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Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations

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SUMMARY

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Maria A. Blackwood
Analyst in Asian Policy

Central Asia: Background and U.S. Relations

Central Asia is a landlocked region that borders the Caspian Sea to the West, Russia to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan and Iran to the south. The five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—collectively cover an area approximately 40% that of the United States. The region's overall population of about 73 million is ethnically diverse and predominantly under 30; the majority religion in Central Asia is Sunni Islam, and the region is also home to religious minority groups including Shia Muslims and various Christian denominations, primarily Russian Orthodox. In addition to the local Turkic and Persian languages, Russian remains spoken throughout the region to varying degrees.

Outside observers classify the governments of Central Asia as authoritarian to varying degrees; all five countries rank low on international democracy and human rights indexes. Central Asia has been described as a challenging environment for efforts to promote democracy, and observers have expressed concerns that democratic progress in the region has been uneven or lacking. Members of Congress have drawn attention to human rights issues in Central Asia, including the lack of press freedom and the detention of political prisoners. Although Central Asian governments have implemented varying degrees of market reforms, political elites maintain significant control over the region's economies, and corruption remains prevalent.

Central Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world. Fostering regional connectivity has long been a major U.S. priority in Central Asia. Intra-regional relations have improved markedly since 2016, when Uzbekistan, the region's most populous country, embarked on a policy of reengaging with its neighbors. This has led to progress on issues such as border demarcation and water disputes. Periodic border clashes have continued between some countries, and analysts assess that water resources remain a potential source of conflict in the region. Much of Central Asia's hydropower potential remains unrealized. Some Central Asian governments are pursuing, with uneven progress, projects to develop solar and wind power in their countries. Despite these and other efforts toward diversification, economies such as Kazakhstan's and Turkmenistan's remain heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports.

The United States was among the first countries to recognize the five Central Asian countries when they became independent amid the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since that time, the United States has emphasized support for the five countries' independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. The U.S. Strategy for Central Asia defines the primary U.S. strategic interest in the region as building a "more stable and prosperous Central Asia that is free to pursue political, economic, and security interests with a variety of partners on its own terms; is connected to global markets and open to international investment; and has strong, democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights." The United States has provided over $9 billion in direct assistance to the countries of Central Asia in the past three decades to support security, democratic reform, and economic growth, and to meet humanitarian needs. Russia maintains strong political, economic, and military ties with the region, and is the primary destination for labor migrants from Central Asia. China's economic presence in Central Asia has grown significantly in recent years and is accompanied by an expanding security footprint. Many in Central Asia remain wary of China, however, due in part to fears of potential Chinese territorial encroachment and anger at China's repression of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, many analysts assess that the primary concerns of Central Asian governments are maintaining stability and ensuring their own countries' security. The governments of Central Asia have generally adopted a pragmatic approach toward the Taliban, particularly Afghanistan's immediate neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The government of Tajikistan, which also shares a border with Afghanistan, has by contrast expressed strong opposition to a Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. All five countries previously provided logistical assistance at various times to U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan, ranging from overflight rights to hosting U.S. forces. The Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan leased bases to the United States from 2001 to 2014 and from 2001 to 2005, respectively. Given Central Asian countries' proximity to Afghanistan and interest in contributing to regional stability, security cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries may evolve in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

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Overview

Central Asia is a region rich in mineral resources that borders Russia, China, Afghanistan, and Iran (see **Figure 1**). The United States was among the first countries to recognize the newly independent Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since that time, the United States has repeatedly expressed support for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the five Central Asian countries, and has implemented programs to support democracy, good governance, and economic reforms in the region. Some observers contend that Central Asia's importance to the United States has historically been "derivative of interests that were not indigenous to Central Asia itself, but rather were functions of U.S. policies, priorities, and relationships with countries around the region."[1] Since 2001, U.S. engagement with Central Asia has largely focused on security cooperation, particularly in relation to the conflict in Afghanistan. Russia maintains strong political and military ties with the region, and China's significant economic presence is accompanied by an expanding security footprint. Central Asia's combined population of approximately 73 million is ethnically diverse, and the median age across all five countries is about 28. In addition to Turkic (Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Uzbek, among others) and Persian (Tajik) languages, Russian remains spoken throughout the region. Outside nongovernmental observers characterize Central Asian governments as authoritarian and repressive to varying degrees (see **Appendix**). The five countries' heads of state did not change between 1992 and 2005, and political elites maintain significant influence over Central Asia's economies.

[1] Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, *U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2016, pp. 3-4.

Figure 1. Map of Central Asia

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Abbreviations: GEO—Georgia; ARM—Armenia; AZE—Azerbaijan; IND—India.

History

Historically inhabited by a combination of nomadic pastoralist and settled agrarian societies, the territories that now make up the five Central Asian states were incorporated into the Russian empire over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries through a combination of military conquests and political settlements. They became part of the Soviet Union after a period of armed struggle following the 1917 Russian Revolution. In 1924, Soviet authorities established the boundaries that served as the basis for Central Asia's modern borders. Soviet settlement policies and Stalin-era internal deportations of certain ethnic groups brought new populations to the region. While the name of each Central Asian republic derives from the locally predominant group, the region has historically been ethnically diverse (see **Figure 2**). Soviet policies granted local languages certain protections, but Russian functioned as a lingua franca and was privileged and promoted for most of the 20th century. The Soviet legacy in Central Asia is complex, encompassing universal literacy and economic development on the one hand, and brutal repression and environmental degradation on the other. Central Asians' contributions to the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany continue to find broad resonance and are officially commemorated in all five countries.

The states of Central Asia became independent with the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the assessment of one scholar, independence brought "massive transformations [that] coexist with significant continuities with the Soviet past."[2] Following independence, many of the region's ethnic Russians moved to Russia, the ethnic German minority mostly left for Germany, and almost all of Central Asia's Jewish population emigrated. Nevertheless, the Central Asian

[2] Adeeb Khalid, *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 442.

countries maintain varying levels of ethnic diversity, even as they have embarked on the process of forging new identities as independent nation-states. The Islamic religious heritage of the region's traditionally Sunni Muslim majority is one factor that informs contemporary national identities in Central Asia.[3] Soviet ideology was hostile to religion, and Soviet anti-religion policies in Central Asia led to the elimination of Islam from public life.[4] Experts and stakeholders assert that Islamic civil society is now growing in importance in the region.[5] At the same time, Central Asian governments generally exert strict control over religious activity.[6]

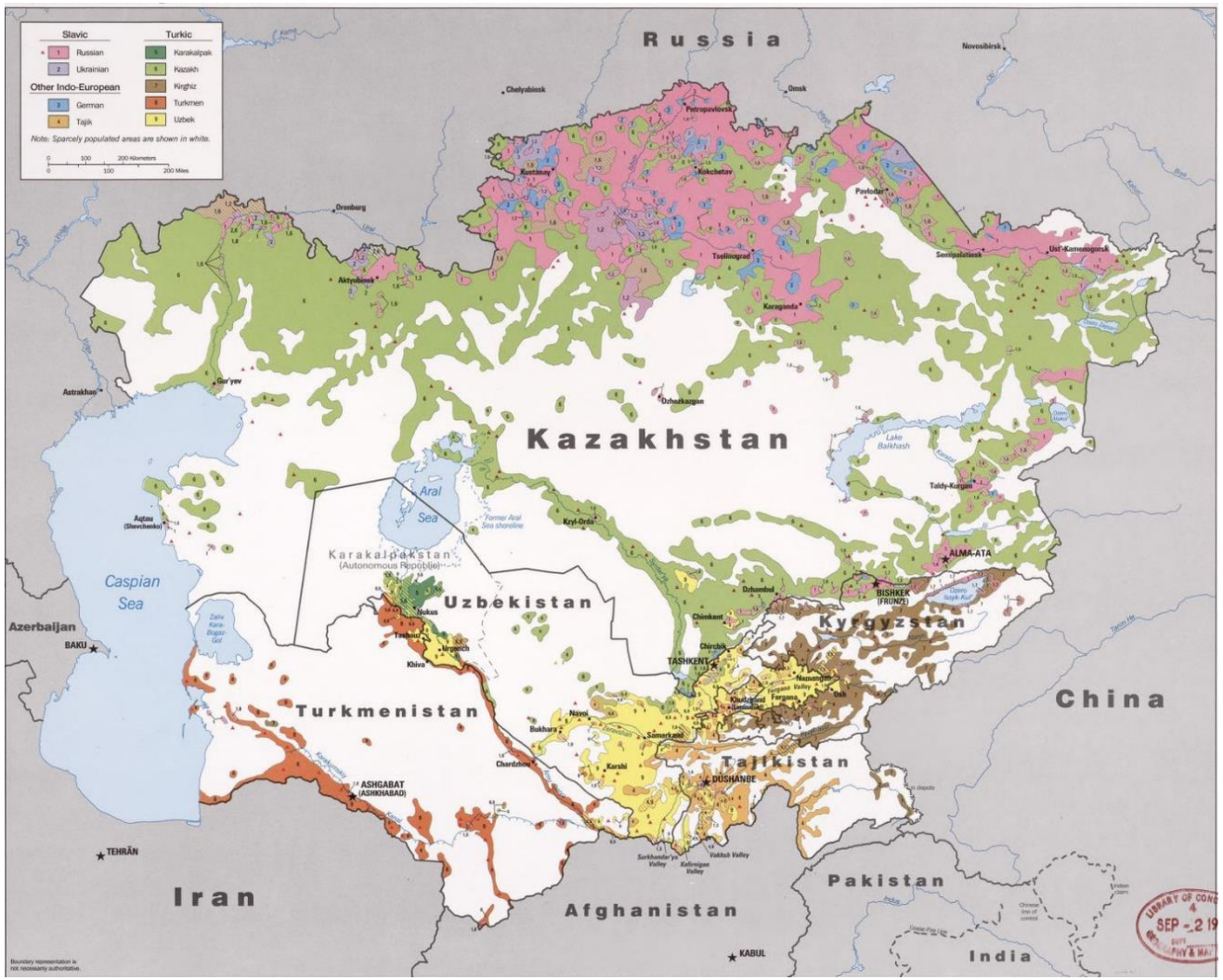
[3] Adeeb Khalid, *Islam After Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), pp. 117-119, 125-126, 132-133.

[4] Khalid, *Central Asia*, pp. 218-220, 351-352; Khalid, *Islam After Communism*, pp. 82-83.

[5] Edward Lemon, Samuel Doveri Vesterbye, and Bradley Jardine, *Emerging Forms of Islamic Civil Society in Central Asia*, The Hollings Center for International Dialogue, May 2021.

[6] See, for example, U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom*, May 12, 2021.

Figure 2. Major Ethnic Groups in Central Asia, 1992



Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, available at https://www.loc.gov/item/92685272.

Country Backgrounds

Kazakhstan

Endowed with significant hydrocarbon and mineral resources, Kazakhstan is the most developed country in Central Asia.[7] Kazakhstan shares lengthy borders with Russia to the north and China to the east, and also borders Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (see **Figure 3**); it is the world's ninth largest country by land area (about four times the size of Texas). The ethnically diverse population of approximately 19 million is predominantly Kazakh (69%), with minority groups including Russians (18.4%), Uzbeks (3.2%), Ukrainians (1.4%), Uyghurs (1.4%), and Tatars (1%), among others.[8] About 70% of the population is Muslim, mostly Sunni, and approximately a quarter is Christian, primarily Russian Orthodox. Since independence, Kazakhstan's authoritarian government has introduced market reforms, developed the energy sector, and moved to diversify its economy. Kazakhstan pursues a "multi-vector" foreign policy, seeking to balance its relations with major powers while actively participating in international organizations.[9]

Figure 3. Map of Kazakhstan

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Abbreviations: GEO—Georgia; AZE—Azerbaijan; MNG—Mongolia.

[7] Kazakhstan ranks 51st in the U.N.'s 2020 Human Development Index, ahead of Kyrgyzstan (120th), Tajikistan (125th), Turkmenistan (111th), and Uzbekistan (106th). Rankings available at https://hdr.undp.org/.

[8] Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *2021 zhyl basyna Qazaqstan Respublikasy khalqynyng zhekelgen etnostary boiynsha sany* [Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by individual ethnic groups at the beginning of 2021], available at https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT414397.

[9] "Mukhtar Tileuberdi: 'Despite the Pandemic, the Foundations of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Remain Unchanged,'" *The Astana Times*, January 7, 2021.

Political Background

Since independence, Kazakhstan's political system has been dominated by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a former high-level Soviet official who became the country's first president in 1991 and remained in that office until 2019. He won reelection four times, most recently in 2015, although observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) report that elections in Kazakhstan consistently do not meet international standards of impartiality, integrity, and transparency.[10] While Nazarbayev's authoritarian government faced international criticism for human rights violations and suppression of political dissent, he enjoyed strong domestic popularity for much of his presidency due to his largely successful efforts to promote stability and economic development.[11] Nazarbayev resigned from the presidency in March 2019, but he maintains his position as Chairman of Kazakhstan's Security Council, an influential post to which he is legally entitled for life, and as leader of the ruling Nur Otan (Radiant Fatherland) party. The day after Nazarbayev's resignation, Kazakhstan's capital, formerly Astana, was renamed Nur-Sultan in his honor. As First President and *Elbasy* (Leader of the Nation), Nazarbayev enjoys constitutionally protected status, including lifelong immunity from prosecution as well as special protections for property belonging to him and certain family members.[12]

Nazarbayev was succeeded by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, an experienced politician and diplomat who previously served as Kazakhstan's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva. Tokayev became acting president upon Nazarbayev's resignation and subsequently won a snap presidential election in June 2019 with 71% of the vote, although independent observers questioned the integrity of this result.[13] Tokayev is widely seen as a Nazarbayev loyalist, and his stated motivation for running was to maintain Nazarbayev's "strategic course" and "ensur[e] the continuity of our Leader's policies."[14] Tokayev has coupled his emphasis on continuity with promises of systemic reforms aimed at modernizing Kazakhstan's political system and improving government openness and accountability.[15]

Some analysts contend that major changes are unlikely as long as Nazarbayev remains entrenched in the political system, questioning the extent to which President Tokayev can act independently of his predecessor.[16] In October 2019, Tokayev signed a decree further enhancing Nazarbayev's

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[10] See OSCE Office for Democracy and Human Rights (ODIHR) reports on elections in Kazakhstan, available at https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan.

[11] Annette Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan: Tested By Transition*, Chatham House, November 2019, p. 16.

[12] Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of July 5, 2018, No. 178-VI, "On the Security Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan," available at https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=38039248#pos=4;-104; Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of July 20, 2000, No. 83-II, "On the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan—The Leader of the Nation," available at http://www.akorda.kz/ru/official_documents/constitutional_laws/o-pervom-prezidente-respubliki-kazahstan-lidere-nacii.

[13] OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Kazakhstan Early Presidential Election, 9 June 2019: ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, October 4, 2019; Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan*, p. 40; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020: Kazakhstan*.

[14] "Nazarbaev reshil vydvinut' Tokaeva v prezidenty Kazakhstana" [Nazarbayev has decided to nominate Tokayev for the presidency of Kazakhstan], *BBC News Russian*, April 23, 2019.

[15] President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address, September 2, 2019, available at https://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019; Ann M. Simmons, "Kazakhstan's Newly Elected Leader Calls Himself a 'Reformer,'" *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2019; S. Frederick Starr, "First Glimpses of Tokayev's Kazakhstan: The Listening State?" Atlantic Council, September 17, 2019.

[16] See, for example, Paolo Sorbello, "The Illusions of Post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan," *The Diplomat*, February 1, 2021; Nurseit Niyazbekov, "Democracy, the Tokayev Way," *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2020; Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan*, pp. v,

powers as Chairman of the National Security Council, requiring that most senior government appointments be approved by Nazarbayev.[17] Moreover, Kazakhstan's parliament is dominated by Nazarbayev's Nur Otan party. Legislation passed in 2020 formalized the concept of a parliamentary opposition, but critics contend that real opposition groups have no chance of entering parliament.[18] The most recent parliamentary elections, held in January 2021, reaffirmed Nur Otan's commanding majority (the party currently holds 76 of 98 elected seats).[19]

Table 1. Kazakhstan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 24/100)	Not Free (Score: 23/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	160th of 180 Countries	155th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Moderately Free (68th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Free (34th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	131st of 168 Countries	94th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	73rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	62nd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016* and *Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, *2016 World Press Freedom Index* and *2021 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2021 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2016* and *Rule of Law Index 2020*.

Human Rights

According to the U.S. State Department, significant human rights issues in Kazakhstan include restrictions on freedoms of expression, assembly, and association; restrictions on political participation; the absence of an independent judiciary and due process; corruption; unlawful or arbitrary killing by or on behalf of the government; and torture by police and prison officials.[20] The State Department notes severe limitations on media independence in Kazakhstan as well as widespread government surveillance of the internet.[21] Reporters Without Borders ranks Kazakhstan 155th out of 180 countries in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index (see **Table 1**). Human Rights Watch assesses that Kazakhstan's government actively persecutes real or perceived political opponents, especially those associated with Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan, an opposition movement banned as "extremist" since 2018.[22]

10-15, 19-22.

[17] Joanna Lillis, "Kazakhstan: Nazarbayev Takes Back Control," *Eurasianet*, October 21, 2019.

[18] Zulfiya Raissova, "Why Does Kazakhstan Have Parliamentary Opposition?" *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, July 2, 2020; Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: Would-Be Opposition Political Parties to Get Leg Up," *Eurasianet*, May 7, 2020.

[19] Another nine deputies are appointed by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a constitutional body chaired by the president.

[20] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kazakhstan*, March 30, 2021.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2020*, pp. 323-325; Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2021*, p. 385.

Although Kazakhstan's constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, restrictive legislation on public demonstrations makes it difficult to exercise in practice. President Tokayev signed a new law on the organization and conduct of demonstrations in May 2020, and the government of Kazakhstan touts the legislation as a positive reform.[23] Domestic and international human rights organizations have criticized the law for failing to meet international human rights standards, however. According to Human Rights Watch, onerous restrictions and bureaucratic requirements mean that the ability to protest remains "more a privilege than a right."[24] Local activists and international human rights experts also expressed concerns that parliament considered the law while the country was under lockdown due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, impeding public debate and blocking potential protests of the bill.[25]

In the past decade, economic inequality and a perceived lack of government accountability have fueled discontent that has sometimes manifested in demonstrations despite Kazakhstan's restrictive protest rules. For example, in 2011, protests by oil workers in the western town of Zhanaozen turned violent, leaving at least 15 demonstrators dead and dozens injured after police opened fire.[26] In 2016, large-scale protests took place against proposed changes to the country's land code, which critics feared would lead to a Chinese takeover of Kazakhstan's agricultural land.[27] Since 2018, women have protested a perceived lack of support from the state for single mothers and families with many children.[28] Nazarbayev's resignation and the June 2019 presidential election catalyzed further protests and calls for broader political change, including transition to a parliamentary system.[29]

Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan is led by Mukhtar Ablyazov, a fugitive businessman and former government official accused of embezzling some $6 billion while serving as chairman of BTA Bank, a major Kazakhstani financial institution. A vocal Nazarbayev critic, Ablyazov maintains that the charges against him are politically motivated. He received political asylum in France but lost court cases brought against him in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other jurisdictions. He was sentenced in absentia on criminal charges in both Kazakhstan and Russia. Kazakhstan's government has been accused of abusing the INTERPOL Red Notice system and other international law enforcement mechanisms in its efforts to go after Ablyazov and his associates. See U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kazakhstan*, March 30, 2021; Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), pp. 71-73; Serge Enderlin, "La France accorde l'asile politique au principal opposant kazakh" [France grants political asylum to primary Kazakh opposition figure], *Le Monde*, October 5, 2020; "Russia Sentences Fugitive Kazakh Banker Ablyazov in Absentia to 15 Years," *RFE/RL*, December 29, 2020.

[23] Assel Satubaldina, "Freedom of Expression Is the Constitutional Right of Every Citizen, Says Tokayev," *Astana Times*, February 17, 2021; Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan: President Signs off on Contentious Rally Law," *Eurasianet*, May 26, 2020.

[24] Mihra Rittman, "Kazakhstan's 'Reformed' Protest Law Hardly an Improvement: Serious Restrictions on Right to Free Assembly Remain," Human Rights Watch, May 28, 2020.

[25] Sarah H. Cleveland, "Joint Opinion on Compliance of the Draft Law on the Procedure for Organising and Holding Peaceful Assemblies with the Republic of Kazakhstan's Human Rights Obligations," International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, The International Commission of Jurists, and the Centre for Civil and Political Rights, May 1, 2020; Laura Mills, "Kazakhstan Draft Law Would Undermine Freedom of Assembly," Human Rights Watch, March 31, 2020.

[26] Bohr et al., *Kazakhstan*, pp. 48-49.

[27] Abdujalil Abdurasulov, "Kazakhstan's Land Reform Protests Explained," *BBC*, April 28, 2016.

[28] Catherine Putz, "Social Benefits Remain at the Heart of Ongoing Kazakh Frustration," *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2020.

[29] See CRS Insight IN11113, *Kazakhstan's Snap Presidential Election Met with Protests*, by Maria A. Blackwood.

Economy

Kazakhstan is Central Asia's most economically developed country, with an export-oriented economy highly dependent on hydrocarbons.[30] Major exports by value include oil, copper, ferroalloys, uranium, and wheat. Dependence on oil exports renders Kazakhstan vulnerable to external shocks. During a period of falling oil prices and currency devaluation tied to international sanctions on Russia (Kazakhstan's largest trading partner), Kazakhstan's real gross domestic product (GDP) growth slowed to an annual average of slightly above 1% in 2015-2016, later accelerating to over 4% in 2017-2019. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the related fall in oil prices have caused significant economic pressure.[31] The World Bank estimates that Kazakhstan's economy contracted by 2.5% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic; the country last experienced negative economic growth in the late 1990s. Projections indicate a recovery of 2.5% GDP growth in 2021.[32]

Energy

Kazakhstan is a major energy exporter, producing significant volumes of crude oil, natural gas, and coal. The country is estimated to have the 12th-largest reserves of oil and 16th-largest reserves of natural gas in the world.[33] Kazakhstan's oil and gas resources attract significant investment from U.S., European, Russian, and Chinese firms (see also "Oil and Gas," below). According to the U.N. Trade Statistics Database, crude oil accounted for about 58% of Kazakhstan's exports by value in 2019.

