

CENTRAL ASIA'S EVOLVING MULTI-VECTOR DIPLOMACY: DIVERSIFICATION, CONNECTIVITY, AND REGIONAL AGENCY

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Abstract *Multi-vector diplomacy has already become a crucial part of the foreign policy of the Central Asian states. For a long time, this policy has been considered a strategy for preserving sovereignty and balancing relations with major powers. However, now it is undergoing an important transformation. This article argues that Central Asia's multi-vector foreign policy is evolving from a strategy of state-building and geopolitical positioning on the global stage into a tool for the region's economic diversification and development. The shifts are addressed through three interlinked sections of this paper: an increase in external economic engagements, expansion and diversification of transport and logistics corridors, and the rising importance of intra-regional connectivity. More importantly, the article suggests that the success of multi-vector diplomacy will be contingent on how Central Asia capitalizes on its geopolitical relevance to develop economic heft, strengthen regional cooperation, and increase strategic optionality in a fractured Eurasian landscape.*

Keywords: *Central Asia; multi-vector diplomacy; strategic autonomy; connectivity; transport corridors; economic diversification; regional agency.*

Introduction

Balancing relations between major powers has defined Central Asia's foreign policy approach since gaining independence. Central Asian states have relied on multi-vectorism to navigate their location between Russia, China, South Asia, the Middle East and Europe. Essentially, it has been a pragmatic solution to geography, existing economic connections, and lingering security issues.¹

However, multi-vector diplomacy should not be considered a fixed concept. As the region has changed, so too has its meaning. In the 1990s and early 2000s, multi-vector diplomacy mostly meant states' policies of consolidation, international recognition, and diplomatic positioning. New Central Asian states tried to keep working relations with Russia, strengthen ties with China, engage Western institutions, and gain access to multilateral organizations. Nowadays, multi-vector diplomacy takes on a new development-oriented role that



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¹ Dzhuraev, E. (2019). 'Multi-vectoral' Central Asia: On the other side of major power agendas. In C. Frappi & F. Indeo (Eds.), *Monitoring Central Asia and the Caspian Area: Development policies, regional trends, and Italian interests* (pp. 15–34). Edizioni Ca' Foscari. <https://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-376-2/002>

includes economic diversification, infrastructure connectivity, new markets, foreign direct investment, technology modernization, and overall institutional strengthening.²

This evolution has been shaped in part by an increasingly fragmented geopolitical landscape. Western sanctions and instability in Eastern Europe are interrupting traditional Eurasian transit routes, security challenges involving Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and the Persian Gulf have complicated southern connectivity. Furthermore, competition over critical minerals, energy transition supply chains, food security, and logistics routes is signifying Central Asia's global relevance. In response to these trends, multi-vector diplomacy is becoming less about balancing between competing powers and more about managing systemic risk.

From State-building to Strategic Diversification

Central Asia's longstanding practice of multi-vector diplomacy can be traced back to a strategy of "hedging for sovereignty" born out of vulnerability. In its application to Central Asia, multi-vector diplomacy has meant navigating asymmetric relationships with great powers and neighbors while remaining opportunistic about forging diplomatic and economic relations elsewhere. Regional multi-vectorism should therefore be seen from the "inside-out" position, rather than measuring it against great power activity "outside-in" in Central Asia.

Central Asian multi-vectorism historically revolved around state-consolidation and sovereignty. Newly independent states needed to prevent geopolitical isolation but without allowing too much influence by any external power in their territory. They thus pragmatically engaged in defense and security cooperation with Russia, economic trade and infrastructure with China, development assistance and institution building with the West and its organizations, as well as cooperation in multilateral organizations to gain international legitimacy and keep great powers in balance.³

As multi-vector diplomacy has evolved, the imperative of sovereignty preservation has given way to additional considerations. Today, multi-vector diplomacy increasingly serves Central Asia's

² Zhang, X., Karabayeva, A., & Xing, R. (2025). Central Asia's strategic autonomy in the new heartland: Introduction to the special issue. *Economic Diplomacy*, 3(1), 135–147. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ecdip-2025-0013>

³ Yuneman, R. A. (2023). Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(2), 141–162. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-2-141-162>

development strategies at home. These states today also to attract infrastructure financing, access export markets, diversify their logistical connections, build human capital, foster sustainable growth, and develop resilient economies. Scholarship on Central Asia's "strategic autonomy" has come to similar conclusions, finding that Central Asian states are no longer defined by great power competition but are increasingly acting upon the region through geoeconomic activism, diplomacy, and connectivity.

