



Central Asia in Transition: From Border Conflicts to Regional Cooperation

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For centuries, Central Asia functioned as a single civilizational space.

Empires rose and fell across its cities, from early dynasties to empires, from the three Turkic khanates to the Soviet Union. Trade routes connected cities like Samarkand, Bukhara and Merv to Xi'an, Istanbul, Delhi, Tabriz and Baghdad. During the Soviet era, five states of the region -- Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan -- were established in their current form and eventually gained independence in 1991. As the USSR crumbled, the Central Asian Five inherited rampant inflation, economic collapse, and, alongside that, the previously

non-existent borders turned into, sometimes bloody, disputes.

Soviet administrative borders, drawn in the 1920s and 1930s with little attention for ethnic, geographic, or economic realities, hardened overnight into international frontiers. Water systems were divided. Transport routes were disrupted. What had once been internal lines became sources of sovereignty disputes. Moreover, the newly drawn borders divided families and relatives, as it was common among Central Asian nationalities to intermarry; consequently, to this day, many Central Asians have at least one relative living in a neighboring country.



The territorial structure of Central Asia is further complicated by a dense concentration of enclaves and exclaves, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, where borders between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan intersect in highly irregular ways. Examples include the Uzbek enclave of [Sokh](#) within Kyrgyz territory and the Tajik enclave of Vorukh, both of which have been recurrent sources of tension due to disputes over land access, water resources, and transport corridors.



For nearly three decades, cooperation in the region remained limited and cautious. Borders were mainly closed and trade fluctuated. Armed clashes, particularly between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in 2022 caused the death of more than 100 people and forced over [100,000](#) Kyrgyz citizens to flee their homes.

On March 13, 2025, Kyrgyz President Sadyr Japarov and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon signed a landmark agreement fully demarcating their nearly 1,000-kilometer border. Weeks later, on [March 31](#), the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan met in Khujand to publicly declare the dispute resolved. It was considered a great achievement as one of Central Asia’s most deeply entrenched conflicts had been formally settled.

This result was not achieved easily. It unfolded within a broader regional transition that began after 2017. That year marked the first consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders in Astana, attended by the heads of state of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The

Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia was established at the [initiative](#) of the President of Uzbekistan¹ and acts as a regular, leader-level dialogue without external powers at the table. It played a great role as an institutional foundation to resolve regional problems and deepen ties in the neighborhood. In 2025, [Azerbaijan](#) was included as a member of this organization,

representing a broader unified Central Asia.²

Numbers demonstrate that the growing ties among Central Asian countries is turning into economic reality. Trade between Uzbekistan and its Central Asian neighbor has grown significantly in recent years, with some figures indicating an [increase](#) of over 20 percent. Similarly, other Central Asian countries also experienced a rapid increase in their trade with neighboring countries. This suggests that the diplomatic thaw underlies a transformation of the economic reality. Moreover, cross-border checkpoints have reopened, visa restrictions have been removed and it is now possible for citizens of Uzbekistan to visit neighboring countries with [national ID](#) cards, except for Turkmenistan which kept its visa requirements. Economic integration is also assuming an institutional form. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan recently launched the [Shavat–Dashoguz cross-border trade zone](#), allowing visa-free entry for

¹ Notably, the initiative has facilitated the ending of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border conflict

² Although Azerbaijan is located in the South Caucasus, its integration into Central Asian affairs and participation in regional consultative meetings have contributed to the concept of a broader Central Asia.

citizens of both countries within the designated area. The joint marketplace includes over a hundred trading rows and shared commercial infrastructure. Earlier, Uzbekistan opened a similar trade zone near its border with Afghanistan. These types of trade zones help foster economic integration and trade between the countries,

granting access to the otherwise inaccessible Turkmeni and Afghani markets.

Tourism offers perhaps the clearest indicator of this transition. According to Uzbekistan's National Statistics Committee, [10.7 million foreign citizens visited](#) the country for tourism purposes between

same time, millions of people from Uzbekistan visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan for touristic and family purposes. Easy and convenient border checkpoints and the increasing number of flights in Central Asia made it possible for foreign travelers to visit multiple countries during their time in Central Asia.

Beyond intra-regional ties, Central Asia is increasingly presenting itself as a collective diplomatic actor. Over the past two years alone, leaders have participated in high-level summits in the [Central Asia Plus](#) format. Summits took place with the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, Golf Cooperation Council, Japan, Italy and more. This format is considered a more effective diplomatic and economic framework, empowering the Central Asian countries by acting as a unified bloc , increasing their bargaining power with major powers and diversifying the economic partnerships. Moreover, it also represents the political realignment in the region.

Furthermore, Central Asian countries are members of several international organizations, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, through which they continue to deepen their cooperation. The states are also actively pursuing major connectivity initiatives such as the Trans-Afghan Railway project, the Middle Corridor, and the recently completed China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. These projects aim to connect Central Asia with South Asia, Europe, and China in order to expand exports and increase regional trade.

The term “transition” aptly describes Central Asia, as the region has managed to resolve several border disputes, reopen border checkpoints, integrate markets, and increasingly act as a coordinated sovereign bloc in international diplomacy, while continuing efforts to deepen cooperation and achieve mutually beneficial economic outcomes. 

Regional Integration

10.7 Million

(Tourists to Uzbekistan in 2025)

80%

(Nations with mutual visa-free travel)

20%

(Growth in intra-regional trade)

100+

(Trading rows in the Shavat-Dashoguz zone)

January and November 2025. The largest numbers came from neighboring Kyrgyzstan (3 million), Kazakhstan (2.5 million), and Tajikistan (2.5 million). At the