Kazakhstan holds 12% of the world's uranium resources and has led world uranium production since 2009. According to the World Nuclear Association, the country accounted for 43% of world uranium production in 2019.[34] In 2015, Kazakhstan's state-owned nuclear energy company Kazatomprom and China General Nuclear Power Corporation agreed to a joint venture to build a fuel fabrication plant, with production slated to begin in 2021.[35] Kazakhstan also hosts a low-enriched uranium (LEU) bank owned and operated by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The LEU bank is intended to decrease the global risk of nuclear weapons proliferation by guaranteeing countries that lack enrichment capabilities access to fuel for peaceful purposes in the event of supply disruptions on the commercial market. It is the only facility of its kind that is not controlled by any individual country.[36]

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[30] U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Kazakhstan—Market Overview," January 19, 2021, at https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kazakhstan-market-overview.

[31] Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*, November 16, 2020, p. 18.

[32] World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, January 2021, p. 79.

[33] BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, July 2021, pp. 16, 34.

[34] World Nuclear Association, "Uranium and Nuclear Power in Kazakhstan," September 2020.

[35] Kazatomprom National Atomic Company, "Kazatomprom and Chinese Companies Sign an Agreement on Nuclear Cooperation," December 15, 2015; Mattia Baldoni and Kamen Kraev, "Kazatomprom-CGN Joint Venture to Supply Framatome Assemblies to China," *NucNet*, March 5, 2020.

[36] IAEA, "IAEA Low Enriched Uranium (LEU) Bank," at https://www.iaea.org/topics/iaea-low-enriched-uranium-bank; Nuclear Threat Initiative, "IAEA Low Enriched Uranium Bank Launches in Kazakhstan, Significant Milestone for NTI-Backed Nuclear Security Initiative," August 28, 2017.

Diversification

Kazakhstan's government seeks to promote non-oil exports through ongoing structural and institutional reforms. The Kazakhstan 2050 Strategy, promulgated by Nazarbayev in 2012, aims to position Kazakhstan as one of the world's top 30 most-developed economies by 2050.[37] As part of this framework, officials are prioritizing transport and logistics development and modernization projects, largely aligned with China's Belt and Road Initiative. Kazakhstan's government also seeks to turn the country into a regional financial hub, in part through the Astana International Financial Centre. This special economic zone, opened in 2018, is backed by Chinese investment and is modeled on the Dubai International Financial Centre.[38] As part of its economic diversification efforts, Kazakhstan's government has announced that the country aims to produce 50% of its power from alternative energy sources by 2050. The U.S. Department of Commerce has identified the agricultural sector as an area of opportunity for U.S. firms as Kazakhstan seeks to reduce its dependence on extractive industries.[39]

U.S.-Kazakhstan Bilateral Relations

The United States was the first country to recognize Kazakhstan's independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. The two countries have developed a strong and wide-ranging bilateral relationship, even as Kazakhstan has sought to avoid alignment with any one power. In February 2019 Senate testimony, General Joseph L. Votel, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command, described U.S. relations with Kazakhstan as "the most mature and forward-thinking in Central Asia."[40]

Nuclear threat reduction has been an area of close cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan from the inception of the bilateral relationship. Kazakhstan was home to the Soviet Union's primary nuclear test site, a 6,950-square-mile zone situated near the city of Semipalatinsk (renamed Semey in 2007) in Kazakhstan's northeast. Over 450 nuclear tests were conducted at the Semipalatinsk Test Site between 1949 and 1989.[41] The dissolution of the Soviet Union left Kazakhstan with one of the world's largest nuclear arsenals, including some 1,400 nuclear warheads and more than 100 intercontinental ballistic missiles. Kazakhstan denuclearized and relinquished the Soviet warheads that remained on its territory, the last of which were transferred to Russia in 1995.[42] Kazakhstan cooperated closely with the United States to secure nuclear materials and dismantle associated infrastructure as part of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program, through which the United States has provided over $275 million in assistance to Kazakhstan's efforts to eliminate weapons of mass destruction and related

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[37] "Address by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Leader of the Nation, N.A. Nazarbayev, Strategy Kazakhstan 2050: New Political Course of the Established State," December 14, 2012, available at https://strategy2050.kz/en/page/multilanguage/.

[38] "Seeking Belt Buckle Role, Kazakhstan Launches China-Backed Financial Hub," Reuters, July 5, 2018.

[39] U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, "Kazakhstan—Market Overview," January 19, 2021, at https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kazakhstan-market-overview.

[40] Senate Armed Services Committee, *Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command*, February 5, 2019.

[41] *Radiological Conditions at the Semipalatinsk Test Site, Kazakhstan: Preliminary Assessment and Recommendations for Further Study* (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, 1998), pp. 3-7; Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019), pp. 234-243.

[42] Federation of American Scientists, "Kazakhstan Special Weapons," at https://fas.org/nuke/guide/kazakhstan/index.html; Nuclear Threat Initiative, "Nuclear Disarmament Kazakhstan," January 2, 2019, at https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/kazakhstan-nuclear-disarmament.

infrastructure since 1991.[43] Kazakhstan also cooperates with the U.S. Department of Energy on nuclear security and nuclear energy through the U.S.-Kazakhstan Energy Partnership, formalized in 2001.[44]

Military-to-military contacts constitute a significant aspect of the U.S.-Kazakhstan bilateral relationship. Since 2003, Kazakhstan has hosted Exercise Steppe Eagle, a multilateral military exercise that focuses on peacekeeping capabilities. In its most recent iteration, conducted in southeastern Kazakhstan in June 2019, Exercise Steppe Eagle included participants from the U.S. Army and the Arizona Army National Guard, as well as forces from the United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with observers from India, Turkey, and Uzbekistan.

Counternarcotics is an active area of cooperation between the two countries. Kazakhstan is a transit country for heroin and other opiates from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe, and the United States seeks to improve Kazakhstan's capacity to combat drug trafficking and related criminal activity. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration maintains a regional office in Almaty, Kazakhstan's largest city. The State Department has characterized U.S.-Kazakhstan law enforcement and military ties as "strong and growing."[45]

U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan aims to advance human rights and democratic values by supporting the rule of law, fostering local media development, and building the capacity of civil society organizations. Additionally, U.S. programs seek to support economic reform and promote renewable energy and improved energy efficiency.[46] Another focus of U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan is security cooperation, particularly strengthening military partnerships, fighting transnational crime, and combatting weapons of mass destruction.[47] The State Department requests $10.7 million in appropriations for aid to Kazakhstan for FY2022, as compared to $12.1 million allocated for FY2020.[48]

The Kyrgyz Republic

The Kyrgyz Republic (commonly known as Kyrgyzstan) is a mountainous country slightly smaller than South Dakota. Kyrgyzstan borders China in addition to three other Central Asian states (see **Figure 4**) and maintains close ties with Russia. The population of approximately 6.6 million is predominantly Kyrgyz (73.8%) with minority groups including Uzbeks (14.8%), Russians (5.1%), Dungans (1.1%), and Uyghurs (0.9%), among others.[49] Approximately 90% of the population is Muslim, primarily Sunni; a plurality of the Christian minority, which accounts for about 7% of the population, is Russian Orthodox.[50] For most of the 30 years since independence, Kyrgyzstan has been considered by scholars and nongovernmental organizations

[43] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Kazakhstan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," January 20, 2021.

[44] Kazakhstan is seeking to produce 50% of its power from alternative energy sources by 2050. As such, the Partnership has most recently focused on clean energy deployment and improving the efficiency of Kazakhstan's electricity markets. U.S. Department of Energy, Office of International Affairs, "U.S.-Kazakhstan Energy Partnership," at https://www.energy.gov/ia/international-affairs-initiatives/us-kazakhstan-energy-partnership.

[45] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Kazakhstan*, August 3, 2018, p. 2.

[46] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2022*, Appendix 2, p. 287.

[47] Ibid., pp. 309, 380-381.

[48] Ibid., p. 576.

[49] National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, "Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia" [Ethnic composition of the population], available at http://www.stat.kg/ru/opendata/category/312/.

[50] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kyrgyz Republic*, May 12, 2021.

(NGOs) as the most democratic country in Central Asia, with a vibrant civil society and a higher degree of press freedom than is found elsewhere in the region (see **Table 2**).[51] Supporting a more inclusive and accountable democracy is a stated U.S. goal in Kyrgyzstan.[52] The country is one of 21 states worldwide that participate in the House Democracy Partnership.[53] In light of recent political developments (see "Political Background," below), in 2021 the NGO Freedom House classified Kyrgyzstan as "not free" for the first time in 11 years. U.S. officials and others have voiced concern about the influence of organized crime in Kyrgyz politics.[54] Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about government pressure on independent media outlets, including the congressionally funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL).[55] The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant economic strain in Kyrgyzstan, which is an impoverished country that relies heavily on foreign remittances.

[51] On Kyrgyztan's "exceptionalism," see, for example, Eugene Huskey, *Encounters at the Edge of the Muslim World: A Political Memoir of Kyrgyzstan* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), pp. 213-215. See also Johan Engvall, "Kyrgyzstan and the Trials of Independence," in Marlene Laruelle and Johan Engvall, eds., *Kyrgyzstan Beyond "Democracy Island" and "Failing State"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 1-19. Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian country to be characterized as "Partly Free" by Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* report after 1993, although it did not consistently maintain that rating (Kyrgyzstan was rated "Partly Free" in 23 of the 30 years since the country became independent). In most years since 1991, Freedom House assessed that Kyrgyzstan exhibited a higher degree of political rights and civil liberties than any other Central Asian country. See Freedom House, "Country and Territory Rankings and Statuses, 1973-2021," available at https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/Country_and_Territory_Ratings_and_Statuses_FIW1973-2021.xlsx.

[52] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Kyrgyz Republic*, November 16, 2018, pp. 5, 10.

[53] House Democracy Partnership, "Kyrgyzstan," available at https://hdp.house.gov/sites/housedemocracypartnership.house.gov/files/Kyrgyzstan%20One-Pager.pdf/.

[54] See, for example, House Foreign Affairs Committee (@HouseForeign), Twitter, October 16, 2020, 12:17 p.m., available at https://twitter.com/HouseForeign/status/1317137561018601475; U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Statement on Threats to the Kyrgyz Constitutional Order," October 13, 2020.

[55] See, for example, Senator Bob Menendez (@SenatorMenendez), Twitter, December 13, 2019, 12:54 p.m., available at https://twitter.com/SenatorMenendez/status/1205546563285798913, and House Foreign Affairs Committee (@HouseForeign), Twitter, December 14, 2019, 12:03AM, available at https://twitter.com/HouseForeign/status/1205714827706015744.

Figure 4. Map of the Kyrgyz Republic

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Political Background

Kyrgyzstan experienced political upheavals that ousted authoritarian-leaning presidents in 2005 and 2010.[56] A new constitution adopted in 2010 limited the presidency to one six-year term and converted the country to a semi-parliamentary system in which the president shared executive power with the prime minister. Several Members of Congress and other U.S. policymakers voiced support for Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary democracy, the only such political system in Central Asia.[57] In light of subsequent political developments, analysts raised concerns about democratic backsliding in the country.[58] According to Freedom House, by 2020, Kyrgyzstan's legislature had "de facto surrendered its constitutionally granted power to form and control the executive branch," and become a rubber-stamp body "merely paying lip service to the declared goal of building a parliamentary democracy."[59] Such concerns were heightened following an April 2021 referendum in which voters approved a new constitution. In addition to significantly increasing presidential power and weakening the legislature, the new constitution also allows a president to

[56] Bruce Pannier, "Rethinking Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution," *RFE/RL*, August 25, 2009; Catherine Putz, "Remembering Kyrgyzstan's Revolutions," *The Diplomat*, April 9, 2015.

[57] See, for example, Sen. Ted Kaufman, "Kyrgyzstan," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 156 (July 15, 2010), p. S5954; Sen. John Kerry, "Kyrgyzstan's Democratic Transition," remarks in the Senate, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 157 (June 28, 2011), p. S4149; Rep. Joe Wilson, "New Partnership with Kyrgyzstan," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 158 (February 27, 2012), p. H951.

[58] See, for example, Paul Stronski and Katherine Quinn-Judge, "Kyrgyzstan at 25: Treading Water," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

[59] Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2020: Kyrgyzstan*.

serve two five-year terms. The document has drawn criticism as "undermin[ing] human rights norms and weaken[ing] checks and balances necessary to prevent abuses of power."[60]

The new constitution came after political upheaval in the wake of disputed October 2020 parliamentary elections whose results heavily favored pro-establishment parties. Opposition parties alleged widespread irregularities, including vote-buying and voter intimidation; these assertions were deemed credible by international election observers.[61] After mass protests broke out in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital, the Central Election Commission annulled the election results.[62] Amid the resulting power vacuum, Sadyr Japarov, a former member of parliament who had been serving a lengthy prison sentence on charges he maintains were politically motivated, emerged as the leading contender to assume power.[63] Within 11 days of the elections, Japarov had become both prime minister and acting president.[64]

Upon taking power, Japarov and his allies began to push for a constitutional referendum to return Kyrgyzstan to a presidential form of government, arguing that the country is not ready for parliamentarism. New parliamentary elections were initially scheduled for December 2020; they were postponed after the sitting parliament voted to extend its mandate through June 2021.[65] The elections are currently scheduled to take place on November 28, 2021. A snap presidential election and a referendum on whether or not Kyrgyzstan should adopt a presidential system took place in January 2021, raising concerns about the state of democracy and rule of law in the country.[66] Japarov was elected president with 79% of the vote amid relatively low turnout. In the concurrent constitutional referendum, 84% of voters supported reverting to a presidential system.[67]

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[60] Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan: Withdraw Problematic Draft Constitution," March 5, 2021.

[61] "Kyrgyz Opposition Decries Mass Irregularities in Parliamentary Elections," *RFE/RL*, October 4, 2020; OSCE ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission, Kyrgyz Republic—Parliamentary Elections, October 4, 2020, "Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions," pp. 1-2, 9.

[62] Central Commission on Elections and the Conduction of Referendums of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, "TsIK priznala nedeistvitel'nymi itogi golosovaniia na vyborakh" [CEC has declared election results invalid], October 6, 2020; Abdujalil Abdurasulov, "Kyrgyzstan Election: Euphoria Turns to Insecurity as Mob Rule Spreads," *BBC News*, October 8, 2020; Catherine Putz, "Does Kyrgyzstan's Post-Election Chaos Put It on the Road to Revolution?" *The Diplomat*, October 6, 2020.

[63] Temur Umarov, "Who's in Charge Following Revolution in Kyrgyzstan?" Carnegie Moscow Center, October 26, 2020; Bruce Pannier, "A Hidden Force In Kyrgyzstan Hijacks The Opposition's Push for Big Changes," *RFE/RL*, October 13, 2020; "Sadyr Japarov: Kyrgyzstan Needs to Change 'Political Culture,'" *Al Jazeera*, October 20, 2020.

[64] "Kyrgyzstan: Japarov's Nomination as PM Pauses Crisis," *Eurasianet*, October 14, 2020; Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyz President Jeenbekov Offers Resignation," *The Diplomat*, October 15, 2020; Peter Leonard, "Kyrgyzstan: Japarov Seizes All Levers of Power," *Eurasianet*, October 16, 2020; "Kyrgyz Parliament Gives Newly Elected PM Japarov Presidential Powers," *RFE/RL*, October 16, 2020.

[65] Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan Punts on Elections to Pursue Constitutional Reforms," *The Diplomat*, October 22, 2020; Ilgiz Kambarov, "Upcoming Parliament Elections Present New Opportunities and Challenges for Kyrgyzstan," *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2021.

[66] European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Urgent Amicus Curiae Brief Relating to the Postponement of Elections Motivated by Constitutional Reform Issued Pursuant to Article 14a of the Venice Commission's Rules of Procedure on the Basis of Comments by Mr. Richard Barrett (Member, Ireland), Ms. Marta Cartabia (Substitute Member, Italy), Ms. Hanna Suchocka (Honorary President, Former Member, Poland), Opinion No. 1007/2020, November 17, 2020; Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan: Bad Faith Efforts to Overhaul Constitution," November 21, 2020; U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Statement on Constitutional Referendum in the Kyrgyz Republic," November 27, 2020; Ayzyiek Imanaliyeva, "Kyrgyzstan: Constitutional Chamber Nixes Attempt to Halt Power Grab," *Eurasianet*, December 2, 2020.

[67] "Kyrgyzstan: Japarov Secures Commanding Election Victory," *Eurasianet*, January 10, 2021; Mariya Omelicheva, "Why Did Kyrgyz Voters Give Up Parliamentarism?" *The Diplomat*, January 12, 2021; Ana-Maria Anghelescu,

Some analysts posit that Kyrgyz voters may be drawn to a strong presidential system due to long-standing frustrations with corruption and the ineffectiveness of parliament.[68] Japarov enjoys widespread popularity, and many in Kyrgyzstan support his populist platform.[69] In a poll conducted by the International Republican Institute in February and March 2021, 70% of respondents said the country is heading in the right direction, up from 41% in August 2020.[70] Nevertheless, some argue that the new constitution and the process by which it was adopted set the stage for future political instability.[71]

As he moved to consolidate power, Japarov announced his intention to combat crime and corruption. In October 2020, Kyrgyz authorities arrested Raimbek Matraimov, a former high-level customs official implicated in a large-scale corruption and money-laundering scheme, and Kamchybek Kolbayev, who is designated by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as a key member of a transnational criminal organization.[72] In December 2020, Treasury added Matraimov to the Specially Designated Nationals List under Executive Order 13818, which implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328), due to his involvement in corruption. The State Department additionally announced visa sanctions against Matraimov and his spouse a day later.[73] While Kyrgyz authorities have expressed willingness to cooperate with the United States on combatting corruption, some analysts question the sincerity of Japarov's anti-corruption efforts and speculate that he has backing from organized crime leaders.[74] The handling of court cases against Matraimov and Kolbayev has raised concerns among U.S. officials and others in light of their lenient treatment; both men have been released from custody.[75]

"Should Europe Worry About Kyrgyzstan?" *The Diplomat*, January 16, 2021.

[68] See, for example, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Kyrgyzstan's Constitutional Referendum: Another Step Backward?," event held on April 9, 2021, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tw5jjrXiFH8; Georgy Mamedov, "'Japarov Is Our Trump': Why Kyrgyzstan Is the Future of Global Politics," Open Democracy, January 6, 2021.

[69] Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, "Kyrgyzstan: Japarov, Last Hope or Populist Menace?," *Eurasianet*, January 6, 2021; Gulzat Baialieva and Joldon Kutmalaiev, "How Kyrgyz Social Media Backed an Imprisoned Politician's Meteoric Rise to Power," Open Democracy, October 15, 2020.

[70] "Ahead of Elections, IRI Poll Reveals Kyrgyz Public Expectations," International Republican Institute, April 2, 2021.

[71] Bruce Pannier, "Does the New Kyrgyz Constitution Set the Country Up for Future Unrest?" *RFE/RL*, April 13, 2021.

[72] Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "Plunder and Patronage in the Heart of Central Asia," available at https://www.occrp.org/en/plunder-and-patronage/; U.S. Department of State, Transnational Organized Crime Rewards Program, "Kamchybek Asanbekovich Kolbayev Criminal Network," April 9, 2017; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Key Members of the Brothers' Circle Criminal Organization," December 20, 2012; "Kyrgyzstan: Kolbayev Arrested in Dramatic Fashion, but Is It Theater?" *Eurasianet*, October 22, 2020.

[73] U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Actors in Africa and Asia," December 9, 2020; U.S. Department of State, "On the Occasion of International Anticorruption Day and International Human Rights Day," December 10, 2020.

[74] Ilgiz Kambarov, "Japarov's Many Promises: Can Stability Emerge From Chaos in Kyrgyzstan?" *The Diplomat*, October 22, 2020; Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan's Japarov: Revolutionary Crime-Fighting Anti-Corruption Crusader?" *Eurasianet*, October 23, 2020; Bruce Pannier, "Kyrgyz Judiciary Seemingly Moving in Step with New Leader Japarov," *RFE/RL*, October 26, 2020; Umarov, "Who's in Charge Following Revolution in Kyrgyzstan?"; "Former Kyrgyz Security Council Chief Dismisses New Government's Anti-Corruption Efforts as a 'Theatrical Show,'" *RFE/RL*, October 27, 2020.

[75] "Kyrgyzstan 'Ready to Closely Work' with U.S. After 'Meddling' Accusation," *RFE/RL*, December 11, 2020; U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "U.S. Embassy Statement on Release of Kamchybek Kolbayev," March 3, 2021; U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "U.S. Embassy Statement on the Release of Criminal Boss Raimbek Matraimov," April 16, 2021.

Table 2. Kyrgyzstan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Partly Free (Score: 38/100)	Not Free (Score: 28/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	85th of 180 Countries	79th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Mostly Unfree (96th of 178 Countries)	Moderately Free (78th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	136th of 168 Countries	124th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	83rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	87th of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016* and *Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, *2016 World Press Freedom Index* and *2021 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2021 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2016* and *Rule of Law Index 2020*.

Human Rights

According to the U.S. State Department, significant human rights issues in Kyrgyzstan include serious restrictions on freedom of expression and the press, corruption, torture and arbitrary detention, and inadequate judicial independence.[76] In 2015, the State Department recognized imprisoned activist Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek from southern Kyrgyzstan, with its Human Rights Defender Award. This led to significant friction in the U.S.-Kyrgyzstan bilateral relationship (see "U.S.-Kyrgyzstan Bilateral Relations," below). Multiple Members of Congress called upon the Kyrgyz government to release Askarov, but he died in prison in July 2020.[77]

Kyrgyzstan has a vibrant civil society relative to its neighbors, and its media pluralism has been described as "exceptional" in the region.[78] NGOs assert that politicians and other powerful individuals have used the justice system to pressure independent media outlets, particularly those involved in reporting on corruption.[79] Recent legislative initiatives have also raised concerns regarding freedom of expression. In June 2020, Kyrgyzstan's parliament passed a law that would enable authorities to censor websites containing information they determined to be untruthful and require internet service providers to turn user data over to government agencies on request. After the bill sparked protests and drew criticism from international observers, then-President

[76] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kyrgyz Republic*, March 30, 2021.

