

## **Infrastructural Developments in Central Asia Easing Regional Cooperation**

### **Introduction**

Central Asia, a region historically characterized by its landlocked geography and fragmented political landscape, has witnessed a transformative shift in recent years. The development of modern transportation infrastructure, coupled with efforts to streamline border procedures and foster regional cooperation, has led to a significant easing of connectivity within the region.

Despite the declared successes of Central Asian countries in increasing interregional trade by 2.5 times over the last 10 years <sup>1</sup>, the region still needs to take and maintain measures to strengthen and boost regionalism. For all countries in the region, extra regional partners remain the most important trading partners, and the commodity orientation of economies limits opportunities for integration. The region's exports are heavily concentrated among a few key trading partners. European countries, China, and Russia collectively represented 75% of the region's total export sales from 2006 to 2022<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, based on the legacy of the Soviet Union, for example, the railroad infrastructure was oriented toward Russia rather than the countries of the region among themselves. And the active promotion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) contributes to strengthening the region's connectivity with China. Therefore, the creation of modern infrastructure between the five countries of the region is an important measure to boost regionalism.

### **Role of border infrastructure in logistics**

The recent series of consultative meetings among Central Asian heads of state, including five previous meetings and the sixth held this year, has led to significant changes aimed at strengthening cooperation in the region. At the same time, emphasis on checkpoints development that are crucial in eliminating congestion and facilitating the movement of goods, people and services can facilitate regionalism substantially. Given that Uzbekistan shares borders with all Central Asian states, border optimization can have a cumulative effect throughout the region.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/ru/%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%80/%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%8A%D0%B5%D0%BC-%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B8-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B4%D1%83-%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%B8-%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BD%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BB%D1%8C%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B9-%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B2%D1%8B%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB-11-%D0%BC%D0%BB%D1%80%D0%B4-/3165184>

<sup>2</sup> Yusupov, Y. (2024). Foreign Trade of Central Asian Countries: Trends, Barriers, and Prospects. <https://capsunlock.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Foreign-Trade-of-Central-Asian-Countries.pdf>

As is well known, unresolved border issues among Central Asian countries have for many years hampered regional ties and served as a divisive factor in bilateral or multilateral projects. Kyrgyz-Tajik border clashes in 2021 and 2022 have led to a severe decrease of trade relations and weakening political ties. Tajikistan also has not signed agreement on Friendship, Neighborliness, and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the 21st Century, inked by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2021<sup>3</sup>.

However, since the progress in resolving border issues started both between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2022 and the completion of border demarcation between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, countries have begun to use borders as an opportunity for regional trade. In particular, work is underway to reopen, modernize and expand border crossings between Central Asian countries.

The two pivotal countries in the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, plan to triple the capacity of border checkpoints<sup>4</sup>. In particular, the parties are reconstructing the Gishtkuprik and Navoi border checkpoints, which will significantly increase the flow of passengers and cargo. In 2023, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan opened two border crossing points (BCP) on the border that had been closed for more than 14 years: the Kara-Bagysh post in Kyrgyzstan's Osh region was almost doubled from 0.5 hectares to 1.12; and the Bek-Abad post, in Jalal-Abad region<sup>5</sup> (hasn't operated since 2009). Authorities of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan opened two more BCPs by the fall of 2024: Kara-Suu in Kara-Suu District of Osh Province and Ken-Sai BCP in Nooken District of Jalal-Abad Province, which will be an important factor for the development of freight traffic along the Fergana Valley. A total 13 out of 16 border checkpoints between two countries have already been put into operation in recent years. Three more checkpoints - Seidikum, Sumsar and Yntymak - are planned to be rehabilitated in 2025. In addition to these points, the Jalal-Abad, Shamaldy-Sai, Kara-Suu, and Kyzyl-Kiya railroad stations will also operate<sup>6</sup>. For example, in the 2000s, only 5-6 out of 16 border points between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were functioning.