Importantly, this does not necessarily mean pivoting away from any one particular partner. In fact, Central Asia should be seen as a win-win strategy. A Central Asia that connects to more markets, transport and trade routes, sources of financing, and diplomatic venues is capable of being a more stable, reliable partner for Russia, China, the EU, the United States, GCC countries, South Asia, and others.

Towards Strategic Risks and New Dependencies?

Central Asia's balanced engagements with external partners have significantly boosted the region's economy. Central Asia's combined GDP grew 2.5-fold over the past eight years to reach around \$520 billion, external trade amounted to \$253 billion, with intraregional trade accounting for more than \$30 billion. This quantitative evidence demonstrates not only the growth of the regional economy, but also the risks related to emerging new dependencies.

Trade between China and the five Central Asian states exceeded \$106 billion in 2025.⁴ China's accumulated investment stock in Central Asia reached approximately \$36 billion in mid-2025. The China Global Investment Tracker estimates Chinese investment and construction activity in Central Asia totaled approximately \$89.3 billion from 2005–2025 alone.⁵

Russia has retained its position as an indispensable economic partner as well. In 2025, trade between Russia and Central Asian exceeded \$45 billion, while cumulative Russian investments in the region have surpassed US\$20 billion.⁶ Russia is one of the closest

⁴ President of Uzbekistan (2025, November 13). *Central Asia on the verge of a new era*. Official Website of the President of Uzbekistan. <https://president.uz/en/lists/view/8653>

⁵ Xinhua. (2026, January 18). *China-Central Asia economic, trade cooperation achieves remarkable progress in 2025*. <https://english.news.cn/20260118/e30b6911e9e4426087a9c1d8d9594653/c.htm>

⁶ President of Russia. (2025, October 9). *Second Russia–Central Asia summit*. <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78180>

partners of Central Asia in terms of remittances, education, security partnerships, energy networks, and legacy infrastructure systems.⁷

The EU has also sought to deepen its economic engagement with Central Asia. EU trade in goods with Central Asia amounted to €54.3 billion in 2024⁸, while the EU also remains the region's largest investor, having accounted for over 40 percent of FDI stock in Central Asia for the last decade, totaling over €100 billion. In April 2025, leaders convened for the first EU–Central Asia Summit in Samarkand, which marked the new stage of political dialogue between the regions.⁹

The U.S. has also stepped up its political engagement via the C5+1 platform. In November 2025, leaders of six states gathered for the first-ever presidential summit at the White House, to discuss cooperation on strategic minerals, connectivity, regional security, and economic growth.

These figures show that Central Asia has come a long way in reducing its external dependency on any one geopolitical partner. Looking forward, the key policy question is no longer whether the Central Asian countries can diversify their external economic relationships, but how. That is, how can Central Asia ensure that its growing ties with the rest of the world lead to productive and sustainable development at home? Stronger domestic value-addition capacities in manufacturing and services, technological upgrading, institutional development, and regional economic integration are key areas where multi-vector diplomacy can begin to prove its worth.

Connectivity as Strategic Optionality for Central Asia

Connectivity matters to Central Asia, as being landlocked places natural constraints on countries' abilities to diversify their trade and engagement with the world. Connectivity, including physical access to different reliable ports, transport routes, digital infrastructure, and electricity grids, increases countries' opportunities for maneuver.

⁷ Xinhua. (2026, January 18). *China-Central Asia economic, trade cooperation achieves remarkable progress in* 2025. <https://english.news.cn/20260118/e30b6911e9e4426087a9c1d8d9594653/c.html>

⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade and Economic Security. (2026, May 20). *European Union, trade in goods with Central Asia 5*. https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/region/details_central-asia-5_en.pdf

⁹ Council of the European Union. (2025, October 29). *EU-Central Asia trade* [Infographic]. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-central-asia-trade/>

Therefore, for Central Asian governments, logistics is becoming another dimension of foreign policy.

The Middle Corridor: Potential vs Bottlenecks

One infrastructure project this cooperation specifically applies to is the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor, which runs from China and Central Asia across the Caspian Sea through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye into Europe. It is increasingly promoted as a way to increase freight traffic between Asia and Europe. The World Bank envisions that “volume crossing the corridor could triple and travel time needed for trips could reduce by half by 2030 if political commitment and investments are ensured”.¹⁰

Even though flows are on the rise, it will take time for the Middle Corridor to match the volumes passing through Russia and Belarus. China–Europe freight had made up for more than 86 percent of freight transferred overland through Russia and Belarus prior to 2022. Meanwhile, cargo transiting along the Middle Corridor made up only 3 percent of total rail freight across Eurasia. Among the reasons for this are increasing costs and transit times caused by inefficient border protocols, limited access to rolling stock and warehousing along the route, tariffs that can be politically weaponized and vary by route, long transshipment periods, and limited port capacity¹¹. Also there are challenges faced by cargo crossing through the Caspian Sea, which is experiencing mounting pressure amid dropping water levels.

