

INITIAL STEPS TO OVERCOME TRANSPORT RESTRICTIONS IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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Annotation: The history of transport infrastructure development in Central Asia from 1991 to 2022 reflects the complex interaction of geopolitical dynamics, economic challenges, and the region's desire for broader connectivity and integration. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which gained independence, faced significant communication isolation for decades due to centralized planning and infrastructure designed mainly for Soviet needs. In the post-independence period, these countries struggled with outdated infrastructure, lack of investment, and the need to redefine transport networks for the development of regional and international trade.

Keywords: Central Asia, transport policy, internal restrictions, infrastructure

Kazakhstan, the largest country in the region, has taken the lead in solving these problems by launching important transport infrastructure projects. The "Kazakhstan 2050" strategy was aimed at turning the country into a transit hub connecting Europe and Asia[1]. The construction of the Western Europe-Western China international highway, which began in 2009 and was completed in 2013, exemplifies this vision, expanding land transport links and significantly reducing travel time for goods and people.

Uzbekistan has also made significant progress in the field of transport infrastructure, with the main focus on the restoration and modernization of railways, which are important for domestic

communication and regional trade[2]. Modernization of the railway network, including the launch of high-speed train services, has not only facilitated domestic traffic but also improved access to neighboring countries. The establishment of the National Airline "Uzbekistan Airways" and the expansion of international airports further strengthened the country's ties.

Kyrgyzstan, with its mountainous terrain, faced specific challenges in transport development. The country tried to improve the road network, in particular, the Bishkek-Osh road, which is an important artery of trade and transport. International assistance, in particular Chinese, played a decisive role in these efforts and allowed Kyrgyzstan to improve road infrastructure and connect with regional transport corridors.

Similarly geographically limited Tajikistan took on the task of restoring roads and bridges damaged as a result of a civil conflict in the 1990s[3]. The country has made significant progress in restoring its transport infrastructure with the support of international financial institutions. Projects such as the Dushanbe-Kurgan-tepa road helped improve access to remote areas and facilitated trade with Afghanistan, which is important for the landlocked country.

Turkmenistan, rich in natural gas, sought to develop transport infrastructure to support economic growth and increase export volumes. The construction of the international seaport of Turkmenbashi on the Caspian Sea and the expansion of road and rail links were aimed at turning Turkmenistan into an important transit center for regional trade, in particular, with Iran and Azerbaijan.

During this period, regional initiatives also played an important role in eliminating communication isolation. The Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, which began in the early

2000s[4], united member states to develop cooperation in the field of transport and trade. Within the framework of CAREC, projects such as the improvement of cross-border transport and customs cooperation are aimed at increasing the overall efficiency of transport networks in the region.

By 2022[5], Central Asia had made significant progress in improving its transport infrastructure, but challenges remain. The legacy of Soviet-era planning, ongoing geopolitical tensions, and the need for sustainable capital created obstacles. At the same time, the commitment to overcoming communication isolation through infrastructure development emphasized the region's potential to serve as an important link between Europe and Asia, contributing not only to economic growth, but also to strengthening regional integration[6]. The period from 1991 to 2022 demonstrated a dynamic journey characterized by ambitious projects and a collective drive to strengthen ties in Central Asia.

The history of transport infrastructure development in Central Asia from 1991 to 2022 is a history of changes shaped by the realities, economic aspirations, and geopolitical dynamics of the region during the post-Soviet period. After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan faced problems with outdated infrastructure, primarily intended for the Soviet system[7]. This necessitated the reconstruction and modernization of transport networks for the development of regional and international relations.

Priority was given to railway transport in Kazakhstan, and investments were made in the modernization of the railway network. New railway routes, including the Astana-Almaty line, made it possible

to make trade flows more flexible and supported Kazakhstan's role as a key transit point in the Eurasian transport network. In addition, Kazakhstan's strategic location led to participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which further strengthened its infrastructure investments and connections in China and beyond.

With its central location, Uzbekistan recognized the importance of restoring its abandoned railways in the 1990s. The government implemented large-scale projects for the modernization of railways, including the launch of high-speed train services on the Tashkent-Samarkand route[8]. This not only improved domestic travel but also connected Uzbekistan with Central Asia and neighboring countries as an important player in the regional logistics sector.

In 2016, a national program for the development of transport infrastructure was launched in Uzbekistan, with a particular focus on improving road networks and expanding air traffic. Modernization of airports, including the reconstruction of Tashkent International Airport, is aimed at improving air connectivity and attracting international airlines. These improvements contributed to the growth of tourism and trade and made Uzbekistan a more convenient destination.

Kyrgyzstan faced unique geographical difficulties due to its mountainous terrain, which made transportation difficult. The government prioritized the Bishkek-Osh highway, which was an important north-south route connecting major cities and facilitating trade with neighboring countries[10]. International cooperation, in particular, was important in financing road reconstruction projects with China, which allowed Kyrgyzstan to improve transport links and develop regional trade.

Tajikistan's efforts to rebuild its road network have been supported by international organizations, including the Asian Development Bank (ADB),[11] and have strengthened ties with Afghanistan, which is important for Tajikistan's trade due to its non-sea-bound status.

Rich in energy resources, Turkmenistan sought to enhance its position by developing transport infrastructure that facilitates exports and trade. The construction of the Turkmenbashi International Seaport, completed in 2018, is aimed at increasing maritime trade opportunities. The development of railway connections, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway, was intended to open new routes for cargo transit connecting Central Asia with South Asia.

During this period, the importance of regional cooperation has increased. Initiatives such as the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program are aimed at improving transport links and strengthening economic cooperation between member states[12]. CAREC projects are aimed at modernizing cross-border vehicles and regulating customs procedures, thereby streamlining trade flows.

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