In addition, from September 1, 2023, citizens of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can cross the border of these countries with ID cards (previously international passport was the only option to cross the border). This arrangement has begun to have a spillover effect, as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are also discussing the issue of allowing citizens of the two countries to cross the state border with ID cards<sup>7</sup>. The number of flights between Bishkek and Tashkent has increased significantly: while for a couple of years there were 2-3 direct flights per week, today they are daily. A seasonal Tashkent-Tamchi flight was also introduced to develop tourism in the Issyk-Kul region of Kyrgyzstan.

As a result, the growth of trade and people-to-people ties is in evidence: according to statistics, more than 14 million people passed through the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border in 2023, and for the first eight months of this year this figure has reached 11 million. The volume

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/central-asia-summit-failure-cooperate/31955695.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spot.uz/ru/2024/03/04/customs-control/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/33118562.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://rus.ozodi.org/a/uzbekistan-i-kazakhstan-obsuzhdayut-vozmozhnosti-peresecheniya-granitsy-po-id-kartam/33079624.html>

of trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2023 amounted to \$693.6 million, and for the first seven months of 2024 - \$428 million<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, work is underway to modernize border crossings in order to eliminate queues for trucks. A pilot project to introduce an electronic queue management system for freight transport is being launched at the Kyzyl-Kyya-Avtodorozhny border crossing point (Kyrgyz-Uzbek border)<sup>9</sup>. This will reduce logistics costs and improve conditions for participants in foreign economic activities. It is expected that this system will simplify trade operations and improve the efficiency of the border crossing point. It is noteworthy that this project is being implemented with under the Ready4Trade Central Asia project funded by the European Union.

At the same time, similar dynamics in the development of checkpoints between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have not yet been observed. For example, systematic cargo congestion on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border is a familiar problem that has not been solved for many years. Kazakh authorities usually refer to Kyrgyz exports' non-compliance with official check procedures such as phytosanitary and veterinary standards, while Kyrgyz experts believe the border is leveraged as a tool of political influence<sup>10</sup>. Although in April 2024, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan reached an agreement on joint work to resume the operation of checkpoints on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh state border, including Kychi-Kapka and Kamyshanovka<sup>11</sup>, the results have not yet been officially released.

## Formation of free-trade zones

Free trade zones (FTZs) can create new opportunities for businesses and consumers alike by reducing trade barriers, expanding market access, and promoting investment. Despite of this, Central Asian countries are not fully ready to introduce these measures in a speedy and meaningful way. Therefore, the countries are more ready for cross-border trade zones rather than full-fledged free trade zones, since the latter implies the absence of customs duties.

Nevertheless, Uzbekistan systematically promotes the initiative of forming a free trade zone in Central Asia, and this proposal was voiced during the last meeting of the heads

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[https://kaktus.media/doc/509235\\_na\\_granice\\_kyrgyzstana\\_i\\_uzbekistana\\_otkryty\\_obnovlennyye\\_punkty\\_propyska\\_foto.html#:~:text=%D0%9D%D0%B0%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B5%20%D0%9A%D1%8B%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%8B%D0%B7%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B8%20%D0%A3%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D1%82%D1%8B%20%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5%20%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%8B%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%22%D0%9A%D0%B5%D0%BD,%D0%A3%D1%87%2D%D0%9A%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B0%BD%20%E2%80%93%D0%90%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%22.](https://kaktus.media/doc/509235_na_granice_kyrgyzstana_i_uzbekistana_otkryty_obnovlennyye_punkty_propyska_foto.html#:~:text=%D0%9D%D0%B0%20%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B5%20%D0%9A%D1%8B%D1%80%D0%B3%D1%8B%D0%B7%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%B8%20%D0%A3%D0%B7%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%BD%D0%B0%20%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D1%82%D1%8B%20%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B5%20%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%BD%D0%BA%D1%82%D1%8B%20%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0%20%22%D0%9A%D0%B5%D0%BD,%D0%A3%D1%87%2D%D0%9A%D1%83%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%B0%BD%20%E2%80%93%D0%90%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B6%D0%BD%D1%8B%D0%B9%22.)