With these challenges in mind, the immediate ability of the Middle Corridor to replace trade routes is limited. However, from a strategic perspective optionality remains primary concern. The Middle Corridor adds transit capacity and provides Central Asia and the South Caucasus with another outlet to the West.

Eastern and Southern Corridors: China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan Railway, Trans-Afghan Route, and Iran

For Uzbekistan, and Central Asia more generally, corridor diversification is not only about the Middle Corridor. As demonstrated

¹⁰ World Bank. (2023). *Middle trade and transport corridor: Policies and investments to triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030*. World Bank.
<https://doi.org/10.1596/40626>

¹¹ World Bank. (2023). *Middle trade and transport corridor: Policies and investments to triple freight volumes and halve travel time by 2030*. World Bank.
<https://doi.org/10.1596/40626>

by multi-vector hub concept that Tashkent has promoted since the late-2010s, multi-vectorism for Uzbekistan means going in all directions: westward via the Caspian; eastward via China; southward via Afghanistan and Pakistan; southwestward via Iran and Türkiye; and northward via existing corridors through Kazakhstan and Russia. Each of these vectors should be seen as complementary, not competitive.

The China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway plays a key role in this context. The project is often described as strategic asset, which could deepen east–west connectivity while simultaneously branching into wider Eurasian rail networks heading towards the Middle Corridor, Iran, Türkiye, and Europe.

The Trans-Afghan railway could play a similar role. Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan signed a Framework Agreement on Joint Preparation of Feasibility Study for the Railway Line Naibabad – Kharlachi in July 2025. Uzbekistan then ratified the agreement in February 2026.

This corridor would connect Uzbekistan through Afghanistan and reach Pakistan's seaports, including Karachi and Gwadar. Once completed, the corridor would allow for cargo transit between Uzbekistan and Pakistan in 3–5 days, instead of the current roughly 35 days. Freight volumes could reach approximately 3 million tons per year early-on, before hitting 15–20 million tons by 2035–2040.

This logic applies to Uzbekistan's approach in Afghanistan more broadly. "Stability through connectivity" approach assumes that infrastructure is not a silver bullet for Afghanistan's problems. But it does suggest that economic isolation increases instability, while new connections create mutual interests in more predictable and pragmatic forms of cooperation.

The first Afghanistan–Central Asia Consultative Dialogue, held in Kabul in April 2026, is of particular importance in this regard. The parties recognized "the importance of joint cooperation in various fields such as trade, transit, energy and transport connectivity". In other words, Afghanistan is increasingly interested in regionalization, actively participating in the region's connectivity and energy projects.¹²

¹² President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2026, February 4). *Ob utverzhenii mezhdunarodnogo dogovora* [On approval of an international treaty] (Resolution No. PP-

While Trans-Afghan connectivity is conditioned by wider security considerations between Afghanistan and Pakistan, China-brokered talks held in Urumqi in April last year ended with both sides expressing guarded optimism. Each agreed to maintain dialogue moving forward and seek de-escalation on a number of critical security and political issues.¹³

Likewise, Iran features prominently in Central Asia's ongoing strategy towards connectivity. It is one of the shortest overland connections between Central Asia and markets around the Persian Gulf, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean. Freight traffic along the route has reportedly doubled in recent years, according to Uzbek official sources.¹⁴

But like the Afghan route, Iran's geopolitical situation illustrates the logic of multi-vectorism. Instability in Iran, the Gulf, or around the Strait of Hormuz impacts fuel prices, transportation costs, and supply-chain reliability for countries across Eurasia. The implication is not to avoid routing goods through Iran; it is to prevent any one uncertainty from undermining Central Asia's diversified portfolio.

South Caucasus Connectivity: The Rise of TRIPP

In recent years, South Caucasus has been gaining importance in Central Asia's connectivity discourse. The latest development in this arena is a proposal to construct a so-called Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). The route first surfaced as part of the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process before being added to a recently published U.S.–Armenia implementation agreement in January 2026. The envisioned route promises unrestricted multimodal transit connectivity across Armenia and might even facilitate connections between Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, Türkiye, and larger Eurasia land bridges.