[77] U.S. Department of State, "Winners of the 2014 Human Rights Award," July 17, 2015; U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Menendez, Six Senate Colleagues Call on Kyrgyzstan President to Release Prisoners," May 8, 2020; U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Bipartisan Group of Senators Call on Central Asian Leaders to Release Unjustly Detained Prisoners at High Risk of COVID-19," June 30, 2020; Committee to Protect Journalists, "Journalist Azimjon Askarov Dies in Prison in Kyrgyzstan," July 25, 2020; Catherine Putz, "The Tragedy of Azimjon Askarov," *The Diplomat*, July 27, 2020; Mihra Rittman, "Kyrgyzstan Must Answer for the Death of Activist Azimjon Askarov," *The Washington Post*, July 29, 2020.

[78] Reporters Without Borders, *2020 World Press Freedom Index: Kyrgyzstan*.

[79] Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2020: Kyrgyzstan*.

Sooronbay Jeenbekov returned it to the legislature for revision. A new version of the bill passed in July 2021 and was signed into law by President Japarov in August.[80]

Nongovernmental organizations operating in Kyrgyzstan also face challenges. In July 2021, President Japarov signed into law new financial and programmatic reporting requirements on NGOs. The bill drew international criticism and inspired protests when it was initially introduced in 2020.[81] Its passage prompted the State Department to express "deep concern" and urge Kyrgyzstan's leadership to reconsider the legislation.[82]

Economy

Kyrgyzstan is a lower middle income country whose economy is heavily dependent on remittances and mining. Gold, Kyrgyzstan's main export commodity, is primarily produced by the Kumtor mine, which accounted for 12.5% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP in 2020.[83] Kyrgyzstan is one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world, with remittances, predominantly from Russia, equaling roughly 30% of GDP in 2019.[84] Kyrgyzstan's large informal economy is estimated at about 24% of GDP; some analysts argue it may be even larger.[85] China is Kyrgyzstan's largest trading partner, followed by Russia. Kyrgyzstan's 1998 accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) helped establish the country as a hub for the re-export of Chinese goods.[86] Kyrgyzstan has been a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU, also abbreviated EAEU) since 2015. Accession has proven somewhat controversial domestically because EEU membership introduced new regulatory hurdles while failing to confer some of the expected benefits.[87]

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[80] Mariya Zozulya, "Internet Censorship Looms in Kyrgyzstan," *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, August 12, 2020; "Zhogorku Kenesh otklonil zakonproekt o zashchite ot lozhnoi informatsii" [Jogorku Kenesh rejects bill on protection from false information], *Radio Azattyk*, June 30, 2021; Bermet Talant, "Kyrgyz Parliament Sneaks Through 'Fake News' Law With President's Blessing," *Eurasianet*, July 29, 2021; "Kyrgyz President Signs Controversial 'False Information' Bill Into Law," *RFE/RL*, August 24, 2021.

[81] Human Rights Watch, "Kyrgyzstan: Bills Curbing Basic Freedoms Advance," June 20, 2020; Ayzirek Imanaliyeva, "Kyrgyzstan: Draft Bill Threatens to Drive NGOs Against the Wall," *Eurasianet*, May 22, 2020; Bakyt Toregel'din ulu, "Usileniiu kontrolia nad NKO byt'? Spornyi zakon odobren parlamentom vo vtorom chtenii [Strengthening control over NGOs? Controversial law approved by parliament in second reading]," *Radio Azattyk*, June 19, 2020.

[82] U.S. Department of State, "Kyrgyz Republic's New Law Directed at NGOs," Press Statement, July 8, 2021.

[83] Kumtor Gold Company, "Contribution to the Economy," at https://www.kumtor.kg/en/contribution-to-the-kyrgyz-economy/. Following Japarov's rise to power, the government of Kyrgyzstan moved to nationalize the mine, which had been owned by a Canadian company. See Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, "Kyrgyzstan Moves to Nationalise Gold Mine Run by Canadian Company," *Al Jazeera*, July 9, 2021; "US Court Rules Kyrgyzstan in Contempt for Pushing Ahead with Local Legal Action Against Kumtor Gold," *bne IntelliNews*, July 23. 2021.

[84] "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens: Migration and Development Brief 32," World Bank Group, April 2020, pp. 18-20.

[85] Hans Holzhacker and Dana Skakova, *Kyrgyz Republic Diagnostic*, EBRD, May 2019, p. 7.

[86] Philipp Schroeder and Elina Schroeder, *Entrepreneurship in Kyrgyzstan: Adjustments to a Changing Economic Environment* (Bishkek: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017); Roman Mogilevskii, "Re-export Activities in Kyrgyzstan: Issues and Prospects," University of Central Asia, Institute of Public Policy and Administration, Working Paper no. 9 (2012); Bartlomej Kaminski and Gael Raballand, "Entrepot for Chinese Consumer Goods in Central Asia: The Puzzle of Re-exports Through Kyrgyz Bazaars," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 50, no. 5 (2009): pp. 581-590.

[87] Nurjamal Djanibekova, "Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan Border Crises Complicated by Mutual Distrust," *Eurasianet*, February 6, 2020; "Here's Looking at EAEU #1: Blowing Hot and Cold," *Eurasianet*, June 4, 2020; Roman Mogilevskii, James Thurlow, and Adeline Yeh, "Kyrgyzstan's Accession to the Eurasian Economic Union: Measuring Economy-Wide Impacts and Uncertainties," University of Central Asia, Institute of Public Policy and Administration, Working Paper no. 44 (2018).

The expanding Chinese economic presence in Kyrgyzstan has sparked controversy and protests. China's Export-Import Bank owns almost 40% of Kyrgyzstan's roughly $4.8 billion of foreign debt.[88] As part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, China has supported several large-scale infrastructure projects in Kyrgyzstan, financed primarily through concessional loans. In February 2020, a joint Chinese-Kyrgyz project to build a $280 million logistics center in Kyrgyzstan's Naryn province was cancelled after protests by local residents, who criticized the investment as a Chinese land-grab.[89]

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Kyrgyzstan's economy and the country's under-resourced health care system. The World Bank estimates an 8.6% decline in GDP in 2020 and projects a rebound to 3.8% growth in 2021. Previous forecasts had predicted 3.4% growth in 2020, and GDP growth had averaged 4% since 2014.[90] Remittances to Kyrgyzstan fell sharply in 2020 as a consequence of the pandemic and the related economic downturn in Russia.[91] Additionally, a large number of people either returned from abroad or were unable to migrate for work, a circumstance analysts deemed likely to aggravate unemployment and place additional stress on the country's social services.[92] Kyrgyzstan has received emergency financial assistance from international financial institutions, and the Kyrgyz government has requested debt relief from China.[93]

U.S.-Kyrgyzstan Bilateral Relations

The United States was among the first countries to recognize Kyrgyzstan's independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. From 2001 to 2014, the United States operated a Transit Center at Manas, near the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, in support of both Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. U.S. relations with Kyrgyzstan deteriorated under President Almazbek Atambayev (in office 2011-2017), reportedly in part due to Russian pressure.[94] U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relations improved somewhat under his successor, President Jeenbekov (in office 2017-2020). Bilateral security cooperation has waned since 2014; the State Department is seeking to develop cooperation in combatting terrorism and extremism, and promoting regional stability. Other U.S. priorities in

[88] Chris Rickleton, "Kyrgyzstan's China Debt: Between Crowdfunding and Austerity," *Eurasianet*, November 17, 2020.

[89] "China-Led $280 Million Kyrgyzstan Project Abandoned After Protests," Reuters, February 18, 2020.

[90] World Bank, *Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, Spring 2021: Data, Digitalization, and Governance*, March 30, 2021, pp. 31, 131-132; OECD, *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*, June 4, 2020, pp. 5, 37; World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, January 2021, p. 79.

[91] "COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens: Migration and Development Brief 32," World Bank Group, April, 2020, pp. 18-20; Konstantin Larionov, "The Impact of Global Economic Recession on Kyrgyz Labor Migrants in Russia," *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, April 14, 2020; OECD, *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*, November 16, 2020, pp. 15-16, 18.

[92] OECD, *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*, November 16, 2020, pp. 15-16; Asian Development Bank and U.N. Development Programme, *COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic: Socioeconomic and Vulnerability Impact Assessment and Policy Response*, August 2020, pp. 21-26.

[93] Reid Standish, "How Will Kyrgyzstan Repay Its Huge Debts to China?" *RFE/RL*, February 27, 2021; Paul Bartlett, "China Offers Cash-Strapped Kyrgyzstan a Glimmer of Hope on Debt," *Nikkei Asia*, December 3, 2020.

[94] Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "The United States Just Closed Its Last Base in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2014; Olga Dzyubenko, "U.S. Vacates Base in Central Asia as Russia's Clout Rises," Reuters, June 3, 2014.

Kyrgyzstan include supporting a more inclusive and accountable democracy and improving the country's business environment.[95]

In 2015, after the U.S. State Department presented Azimjon Askarov with its 2014 Human Rights Defender Award, the Kyrgyz government terminated the bilateral cooperation agreement (BCA) that had been in place between the United States and Kyrgyzstan since 1993.[96] The BCA had facilitated the provision of U.S. humanitarian and technical economic assistance to Kyrgyzstan by providing tax exemptions and guaranteeing certain protections for U.S. civilian and military personnel present in Kyrgyzstan in connection with U.S. assistance programs.[97] In 2015, the State Department warned that the lack of a BCA could put U.S. assistance programs to Kyrgyzstan in jeopardy.[98] Aid programs have continued, however, and U.S. officials have been involved in efforts to conclude a new BCA.[99] The State Department requests $31.4 million in assistance to Kyrgyzstan for FY2022, compared to $34.4 million allocated in FY2020, in order to pursue goals that include supporting democracy in the country, strengthening civil society and independent media, improving rule of law and promoting good governance, combatting corruption, protecting human rights, promoting business competitiveness, and combatting tuberculosis. The United States also seeks to promote law enforcement reform, counter violent extremism, and assist Kyrgyzstan in professionalizing its military and safely managing its conventional munitions stockpiles.[100]

In January 2020, the Trump Administration suspended the issuance of most immigrant visas to Kyrgyz citizens as part of its expansion of the travel restrictions introduced by Executive Order 13780 of March 6, 2017. The Administration cited Kyrgyzstan's failure to comply with information-sharing criteria, deficiencies in the security of Kyrgyz passports, and deficiencies in the integrity of the country's passport issuance process.[101] Kyrgyzstan's introduction of biometric passports was delayed in 2019, reportedly as the result of a corruption investigation involving the tender for passport booklets.[102] Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the U.S. travel restrictions, stating that they caused "significant damage" to U.S.-Kyrgyzstan relations and noting that more than 80 countries had yet to introduce biometric passports.[103] President Biden revoked

[95] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Kyrgyz Republic*, November 16, 2018.

[96] "Kyrgyzstan Ends U.S. Cooperation Agreement Amid Human Rights Dispute," *RFE/RL*, July 21, 2015.

[97] Agreement Between the Government of the United States of American and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic Regarding Cooperation to Facilitate the Provision of Assistance, May 19, 1993.

[98] U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Kyrgyzstan: Tangible Benefits of U.S. Assistance in Response to Termination of the 1993 Bilateral Agreement," July 23, 2015.

[99] See, for example, U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Readout of U.S. Ambassador Donald Lu's Meeting with Foreign Minister of the Kyrgyz Republic Ruslan Kazakbaev," December 3, 2020; Ibid., "Successful U.S.-Kyrgyz Annual Bilateral Consultations: Building Our Partnership," July 31, 2019; Ibid., "USAID Representative Visits the Kyrgyz Republic to Advance Bilateral Cooperation Agreement," April 22, 2019.

[100] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2022*, Appendix 2, pp. 160, 288, 309, 340, 380-381, 577-578.

[101] The White House, "Proclamation on Improving Enhanced Vetting Capabilities and Processes for Detecting Attempted Entry," January 31, 2020; U.S. Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic, "Kyrgyz Republic Designated for U.S. Immigrant and Diversity Visa Restrictions," February 1, 2020.

[102] Alexandra Li, "Multimillion Passport Deal Under Investigation in Kyrgyzstan," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, April 19, 2019.

[103] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, "Zaiavlenie Ministerstva innostrannykh del Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki ot 1go fevralia 2020 goda [Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic dated February 1, 2020]," February 1, 2020.

Executive Order 13780 and related proclamations on January 20, 2021, ordering the resumption of visa processing.[104] Kyrgyzstan began issuing biometric passports in May 2021.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan borders four other states, including China and Afghanistan (see **Figure 5**), and maintains close ties with Russia. Tajikistan's population of approximately 9.5 million is predominantly Tajik (about 84% as of 2014), with a sizeable Uzbek minority (about 14% as of 2014).[105] The country's territory is slightly smaller than Wisconsin. According to local estimates, more than 90% of Tajikistan's inhabitants are Muslim, primarily Sunni; Ismaili Shias account for about 4% of the Muslim population.[106] Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan and the potential for instability in that country to spill over into Central Asia draw interest in Tajikistan from China, Russia, and the United States. Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the government of Tajikistan has stood out from its neighbors in its strong opposition to a Taliban-led government, signaling that it would not recognize a government in Afghanistan that it does not see as inclusive.[107] In Afghanistan, opposition to the Taliban is concentrated in the country's ethnic Tajik community; Tajiks are estimated to be the second-largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, accounting for about a quarter of the population. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is causing significant strain on foreign remittances, which come primarily from Russia and equaled roughly a third of GDP in 2019. Tajikistan is increasingly dependent on China, which is Tajikistan's largest foreign creditor and is building a security presence in the country. Tajikistan has faced incidents of violence attributed to the Islamic State (IS), but it has been asserted by some observers that the government also uses the prospect of insurgent activity as a pretext for stifling opposition. President Emomali Rahmon and his family control the government and significant sectors of the economy. The U.S. Department of State describes corruption in Tajikistan as widespread.[108]

[104] The White House, "Proclamation on Ending Discriminatory Bans on Entry to The United States," January 20, 2021.

[105] The CIA World Factbook.

[106] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tajikistan*, May 12, 2021.

[107] Umida Hashimova, "Tajikistan and Uzbekistan Take Different Approaches to Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2021; Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: The Taliban's Toughest Critic," *RFE/RL*, September 13, 2021; Ivan Klyszcz, "Don't Underestimate Tajikistan in the Afghanistan Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2021.

[108] U.S. Department of State, *2021 Investment Climate Statements: Tajikistan*, July 21, 2021.

Figure 5. Map of Tajikistan

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Abbreviations: TKM—Turkmenistan; KAZ—Kazakhstan.

Political Background

Tajikistan is a presidential republic with power heavily concentrated in the executive. The president serves as both head of state and head of the government; the role and influence of the legislature is limited. President Rahmon, 68, has been in power since 1992 and is now the oldest and longest-serving head of state in the post-Soviet states. He was exempted from term limits in a 2016 constitutional referendum that also granted him and his family immunity from prosecution.[109] Freedom House describes Tajikistan under Rahmon as a "nepotistic kleptocracy," as a small group of families close to the president dominate the political and economic spheres.[110] Although six parties have seats in parliament, all support Rahmon, and observers have described Tajikistan as a *de facto* one-party state.[111] As speaker of the parliament's upper chamber, the president's son, Rustam Emomali, 33, is first in the line of presidential succession. OSCE observers describe the electoral process in Tajikistan as lacking credibility and transparency.[112]

Shortly after Tajikistan became independent in 1991, the country entered into a five-year civil war (1992-1997) during which as many as 300,000 people died and more than a million were displaced.[113] The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which fought as part of a

[109] Catherine Putz, "Meet Central Asia's Newest President-for-Life," *The Diplomat*, May 23, 2016.

[110] Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2018: Tajikistan*.

[111] Edward Lemon, "The Fall of Tajikistan's Opposition," *The Diplomat*, March 2020.

[112] OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Tajikistan Presidential Election, 11 October 2020: ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report*, 29 January 2021, p. 1.

[113] Estimated fatalities vary widely, from 50,000 to 300,000. See Anna Matveeva, "The Perils of Emerging Statehood: Civil War and State Reconstruction in Tajikistan," *Crisis States Working Papers Series* No. 2, March 2009; and Bruce

coalition of anti-government forces, was legalized following the 1997 peace deal and adopted an agenda of democratization. It became Tajikistan's second-largest political party and held seats in parliament from 2000 to 2015.[114] In 2015, the Tajik government outlawed the IRPT and labelled it a terrorist organization in what the U.S. State Department characterized as "steps to eliminate political opposition."[115] Some of the party's leaders have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms, while others have fled the country. Tajikistan's March 2020 parliamentary elections were the first to be held since the IRPT was outlawed. One opposition party fielded candidates, but failed to secure any seats. The president's People's Democratic Party won a decisive majority of 47 out of 63 seats in the lower chamber, among reports of widespread electoral fraud. International observers questioned the integrity of the electoral results.[116]

In October 2020, President Rahmon was reelected for a fifth term with 90.9% of the vote, in an election that "lacked credibility and transparency" in the assessment of the OSCE.[117] Some analysts had previously speculated that he might be replaced on the ballot by his son, who was eligible to run in 2020 following constitutional changes that lowered the age requirement for candidates. Some argue that it is likely Rahmon will not serve out his full seven-year term, and will resign in favor of his son at some point before the next presidential election, which is set to take place in 2027.[118]

Table 3. Tajikistan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 16/100)	Not Free (Score: 8/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	150th of 180 Countries	162nd of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Mostly Unfree (149th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Unfree (134th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	151st of 168 Countries	149th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	Not Ranked	Not Ranked

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016 and Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, 2016 World Press Freedom Index and 2021 World Press Freedom Index; The Heritage Foundation, 2016 Index of Economic Freedom and 2021 Index of Economic Freedom; Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 and Corruption Perceptions Index 2021; World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2016 and Rule of Law Index 2020.

Pannier, "Tajikistan's Civil War: A Nightmare the Government Won't Let Its People Forget," *RFE/RL*, June 23, 2017.

[114] Ilya Lozovsky, "The Death of Tajikistan's Islamic Renaissance," *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, June 5, 2018; Human Rights Watch, "Tajikistan: Reverse Political Party Closure," September 14, 2015.

[115] U.S. Department of State, *2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Introduction*, April 13, 2016.

[116] "Tajikistan: Fraud-Ridden Election Hands Crushing Win to Ruling Party," *Eurasianet*, March 2, 2020; OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Tajikistan Parliamentary Elections, 1 March 2020: ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report*, May 27, 2020, p. 3.

[117] OSCE ODIHR, *Republic of Tajikistan Presidential Election, 11 October 2020: ODIHR Election Assessment Mission Final Report*, 29 January 2021, p. 1.

[118] Temur Umarov, "The Secret of the Tajik President's Staying Power," Carnegie Moscow Center, October 10, 2020.

Human Rights

According to the State Department, significant human rights issues in Tajikistan include kidnapping and forced repatriation of citizens from foreign countries, forced disappearances, torture, arbitrary detention, and a non-independent judiciary, as well as significant restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, religious freedom, and political participation.[119] Tajikistan has faced criticism, including from some Members of Congress, for engaging in transnational repression of government critics.[120] This includes targeting IRPT members and other dissidents through law enforcement mechanisms such as International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) wanted persons notices and pressuring family members who remain in Tajikistan (see also "Outlook and Issues for Congress," below).[121]

Media freedom in Tajikistan reportedly is curtailed severely.[122] Reporters Without Borders ranked Tajikistan 162nd out of 180 countries in its 2021 World Press Freedom Index (see **Table 3**), down from 149th in 2018. Some Members of Congress have expressed concerns about government pressure on independent media outlets in Tajikistan, particularly the U.S.-funded RFE/RL.[123] Tajikistan's government sometimes curtails internet access throughout the country, purportedly in order to block citizens' access to critical voices, including those of IRPT leaders.[124]

The Tajik government restricts and strictly regulates religious practices.[125] Authorities target outward signs of religiosity, such as hijabs and beards. Minors are prohibited from participating in public religious activities. The government also places restrictions on minority religious groups, including Christian denominations.[126] Tajikistan is designated a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA, P.L. 105-292), but the State Department has consistently waived related sanctions in consideration of U.S. national interests. In its 2021 Annual Report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommends that the State Department redesignate Tajikistan as a CPC and condition U.S. assistance to Tajikistan, other than aid to improve humanitarian conditions or advance human rights, on improvement of religious freedom conditions in the country and mandated religious freedom training for Tajik officials. Additionally, USCIRF recommends targeted sanctions on

[119] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Tajikistan*, March 30, 2021.

[120] See, for example, Rep. Alcee Hastings, "Introduction of the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act of 2019 (TRAP Act)," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (September 16, 2019), p. E1153; Rep. Steve Cohen, "Congressman Cohen Introduces the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act," press release, July 29, 2021.

[121] Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression*, Freedom House, February 2021, pp. 48-49; Edward Lemon, "Weaponizing Interpol," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): pp. 15-29.

[122] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020: Tajikistan*.

[123] U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Bipartisan Group of Senators Sends Letter to President of Tajikistan Regarding Harassment of Tajik Journalists," October 25, 2019.

[124] "Tajikistan's Internet Goes Down Just as Speech by Exiled Opposition Leader Delivered Online," *RFE/RL*, September 17, 2020; Catherine Putz, "Muhiddin Kabiri Speaks Online, Tajikistan's Internet Shuts Down," *The Diplomat*, September 18, 2020. See also "Tajikistan: Opposition Comes On, Internet Goes Off," *Eurasianet*, February 23, 2019.

[125] See Jason Morton, *Promoting Religious Freedom and Countering Violent Extremism in Tajikistan*, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, November 2020.