<sup>9</sup> [https://kabar.kg/news/na-kyrgyzsko-uzbekskoi-granitce-zapuskaetsia-pilotnyi-proekt-po-elektronnoi-sisteme-upravleniia-ochered-iu-dlia-gruzovogo/?fbclid=IwZXhObgNhZW0CMTEAR0e5JGFJ3LF6h\\_rJ0AALmYnDwqhk\\_McEA7zdCKMCHC3K\\_1LUUmzXP-ykdU\\_aem\\_UZonOdrHjwAjc1QTJ1vuFw](https://kabar.kg/news/na-kyrgyzsko-uzbekskoi-granitce-zapuskaetsia-pilotnyi-proekt-po-elektronnoi-sisteme-upravleniia-ochered-iu-dlia-gruzovogo/?fbclid=IwZXhObgNhZW0CMTEAR0e5JGFJ3LF6h_rJ0AALmYnDwqhk_McEA7zdCKMCHC3K_1LUUmzXP-ykdU_aem_UZonOdrHjwAjc1QTJ1vuFw)

<sup>10</sup> <https://cabar.asia/en/addressing-non-tariff-barriers-between-kyrgyzstan-and-kazakhstan>

<sup>11</sup> <https://economist.kg/vlast/2024/04/19/kpp-kichi-kapka-i-kamyshanovka-na-kyrgyzsko-kazakhskoi-ghranitsie-moghut-vozobnovit-rabotu/>

of Central Asian countries, which was held in Dushanbe in 2023. Thus so far, it can be noted that the Free Trade Zone was put into operation in Termez district of Surkhandarya region, on the border of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan in August 2024. Experts predict that the complex will attract 1.5 million people annually and annual sales will amount to 1.2 billion dollars<sup>12</sup>. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are also planning joint projects to create a trade zone at the border point “Oybek-Fotekhobod”, as well as the construction of a trade and logistics center “Andarkhan”<sup>13</sup>. In addition, the parties agreed that transit passage of trucks through the territories of both states will be carried out without permit forms<sup>14</sup>.

In April 2021, Astana and Bishkek agreed to build industrial and logistics hubs on the border. In August of the same year, the countries signed the Concept for the creation of industrial hubs on the border, according to which the first cross-border logistics complex should appear near the checkpoints “Karasu” and “Ak-Tilek”. It is assumed that the main consumers of its products will be residents of Almaty, Bishkek and Taraz. In total, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan planned to build five logistics complexes on the joint border<sup>15</sup>. However, these intentions are being realized very slowly, only in 2023 the Government of Kazakhstan approved a draft agreement with Kyrgyzstan on the construction of a border logistics complex in the area of the road checkpoint “Karasu” in Zhambyl oblast.

### **Contribution of C5+1 to boost regional trade**

Other actors can also contribute to the synergy effect in order to strengthen interregional trade. Of particular interest are the C5+1 platforms (a comprehensive diplomatic framework involving five Central Asian countries and the external actor) promoted by countries such as the USA, South Korea, and the EU through the implementation of certain projects.

Within the framework of C5+USA, working groups on economy, energy, environment and security have been established. These working groups bring together representatives of government agencies, the civil sector, members of the expert and academic communities of Central Asian states to discuss relevant thematic issues, and organize regional training programs and seminars. In 2022, the C5+1 Secretariat was established to coordinate the format's activities and identify priority areas for cooperation. In 2023, the parties – Central Asian countries and the USA established the B5+1 Business Platform (first meeting held in 2024). This initiative takes the lead in fostering regional free trade from bottom up and the diversification of export routes, which will attract more Western trade and investment<sup>16</sup>.