41). National Database of Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

<https://lex.uz/ru/docs/8033457>

¹³ Thompson, A. (2025, July 28). *A trans-Afghan railway chugs toward reality with new agreement*. Eurasianet. <https://eurasianet.org/a-trans-afghan-railway-chugs-toward-reality-with-new-agreement>

¹⁴ Khidiov, A. (2026, February 6). *From land-locked to land-linked: Uzbekistan and Pakistan form the shortest route to the world ocean*. UzA. <https://uza.uz/en/posts/from-land-locked-to-land-linked-uzbekistan-and-pakistan-form-the-shortest-route-to-the-world-ocean> 816428

Baku views TRIPP as a west-ward extension of itself that could complement the Middle Corridor and help operationalize Central Asia-Europe connectivity more broadly.¹⁵

Officials have mentioned, however, that the project's success is contingent on mutually agreeable progress being made on issues such as security arrangements. Political factors continue to be important when it comes to TRIPP's operationalization.

For Central Asia, TRIPP is significant in terms of increasing the number of Eurasian transport routes. As such, if realized, this route would further underscore the South Caucasus' importance as a transit hub linking Central Asia with Türkiye and Europe. Its success as a commercial and political venture, however, is likely predicated on continued normalization between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Regional Cooperation: Enhancing Central Asian Agency

The most robust pillar of Central Asia's multi-vector diplomacy resilience is regional cooperation. Whilst individual states can practice multi-vector diplomacy, only Central Asia as a more coordinated region can translate external interest into collective bargaining power and sustainable economic benefit. Regional issues in particular stand to gain from increased coordination, including water management, energy trade, border facilitation and harmonization of transport policies, climate adaptation, regulation of digital spaces, and regional security.

Heads of Central Asian states have now held seven Consultative Meetings since 2018. The most recent of these was convened in November of 2025 in Tashkent, where leaders decided to take the partnership to the next level: welcome Azerbaijan as a full participant of the format.

This development deserves attention. It is reflective of how Central Asian regionalism is taking on a more outward-looking and connectivity-oriented dimension. Azerbaijan's inclusion in the format underlined Central Asia's growing interdependence with the South Caucasus on matters pertaining to the Caspian Sea, the Middle Corridor, energy, and market access to Türkiye and Europe. At the same time, it may also point to the emergence of a broader C6 logic,

¹⁵ De Waal, T., Kochinyan, A., & Shiryev, Z. (2026, April 1). *Rewiring the South Caucasus: TRIPP and the new geopolitics of connectivity*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/03/rewiring-the-south-caucasus-tripp-and-the-new-geopolitics-of-connectivity>

under which Central Asian regional cooperation becomes more actively linked to neighbouring regions of strategic importance.

Central Asia's regional cooperation mechanism is based on flexibility and consensus-driven approach that prioritizes sovereignty while enabling cooperation on mutually beneficial issues. Going forward, the challenge will be ensuring that efforts to deepen regional mechanisms doesn't come at the expense of this important political trust. To this end, the region's cooperation moving forward should be described as "functional regionalism," or regional integration driven by concrete policy considerations rather than blueprinting supranational organizations from the onset.

Multi-vector diplomacy both enables and is strengthened by regional cooperation. Central Asia that is able to increase intra-regional harmonization of interests and policies will be more appealing as a partner for external powers. Likewise, multi-vector partnerships will create opportunities for regional infrastructure and development. On the other hand, weak model of regional cooperation risks leaving the region vulnerable as a whole to pressure from outside powers.

Conclusion

Central Asia's multi-vectorism is changing. It is now less about survivalism, positioning and balancing in the post-independence years than it once was. It is evolving into a tool of economic resilience, corridor diversification, and regional agency. The question now is no longer whether Central Asian states will maintain relations with multiple partners, which they will, but whether those relationships further sustainable domestic and regional resilience.

Central Asia has begun to realize that connectivity is the key driver of that resilience. Infrastructure projects like the Middle Corridor, China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway, plans to develop the Trans-Afghan route, access corridors through Iran, the various South Caucasus transit and transport initiatives, and more all demonstrate Central Asia's commitment to decreasing its dependence on a single source of transit. One route will not solve Central Asia's structural challenges. But together they allow for optionality, help mitigate risk, and allow Central Asia to balance itself.

But maximizing Central Asia's multi-vector potential requires internal consolidation as well. Regional cooperation should be the catalyst for Central Asia's multi-vectorism. By cooperating more with one

another, Central Asian states can negotiate better deals with partners, attract investment on a larger scale, coordinate transport and trade policies, and achieve a strategic autonomy that allows for independence without distancing itself from one partner to balance another.

Multi-vectorism, then, is not about the great powers balancing one another's interests in Central Asia. It will be defined by optionality, resilience, and what Central Asian states can do for themselves.

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