[126] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Tajikistan*, May 12, 2021.

government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom in Tajikistan.[127]

Economy

Tajikistan is one of the world's poorest countries, with an economy dependent on metal and mineral exports and remittances from migrant workers. Although Tajikistan has no known deposits of bauxite, the country's primary industrial asset is the state-owned Tajikistan Aluminum Company (Talco), the world's fourth-largest aluminum smelter. The factory accounts for a significant fraction of Tajikistan's GDP. It also consumes about a third of the country's electricity supply at a steeply discounted rate and has been implicated in large-scale corruption involving members of the president's family.[128]

Tajikistan has significant hydropower potential. The partially U.S.-funded Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000) aims to develop hydropower infrastructure and export electricity to South Asia.[129] If completed, the Rogun Dam could alleviate domestic electricity shortages and make the country a net energy exporter. Two of the planned six turbines are currently operational, and construction is slated for completion in 2028.[130] Although Tajikistan has increased electricity exports, the country continues to face rolling blackouts domestically.[131]

Tajikistan depends heavily on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, which equaled almost a third of Tajikistan's GDP in 2019 (down from almost half in 2013).[132] This renders Tajikistan highly vulnerable to external shocks. Remittances fell significantly in 2020 due to travel restrictions and economic disruption in Russia caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.[133] The pandemic response has increased unemployment and exacerbated Tajikistan's chronic food insecurity. According to the World Bank's *Listening to Tajikistan* survey, in May 2020 more than 41% of respondents reported that their households had reduced their food consumption. The World Bank estimates that Tajikistan's GDP growth fell to 2.2% in 2020 (down from 7.5% in 2019), projecting a gradual acceleration in GDP growth in 2021 and 2022.[134]

Although Russia remains Tajikistan's primary economic partner, China has increased its presence in the country in recent years. China has made a range of investments in Tajikistan as part of the Belt and Road Initiative and now holds the majority of Tajikistan's foreign debt. In April 2019, a Chinese state-owned company entered into an agreement to receive a stake in Talco in exchange

[127] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2021, p. 48.

[128] Cooley and Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders*, pp. 80-111; "Report: Tajikistan to Yield Share in Aluminum Plant to China," *Eurasianet*, December 5, 2019; David Trilling, "Russian Aluminum Giant Pries Open Books at Tajikistan's Largest Factory," *Eurasianet*, June 9, 2014.

[129] USAID, *Secretariat for CASA-1000 Power Transmission Project Fact Sheet*, September 14, 2020.

[130] Catherine Putz, "Tajikistan's Rogun Dam Begins Operations," *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2018; Catherine Putz, "Winter Energy Woes Bedevil Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, January 13, 2021.

[131] "Tajikistan Returning to Electricity Rationing Regime," *Eurasianet*, January 6, 2021; "Tajikistan: Lights Out as Dams Falter," *Eurasianet*, November 17, 2020.

[132] World Bank, "Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)—Tajikistan," available at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=TJ.

[133] Khiradmand Sheraliev, "A Critical Lesson for Tajikistan: The State of Migrant Workers in 2020," *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2021; "Tajikistan: Coronavirus Taking Heavy Toll on Remittances," *Eurasianet*, July 22, 2020.

[134] World Bank, *Tajikistan Country Economic Update Fall 2020: Economic Slowdown Amid the Pandemic*, December 23, 2020.

for investing $545 million in modernizing the facility.[135] As much as 90% of Tajikistan's telecommunications infrastructure is from China, manufactured by Huawei.[136]

U.S.-Tajikistan Bilateral Relations

Tajikistan works with the United States to promote greater regional connectivity in Central Asia, and U.S. officials have viewed it as an important partner for promoting stability in Afghanistan.[137] The State Department requests $48.4 million for assistance to Tajikistan in FY2022, compared to $50.9 million allocated in FY2020. U.S. aid to Tajikistan includes public health programs targeting nutrition, tuberculosis, and maternal and child health, as well as programs intended to build democratic institutions, political pluralism and civil society; support the modernization of the country's education system; address climate change; support agricultural development; and improve private sector competitiveness.[138] U.S. engagement with Tajikistan also includes security cooperation, particularly in counternarcotics, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and countering violent extremism. Tajikistan lies along a major drug trafficking route for opiates from Afghanistan, and the United States provides equipment and training to relevant Tajik agencies.[139]

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan borders the Caspian Sea and four other countries, including Afghanistan and Iran (see **Figure 6**). The country is slightly larger than California and is more than 80% desert. The size of Turkmenistan's population is disputed; the figure asserted by the government is 6.2 million, but some argue that it may be less than half of that.[140] According to the U.S. State Department, Turkmenistan is approximately 89% Muslim (predominantly Sunni), and about 9% Eastern Orthodox.[141] A large majority of the country's population is Turkmen (approximately 85% according to U.S. government estimates), with minority groups including Uzbeks and Russians. Since independence, Turkmenistan's authoritarian government has kept the country largely isolated from the outside world and maintained tight control over the economy, although Turkmenistan's natural gas resources have attracted foreign investment. Turkmenistan's constitution establishes "permanent neutrality" as the core principle of the country's foreign policy. History and geography underpin a complicated but important relationship with Russia, and increasing economic dependence is driving closer ties with China. In recent years, U.S. engagement with Turkmenistan has focused primarily on border security issues, particularly with neighboring Afghanistan. Turkmenistan's government has not acknowledged any cases of COVID-19 within its borders. Independent media operating outside the country have compiled evidence of COVID-19 infections and deaths, and report that authorities have imposed pandemic-related restrictions domestically.[142] The pandemic has exacerbated Turkmenistan's economic

[135] "Report: Tajikistan to Yield Share in Aluminum Plant to China," *Eurasianet*, December 5, 2019; "Chast' imushchestva aliuminievogo giganta Tadzhikistana peredadut novoi kompanii [Part of the assets of Tajikistan's aluminum giant will be transferred to a new company]," *Fergana News*, May 22, 2020.

[136] Bradley Jardine, "China's Surveillance State Has Eyes on Central Asia," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2019.

[137] See, for example, U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Tajikistan: Bilateral Relations Factsheet," January 20, 2021.

[138] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2022*, Appendix 2, pp. 162, 288, 310, 340, 380-381.

[139] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "Tajikistan Summary."

[140] "Turkmenistan Faces 'Shocking Population Decline' As Exodus Continues," *RFE/RL*, July 12, 2021.

[141] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Turkmenistan*, May 12, 2021.

[142] Turkmen.news, *Survival of the Fittest: All About Coronavirus in Turkmenistan, Though Officially the Country Has No COVID-19 Infections*, May 2021.

situation. Residents face chronic food shortages as well as difficulties withdrawing cash, which is used for most transactions.

Figure 6. Map of Turkmenistan

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Political Background

Executive power in Turkmenistan is largely unchecked, and President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov dominates the country's political structures. The president has extensive powers that include presiding over the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as appointing and dismissing regional governors and mayors. Although the constitution stipulates the independence of the judiciary, the president also appoints and dismisses judges. The legislature, termed a "rubber-stamp body" by observers, became bicameral following constitutional changes introduced in September 2020.[143] Following 2012 legislation allowing for a multi-party system, Turkmenistan has three officially recognized political parties: the Democratic Party (established in 1991 as the successor to the Soviet-era Communist Party), the Party of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, and the Agrarian Party. The OSCE describes Turkmenistan's political environment as "only nominally pluralist," as all three parties are aligned with the president and electoral procedures fail to meet international standards.[144]

Saparmurad Niyazov, former first secretary of Turkmenistan's Communist Party, became the country's first elected president after an uncontested 1992 race. A 1994 referendum extended his term to 2002, and in 1999, amendments to the constitution proclaimed him president for life. Niyazov, known as Turkmenbashi, or Leader of the Turkmen, was an autocratic ruler who created a cult of personality around himself and his family, isolated the country, and suppressed dissent.

[143] Bruce Pannier, "Turkmen Elections Look Like Next Step Toward Dynasty," *RFE/RL*, March 22, 2018.

[144] OSCE ODIHR, *Turkmenistan Parliamentary Elections, 25 March 2018, ODIHR Election Assessment Mission: Final Report*, May 30, 2018.

Following Niyazov's death in December 2006, former Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Berdimuhamedov was elected in a 2007 election widely seen as fraudulent. He was reelected in 2012 and again in 2017 (in 2016, the presidential term was extended from five to seven years). No constitutional limit exists on the number of terms a president can hold office. With the passage of constitutional amendments in 2016, presidential candidates no longer have an upper age limit. Berdimuhamedov has largely followed in his predecessor's authoritarian footsteps.[145] He has replaced Niyazov's cult of personality with veneration of himself and uses the title Arkadag (the Protector).[146] Many analysts assess that Berdimuhamedov is positioning his son Serdar, 39, as his successor.[147]

Table 4. Turkmenistan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 4/100)	Not Free (Score: 2/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	178th of 180 Countries	178th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Repressed (174th of 178 Countries)	Repressed (167th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	154th of 168 Countries	165th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	Not Ranked	Not Ranked

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016 and Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, 2016 World Press Freedom Index and 2021 World Press Freedom Index; The Heritage Foundation, 2016 Index of Economic Freedom and 2021 Index of Economic Freedom; Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index 2016 and Corruption Perceptions Index 2021; World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index 2016 and Rule of Law Index 2020.

Human Rights

The State Department identifies human rights issues in Turkmenistan, and Turkmenistan faces human rights criticism from international nongovernmental organizations. The NGO Freedom House describes the country as "a repressive authoritarian state where political rights and civil liberties are almost completely denied in practice."[148] Citizens are reportedly subject to widespread surveillance, arbitrary arrest and detention, and torture. The government also imposes severe restrictions on freedom of movement.[149] The State Department describes corruption in

[145] Aisha Berdyeva, "Turkmenistan: Berdymukhamedov Marks First Year as President," *Eurasianet*, February 11, 2008.

[146] Farangis Najibullah, "Turkmenistan: My Personality Cult Is Better Than Yours," *RFE/RL*, February 13, 2012.

[147] "Turkmen Leader's Son Takes On New Roles; Rapid Rise Renews Talk of Succession," *RFE/RL*, February 12, 2021; Victoria Clement, "Passing the Baton in Turkmenistan," Atlantic Council, October 21, 2019.

[148] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2018: Turkmenistan*.

[149] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Turkmenistan*, March 30, 2021.

Turkmenistan as rampant.[150] With billions of dollars in state revenues allegedly embezzled on behalf of the president, one NGO has termed Turkmenistan a "model kleptocracy."[151]

Because of its violations of religious freedom, Turkmenistan has been designated as a CPC under the IRFA since 2014. The State Department regularly waives the related sanctions, citing U.S. national interests. The Secretary of State redesignated Turkmenistan as a CPC in December 2020. USCIRF describes religious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan as "among the worst in the world."[152] In its 2021 Annual Report, USCIRF recommends that the State Department continue to designate Turkmenistan as a CPC and lift the sanctions waiver, given the country's record of severe and wide-ranging violations of religious freedom. Additionally, USCIRF recommends that the U.S. government limit security assistance to Turkmenistan under IRFA Section 405(a)(22) and impose targeted sanctions on government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom in Turkmenistan.[153]

Turkmenistan has long faced international criticism for engaging in widespread use of state-orchestrated forced labor, particularly in the harvesting of cotton. Public sector employees are reportedly forced to pick cotton, and private businesses are allegedly also forced to contribute labor. In 2018, U.S. Customs and Border Protection responded to concerns about forced labor by issuing a Withhold Release Order banning the importation of all cotton from Turkmenistan, as well as all products produced using cotton from Turkmenistan.[154] In its 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, the State Department assessed that the government of Turkmenistan had a documented "policy or pattern of forced labor," and ranked Turkmenistan as a Tier 3 country for human trafficking.[155] Although Turkmenistan has taken steps to mechanize the cotton harvest, local officials continue to coerce soldiers, public sector workers, and private-sector employees to pick cotton without pay in order to meet government production quotas. Additionally, students and public sector workers, including teachers and doctors, continue to face compulsory mobilization for public works projects such as preparing public spaces for presidential visits and supporting government-sponsored events.[156]

Media outlets in Turkmenistan are predominantly state-controlled, and NGOs identify significant abuses. The Committee to Protect Journalists has condemned the "systematic harassment" of the few independent journalists active in the country, and, in its *2021 World Press Freedom Index*, Reporters Without Borders ranked Turkmenistan 178th out 180 countries in levels of freedom available to journalists (see **Table 4**), terming Turkmenistan "an ever-expanding news 'black hole.'"[157] The U.S.-funded RFE/RL is one of a small number of independent news outlets that reports from within Turkmenistan. Internet censorship is prevalent, and the government blocks access to many websites.

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[150] U.S. Department of State, *2021 Investment Climate Statements*, July 21, 2021.

[151] Crude Accountability, *Turkmenistan: A Model Kleptocracy*, June 2021.

[152] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2021, p. 50.

[153] Ibid.

[154] U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Withhold Release Orders and Findings," May 18, 2018, at https://www.cbp.gov/trade/trade-community/programs-outreach/convict-importations/detention-orders.

[155] U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2021, p. 565.

[156] Ibid., pp. 565-567.

[157] Reporters Without Borders, "Turkmenistan," at https://rsf.org/en/turkmenistan; Committee to Protect Journalists, "Turkmenistan Journalist Soltan Achilova Barred from Traveling Abroad," March 25, 2019.

Economy

The opaque nature of Turkmenistan's government presents difficulties for accessing reliable data on the country's centrally-managed economy.[158] Turkmenistan is largely dependent on the export of hydrocarbons, especially natural gas, which was estimated to have accounted for 83.4% of the country's exports by value in 2019, with oil comprising another 9.5%.[159] Soviet industrialization policies established a cotton monoculture in the country, and cotton is Turkmenistan's largest export after hydrocarbons. The country's other major crop, wheat, is cultivated for the domestic market. Foreign direct investment remains limited beyond the hydrocarbons sector. The government of Turkmenistan maintains that the country has had no cases of COVID-19. The country has experienced the economic effects of the global pandemic, with GDP growth slowing to 0.8% in 2020 according to IMF data.[160]

Turkmenistan is estimated to have the fourth-largest natural gas reserves in the world, accounting for about 7% of the global total.[161] The country's export capacity is limited by its infrastructure. Payment disputes with Russia and Iran halted gas flows from Turkmenistan in 2016 and 2017, respectively, leaving China as Turkmenistan's major export market. Roughly half of Turkmenistan's gas production is consumed domestically, while the majority of the rest is exported to China. Turkmenistan is China's largest natural gas supplier by pipeline, accounting for over 60% of pipeline imports in 2019 (see "Oil and Gas," below). China is also Turkmenistan's primary international lender, having provided over $8 billion in loans to develop Turkmenistan's gas infrastructure. Analysts speculate that Turkmenistan services its Chinese loans through discounted gas sales.[162] Although Russia resumed gas imports from Turkmenistan in 2019, the volume is relatively minor compared to Turkmenistan's exports to China.[163] The drop in natural gas prices and lower demand resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant negative impact on Turkmenistan's economy. The value of China's imports from Turkmenistan, which consist almost exclusively of natural gas, fell by 30% in 2020.[164]

Even before the pandemic, declining revenue from gas exports put pressure on Turkmenistan's economy, reducing living standards in recent years. High inflation, currency devaluation, tight foreign exchange controls, and import restrictions mean that the country faces chronic shortages of food and constraints on the ability to withdraw paper currency at local banks. The U.S.

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[158] Economic indicators provided by the government of Turkmenistan are generally seen as unreliable. The U.S. Department of Commerce terms GDP and growth rate figures put forward by the government of Turkmenistan "implausible" and "not credible" (see U.S. Department of Commerce, *Turkmenistan Country Commercial Guide*, July 21, 2019, available at https://www.export.gov/apex/article2?id=Turkmenistan-Market-Overview). Citing a lack of reliable data, the World Bank does not publish economic output, income, or growth data for Turkmenistan. See also Peter Leonard, "Turkmenistan: End of the Road for the Roaring Growth Myth?" *Eurasianet*, April 7, 2021.

[159] Data from the Economist Intelligence Unit.

[160] International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: Managing Divergent Recoveries*, April 2021, p. 38. This contrasts with the 5.8% growth claimed by the government of Turkmenistan. The Economist Intelligence Unit estimates a 0.8% contraction in Turkmenistan's GDP in 2020.

[161] BP, *Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, July 2021, p. 34.

[162] Luca Anceschi, "A Tale of Four Pipelines: The International Politics of Turkmen Natural Gas," in Adam Hug, ed., *Spotlight on Turkmenistan*, The Foreign Policy Centre, July 2019, pp. 36-37; Jakub Jakobowski and Mariusz Marszewski, "Crisis in Turkmenistan: A Test for China's Policy in the Region," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, August 31, 2018.

[163] Catherine Putz, "Russia Is Buying Turkmen Gas Again. Why?" *The Diplomat*, April 25, 2019.

[164] People's Republic of China General Administration of Customs, "Imports and Exports by Country (Region) of Origin/Destination, 12.2020," January 18, 2021, available at http://english.customs.gov.cn/Statics/81bd4a20-01a8-45be-bcbc-f0627fd206da.html.

Department of Commerce describes corruption in Turkmenistan as "pervasive and endemic," and notes that foreign companies have reported problems collecting payments for government contracts.[165] The Heritage Foundation's 2021 Index of Economic Freedom classifies Turkmenistan as "repressed," ranking it 167th out of 180 countries. The country's dire economic situation has prompted many citizens to emigrate to countries such as Turkey and Russia.[166]

U.S.-Turkmenistan Bilateral Relations

Turkmenistan's constitution outlines the principle of "permanent neutrality" as the basis for the country's foreign policy. The United Nations officially recognized Turkmenistan's neutral status in 1995.[167] In practice, Turkmenistan's neutrality translates to foreign policy isolationism, and the country is largely closed off from the outside world. While Turkmenistan's geography and energy resources make it a potential strategic partner for the United States, the development of U.S.-Turkmenistan ties is hampered by the country's uninviting investment climate, repressive government, and generally closed nature. Bilateral engagement to date has focused largely on regional security issues. In 2019 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Joseph L. Votel, then-Commander of U.S. Central Command, noted that while international cooperation is limited by Turkmenistan's neutrality policy, U.S. efforts have focused on English language training, medical engagements, and the development of Turkmenistan's Special Forces. He identified Turkmenistan's interest in enhancing its disaster response capability and border security as avenues of opportunity for U.S. Central Command. "Maintaining a small, consistent security cooperation portfolio in Turkmenistan has outsized impact and will help counter Russian and Chinese influence," he concluded.[168]

The State Department requests $4.1 million in assistance to Turkmenistan in FY2022, compared to $4 million allocated in FY2020.[169] In order to "help [Turkmenistan] become a partner whose contributions can help stabilize Afghanistan," U.S. programs include efforts to improve the country's business climate and foster a more diversified economy; combat trafficking in persons; and advance good governance.[170]

Uzbekistan

Many analysts see Uzbekistan a potential regional leader.[171] Uzbekistan has the largest population in the region and is the only country that borders all four other Central Asian states (see **Figure**

[165] U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, *Turkmenistan—Country Commercial Guide*, October 15, 2020.

[166] "Istochniki: Turkmenistan v sostoianii depopulatsii. V strane ostalos' 2,7 milliona naseleniia" [Sources: Turkmenistan is in a state of depopulation. There are 2.7 million inhabitants left in the country], *Radio Azatlyk*, July 2, 2021; Bruce Pannier, "How Many People Live in Turkmenistan? The Official Figure Is Hard to Believe," *RFE/RL*, January 23, 2020.

[167] U.N. General Assembly Resolution 50/80, *Maintenance of International Security*, December 12, 1995.

[168] U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command*, February 5, 2019.

[169] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2022*, Appendix 2, pp. 583-584.

[170] Ibid., p. 289.

[171] See, for example, Nathan Hutson and Marsha McGraw Olive, "Uzbekistan Rising as Central Asian Integration Catalyst," *Eurasianet*, February 8, 2021; Wilder Alejandro Sanchez, "Will an Ascendant Uzbekistan Challenge Kazakhstan's Leadership in Central Asia?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, June 4, 2018; Timur Toktonaliev, "Could Uzbekistan Lead Central Asia?" *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, November 22, 2017.

7). The country also shares a border with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is slightly larger than California, and the majority of the country's population of approximately 34.9 million is Uzbek (83.8%), with Tajik (4.8%), Kazakh (2.5%), Russian (2.3%), Karakalpak (2.2%), and Tatar (1.5%) minorities, among others.[172] Most of Uzbekistan's inhabitants are Muslim (88% according to U.S. government estimates, and 96% according to the government of Uzbekistan), almost exclusively Sunni, and about 2.2% of the population is Russian Orthodox.[173] The United States and Uzbekistan cooperate in addressing regional threats such as illegal narcotics, trafficking in persons, terrorism, and violent extremism.[174] Additionally, the wide-ranging reform effort currently underway in Uzbekistan potentially creates new opportunities for U.S. engagement with the country across a range of sectors. Uzbekistan previously had sought to position itself as an intermediary between the Taliban and the Afghan government, in line with Uzbekistan's stated aim of facilitating intra-Afghan peace talks.[175] Uzbekistan's stance toward the Taliban is generally seen as pragmatic, with the priority of ensuring Uzbekistan's security (see "Afghanistan," below).[176]

Figure 7. Map of Uzbekistan

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

[172] Population estimate as of July 1, 2021, from the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, available at https://stat.uz/en/. Ethnic breakdown estimated as of 2017, from the CIA World Factbook.

[173] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 12, 2021.

[174] U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations With Uzbekistan: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," January 20, 2021.

[175] James Durso, "Uzbekistan's Role in Afghan Reconciliation," *The Diplomat*, August 18, 2020; Umida Hashimova, "What Is Uzbekistan's Role in the Afghan Peace Process?" *The Diplomat*, March 11, 2019.

[176] See, for example, Henry Foy, "Taliban Takeover Turns Uzbekistan into Powerbroker," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Muhammad Tahir, "Majlis Podcast: Uzbekistan Walks the Tightrope in Its Policies Toward Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, September 5, 2021; Gavin Helf and Barmak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover," United States Institute of Peace, July 20, 2021.

Political Background

From 1991 to 2016, Uzbekistan was led by President Islam Karimov, a former high-level Soviet official. International observers considered his rule authoritarian and highly repressive.[177] Karimov's economic policies emphasized self-sufficiency, and his government pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy. After his death, Karimov was succeeded by Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was prime minister under Karimov for 13 years. After serving as acting president, Mirziyoyev won a December 2016 presidential election that was criticized by international observers as "devoid of genuine competition."[178] Although Mirziyoyev was widely expected to continue his predecessor's policies, he embarked on an ambitious reform program, aiming to transform Uzbekistan by modernizing and liberalizing the economy, streamlining the bureaucracy, easing political repression, addressing human rights concerns, reengaging with the international community, and attracting increased foreign investment.