The EU is in fact supporting the efforts of Central Asian countries to optimize regional trade by launching the Ready4Trade Central Asia project. It aims to support the development of intra-regional and international trade in five Central Asian countries by

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<sup>12</sup> <https://nuz.uz/2024/08/30/na-graniche-s-afganistanom-uzbekistan-otkryl-novyj-torgovyj-hab/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20240418/tadzhiksko-uzbekskeya-investitsionnaya-kompaniya-planiruet-realizovat-14-proektov-na-135-mln-dollarov>

<sup>14</sup> <https://khover.tj/rus/2024/04/tadzhikistan-i-uzbekistan-budut-uproshhat-tranzitnyj-proezd-gruzovyh-avtomobilej-cherez-svoi-territorii/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://kz.kursiv.media/2023-06-05/lbrt-sklad/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://eurasianet.org/central-asian-states-easing-trade-barriers>

enhancing the transparency of cross-border requirements, removing regulatory and procedural barriers, strengthening business capability to comply with trade formalities and standards, as well as by improving cross-border e-commerce<sup>17</sup>. This portal offers detailed guides on various trade formalities, such as licenses, permits, and customs clearance, for goods moving within and through Central Asia. In close collaboration with the governments, the project tackled obstacles to cross-border trade by simplifying and digitalizing trade procedures, ensuring greater transparency and efficiency in terms of cost and time<sup>18</sup>.

South Korea is another important player whose projects align with the stream of regional processes in Central Asia. The visit of South Korean President Yoon to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan this summer was notable for the announcement of the “K-Silk Road” concept. In addition, preparations are underway for the South Korea-Central Asia Forum to be held this fall.

South Korea's initiatives and projects bring impetus to regionalism in Central Asia, among them high technology from Korea, educational programs, as well as projects on digitalization and strengthening the logistical potential of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will implement the project named “Capacity Building of Civil Servants to Promote Digital Transformation and Digital Governance” funded by the Government of the Republic of Korea for three years<sup>19</sup>. Uzbekistan and South Korea, following the Korean president's visit to Uzbekistan in 2024, also agreed to expand partnership in artificial intelligence, business process outsourcing and digital technologies<sup>20</sup>. Agreements with the Export-Import Bank of Korea and Hyundai Rotem on the purchase and supply of high-speed electric trains will strengthen Uzbekistan's railroad industry. Kazakhstan's interest in utilizing Korea's experience in training personnel in the maritime industry to develop the Caspian economy is also growing<sup>21</sup>.

As can be seen, such countries as the US, the EU and South Korea can synergistically contribute to accelerating and strengthening the trend towards regionalization of Central Asia. In particular, the C5+ platforms promoted by these countries overlap in many ways and can bring a cumulative multiplicative effect in regional cooperation.

## Conclusion

The dynamics and readiness of Central Asian countries to regionalization processes are uneven. For example, the development of cross-border infrastructure is differentiated in Central Asia. In particular, the most active work is carried out by Uzbekistan in tandem with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At the same time, for example, there is no progress between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and similar projects between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are progressing slowly. Systematic cargo congestion on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan does not contribute to the promotion of regional cooperation, and bilateral agreements on the construction of trade and logistics hubs

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<sup>17</sup> <https://ready4trade.intracen.org/en/about>

<sup>18</sup> <https://timesca.com/eu-funded-projects-strengthen-central-asias-trade-and-economic-ties/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.undp.org/ru/kazakhstan/press-releases/proekt-po-cifrovoy-transformacii-gossektora-12-stran-startoval-v-kazakhstane>

<sup>20</sup> <https://nova24.uz/uzbekistan/koreya-pomozhet-uzbekistanu-razvit-iskusstvennyj-intellekt/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://kisi.kz/ru/forum-chentrlnaya-aziya-respublika-koreya-sposobstvuet-vsestoronnemu-razvitiyu-cherez-analiticheskie-chentry/>



are making slow progress. Turkmenistan limits itself to declarations about the need to maintain the spirit of good-neighborliness, but is not ready to make concessions in the form of visa regime abolition. Therefore, at this stage, bilateral projects bring more tangible results, but this does not detract from the possibility of multilateral cooperation. The most active country in promoting interregional infrastructure solutions is Uzbekistan. In terms of geography, Uzbekistan has a good advantage - it borders all Central Asian countries. Other countries such as the USA, EU and South Korea also contribute to this picture of rapidly unfolding processes of regional cooperation. Systematic work, including within the framework of the C5+1 format, can contribute to a multiplier effect in our region.

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