Central Asian countries remain cautious, recognizing the possibility of Russia continuing to play a major role in the region. Their sovereignty concerns underscore the necessity for these nations to unite, address their differences regarding unresolved territorial disputes, and establish regional cohesion.

The Taliban's presence in Kabul raises additional concerns for the region. While some stakeholders look to the Taliban to help resolve issues, there is a lack of consensus on how to combat extremism effectively. Various extremist factions, such as Jamaat Ansarullah (the Tajik branch of the IMU) and other local groups that have remained inactive since the events of September 11, are poised to re-emerge and infiltrate the area. Additionally, the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISK) remains active in neighboring Afghanistan.

Central Asia is becoming a strategic market for China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, and now the European Union, which is seeking alternative avenues in the region amid the tariff crisis. Beyond historical trade ties, the energy and mineral wealth of Central Asia attracts these powers, making it relatively straightforward for them to satisfy the import demands of the five republics.

China's substantial involvement in Central Asia is particularly significant. It not only addresses the region's demand for goods but also supplies crucial investment for development. Meanwhile, the Central Asian Republics have shown a pragmatic approach by accepting Chinese economic assistance while safeguarding their social and religious structures. This stance encourages other nations, including India, to continue their engagement with the region. However, with Russia maintaining its military presence, China's capacity to exert considerable strategic influence through its economic power remains somewhat in check.

As Russia remains preoccupied in Ukraine, Central Asian nations are actively exploring alternative partnerships. They have expressed a strong interest in fostering closer ties with India for various reasons, including the need for efficient logistics, strategic options and access to markets.

India maintains strong bilateral relations with these countries. Since joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2016, India has initiated a structured dialogue known as the "India-Central Asia Dialogue" since 2019, aimed at enhancing cooperation in political, security, economic, and developmental areas. However, tangible progress has been limited, with India's trade with Central Asia amounting to just under \$3 billion in 2023.

Central Asia presents a significant opportunity for India to broaden its focus, warranting greater emphasis in its foreign policy. Given the region's proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China, India must enhance its presence in Central Asia. New Delhi should adopt a forward-thinking approach and formulate a comprehensive strategy that takes into account the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in Eurasia.

Each Central Asian country possesses distinct characteristics and growth potential. Efforts to strengthen economic relations, both bilaterally and regionally, could yield substantial benefits, including in light of the trade disruptions following President Trump's tariff policies.

India should now define new roles it can assume in collaboration with these nations. The primary goal must be to ensure that India does not relinquish influence in the region to either Islamist forces or China's growing dominance.



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