U.S. officials and other international observers have noted continuing reforms in Uzbekistan since the country began that process in 2016.[179] Uzbek government officials consistently describe the country's reform process as "irreversible."[180] Longtime observers describe the overall changes taking place in Uzbekistan as "remarkable," particularly with regard to increased openness, improved governance, and decreased repression, and U.S. officials have voiced strong support for the country's ongoing reforms.[181] Reform remains a top-down, centralized process, leading to skepticism among some analysts as to whether the government will implement true democratization.[182] Analysts note a slower pace in areas such as the privatization of state assets, decentralization of political power, and combatting corruption.[183] Some observers, including the U.S. government, continue to express concerns about human rights and political freedoms.[184]

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[177] See, for example, "Uzbekistan: Authoritarian President Karimov Reported Dead: Legacy Is Quarter Century of Ruthless Repression," Human Rights Watch, September 2, 2016; Casey Michel, "Uzbekistan's Karimov Leaves Behind a Legacy of Repression, Slavery, and Kleptocracy," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2016.

[178] OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan, Early Presidential Election, 4 December 2016: Final Report*, March 22, 2017, p. 1.

[179] See, for example, U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo and Uzbekistan Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov," February 3, 2020; Navbahor Imamova, "U.S.-Uzbekistan: Strategic Partnership, Continuity, and Mirziyoyev's Challenges," *Amerika Ovozi*, November 22, 2020.

[180] See, for example, The White House, "The United States and Uzbekistan: Launching a New Era of Strategic Partnership," May 16, 2018; United Nations General Assembly, "General Assembly Debate Concludes Amid Calls to Foster Global Stability through Multilateralism, Cooperation, Respect for Human Rights," GA/12073, October 1, 2018; Umida Hashimova, "Uzbek Foreign Minister on Reforms: 'There Is No Way Back,'" *The Diplomat*, February 13, 2019.

[181] Navbahor Imamova, "Where Freedoms Are Expanding—Slowly," *The Atlantic*, October 5, 2019; U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "Remarks by Ambassador Alice Wells," February 27, 2019.

[182] See, for example, Fred Harrison, "Uzbekistan Is Being Transformed, but Where Are the Democratic Reforms?" *BNE Intellinews*, January 6, 2021; Dilmira Matyakubowa, "There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why," *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2020.

[183] See, for example, Nastassia Astrasheuskaya, "Uzbekistan Reform Agenda Shows Signs of Slowing," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Fred Harrison, "Uzbekistan Is Being Transformed, but Where Are the Democratic Reforms?" *BNE Intellinews*, January 6, 2021; Dilmira Matyakubowa, "There Won't Be Political Reform in Uzbekistan. Here's Why," *The Diplomat*, December 22, 2020.

[184] See, for example, Laurence Fletcher, "Uzbekistan Fails to Address Human Rights Violations," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Reform Pace Questioned as Presidential Election Approaches," *Voice of America*, May 26, 2021; Steve Swerdlow, "Uzbekistan Needs a Navruz for Human Rights," March 1, 2021; U.S. Department of State, *2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Uzbekistan*, March 30, 2021.

Freedom House continues to classify Uzbekistan as "not free," assessing that the country "remains an authoritarian state with few signs of democratization."[185]

Uzbekistan's centralized government structure grants the executive branch extensive powers, with the president exercising significant control over the legislature and the judiciary. The president nominates the prime minister, the chair of the Senate, the general prosecutor, and all regional governors. He also approves the Cabinet of Ministers, and appoints and dismisses all judges. By law, the president is limited to two five-year terms, but this limit was not observed by Karimov. The bicameral legislature (*Oliy Majlis*) has historically provided neither an effective check on the executive nor a venue for genuine political debate. Its role has expanded somewhat under Mirziyoyev, who has urged more oversight over the executive and greater initiative from parliament.[186]

The country's first post-Karimov parliamentary elections were held in December 2019 under the slogan "New Uzbekistan—New Elections." According to international observers, the elections took place in an atmosphere of unprecedented openness and engagement with voters but did not demonstrate genuine competitiveness.[187] The composition of parliament remains largely unchanged, and the five parties that currently hold seats are seen as pro-government. Although no party has an outright majority, Mirziyoyev's Liberal Democratic Party received the highest number of seats (53 of the 150 seats in the chamber). More than half of the incoming deputies were elected for the first time, and they are on average younger than their predecessors.[188] In 2020, legislative amendments expanded the oversight powers of the *Oliy Majlis*, and the new parliament has engaged in increased debate on policy issues.[189]

Table 5. Uzbekistan: Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Not Free (Score: 3/100)	Not Free (Score: 11/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	166th of 180 Countries	157th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Repressed (166th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Unfree (108th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	156th of 168 Countries	146th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	93rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	92nd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions

[185] Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021: Uzbekistan*.

[186] "Address by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Oliy Majlis," December 28, 2018, available at https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/address-president-republic-uzbekistan-shavkat-mirziyoyev-oliy-majlis-0.

[187] OSCE ODIHR, *Uzbekistan, Parliamentary Elections, 22 December 2019: Final Report*, May 13, 2020; OSCE ODIHR, "Important Progress in Election Legislation Could Not Offset Lack of Real Contest in Uzbekistan's Parliamentary Elections, International Observers Say," December 23, 2019.

[188] Zaki Shaikh, *Uzbekistan's New Parliament: Real Reform or Just the Will of the "President's Men?"*, Al Jazeera Center for Studies, January 23, 2020; Catherine Putz, "Final Tally on Uzbekistan's New Parliament: A 2014 Repeat?" *The Diplomat*, January 7, 2020.

[189] Oleg Zamanov, "Olii Mazhlis poluchil pravo provodit' rassledovaniia" [Oliy Majlis received the right to conduct investigations], *Norma*, August 11, 2020; Catherine Putz, "Checking in on Uzbekistan's Political Progress in 2020: An Interview with Farkhod Tolipov," *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2020.

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016* and *Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, *2016 World Press Freedom Index* and *2021 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2021 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2016* and *Rule of Law Index 2020*.

Human Rights

International organizations have lauded Uzbekistan's progress on human rights since 2016, but concerns persist among some observers. Human rights activists have long criticized Uzbekistan for its use of forced labor in harvesting cotton, the country's primary cash crop. Under Karimov, the government annually forced millions of people to pick cotton, a practice that dated to the Soviet era. In its 2019 *Trafficking in Persons* report, the State Department assessed that Mirziyoyev's government has taken "substantive actions" to combat forced labor, and in 2021 the State Department noted Uzbekistan's "increasing efforts" in this area.[190] The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) continues to classify cotton and silk cocoons as goods produced through forced labor in Uzbekistan. DOL removed Uzbek cotton from a list of products produced through forced child labor in 2019. In a report published in January 2021, the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that systematic child labor and systematic forced labor did not occur in the 2020 cotton harvest, although some incidents were reported. While the central government has stated its strong commitment to eradicating child labor and forced labor, some local officials reportedly continue to coerce people into picking cotton. The ILO assesses that reforms have led to a significant and accelerating reduction in forced labor in the cotton harvest, with an estimated 4% of cotton pickers subjected to direct or perceived forms of coercion in 2020.[191]

Mirziyoyev has received recognition for releasing dozens of political prisoners, including two journalists who had been jailed for almost 20 years.[192] In August 2019, Mirziyoyev announced that the notoriously brutal Jaslyk Prison would be closed, a move heralded as a "very positive step" by international observers.[193] Nevertheless, the U.N. Committee Against Torture noted that as of December 2019, there were reports that torture and ill-treatment of prisoners remain "widespread" and "routine."[194] Although at least 60 political prisoners have been released, they have not been formally rehabilitated, meaning they remain legally presumed guilty of having committed a crime.[195]

The Uzbek state strictly controls and monitors religious practices, and unregistered religious activity is criminalized.[196] A law on religion signed by President Mirziyoyev in July 2021 eases some restrictions but has drawn criticism from religious freedom advocates for maintaining

[190] U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2019, p. 493; U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, June 2021, p. 597.

[191] International Labour Organization, *2020 Third-Party Monitoring of Child Labour and Forced Labour During the Cotton Harvest in Uzbekistan*, January 2021.

[192] Freedom House, "Uzbekistan: Freedom House Welcomes Release of Political Prisoners," August 31, 2020; Steve Swerdlow, "Charting Progress in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan," *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2019.

[193] Hugh Williamson and Steve Swerdlow, "Shuttering Notorious Jaslyk Prison A Victory for Human Rights in Uzbekistan," Human Rights Watch, August 27, 2019; Steve Swerdlow, "Charting Progress in Mirziyoyev's Uzbekistan," *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2019.

[194] United Nations Committee Against Torture, "Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of Uzbekistan: Advanced Unedited Version," December 2019.

[195] Steve Swerdlow, "Rehabilitation Here and Now: Pursuing Transitional Justice in Uzbekistan," Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, October 5, 2020.

[196] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 12, 2021.

registration requirements and other elements of government control over religious life.[197] In December 2020, the U.S. State Department removed Uzbekistan from its Special Watch List of countries that engage in severe violations of religious freedom. Uzbekistan had previously been designated as a CPC from 2006 to 2017, and was placed on the Special Watch List in 2018 and 2019.[198] In its 2021 Annual Report, USCIRF noted positive changes in religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan, but recommended that the State Department return Uzbekistan to the Special Watch List.[199]

Uzbekistan's media and civil society now operate more freely than under Karimov, but still face constraints (see **Table 5**). Local media have begun covering previously taboo topics such as forced labor and corruption, but self-censorship persists. Journalists representing international media outlets have received accreditation, and independent news, social media, and human rights-related websites that had long been blocked in the country are now accessible. RFE/RL's Uzbek service remains blocked, however, and the government has refused to accredit its journalists. The Mirziyoyev government has eased barriers to NGO registration, but both local and international organizations face bureaucratic obstacles. It also remains difficult to create a new political party. No new parties have been able to register, and all existing parties support the government.[200]

Economy

Uzbekistan is a lower-middle-income country with significant natural resources and relatively well developed infrastructure. Major exports include cotton, natural gas, uranium, and gold. The country is the world's seventh-largest producer of cotton, and the Uzbek government is moving to transition from raw cotton exports to textile production. Uzbekistan has sizeable natural gas reserves; the primary destination for natural gas exports is China, although the majority of production is consumed domestically. Uzbekistan is the world's seventh-largest uranium supplier and has concluded long-term supply agreements with various countries, including the United States, China, India, and Japan. According to official figures, about two million Uzbeks work abroad as labor migrants, primarily in Russia; the actual number may be higher. Remittances amounted to about 15% of GDP in 2019.

In April 2020, Uzbekistan's parliament voted in favor of seeking observer status in the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); the country officially became an EEU observer in December of that year. Uzbekistan is also pursuing accession to the WTO, a move supported by the United States.[201] Uzbekistan has received sizeable investment from China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

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[197] Felix Corley and Mushfig Bayram, "UZBEKISTAN: President to Sign Restrictive New Religion Law?" Forum 18, July 5, 2021; "Uzbekistan Disappoints with Secretively Adopted Religion Law," *Eurasianet*, July 7, 2021. See also: European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) and OSCE ODIHR, Uzbekistan: Joint Opinion on the Draft Law "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations," Venice Commission Opinion No. 998/2020, OSCE/ODIHR Opinion No. FORB-UZB/387/2020, October 12, 2020.

[198] U.S. Department of State, *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uzbekistan*, May 12, 2021.

[199] U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Annual Report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom*, April 2021, p. 84.

[200] Bruce Pannier, "New Uzbek Opposition Party Runs into the Same Wall as Its Predecessors," *RFE/RL*, March 24, 2021.

[201] Uzbekistan began the accession process in 1994, but froze talks in 2005, a move related to Karimov's emphasis on economic self-sufficiency. Accession negotiations resumed in 2020. See World Trade Organization, "Uzbekistan Resumes WTO Membership Negotiations," July 7, 2020 and Richard Pomfret, "Uzbekistan and the World Trade Organization," June 2020, available at https://iit.adelaide.edu.au/ua/media/726/uzbekistan-wto.pdf.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on Uzbekistan's economy, which faces pressure due to lower exports, lower natural gas prices and export volumes, decreased remittances, and domestic economic disruption. The World Bank estimates that Uzbekistan's GDP expansion slowed to 1.6% in 2020 (down from 5.6% growth in 2019), and projects a rebound to 4.8% growth in 2021.[202]

Economic Liberalization

Under President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has implemented economic reforms aimed at reducing the role of the state in favor of the private sector and attracting large-scale foreign investment.[203] The government has prioritized improving the country's business environment and streamlining public administration. The World Bank has commended Uzbekistan's "strong progress" on economic reforms.[204] In 2017, Uzbekistan's government eased long-standing currency controls and liberalized its monetary policy, eliminating a major impediment to foreign investment and privatization. Economic growth remains driven largely by state-funded projects. State-owned enterprises (SOEs) dominate key sectors of the economy, and some SOEs are slated for privatization. According to the State Department, Uzbekistan's government has achieved "notable improvement" in fiscal transparency and has increased engagement with international experts.[205] The U.S. Department of Commerce identifies insufficient protection of intellectual property rights, an overregulated and inefficient financial sector, and the dominant role of SOEs as among the challenges facing foreign businesses operating in Uzbekistan.[206]

U.S.-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations

U.S. relations with Uzbekistan have improved markedly since 2016, reflecting the country's broader development of international ties, and U.S. officials have expressed strong support for Uzbekistan's reform efforts. President Mirziyoyev traveled to Washington, DC, in May 2018, the first official visit by an Uzbek president to the United States since 2002, and lauded the "new era of the strategic partnership" between the two countries.[207] According to Trump Administration officials, Uzbekistan's reengagement with its neighbors invigorated the U.S.-led C5+1 framework, which provides a high-level forum for discussing regional issues.[208]

From 2001 to 2005, relations between the United States and Uzbekistan were relatively robust, and focused heavily on security cooperation related to Afghanistan. In 2002, during a visit by then-President Karimov to Washington, DC, the two countries signed a Declaration of Strategic Partnership and Cooperation. U.S.-Uzbekistan relations experienced a severe downturn in 2005, after government forces killed over 100 unarmed civilians during unrest in the eastern city of

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[202] World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, June 2021, p. 71.

[203] Lilia Burunciuc et al., "How Uzbekistan Is Transforming into an Open Economy," The Brookings Institution, December 20, 2018.

[204] The World Bank, "Uzbekistan Economic and Social Reforms Building Better Opportunities for People, Says World Bank Regional Vice-President," February 27, 2019.

[205] U.S. Department of State, *2019 Investment Climate Statements: Uzbekistan*, July 11, 2019.

[206] U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, *Uzbekistan—Country Commercial Guide*, October 14, 2020.

[207] The White House, "Remarks by President Trump and President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan Before Bilateral Meeting," May 16, 2018.

[208] Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Faces Choice Between Closer Ties to US, Russia," *Voice of America*, December 1, 2019.

Andijan. The government responded to foreign criticism by expelling numerous international NGOs and media organizations, ending the Peace Corps program, and demanding the withdrawal of U.S. forces stationed at the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in support of military operations in Afghanistan.[209] Uzbekistan continued to provide logistical support for NATO forces in Afghanistan by allowing the transit of non-lethal shipments through its territory as part of the Northern Distribution Network, established in 2009.

The value of bilateral trade between the United States and Uzbekistan more than doubled from 2017 to 2018, from approximately $150 million to $315 million, and reached $540 million in 2019.[210] The first U.S. Department of Commerce Certified Trade Mission visited Uzbekistan in June 2019; the then-Secretary of Commerce assessed that "significant opportunities exist to strengthen commercial and economic ties."[211]

U.S. foreign assistance to Uzbekistan aims to support the country's reform efforts, especially in the judicial, education, economic, and financial sectors, in order to increase protection of human rights, combat corruption, and improve resiliency. Assistance to Uzbekistan includes nonproliferation activities and public health programs aimed at combatting tuberculosis, as well as support for the expansion of civil society, strengthening journalistic professionalism, and developing the capacity of Uzbekistan's parliament to initiate legislation and provide meaningful oversight over the other branches of government. Aid is also intended to promote security and regional stability by helping Uzbekistan professionalize its defense forces and bolstering border security and counterterrorism capabilities. The State Department requests $44 million in assistance to Uzbekistan in FY2022, compared to $43.7 million allocated in FY2020.[212]

Regional Issues

U.S. Regional Relations and Interests

As noted above, the United States was among the first countries to recognize the independence of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since that time, the United States has repeatedly expressed support for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the five Central Asian states, and has implemented programs to support democracy, good governance, and economic reforms in the region. The United States has provided over $9 billion in direct assistance to the countries of Central Asia in the past three decades to support security, democratic reform, and economic growth, and to meet humanitarian needs.[213] Some observers contend that Central Asia's importance to the United States has historically been "derivative of interests that were not indigenous to Central Asia itself, but rather were functions of U.S. policies, priorities, and relationships with countries around the region."[214] Central Asia has been described

[209] OSCE ODIHR, *Preliminary Findings on the Events in Andijan, Uzbekistan*, May 13, 2005.

[210] Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Uzbekistan," October 2, 2020.

[211] U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, "First Commerce Department Certified U.S. Trade Mission Visits Uzbekistan," June 18, 2019.

[212] U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2022*, Appendix 2, pp. 162, 289-290, 310, 350, 371, 584-585.

[213] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)," February 5, 2020.

[214] Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, *U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2016, pp. 3-4.

as a challenging environment for democracy promotion efforts, and observers have voiced concerns that democratic progress in the region has been uneven or nonexistent.[215]

Since 2001, U.S. engagement with Central Asia has largely focused on security cooperation, particularly in relation to U.S.-led efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. The United States engages in security cooperation with all five Central Asian countries, implementing programs to provide training, improve peacekeeping and disaster response capabilities, and bolster border security. In some cases, security cooperation provides an opportunity to maintain and develop a bilateral relationship where other opportunities for engagement are limited. Through the National Guard's State Partnership Program, four of the five Central Asian countries are paired with U.S. states (Kazakhstan-Arizona, Kyrgyzstan-Montana, Tajikistan-Virginia, and Uzbekistan-Mississippi), developing military-to-military contacts and receiving training in areas such as counterterrorism and disaster preparedness. Turkmenistan previously partnered with Nevada from 1996 to 2011.[216]

U.S. Strategy for Central Asia

U.S. policy priorities for the region are outlined in the United States Strategy for Central Asia, the most recent version of which was issued in February 2020.[217] The strategy defines the primary U.S. strategic interest in Central Asia as building "a more stable and prosperous Central Asia that is free to pursue political, economic, and security interests with a variety of partners on its own terms; is connected to global markets and open to international investment; and has strong, democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights."[218] The strategy reiterates U.S. commitment to supporting the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states, while acknowledging that shifts within the region present new opportunities to promote regional connectivity and intra-regional cooperation.[219] Other U.S. priorities in Central Asia outlined in the Strategy include reducing the threat of terrorism, promoting the rule of law and human rights, and promoting U.S. investment in the region.

C5+1

Since 2015, U.S. bilateral relationships in the region have been complemented by the C5+1 diplomatic platform, which provides a forum for the United States and the five Central Asian countries to address the common challenges they face in areas such as security, economic connectivity, and environmental vulnerabilities. The State Department notes the format's success in "enhancing regional dialogue, cooperation, and partnership among the participating countries" and contributions to "increasing economic and energy connectivity and trade, mitigating environmental and health challenges, jointly addressing security threats, and advocating for the full participation of women in all aspects of the political, economic, and social life of member

[215] See, for example, Rumer et al, *U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0*; Sean Roberts, *Saving Democracy Promotion From Short-Term U.S. Policy Interests in Central Asia*, The Century Foundation, 2009; Martha Brill Olcott, "Democracy Promotion in Central Asia: From High Expectations to Disillusionment," CORE Workshop on Democratization in Central Asia, February 10, 2007.

[216] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Central Asia," May 19, 2021.

[217] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)," February 5, 2020.

[218] Ibid.

[219] Catherine Putz, "A New U.S. Strategy for Central Asia: Continuity Under Better Conditions," *The Diplomat*, February 6, 2020.

countries."[220] The most recent C5+1 ministerial took place in September 2021, bringing together Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. U.S.-led C5+1 initiatives bring together government officials, practitioners, and other key stakeholders from all six countries to address common obstacles and discuss best practices on issues ranging from the rehabilitation and reintegration for returnees from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq to fostering clean energy development and regional electricity trade.

Intra-Regional Issues

Central Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world.[221] After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, economic links within Central Asia were disrupted. Some of the bilateral relationships within the region grew tense over issues such as water management and border disputes. For much of the past three decades, border closures and restrictive visa regimes hampered travel within the region, and intra-regional trade remained limited.

According to the U.S. State Department, the shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy after the country's 2016 leadership transition has encouraged regional connectivity.[222] Uzbekistan under Karimov represented "an obstacle to regional integration" and "a knot at the heart of the region," in the assessment of one longtime observer, due to tense relations with neighboring countries.[223] Trump Administration officials reportedly credited Uzbekistan's reengagement with its neighbors with invigorating the U.S.-led C5+1 framework.[224] Upon assuming power, President Mirziyoyev embarked on a "good neighbor" policy, reengaging with the region and declaring Central Asia to be Uzbekistan's main foreign policy priority.[225] Uzbekistan has moved to normalize and improve previously strained relations with its Central Asian neighbors, resolving border disputes with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and engaging in increased regional outreach. Uzbekistan's government eased visa restrictions and opened border crossings. Economic integration and intra-regional trade have grown markedly. Uzbekistan's trade turnover with each of its four Central Asian neighbors increased between 53% and 131% from 2016 to 2018.[226] In 2018, a meeting between Central Asia's heads of state took place for the first time in nine years. The summit, held in Kazakhstan, was initiated by Mirziyoyev. U.S. Ambassador to Uzbekistan Daniel Rosenblum was later quoted in the press as crediting President Mirziyoyev with "dramatically changing the tenor of relations in the region from mutual suspicion to mutual cooperation."[227]

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[220] U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on the C5+1 Virtual Ministerial," May 4, 2021.

[221] See, for example, U.S. Department of State, *Prospects for Regional Integration in Central Asia: Remarks by Fatema Z. Sumar, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of South and Central Asia*, October 28, 2014.

[222] U.S. Department of State, *Integrated Country Strategy: Uzbekistan*, August 3, 2018.

[223] Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan: The Suddenly Good Neighbor," *RFE/RL*, October 4, 2016.

[224] Navbahor Imamova, "Uzbekistan Faces Choice Between Closer Ties to US, Russia," *Voice of America*, December 1, 2019.

[225] "Central Asia—The Main Priority of Uzbekistan's Foreign Policy," *O'zbekiston Miliy Axborot Agentligi*, August 12, 2017.

[226] Sam Bhutia, "Uzbekistan's Trade with Neighbors Rises Sharply," *Eurasianet*, September 30, 2019.

[227] Navbahor Imamova, "Analysis: Will Uzbekistan's Champion of Reform Stay the Course?" *Voice of America*, August 30, 2020.

Border Disputes

Central Asia's current borders date back to the Soviet government's effort to carry out a delimitation of the region along ethnic lines in the 1920s, although they underwent some subsequent changes.[228] These borders were drawn as administrative divisions and were not intended to serve as international boundaries. Borders were not fully demarcated during the Soviet period, and it was not uncommon, for instance, for residents of one republic to farm land that belonged to another.[229] This led to a range of issues after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, when Central Asia's pre-independence borders became *de jure* international boundaries. In the past three decades, border disputes have disrupted travel and economic activity and led to occasional outbreaks of violence.[230] In addition to disagreements over land and water rights, relations among some Central Asian countries have at times been complicated by the existence of exclaves—territories belonging to one country but entirely surrounded by the territory of another. There are eight exclaves in the Fergana Valley (see **Figure 8**), which is divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The largest, Uzbekistan's Sokh exclave, covers roughly 80 square miles, has a primarily ethnic Tajik population of about 85,000, and is entirely surrounded by Kyrgyz territory.[231] The Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek governments have taken steps to ease access to some exclaves, but residents of these territories continue to report difficulties. Periodic clashes along the Uzbek-Kyrgyz, Kyrgyz-Tajik, and Tajik-Uzbek borders continue to occur, although all three governments have taken steps in recent years to address outstanding border disputes.[232]

[228] See, for example, Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

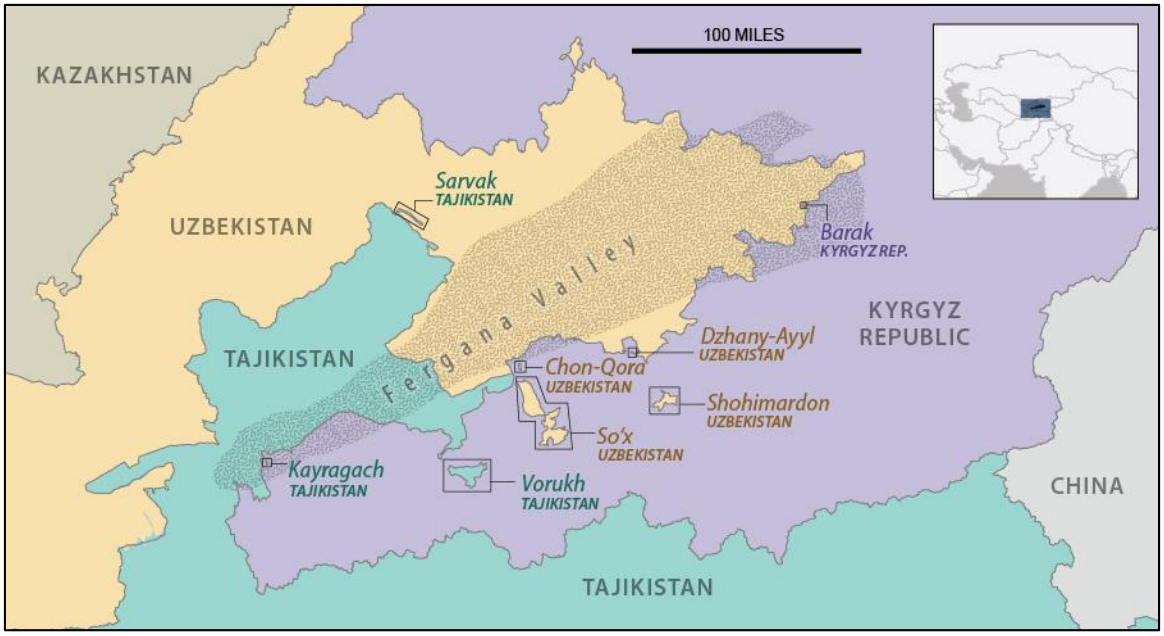
[229] Nick Megoran, *Nationalism in Central Asia: A Biography of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017); Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014); Madeleine Reeves, "A Weekend in Osh," *London Review of Books*, July 8, 2010.

[230] "Convoluted Borders are Hampering Central Asian Integration," *The Economist*, October 31, 2019; Bruce Pannier, "Signs of Hope (and Conflict) On Central Asia's Borders," *RFE/RL*, May 16, 2020; Timur Toktonaliev, "Settling Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Conflicts," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 19, 2019.

[231] At the time the exclave was created, Tajikistan was an autonomous region within the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, which is why this predominantly Tajik territory became part of Uzbekistan. Sokh remained part of Uzbekistan after Tajikistan became a separate republic in 1929. See Rashid Gabdulhakov, "Geographical Enclaves of the Fergana Valley: Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?" *OSCE Academy Central Asia Security Policy Briefs*, no. 14 (2014).

[232] Catherine Putz, "Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Border: 'Resolved 100 Percent,'" *The Diplomat*, March 30, 2021.

Figure 8. Exclaves in the Fergana Valley



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: "Sokh," a variant spelling of So'x, is used in the text of this report.

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has demined its border with Tajikistan, and rail and flight connections between the two countries have resumed.[233] The two sides are working to finalize the demarcation of their shared boundary. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are in the process of delimiting and demarcating their border and settling outstanding disputes related to land and water rights, although the prospect of land swaps has spurred some protests among local residents.[234] Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are also in the process of demarcating their border. Efforts to resolve outstanding border issues between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been less successful; just over half of their shared border has been delimited and demarcated.[235] In April 2021, a fight at a water intake station that releases water into canals in both countries escalated into a broader clash that reportedly left dozens of people dead and homes destroyed on both sides of the border.[236]

[233] "Tajik-Uzbek Border Cleared Of Mines," *RFE/RL*, January 6, 2020; "Uzbekistan, Tajikistan Railroad Set for Imminent Reactivation," *Eurasianet*, February 28, 2018; Catherine Putz, "After Cancellations and Delays, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Reopen Air Link," *The Diplomat*, April 12, 2017.

[234] "Pogranichnye voprosy s Kygystanom namereny reshit' za tri mesiatsa—Shavkat Mirzieev" [We intend to resolve border issues with Kyrgyzstan within three months—Shavkat Mirziyoyev], *Gazeta.uz*, March 11, 2021; Ernist Nurmatov, "Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan namereny za tri mesiatsia reshit' vse voprosy po granitsam" [Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan intend to resolve all border issues within three months], *Radio Azattyk*, March 13, 2021; Guliza Avazova, "V Kara-Suiskom raione zhiteli vyshli protiv peredachi 50 gektarov zemli Uzbekistanu" [In Kara-Su region, residents demonstrated against the transfer of 50 hectares of land to Uzbekistan], *Kaktus Media*, April 1, 2021.

[235] Bruce Pannier, "'No Issues Remain'? Not So Fast. Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border Disputes Don't Appear to Be Decided," *RFE/RL*, April 2, 2021; Catherine Putz, "Settling Central Asia's Borders Is No Easy Task," *The Diplomat*, April 10, 2021; Kamila Baimuratova, "Tashiev otvetil na kritku eks-glavy MID Tadzhikistana ob anklave Vorukh" [Tashiev responded to criticism from former head of Tajikistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Vorukh enclave], *Kloop*, April 1, 2021.

[236] Ayzirek Imanaliyeva and Kamila Ibragimova, "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan: Officials Talk peace, but Popular Moods Still Raw," *Eurasianet*, May 1, 2020; Bruce Pannier, "Conflict on the Kyrgyz-Tajik Border Moves from Sticks and Stones to Bullets and Bombs," *RFE/RL*, April 30, 2021.

Energy

Oil and Gas

Central Asia is rich in hydrocarbons (see **Table 6**), and the oil and gas sector has attracted foreign investment to the region, particularly to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Because they are landlocked, these Central Asian countries depend primarily on pipelines to transport their hydrocarbon production to world markets (see **Figure 9**). The Caspian Pipeline Consortium transports crude oil from western Kazakhstan to the port of Novorossiysk on Russia's Black Sea coast; other major export routes for Kazakhstan's crude oil include the Kazakhstan-China pipeline and the Uzen-Atyrau-Samara pipeline to Russia. Kazakhstan also ships oil by tanker across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, from where it is transported by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline to Turkey's Mediterranean coast or by the Northern Route pipeline to Novorossiysk.[237] Turkmenistan exported some oil via the BTC pipeline in the past, but diverted those flows to Novorossiysk in 2019.[238] Central Asian countries previously exported some of their crude via oil swaps with Iran; little to no crude oil has been swapped since 2011, reportedly due to complications arising from international sanctions on Iran and Iran's desire for higher fees per barrel swapped.[239]

In the past decade, China has become the primary export destination for Central Asian natural gas, followed by Russia, although the majority of natural gas produced in Central Asia is consumed domestically. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline transports natural gas from Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to China. Turkmenistan is China's largest natural gas supplier by pipeline. The planned Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, first proposed in the 1990s, would open new markets for Turkmenistan and improve South Asia's regional energy security, but its completion remains highly speculative.[240] Because Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan all produce significant volumes of natural gas, many in the United States and the European Union have argued that these countries represent a potential alternative to Russian natural gas for the European market.[241] To date there has been no direct gas trade between Central Asia and Europe. The proposed Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline would enable Turkmenistan to supply gas to European markets, but this project has been hampered by opposition from Russia and Iran, as well as by unresolved questions concerning the delimitation of Caspian seabed rights.[242] Azerbaijan has begun exports of Caspian natural gas to Europe, and in January 2021 the governments of Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan signed an agreement to jointly develop a previously disputed gas field on their maritime border, potentially facilitating future export of gas from Turkmenistan to Europe.[243]

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[237] U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Background Reference: Kazakhstan*, January 7, 2019.

[238] "Oil Exports from Ceyhan Poised to Fall Due to Turkmen Diversion," Reuters, January 25, 2019; "Azerbaijan's Jan-May Oil Exports via BTC Pipeline Fall 6.6% y/y," Reuters, June 12, 2020.

[239] U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Background Reference: Kazakhstan*, January 7, 2019.

[240] Catherine Putz, "Taliban Visit Turkmenistan, Promise (Again) to Protect TAPI," *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2021.

[241] See CRS Report R42405, *European Energy Security: Options for EU Natural Gas Diversification*, coordinated by Michael Ratner.

[242] See CRS Report R42405, *European Energy Security: Options for EU Natural Gas Diversification*, coordinated by Michael Ratner.

[243] David O'Byrne, "Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan Agreement Advances Caspian Gas Cooperation," *Eurasianet*, January 22, 2021.

Kazakhstan's oil and gas resources have attracted significant foreign investment, and the country has long-standing relationships with American energy companies. Chevron and ExxonMobil have both maintained a presence in Kazakhstan since 1993. The two companies hold 50% and 25% interests, respectively, in Tengizchevroil, the consortium developing Kazakhstan's largest oil and gas field, located in the northwest of the country along the Caspian Sea coast. Chevron, the largest private oil producer in Kazakhstan, also holds an 18% stake in Karachaganak, one of the world's largest gas condensate fields, and is the largest private shareholder in the Caspian Pipeline Consortium.[244] ExxonMobil, meanwhile, has a 16.81% stake in the international consortium developing the offshore Kashagan oil field.[245]

Table 6. Oil and Natural Gas in Central Asia

Country	Natural Gas Production (bcf)	Natural Gas Consumption (bcf)	Natural Gas Reserves (tcf)	Oil Production (kb/d)	Oil Consumption (kb/d)	Oil Reserves (bnbl)
Kazakhstan	895	547	85	1,959	330	30
Kyrgyz Republic	1	7.7	0.2	1	40	(s)
Tajikistan	0.6	2.6	0.2	0.2	22	(s)
Turkmenistan	2,874	1,388	265	280	152	0.6
Uzbekistan	2,014	1,481	65	56	95	0.6

Source: U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Notes: Data from 2018. Units: bcf = billion cubic feet; tcf = trillion cubic feet; kb/d = thousand barrels a day; bnbl = billion barrels; (s) = value too small for the number of decimal places shown.

[244] Tengizchevroil, "Overview," at http://www.tengizchevroil.com/en/about/overview; Chevron, "Kazakhstan," at https://www.chevron.com/worldwide/kazakhstan.

[245] North Caspian Operating Company, "NCOC Governance and Management System," at https://www.ncoc.kz/en/ncoc/ncoc-governance.

Figure 9. Oil and Gas in Central Asia

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Renewables

Central Asian countries have significant potential to develop wind, solar, and hydropower. In recent years, some Central Asian governments have committed to diversifying towards renewable energy sources. Kazakhstan's government has announced that it plans to supply 10% of the country's electricity from renewable sources by 2030 and aims to reach 50% by 2050. Uzbekistan's government says it intends to increase the share of renewables in electricity generation to 25% by 2030. Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have initiated solar energy projects with Chinese and European investors.[246] In November 2020, Kazakhstan initiated a $95.3 million wind farm project with Chinese and European financing.[247] Any shift to renewables would also free up hydrocarbons for export.

[246] Niva Yau, "Chinese Solar Investments in Central Asia: A Snapshot," *Eurasianet*, October 15, 2020.

[247] Petr Konstantiov, "Kazakhstan Forges Ahead with Renewable Energy," European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, November 16, 2020.

Hydropower and Water Resources

Central Asia's water resources give some countries in the region significant hydropower potential, but they also serve as a potential source of conflict given downstream countries' dependence on the region's rivers for irrigation. Soviet-era irrigation projects that diverted large volumes of water for agricultural purposes from the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, the region's two major rivers, led to the desiccation of the Aral Sea, once the world's fourth-largest lake, with environmental, economic, and public health consequences.[248] Today, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya each cross multiple international borders: the Amu Darya originates in Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains and flows northwest to what remains of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan, forming part of Afghanistan's northern border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan; the Syr Darya originates in the Tien Shan Mountains in Kyrgyzstan and flows northwest through Uzbekistan and southern Kazakhstan to the northern remnants of the Aral Sea (see **Figure 10**). Some analysts argue that climate change will lead to additional stress on Central Asia's water resources, heightening the potential for conflict.[249]

Figure 10. Aral Sea Watershed

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Actual Aral Sea water levels fluctuate.

While Central Asian countries have made some progress in resolving recurrent disagreements over the management of water resources, access to water continues to be a focal point of intermittent cross-border disputes.[250] Historically, the significant potential of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to develop hydropower has been complicated by opposition from downstream countries. Due to its climate and geography, Uzbekistan is dependent on its upstream neighbors for much of the water it consumes, including in the water-intensive cotton industry.[251] Similarly, southern Kazakhstan depends on water from the Syr Darya. In the past, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan reacted negatively to hydropower projects initiated by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Increased intra-regional dialogue has ameliorated the situation somewhat in recent years. In 2020, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan reached an agreement to construct two hydropower dams in Tajikistan to supply electricity to Uzbekistan.[252] In March 2021, the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan agreed to a joint project for constructing a hydropower station on the Naryn River.[253]

[248] See, for example, Dante Schulz, "The Cautionary Tale of the Aral Sea: Environmental Destruction at Economic Costs," Caspian Policy Center, December 30, 2020.

[249] Khamza Sharifzoda, "Climate Change: An Omitted Security Threat in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, July 22, 2019; World Economic Forum, "Climate Change Is Threatening Security in Central Asia," January 25, 2019.

[250] Alima Dalbaeva, "End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia," International Crisis Group, March 15, 2018.

[251] Aziz Egamov, "Uzbekistan's Impending Water Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 5, 2019.

[252] Sam Bhutia, "Could Energy Trade Be a Win-Win for Tajik-Uzbek Ties?" *Eurasianet*, February 3, 2020.

[253] Ernist Nurmatov, "Kyrgyzstan i Uzbekistan dogovorilis' vmeste stroit' GES" [Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have agreed to jointly construct a hydropower station], *Radio Azattyk*, March 18, 2021.

Security

Afghanistan

In the past two decades, promoting stability in Afghanistan has been a key element of the U.S. approach to Central Asia, and the United States has sought to promote regional connectivity and intra-regional cooperation both within Central Asia and between Central Asia and Afghanistan. According to the most recent iteration of the U.S. Strategy for Central Asia, released in 2020, the United States seeks to "encourage the Central Asian states to develop economic and trade links with Afghanistan and to model stable governance of multi-ethnic, Muslim-majority countries."[254] The nature of U.S. engagement with Central Asia may evolve in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the August 2021 Taliban takeover of the country.[255] Analysts assess that recent events in Afghanistan may lead to an intensified Russian security presence in Central Asia.[256] Others conjecture that Taliban control in Afghanistan may also bolster Chinese influence in Central Asia and the broader region.[257] Conversely, one longtime observer of the region contends that, "it is arguably more likely that little about Central Asia's relationships with the big powers, as they currently stand, will change at all," with the United States providing a counterweight to Russian and Chinese influence in the region.[258] Some posit that the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan may prompt Uzbekistan to redouble efforts to build regional cooperation and solidify its role as a leader within Central Asia.[259]

Many analysts assess that the primary concerns of Central Asian governments following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan are maintaining stability and ensuring their own countries' security, including by minimizing the potential for large refugee outflows and the spread of Islamic State-affiliated or other terrorist groups.[260] Taliban leaders have reportedly stated that they will not violate the territorial integrity of Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors, and that they do not pose a threat to the region.[261] The governments of Central Asia have generally adopted a

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[254] U.S. Department of State, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)," February 5, 2020.

[255] See, for example, Alexander Cooley, "A Post-American Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, August 23, 2021.

[256] Temur Umarov, "Do the Taliban Pose a Threat to Stability in Central Asia?" Carnegie Moscow Center, September 3, 2021; Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," Chatham House, August 27, 2021; Andrew Kramer and Anton Troianovski, "With Afghan Collapse, Moscow Takes Charge in Central Asia," *New York Times*, August 19, 2021.

[257] Khursand Khurramov, "Usilitsia li vliianie Kitaia v regione posle prikhoda k vlasti 'Taliban'?" [Will the influence of China in the region increase after the Taliban have come to power?] *Radio Ozodi*, September 16, 2021; Reid Standish, "China Cautiously Eyes New Regional Leadership Role As Afghanistan Fighting Intensifies," *RFE/RL*, July 14, 2021.

[258] Bruce Pannier, "How Much Will Afghanistan Change Central Asia's Relations with Russia, China, and the United States?" *RFE/RL*, August 24, 2021.

[259] See, for example, Henry Foy, "Taliban Takeover Turns Uzbekistan into Powerbroker," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021.

[260] Kate Mallinson, "Afghanistan Creates Tricky New Reality for Central Asia," Chatham House, August 27, 2021; Mansur Mirovalev, "Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Panic, Reject Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2021; Chris Rickleton, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Enemies at the Gate?" *Eurasianet*, August 13, 2021; Dmitri Trenin, "Afghanistan After the U.S. Pullout: Challenges to Russia and Central Asia," Carnegie Moscow Center, July 13, 2021.

[261] Umida Hashimova, "Greater Coordination in Central Asian Responses to Afghan Border Troubles," *The Diplomat*, July 19, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russian Envoy Expects Taliban Not to Threaten Central Asia," Associated Press, July 14, 2021; Vladimir Isachenkov, "Taliban Visit Moscow to Say Their Wins Don't Threaten Russia," Associated Press, July 8, 2021; "As Tajikistan Mobilizes 20,000 Troops, Taliban Says It Poses No Threat," *Eurasianet*, July 6, 2021; Umida Hashimova, "Beyond the Intra-Afghan Talks, Uzbekistan Sees a Bright Future," *The Diplomat*,

pragmatic approach toward the Taliban, particularly Afghanistan's immediate neighbors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.[262] Turkmenistan's history of engaging with the Taliban goes back to the 1990s, and the country's government hosted Taliban delegations in February and July 2021.[263] Since the collapse of the Afghan government, relations between Turkmenistan and the Taliban have been described as "convivial" and driven by a desire to develop energy exports.[264] In a statement issued on September 8, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed the Taliban's formation of an interim government in Afghanistan, adding, "We hope that this decision will be the first step toward achieving a broad national consensus and lasting peace and stability in that country. We express our readiness to develop a constructive dialogue and practical cooperation with the new state organs of Afghanistan."[265] The government of Tajikistan, which also shares a border with Afghanistan, has by contrast expressed strong opposition to the Taliban government in Afghanistan, emphasizing the need for an inclusive government that would include representatives of Afghanistan's sizeable Tajik minority.[266] In remarks delivered on September 17, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon stated, "Tajiks and other ethnic groups must have their rightful place in [an] inclusive government," adding, "only in this way can peace and stability in Afghanistan be ensured."[267]

The Central Asian countries had previously provided support to U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan. As of May 2019, Kazakhstan had contributed $6 million to the NATO-run Afghan National Army Trust Fund; it was one of 11 non-NATO countries to contribute.[268] All five countries provided logistical assistance to U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan, ranging from overflight rights to hosting U.S. forces. The Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan leased bases to the United States from 2001 to 2014 and from 2001 to 2005, respectively. Beginning in 2009, Central Asian countries other than Turkmenistan allowed the transit through their territory of non-lethal

September 21, 2020.

[262] See, for example, Mulloradzhab Iusufzoda and Barot Iusufi, "Sammit ODBK v Dushanbe: Zhaparov vystupil za dialog z talibami, Rakhmon vyrazil bespokoistvo situatsiei v Pandzhshere" [CSTO summit in Dushanbe: Japarov spoke in favor of dialogue with the Taliban, Rahmon expressed concern over the situation in Panjshir], *Radio Ozodi*, September 16, 2021; "Kazakhstan gotov k ustanovleniiu delovykh kontaktov s pravitel'stvom Afganistama – Tokaev" [Kazakhstan is prepared to establish business contacts with the government of Afghanistan], *Vlast.kz*, September 10, 2021; Henry Foy, "Taliban Takeover Turns Uzbekistan into Powerbroker," *Financial Times*, September 9, 2021; Muhammad Tahir, "Majlis Podcast: Uzbekistan Walks The Tightrope In Its Policies Toward Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, September 5, 2021; Gavin Helf and Barmak Pazhwak, "Central Asia Prepares for Taliban Takeover," United States Institute of Peace, July 20, 2021. Ivan Klyszcz, "Don't Underestimate Tajikistan in the Afghanistan Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2021; "Turkmenistan: Taliban of Brothers," *Eurasianet*, August 24, 2021.

[263] "Turkmenistan: As Taliban Arrives at the Gates, Diplomats and Army Scramble," *Eurasianet*, July 13, 2021; Bruce Pannier, "Then and Now: Concerns About a Taliban-Led Afghan Spillover into Central Asia," *RFE/RL*, July 12, 2021; Bruce Pannier and Abubakar Siddique, "What Happened When the Taliban Visited Turkmenistan?" *RFE/RL*, February 11, 2021.

[264] "Turkmenistan: Taliban of Brothers," *Eurasianet*, August 24, 2021.

[265] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "O'zbekiston Respublikasi Tashqi ishlar vazirligi rasmiy vakilining bayonoti" [Statement by the official representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan], September 8, 2021.

[266] Mulloradzhab Iusufzoda and Barot Iusufi, "Sammit ODBK v Dushanbe: Zhaparov vystupil za dialog z talibami, Rakhmon vyrazil bespokoistvo situatsiei v Pandzhshere" [CSTO summit in Dushanbe: Japarov spoke in favor of dialogue with the Taliban, Rahmon expressed concern over the situation in Panjshir], *Radio Ozodi*, September 16, 2021; Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: The Taliban's Toughest Critic," *RFE/RL*, September 13, 2021; Ivan Klyszcz, "Don't Underestimate Tajikistan in the Afghanistan Crisis," *The Diplomat*, September 2, 2021.

[267] President of the Republic of Tajikistan, "Speech at a Press Conference Following Talks with the Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Imran Khan," September 17, 2021, available at http://president.tj/en/node/26549.

[268] NATO, Public Diplomacy Division, "Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund," May 2019.

shipments for NATO forces as part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). In 2018, Kazakhstan's government approved an agreement allowing the United States to transport nonmilitary supplies through two ports on the Caspian Sea, bolstering supply capabilities in the wake of Russia's 2015 withdrawal from the NDN. From Kazakhstan, supplies transited to Afghanistan via Uzbekistan by rail, or via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by truck. The NDN had also been used to remove equipment from Afghanistan. Prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, some analysts speculated that the NDN might continue to be used beyond the withdrawal of U.S. forces in order to support the Afghan government.[269]

In the weeks leading up to the completion of the U.S. military withdrawal, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan bolstered their military presence at their borders with Afghanistan, holding largescale military exercises.[270] Turkmenistan also reportedly deployed additional troops and equipment to its southern border, although the country's government denied doing so.[271] In August and September 2021, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan each participated in bilateral and/or multilateral military exercises with Russia that focused on potential security threats emanating from Afghanistan.[272] Tajikistan also held an anti-terrorism exercise with China.[273] Further military exercises by the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are planned in Tajikistan for October and November.[274]

International human rights organizations have urged Central Asian countries to take in refugees from Afghanistan, but regional governments have been reluctant to accept large numbers of such migrants.[275] Central Asia has not historically been a major destination for displaced Afghans.[276] Although officials in Tajikistan initially signaled willingness to take in as many as 100,000 refugees, in September the country's Minister of Internal Affairs stated that Tajikistan lacks the resources to do so without international assistance.[277] Some countries have expressed willingness to accept their coethnics from Afghanistan. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan announced that his government is considering the possibility of repatriating the Kazakh diaspora in Afghanistan.[278] Kazakhstan accepted 35 ethnic Kazakhs from Afghanistan on

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[269] Bruce Pannier, "Will Central Asia Host U.S. Military Forces Once Again?" *RFE/RL*, April 23, 2021.

[270] "Tajikistan Holds Massive Combat-Readiness Check amid Rising Instability in Neighboring Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, July 22, 2021; "Turkmenistan: as Taliban Arrives at the Gates, Diplomats and Army Scramble," *Eurasianet*, July 13, 2021.

[271] "Turkmenistan Continues Military Buildup near Border amid Deteriorating Afghan Security," *RFE/RL*, July 19, 2021; "Turkmenistan Sending Heavy Weaponry, Aircraft to Afghan Border amid Deteriorating Security," *RFE/RL*, July 11, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, Press Release, July 10, 2021, available at https://www.mfa.gov.tm/en/news/2701.

[272] "Russia Wraps Up Drills with Uzbek and Tajik Troops near Afghan Border," *RFE/RL*, August 11, 2021; "Russia-Led CSTO to Hold Military Drills in Central Asia Due to Situation in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, August 27, 2021; "Russia-Led CSTO Starts Military Drills in Kyrgyzstan Due to Situation in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, September 7, 2021.

[273] Laura Zhou, "China Conducts Anti-Terror Drill with Tajikistan, as Afghan Spillover Worries Grip Central Asia," *South China Morning Post*, August 18, 2021.

[274] "Russia-Led CSTO To Hold Military Drills in Central Asia Due to Situation in Afghanistan," *RFE/RL*, August 27, 2021. CSTO member states include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

[275] Mihra Rittman and Hugh Williamson, "Uzbekistan Should Do More to Help Afghans," *The Diplomat*, September 8, 2021; Mansur Mirovalev, "Afghanistan's Central Asian Neighbours Panic, Reject Refugees," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2021; "Central Asia Refuses to Accept Afghan Refugees," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, September 8, 2021.

[276] Temur Umarov, "Do the Taliban Pose a Threat to Stability in Central Asia?" Carnegie Moscow Center, September 3, 2021; Chris Rickleton, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Enemies at the Gate?" *Eurasianet*, August 13, 2021.

[277] "Unpacking Eurasia's Role in the Afghanistan Evacuation," *Eurasianet*, September 3, 2021; "Tajikistan Can't Afford to Take in Afghan Refugees Without Help—Police Chief," Reuters, September 2, 2021.

[278] Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Glava gosudarstva prinial veritel'nye gramoty u

September 9, 2021, deploying a military plane to evacuate them from Kabul; several hundred ethnic Kazakhs reportedly remain in Afghanistan.[279] After a group of over 300 ethnic Kyrgyz from Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor fled into Tajikistan in July, Kyrgyzstan expressed its willingness to accept them.[280] Tajikistan returned them to Afghanistan, however, citing guarantees from the Afghan government that they would be safe.[281]

Thousands of Afghan troops reportedly fled to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as the Taliban established control of northern Afghanistan, but some have subsequently been repatriated.[282] On August 14 and 15, a reported 46 aircraft from the Afghan Air Force crossed into Uzbekistan carrying some 500 people, including pilots, crew, and their families.[283] The government of Uzbekistan reportedly faced pressure from the Taliban to return the personnel and their aircraft to Afghanistan, and requested that the United States relocate them.[284] On September 12 and 13, these Afghan personnel were transferred from Uzbekistan to a U.S. base in the United Arab Emirates.[285] It remains unclear what will happen to the aircraft, which are said to include Black Hawk helicopters and PC-12 surveillance aircraft supplied to Afghanistan by the United States.[286] On August 15, a smaller group, reportedly over 140 people and around 18 aircraft, flew from Afghanistan to Tajikistan.[287] A State Department spokesperson was quoted in the media on September 13 as stating, "the Afghan personnel and aircraft are secure and being housed by the government of Tajikistan."[288]

Central Asian countries have assisted evacuation efforts out of Afghanistan. The U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has temporarily relocated some of its staff to Almaty, Kazakhstan. The UNAMA staff deployed to Almaty, who number about 100, are expected to stay in Kazakhstan for six months, although conditions in Afghanistan may lead to the extension of

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poslov riada gosudarstv" [The head of state received credentials from the ambassadors of a number of states], September 8, 2021.

[279] "Spetsbort iz Kabula: 35 etnicheskikh kazakhov pribyli na istorichesku rodinu, sotni ostaiutsia v Afganistane [Special flight from Kabul: 35 ethnic Kazakhs arrived in their historical homeland, hundreds more remain in Afghanistan], *Radio Azattyq*, September 10, 2021.

[280] "Afganskikh kyrgyzov, bezhavshikh ot talibov, planiruiut evakuirovat' v Kyrgyzstan" [Ethnic Kyrgyz who fled the Taliban are to be evacuated to Kyrgyzstan], *24.kg*, July 15, 2021.

[281] Andrew Kramer, "These Herders Lived in Peaceful Isolation. Now, War Has Found Them," *New York Times*, July 29, 2021; "Tadzhikistan vernul etnicheskikh kyrgyzov v Afganistan. Komentarii MID KR" [Tajikistan returned ethnic Kyrgyz to Afghanistan. Commentary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic], *24.kg*, July 20, 2021; "MID Kyrgyzstana prokommentiroval vozvrashchenie Tadzhikistanom etnicheskikh kyrgyzov v Afganistan" [Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commented on Tajikistan's return of ethnic Kyrgyz to Afghanistan], *Radio Azattyk*, July 20, 2021.

[282] "Unpacking Eurasia's Role in the Afghanistan Evacuation," *Eurasianet*, September 3, 2021.

[283] Catherine Putz, "Afghan Forces Flee, Fly to Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021; Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.

[284] Phil Stewart, "Afghan Pilots Start Leaving Uzbekistan for UAE, Despite Taliban Pressure—Source," Reuters, September 12, 2021; Siobhan Hughes and Jessica Donati, "Uzbekistan Warns U.S. That Afghan Pilots and Their Families Can't Stay," *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2021.

[285] Jessica Donati and Siobhan Hughes, "Afghan Pilots Who Sought Safety in Uzbekistan Begin U.S. Transfer Under New Agreement," *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2021.

[286] Ibid.

[287] Bruce Pannier, "Tajikistan: The Taliban's Toughest Critic," *RFE/RL*, September 13, 2021; Catherine Putz, "What's Next for Afghan Pilots Who Escaped to Central Asia?" *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2021.

[288] Catherine Putz, "What's Next for Afghan Pilots Who Escaped to Central Asia?" *The Diplomat*, September 13, 2021.

their stay. Depending on the security situation in Afghanistan, U.N. staff may use Almaty as a hub to rotate in and out of the country.[289] Uzbekistan facilitated the transit of Afghans and foreign nationals out of Afghanistan, allowing European military aircraft to fly evacuees from Kabul to airports in Tashkent, Navoiy, and Bukhara.[290] From there, evacuees, including some U.S. citizens, were flown to Europe on specially chartered civilian airliners.[291] Tajikistan also facilitated evacuations from Afghanistan, including flights via Dushanbe organized by Turkey and India.[292] In testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on September 13, 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that the United States is working with countries including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to ensure that U.S. citizens, residents, and visa-holders are able to cross their borders in order to leave Afghanistan, and that the United States has basic agreements in place with those countries to make that possible.[293] Some limited overland evacuations of U.S. citizens and others from Afghanistan have taken place since August 30, 2021, but U.S. officials have declined to state where those evacuations took place.

In remarks reported on August 27, 2021, President Mirziyoyev expressed Uzbekistan's willingness to facilitate the delivery of international humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, noting that the only railroad connection to the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif runs from Uzbekistan.[294] President Mirziyoyev also stated Uzbekistan's intention to provide aid to Afghanistan.[295] On September 14, Uzbekistan delivered a shipment of 1,300 tons of aid, including food, medicine, and clothing, to Afghanistan's northern Balkh province via rail.[296] The U.N. World Food Programme is setting up its primary logistics center for the provision of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan in Termez in southern Uzbekistan.[297]

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[289] United Nations Kazakhstan, "UN Statement on Temporary Relocation of the UNAMA Staff to Almaty," August 20, 2021; United Nations, "Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General," August 18, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "On Temporary Deployment of the UN Mission in Almaty," August 18, 2021.

[290] "Uzbekistan predostavil tretii aeroport dlia evakuatsii iz Afganistana—Bukharu" [Uzbekistan has made a third airport available for evacuation from Afghanistan—Bukhara], *Fergana News*, August 23, 2021.

[291] "'You Have Seen the Outrageous and Achieved Incredible Things,' Germany Tells Troops," Reuters, August 27, 2021; "AKK spricht mit Bundeswehrsoldaten in Taschkent" [AKK speaks with Bundeswehr soldiers in Tashkent], *Deutsche Welle*, August 27, 2021; Official Website of the Republic of Poland, The Chancellery of the Prime Minister, "Premier: Polska jest tam, gdzie inni tej pomocy od nas potrzebują" [Prime Minister: Poland is there when others need help from us], August 26, 2021, available at https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/premier-polska-jest-tam-gdzie-inni-tej-pomocy-od-nas-potrzebuja; "Hungary Ends Afghan Evacuations with 540 Flown Out," Agence France Presse, August 26, 2021.

[292] "Afghanistan Evacuees Arrive in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan," *RFE/RL*, August 21, 2021; Manjeet Negi, "IAF Transport Aircraft Return from Tajikistan after Afghanistan Evacuations," *India Today*, August 30, 2021.

[293] U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Hearing: Afghanistan 2001-2021: Evaluating the Withdrawal and U.S. Policies—Part 1, September 13, 2021, available at https://youtu.be/R2MEJjKUk0Q?t=14689.

[294] "'Radi spokoistva naroda, ia provedu peregovory s liuboi storonoi': Mirzieev o situatsii v Afganistane" ["For the sake of the peace of my people, I will negotiate with any side": Mirziyoyev on the situation in Afghanistan], *Kun.uz*, August 27, 2021.

[295] Ibid.

[296] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "About the Humanitarian Aid Delivery Ceremony," September 14, 2021; "Uzbekistan Sends in Large Consignment of Emergency Aid to Neighboring Afghanistan," *Ariana News*, September 14, 2021.

[297] United Nations, "V Uzbekistane sozdaiut logisticheskii tstentr VPP dlia okazaniia pomoshchi Afganistanu" [A WFP logistics center is being set up in Uzbekistan to provide assistance to Afghanistan], September 14, 2021; United Nations, "First Humanitarian Flight to Kabul Marks 'Turning Point' in Crisis: WFP," September 14, 2021.

Terrorism and Violent Extremism

Acts of terrorism within Central Asia are rare. Between 2008 and 2018, Central Asian governments reportedly labelled 19 attacks by non-state actors as terrorism, with 138 reported fatalities (78 members of law enforcement, 49 attackers, and 11 civilians).[298] Human rights advocates and others note that Central Asian governments use broadly written anti-extremism legislation also to punish critics and suppress dissent, and that repressive government measures in the name of counter-extremism can fuel radicalization.[299] Potential spillover from Afghanistan and the return of Central Asian national foreign terrorist fighters from conflict zones in Syria and Iraq raise terrorism concerns in the region (see "Foreign Terrorist Fighters," below).

Tajikistan's long, porous border with Afghanistan is a particular source of security concerns because of transnational threats such as violent extremism and narcotics trafficking. In 2019, the United Nations estimated that about 100 Tajik nationals were present in Afghanistan as part of terrorist groups affiliated with Al Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS).[300] Afghanistan-based terrorist groups cooperate with organized criminal networks involved in smuggling narcotics from Afghanistan into Tajikistan. Tajikistan has experienced several violent incidents attributed to IS, including prison riots in 2018 and 2019 and a 2019 attack on a border post. Some analysts argue that Tajik authorities' lack of transparency makes it difficult to determine the true nature of these events.[301] In 2018, four Western cyclists, including two Americans, were killed in a terrorist attack while traveling on a highway south of Dushanbe. Tajik authorities blamed the attack on the IRPT, though the attackers had recorded a video declaring their IS allegiance.[302]

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

Thousands of Central Asian nationals traveled to Syria and Iraq in order to join IS or other extremist groups. The precise number of such nationals is difficult to determine; researchers from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation estimated the total population of Central Asians affiliated with IS in Syria and Iraq at about 5,700 to 7,100 as of 2019.[303] Analysts assess that the radicalization of many of these individuals occurred largely abroad, often linked to their experiences of discrimination and marginalization as labor migrants in Russia.[304] Because many Central Asian foreign fighters traveled to Syria and Iraq with their families, the overall total of

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[298] Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," *Kennan Cable* no. 38, December 2018.

[299] Eric Rosand, "CVE's Relevance and Challenges: Central Asia as Surprising Snapshot," Just Security, January 7, 2020; Edward Lemon, "Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia," *Kennan Cable* 38 (December 2018).

[300] U.N. Security Council, *Letter Dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2019/570, July 15, 2019, p. 15.

[301] Catherine Putz, "Discussing Violence and Terrorism in Tajikistan: An Interview with Edward Lemon," *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2019.

[302] "Tajikistan Blames Banned Party for Attack on Foreign Cyclists; IS Posts Video," *RFE/RL*, July 31, 2018.

[303] John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, "Who Says Syria's Calling? Why It Is Sometimes Better to Admit That We Just Do Not Know," Communities Engaging with Difference and Religion, February 17, 2015; Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II: The Challenges Posed by Women and Minors After the Fall of the Caliphate*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, July 2019, p. 20.

[304] Noah Tucker, *Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses*, USAID, May 4, 2015; Lynch et al., *The Return of Foreign Fighters to Central Asia*. The number of Central Asians who travelled to Syria and Iraq equates to a very small fraction of the overall number of Central Asians who travel to Russia as labor migrants. See Caress Schenk, "The Migration—Extremism Fallacy," Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, September 30, 2020.

Central Asian nationals involved includes large numbers of women and children.[305] Foreign fighters from Central Asia remain an international concern due to their ongoing participation in other armed groups active in Syria and Afghanistan, including Al Qaeda and the IS-Khorasan Province.[306]

Repatriation and Rehabilitation

Following the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in March 2019, the international community has faced the quandary of what to do with thousands of remaining foreign fighters and their families held in prisons as well as in camps for displaced persons in Iraq and northern Syria. The United States has called on countries to repatriate their citizens, and the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has also appealed for the repatriation of foreign fighters and their families.[307] U.N. Security Council Resolution 2396 calls on member states "to help build the capacity of other Member States to address the threat posed by foreign terrorist fighter returnees and relocators and their accompanying family members, prioritizing those Member States most affected by the threat."[308]

Central Asian countries—in particular, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—have carried out repatriation efforts, bringing back hundreds of their citizens since January 2019.[309] This marks a shift in policy, as Central Asian governments previously enacted legislation introducing harsh penalties, including revocation of citizenship, for fighting abroad and for participation in recognized terrorist groups.[310] In light of their repatriation operations, some analysts have termed Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan "pioneers."[311] A senior State Department official described these countries as "the tip of the spear" in dealing with repatriation and reintegration.[312] The vast majority of those repatriated are children, many of whom are orphans. The United States provided logistical support for certain repatriation efforts by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the U.S.-funded United States Institute of Peace is supporting rehabilitation programs throughout Central Asia.

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[305] Cook and Vale, *From Daesh to 'Diaspora' II*, p. 20.

[306] U.N. Security Council, *Letter Dated 15 July 2019 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Pursuant to Resolutions 1267 (1999), 1989 (2011) and 2253 (2015) Concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals, Groups, Undertakings and Entities Addressed to the President of the Security Council*, S/2019/570, July 15, 2019; *Eleventh Report of the Secretary-General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat*, S/2020/774, August 4, 2020.

[307] Patrick Wintour, "US Pushes France and UK to Take Isis Fighters Back from Iraq and Syria," *The Guardian*, June 28, 2021; U.N. Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights, "Bachelet Urges States to Help Their Nationals Stranded in Syrian Camps," June 22, 2020.

[308] U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2396 (2017), S/RES/2396(2017), December 21, 2017.

[309] As of June 2021, the numbers of repatriates by country are Kazakhstan: 722; Uzbekistan: 435; Tajikistan: 84; Kyrgyzstan: 79. See Cholpon Orozbekova et al., *The Repatriation, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Women and Children from Syria and Iraq: The Experiences of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan*, The Bulan Institute for Peace Innovations, June 2021.

[310] Elena Zhirukhina, "Foreign Fighters from Central Asia: Between Renunciation and Repatriation," Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale, October 3, 2019.

[311] Emil Juraev, *Rehabilitation and Reintegration Processes of Repatriates in Central Asia: Policy Priorities, Approaches, Best Practices, and Lessons Learned*, Search for Common Ground, 2019, p. 3; Gavin Helf, "Central Asia Leads the Way on Islamic State Returnees."

[312] U.S. Department of State, "Acting Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells at the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly," September 26, 2019.

Counternarcotics

Counternarcotics is an active area of cooperation between the United States and Central Asian countries. All five Central Asian states are transit countries for heroin and other opiates from Afghanistan en route to Russia and Europe (and in the case of Turkmenistan, Turkey). The United States seeks to improve Central Asian countries' capacity to combat drug trafficking and related criminal activity. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration maintains an office in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The State Department classifies all five Central Asian states as "major money laundering countries," defined by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended (22 U.S.C. §2291), as countries "whose financial institutions engage in currency transactions involving significant amounts of proceeds from international narcotics trafficking."[313]

Nonproliferation

Before they became independent, all five Central Asian countries were integrated into Soviet weapons production infrastructure, leaving a legacy of environmental damage and proliferation risks. Since the 1990s, the United States has supported nonproliferation activities in the region, providing assistance in areas such as securing nuclear materials, destroying biological weapons production facilities, and decontaminating testing sites.[314] Additionally, as part of the Department of Defense Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, the United States funded the construction of a secure laboratory in Kazakhstan to assist the monitoring of high-risk, naturally occurring diseases, replacing Soviet-era laboratories that had fallen into disrepair and presented significant safety risks.[315]

Foreign Relations

Russia

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has consistently sought to maintain close ties with other former Soviet states, including the Central Asian countries, although relations are sometimes strained.[316] As former Soviet republics, the five Central Asian states share a common institutional legacy with Russia that underpins military, political, economic, and cultural ties. The Russian language remains spoken to varying degrees throughout Central Asia; it has official status in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and is recognized as the language of interethnic communication in Tajikistan's constitution. According to public opinion polling, Russia enjoys much higher approval among Central Asians than do either China or the United States.[317] While Russia remains Central Asia's primary security partner, its economic role in the region is being exceeded by that of China. Russia remains the primary destination for labor migrants from Central Asia, however. According to Russian government figures, about 9.5 million Central

[313] U.S. Department of State, *International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, Vol. 1, *Drug and Chemical Control*, March 2020, p. 6.

[314] See CRS Report RL33865, *Arms Control and Nonproliferation: A Catalog of Treaties and Agreements*, by Amy F. Woolf, Paul K. Kerr, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, and CRS Report R43143, *The Evolution of Cooperative Threat Reduction: Issues for Congress*, by Mary Beth D. Nikitin and Amy F. Woolf.

[315] Andrew Weber and Richard Pilch, "Kazakhstan's New National Laboratory Is a Regional Resource for a Global Cause," James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, May 18, 2020.

[316] See CRS Report R46761, *Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations*, by Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt.

[317] Eric McGlinchey and Marlene Laruelle, "Explaining Great Power Status in Central Asia: Unfamilarity and Discontent," Minerva Research Initiative, October 29, 2019.

Asians registered with the country's migration authorities in 2019; the total number of Central Asian migrants in the country is likely higher.[318]

Eurasian Economic Union

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is a single market that unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia.[319] Established in 2015, the EEU grew out of a customs union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan launched in 2011, following several previous attempts at regional integration. Uzbekistan became an EEU observer in December 2020 and plans to obtain full membership by 2025 (Moldova and Cuba are also observer states; see **Figure 11**).[320] Tajik authorities have been considering membership in recent years, but are reportedly hesitant to give up income from customs duties.[321] The EEU eases labor migration within the bloc while trade continues to face administrative barriers.[322] While Russia dominates the EEU and accounts for most of the bloc's collective GDP, Kazakhstan in particular has resisted Russian efforts to develop the EEU into more of a political union.[323] The EEU has been a source of frustration for some member states due to unilateral actions by Russia. For example, after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea region, sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and the European Union and countersanctions introduced by Russia affected other EEU members' economies.[324]

[318] Sher Khashimov et al., *Introducing the Central Asia Migration Tracker*, Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, December 15, 2020.

[319] See CRS In Focus IF10309, *Eurasian Economic Union*, by Edward Y. Gracia et al.

[320] Umida Hashimova, "Uzbekistan Joins Online Eurasian Economic Union Meeting as an Observer," *The Diplomat*, December 14, 2020; Umida Hashimova, "Uzbek Parliament Approves EAEU Observer Status," *The Diplomat*, May 4, 2020.

[321] "Russia Using Crisis in Tajikistan to Advance EAEU Agenda?" *Eurasianet*, February 12, 2021; Umida Hashimova, "Will Tajikistan Ever Join the Eurasian Economic Union?" *The Diplomat*, August 10, 2020.

[322] Almaz Kumenov, "Kazakhstan Grumbles at Russia Breaking Trade Bloc Rules," *Eurasianet*, April 28, 2021; Oybek Madiyev, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Repaving Central Asia's Road to Russia?" Migration Policy Institute, February 3, 2021; Nurjamal Djanibekova, "Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan Border Crises Complicated by Mutual Distrust," *Eurasianet*, February 6, 2020.

[323] See, for example, "Kazakhstan Rejects Proposal to Join Russian Sanctions-Busting Plans," *Eurasianet*, June 7, 2021.

[324] Evgeny Troitskiy, "The Eurasian Economic Union at Five: Great Expectations and Hard Times," Wilson Center, January 14, 2020.

Figure 11. The Eurasian Economic Union

Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Military Cooperation

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has been Central Asia's primary security partner, at least in part due to a shared Soviet military legacy. Russia continues to provide military training and defense equipment to Central Asian countries and is estimated to account for over 60% of arms transfers to the region by value between 2015 and 2020.[325] Most Central Asian military leaders studied at one of Russia's military academies, and Russian professional military education continues to be seen as the most prestigious option for Central Asian officers.[326] Russia also maintains military installations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (see **Figure 12**). These include a missile defense testing site and a test flight center in Kazakhstan; an airbase, an anti-submarine weapons test base, a naval communications facility, and a seismographic laboratory in Kyrgyzstan; and a large military base and a space surveillance station in Tajikistan.[327] Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome, the largest spaceport in the world, is leased by the Russian government and serves as the sole launch site for Russia's manned space missions. Although previously under Russian military control, the spaceport is now managed by Russia's civilian space agency, Roscosmos. The Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), established in 1992, is a security alliance that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, as well as Armenia and Belarus.[328] Under the auspices of the CSTO, member states conduct joint military exercises and training; member states are also able to purchase Russian military equipment at reduced prices. Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012, but the country has increased security cooperation with Russia under President Mirziyoyev. As part of its

[325] Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database. By country, the estimated percentage of arms transferred from Russia by value between 2015 and 2020 is as follows: Kazakhstan—91%; Kyrgyzstan—98%; Tajikistan—88%; Turkmenistan—12%; Uzbekistan—24%. Per SIPRI data, Turkmenistan's largest arms suppliers in this period were Turkey (41%) and China (33%), while Uzbekistan received slightly more from China (28%) than from Russia and 23% from France.

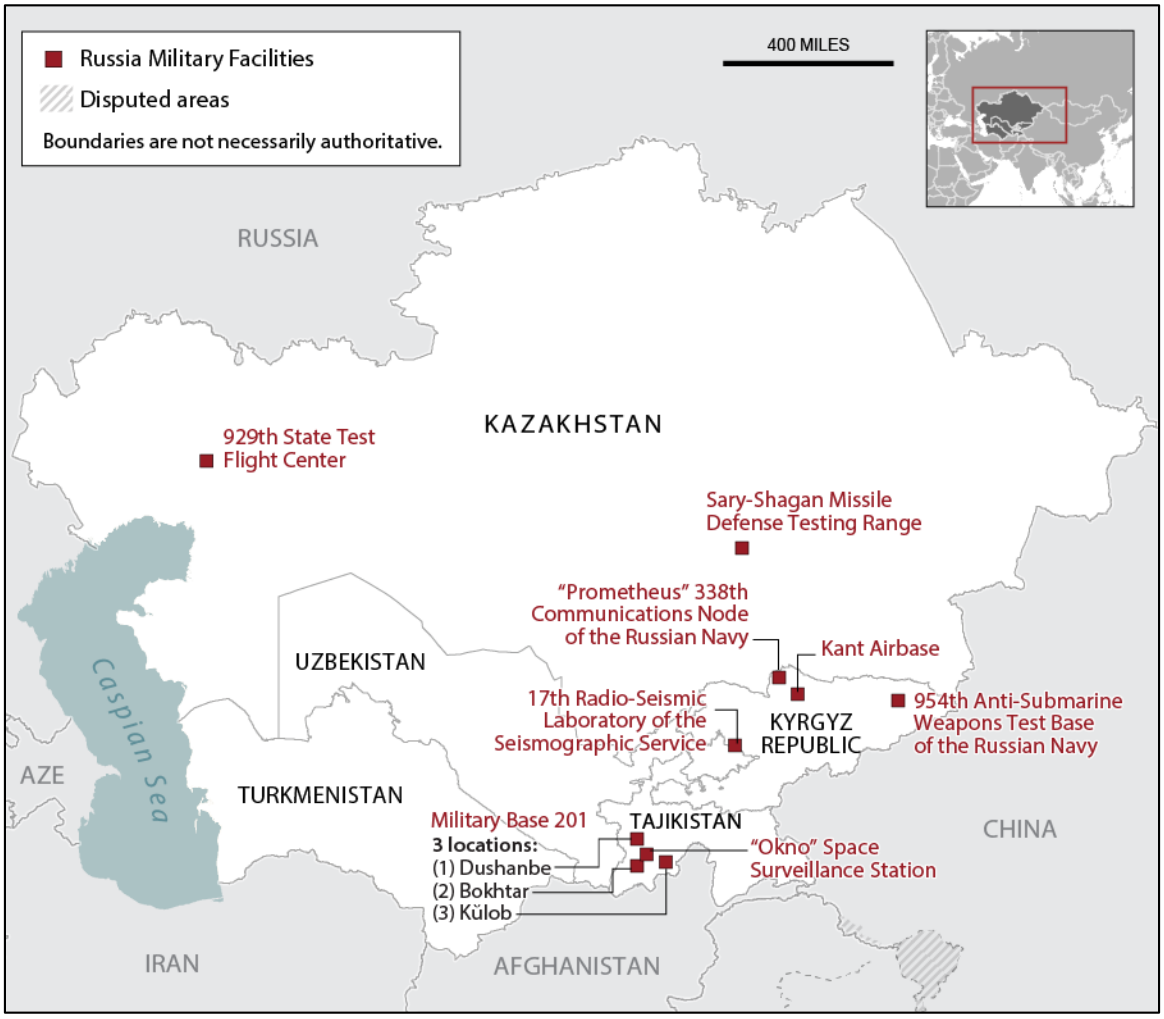
[326] Erica Marat, "China's Expanding Military Education Diplomacy in Central Asia," PONARS Eurasia, April 19, 2021.

[327] Agnieszka Rogozinska and Aleksander Ksawery Olech, *The Russian Federation's Military Bases Abroad*, Institute of New Europe, 2020, pp. 23-37, 53-57.

[328] See CRS Report R46761, *Russia: Foreign Policy and U.S. Relations*, by Andrew S. Bowen and Cory Welt.

constitutionally mandated neutrality policy, Turkmenistan avoids membership in multilateral security organizations.

Figure 12. Russian Military Installations in Central Asia



Source: Graphic created by CRS.

Notes: Abbreviations: AZE—Azerbaijan.

China

China has expanded its economic presence in Central Asia, becoming the largest source of investment in the region, and is establishing a security footprint. Analysts note a shift in recent years from large-scale infrastructure projects to manufacturing facilities intended to build industrial capacity. Government-to-government lending has been decreasing (with the possible exceptions of Uzbekistan, which did not engage in much foreign borrowing before 2016, and Turkmenistan, whose government borrowing is opaque) amid a steady stream of Chinese private

investments.[329] China has also increased efforts to bolster its soft power in Central Asia, including through educational initiatives and outreach to civil society.[330]

Public opinion surveys indicate that many in Central Asia remain wary of China.[331] Sinophobic attitudes in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been fueled by fears of potential Chinese territorial encroachment, resentment of Chinese labor migrants, and anger at China's repression of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, including ethnic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. Anti-China sentiments have driven numerous protests in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in recent years. Some of the largest protests in post-independence Kazakhstan took place in 2016 over proposed land reform legislation that some feared would permit Chinese entities to purchase land in the country; smaller-scale demonstrations expressing anti-China sentiments continue to take place.[332] In Kyrgyzstan, protests against Chinese investment projects have sometimes turned violent. In February 2020, a planned joint Kyrgyz-Chinese venture to construct a $280 million logistics center near Kyrgyzstan's border with China was cancelled after demonstrations by local residents.[333]

Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the investment program now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during a speech in Kazakhstan's capital. Central Asia is a key component of the overland "belt" intended to connect China to European markets. China has invested in a range of large-scale infrastructure projects in all five Central Asian countries. As part of the Digital Silk Road component of the BRI, China has supplied digital surveillance equipment to Central Asian governments, which are implementing "Safe City" projects using Chinese technology.[334] Some within the region as well as some outside observers assert that Chinese investment enables corruption by Central Asian elites.[335] Others contend that China has provided valuable infrastructure and transport linkages.[336] While some analysts assess that China may reduce BRI-related lending in the near term in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, others expect that competition with the United States will lead China to increase its engagement with Central Asia.[337]

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[329] Dirk van der Kley, "China Diversifies in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, November 23, 2020.

[330] See, for example, Niva Yau, "China Polishes Its Image in Central Asia Through the Soft Power of Language," Open Democracy, March 23, 2021.

[331] See McGlinchey and Laruelle, "Explaining Great Power Status in Central Asia: Unfamilarity and Discontent."

[332] Abdujalil Abdurasulov, "Kazakhstan's Land Reform Protests Explained," BBC, April 28, 2016.

[333] "China-Led $280 Million Kyrgyzstan Project Abandoned After Protests," Reuters, February 18, 2020; "Hundreds Join Protests Against Chinese Investment in Kyrgyzstan," *RFE/RL*, February 17, 2020.

[334] Cian Stryker, "Digital Silk Road and Surveillance Technology in Central Asia," in Nargis Kassenova and Brendan Duprey, eds., *Digital Silk Road in Central Asia: Present and Future*, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, June 2021, pp. 17-54.

[335] Gül Berna Özcan, "Chinese Business in Central Asia: How Crony Capitalism is Eroding Justice," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 30, 2021; Temur Umarov, "Dangerous Liaisons: How China Is Taming Central Asia's Elites," Carnegie Moscow Center, January 29, 2021; International Crisis Group, *Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*, Europe and Central Asia Report no. 245, July 27, 2017, pp. 13-14.

[336] Susan A. Thornton, "China in Central Asia: Is China Winning the 'New Great Game'?" Brookings Institution, June 2020.

[337] Cissy Zhou, "China Debt: Beijing May Cut Belt and Road Lending Due to Domestic Pressure, to Ensure Future of Project," *South China Morning Post*, November 24, 2020; Srdjan Uljevic, "China's Central Asia Strategy in the Age of 'Extreme Competition,'" *Eurasianet*, March 29, 2021.

Increasing Security Cooperation

China has significantly increased its security presence in Central Asia, although it has not matched that of Russia.[338] According to internal Chinese documents leaked in 2019, Chinese President Xi is concerned about the potential infiltration of Central Asia by terrorist organizations following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.[339] Arms transfers from China to Central Asia have grown in recent years: from 1.5% of total arms supplied to the region by value in 2010-2014 to 13% in 2015-2020; the total value of arms transferred to Central Asia almost tripled across these two time periods.[340] Since 2014, China has increased the number of bilateral military exercises it organizes with Central Asian countries. China also engages Central Asia multilaterally. In July 2020, China held the first meeting of the C+C5, a high-level forum bringing together China and the five Central Asian states to discuss security and other regional issues. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an intergovernmental organization headquartered in Beijing that focuses on security cooperation in Eurasia; Turkmenistan has participated as a guest at SCO summits.[341] Increased Chinese investment in the region has brought with it the presence of Chinese private security firms, notably in Kyrgyzstan.[342] Tajikistan in particular is increasingly engaging in security cooperation with China, which views the country as an important barrier against potential extremist spillover from Afghanistan into Xinjiang. China has deployed personnel from its People's Armed Police to Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains, close to the border with Afghanistan.[343]

Outlook and Issues for Congress

U.S. security cooperation with Central Asian states may evolve in light of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. On September 1, 2021, the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe announced a project to construct new border guard facilities in Tajikistan along the Tajik-Afghan-Uzbek border.[344] The United States has overflight agreements in place with all Central Asian countries other than Kyrgyzstan. Some speculate that the United States may request access to bases in the region to support counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.[345] Russia has expressed opposition to a U.S. military presence in Central Asia, however.[346] Following a CSTO summit held in Dushanbe on September 16, 2021, the government of Kazakhstan reportedly stated that President Kassym-

[338] See, for example, Rafaello Pantucci, "Not-So-Hidden Dragon: China Reveals Its Claws in Central Asian Security," Carnegie Moscow Center, February 25, 2021.

[339] Austin Ramzy and Chris Buckley, "'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2019.

[340] Data from SIPRI Arms Transfers Database. See also Bradley Jardine and Edward Lemon, "Avoiding Dependence? Central Asian Security in a Multipolar World," Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs," September 28, 2020.

[341] The SCO was established in 2001. Its current member states are China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

[342] Niva Yau and Dirk van der Kley, *The Growth, Adaptation, and Limitations of Chinese Private Security Companies in Central Asia*, The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs, October 13, 2020.

[343] Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," *NBR Special Report* no. 80 (September 2019), pp. 71-89.

[344] U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan, "U.S. Embassy to Support a New Border Guard Detachment at Ayvoj, Along the Tajik-Afghan-Uzbek Border," September 1, 2021.

[345] Navbahor Imamova, "US Seeking New Security Arrangements in Central Asia," Voice of America, May 21, 2021.

[346] "Lavrov Says Russia Doesn't Want to See U.S. Troops in Central Asia," *RFE/RL*, August 24, 2021.

Jomart Tokayev "supported the joint CSTO position that the placement of Afghan refugees or foreign military bases on our countries' territories is unacceptable."[347]

Prior to the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the United States expanded its diplomatic engagement to encompass multilateral meetings involving Afghanistan and Central Asian countries. In May 2020, officials from the United States, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan held an inaugural trilateral meeting to discuss deepening cooperation on regional security and other issues.[348] A similar meeting between the United States, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan took place in March 2021.[349] In July 2021, the United States, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan announced a new quadrilateral format focused on enhancing regional connectivity.[350] It remains unclear whether the United States will establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban government, as does the future of such multilateral meetings.

Corruption and Human Rights

Some Members of Congress have sought to counter kleptocracy and combat authoritarian governments' efforts to exert pressure on political opponents beyond their borders through transnational repression.[351] Scholars assert that Central Asian elites use international financial institutions and offshore accounts to conceal billions of dollars of wealth obtained through corruption.[352] According to a Freedom House study that examines the period from 2014 to 2020, exiles from Tajikistan faced "the largest wave of transnational repression in Eurasia," and the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan also engaged in physical repression of their opponents abroad.[353] In a media environment characterized by limited press freedom, the U.S.-funded RFE/RL plays an important role by reporting on such corruption and human rights abuses in Central Asia.

Trade

Trade relations between the United States and four of the five Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are governed by Section 402 of the Trade Act of 1974 (P.L. 93-618), the so-called Jackson-Vanik amendment. This section denies normal trade relations (NTR) status to some current and former nonmarket economy countries unless they adhere to certain freedom-of-emigration requirements. These requirements were initially aimed at promoting free emigration from the Soviet Union and were prompted by Soviet

[347] "Russia's Central Asian allies say won't host Afghan refugees," Reuters, September 16, 2021.

[348] U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan Trilateral Meeting," May 27, 2020.

[349] U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement on the Occasion of a Trilateral Discussion Among Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the United States," March 19, 2021.

[350] U.S. Department of State, "Announcing the U.S.-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan-Pakistan Quad Regional Support for Afghanistan-Peace Process and Post Settlement," July 16, 2021.

[351] The Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act, introduced as S. 1591 in the 117th Congress, seeks to address politically-motivated abuse of INTERPOL by authoritarian governments such as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It was previously introduced as H.R. 4330 and S. 2483 in the 116th Congress. See Rep. Alcee Hastings, "Introduction of the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention Act of 2019 (TRAP Act)," remarks in the House, *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (September 16, 2019), p. E1153. The Countering Russian and Other Overseas Kleptocracy Act, introduced as H.R. 402 in the 117th Congress, seeks to support international anti-corruption efforts and bolster good governance and the rule of law abroad, particularly during windows of opportunity for reform in foreign countries. The bill was previously introduced as H.R. 3843 and S. 3026 in the 116th Congress.

[352] Cooley and Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders*.

[353] Schenkkan and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, pp. 48-49.

restrictions on Jewish emigration. Following Kyrgyzstan's WTO accession, that country was exempted from the amendment via the Trade and Development Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-200). Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan receive temporary NTR status under a provision of the Jackson-Vanik amendment that allows the President to extend NTR status to a country affected by the amendment by either waiving the freedom-of-emigration requirements or determining that the country is not in violation of the amendment's provisions, subject to annual review. A complete lifting of the Jackson-Vanik requirements would require Congress to enact relevant legislation. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan acceded to the WTO in 2015, but because the Jackson-Vanik amendment prevents the conferral of permanent NTR status on these two countries, the United States cannot fully benefit from their WTO membership.[354] Language to exempt Kazakhstan from the Jackson-Vanik amendment was introduced in previous congresses. Uzbekistan resumed WTO accession negotiations in 2020 after a 15-year hiatus. The Uzbekistan Normalized Trade Act (H.R. 1913), introduced in the 117th Congress, would exempt Uzbekistan from Title IV of the Trade Act of 1974 should the President proclaim the extension of nondiscriminatory treatment to imports from Uzbekistan.

[354] CRS In Focus IF10294, *Kazakhstan and Tajikistan: WTO Accession and U.S. Trade Relations*, by Vivian C. Jones and Ian F. Fergusson.

Appendix. Central Asian Countries' Performance on Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Table 7. Central Asia on Selected Democracy and Human Rights Indexes

Issue	Index	Country	2016 Status/Rank	2020/2021 Status/Rank
Democracy	Freedom House, Freedom in the World	Kazakhstan	Not Free (Score: 24/100)	Not Free (Score: 23/100)
		Kyrgyzstan	Partly Free (Score: 38/100)	Not Free (Score: 28/100)
		Tajikistan	Not Free (Score: 16/100)	Not Free (Score: 8/100)
		Turkmenistan	Not Free (Score: 4/100)	Not Free (Score: 2/100)
		Uzbekistan	Not Free (Score: 3/100)	Not Free (Score: 11/100)
Press Freedom	Reporters Without Borders, World Press Freedom Index	Kazakhstan	160th of 180 Countries	155th of 180 Countries
		Kyrgyzstan	85th of 180 Countries	79th of 180 Countries
		Tajikistan	150th of 180 Countries	162nd of 180 Countries
		Turkmenistan	178th of 180 Countries	178th of 180 Countries
		Uzbekistan	166th of 180 Countries	157th of 180 Countries
Economic Freedom	Heritage Foundation, Index of Economic Freedom	Kazakhstan	Moderately Free (68th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Free (34th of 178 Countries)
		Kyrgyzstan	Mostly Unfree (96th of 178 Countries)	Moderately Free (78th of 178 Countries)
		Tajikistan	Mostly Unfree (149th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Unfree (134th of 178 Countries)
		Turkmenistan	Repressed (174th of 178 Countries)	Repressed (167th of 178 Countries)
		Uzbekistan	Repressed (166th of 178 Countries)	Mostly Unfree (108th of 178 Countries)
Perceptions of Corruption	Transparency International, Corruption Perceptions Index	Kazakhstan	131st of 168 Countries	94th of 179 Countries
		Kyrgyzstan	136th of 168 Countries	124th of 179 Countries
		Tajikistan	151st of 168 Countries	149th of 179 Countries
		Turkmenistan	154th of 168 Countries	165th of 179 Countries
		Uzbekistan	156th of 168 Countries	146th of 179 Countries
Rule of Law	World Justice Project, Rule of Law Index	Kazakhstan	73rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	62nd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions

Kyrgyzstan	83rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	87th of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions
Tajikistan	Not Ranked	Not Ranked
Turkmenistan	Not Ranked	Not Ranked
Uzbekistan	93rd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions	92nd of 128 Countries and Jurisdictions

Source: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2016* and *Freedom in the World 2021*; Reporters Without Borders, *2016 World Press Freedom Index* and *2021 World Press Freedom Index*; The Heritage Foundation, *2016 Index of Economic Freedom* and *2021 Index of Economic Freedom*; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2016* and *Corruption Perceptions Index 2021*; World Justice Project, *Rule of Law Index 2016* and *Rule of Law Index 2020*.

Author Information

Maria A. Blackwood
Analyst in Asian Policy

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