
Suggestions for Building a Cooperation Framework between Korea and Central Asia

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1. Introduction

Today, the global economic and trade order stands at a critical turning point. The free trade-oriented system that prevailed for more than three decades is under increasing pressure, while protectionism led by major economic powers has been gaining momentum. These changes became particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequently, the Russia-Ukraine war and the intensifying U.S.-China strategic rivalry have further accelerated trends of resource nationalism and economic protectionism. Amid these shifts in the international environment, countries around the world have begun to focus on restoring and strengthening supply chains.

At the same time, the strategic value of Central Asia has risen significantly. Located at a geopolitical crossroads, the five Central Asian states have witnessed a surge in high-level diplomatic engagements with the United States, China, the European Union, Japan, and other major actors, particularly as the war in Ukraine has become protracted. In parallel, cooperation projects previously envisioned with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia are increasingly taking concrete shape. Western firms relocating from Russia to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,

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along with Russian professionals migrating to Central Asia, have contributed substantially to industrial development in the region. Moreover, not passing through Russian territory freight volumes on railways and road networks connecting China to Europe and Central Asia have increased sharply. So, Central Asia's growing role as an alternative logistics corridor across Eurasia.

Since establishing diplomatic relations, Korea has engaged in cooperation with Central Asian countries primarily through private enterprises and selected bilateral initiatives. However, government level cooperation aimed at strengthening energy and critical mineral supply chains has relatively limited. Recently, Korea has begun exploring more structured engagement with the region, including efforts to promote a Korea-Central Asia summit. This juncture calls for a systematic approach to cooperation across multiple sectors with Central Asian countries.

This paper proposes cooperation strategies that extend beyond securing energy and mineral supply chains, emphasizing alignment with the national development strategies of each Central Asian countries. Each Central Asian country is pursuing its own development strategy based on domestic conditions, and Korea must design cooperative initiatives that contribute not only economic security but also to the development objectives of its partners. By offering policy and institutional recommendations for medium to long-term cooperation. This study aims to suggest ways to deepen collaboration not only in economic areas but also in social, trade, and security sectors.

2. The Strategic Value of Central Asia

Central Asia occupies a geo-politically significant position. It borders or lies adjacent to Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, the Middle East, and Europe. Geographically, the region possesses transportation and logistics networks that connect Asia and Europe, making it a critical hub in Eurasian connectivity. Accordingly, major powers including Russia,

European Union (EU), China, and the United States have been convening summits and expanding cooperation with Central Asian countries, further underscoring the region's growing importance. The areas in which major powers seek cooperation with Central Asia can be broadly categorized into security, energy, mineral resources, logistics, and transportation.

In particular, the EU, which has faced difficulties in securing energy resources previously supplied by Russia following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, has expanded cooperation with Central Asian countries in order to diversify its energy supply chains. Through the construction of infrastructure such as oil pipelines, railway networks, and gas pipelines, the EU aims for Central Asia to serve as an alternative source of energy supplies that were formerly met by Russia and the Middle East prior to the Ukraine war. As a result, EU-Central Asia summits have been held, and trade volumes between the two sides have increased. On April 5, 2025, the EU agreed to elevate its relations with the five Central Asian countries to a strategic partnership and decided to invest 12 billion euro in Central Asia to expand economic cooperation²⁾. This development illustrates the rising strategic value of Central Asia for Europe.

Central Asia has energy resources, including crude oil, natural gas, and coal, as well as mineral resources essential for industrial development, such as gold, uranium, and rare earth elements. A closer examination reveals that among the five Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan are energy-exporting states. According to World Bank, their gross national income(GNI) per capita ranges from USD 4,096 to 12,695, classifying them as middle-income countries. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are energy-importing countries. Although they possess mineral resources that fall within the 33 critical minerals essential for the development of Korea's industries, their production volumes are limited and therefore do not make a significant contribution to their

2) "EU and Central Asia Upgrade Relations to a 'Strategic Partnership'... Strengthening Economic Cooperation," Yonhap News, April 5, 2025

national economies.

<Table 1> Energy Resource Status of Central Asian Countries

country	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan
Major Natural Resources (World Ranking)	Oil (12th), uranium (2nd), natural gas (22nd), coal (11th), chromium (1st), manganese (2nd), tungsten (1st)	Gold (10th), uranium (8th), molybdenum (13th), natural gas (16th)	Natural gas (4th), oil (44th)	Gold, antimony, rare earth elements, titanium, etc.

* Data : Song Hyo-gyu et al. (2024), "Measures to Expand Korea-Central Asia Economic Cooperation," Trade Focus(23), 7.

Meanwhile, by the Ukraine war, the use of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route(TITR), a railway corridor that bypasses Russia which is subject to Western sanctions, has increased sharply. This route runs from China through Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea, and onward to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, and is used for freight and passenger transport between China and Europe. Among its segments, the international railway connecting Baku in Azerbaijan, Tbilisi in Georgia, and Kars in Türkiye represents the shortest route linking Europe and Central Asia. Between 2023 and 2024, freight volumes along this corridor increased by 62%, reaching 4.5 million tons, while transportation costs and transit times have continued to improve significantly each year.

In addition, construction is underway on the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway, a project with a total length of 523km and an estimated cost of approximately USD 8 billion, which aims to connect Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Furthermore, the construction of the Trans-Afghan Railway, linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway, UAP), has been agreed upon by the relevant countries and is expected to begin as early as possible. As these new transportation networks and cooperation projects centered on Central Asia

move forward in earnest, the region's development prospects and strategic value continue to rise.

3. Current status of cooperation with Korea

Cooperation between the governments of Korea and Central Asian countries has primarily been discussed through multilateral consultative frameworks. Since 2007, the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum has been operated under the leadership of the Korean government, with its secretariat established in Korea as an implementation body for government-level cooperation. In addition, the first Korea-Central Asia Summit is scheduled to be held in 2026. Alongside these multilateral mechanisms, high-level exchanges with individual Central Asian countries have been conducted on a regular basis.

In 2004, the Korean President visited Kazakhstan, marking the beginning of Korea's comprehensive engagement with Central Asia at the governmental level. This was followed by a bilateral summit with Uzbekistan in 2005. In 2009, the Korean President visited Kazakhstan with a focus on resource diplomacy, elevating bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, and also paid a visit to neighboring Uzbekistan. In 2014, the Korean President visited three Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. In 2019, the President visited Uzbekistan and presented the vision of Korea's New Northern Policy. In 2021, the Korean President again visited Kazakhstan, where the two leaders agreed to further deepen their strategic partnership.

The two leaders agreed to continuously strengthen cooperation in the fields of resource development and infrastructure construction, while further expanding bilateral cooperation into manufacturing, information and communications technology(ICT), and agriculture.

Beginning with the 17th Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, held following the Korean President's visits to three Central Asian countries in June 2024, the forum was elevated to the ministerial level. The Korea-

Central Asia Cooperation Forum, which is regularly convened with all five Central Asian countries, is an official inter-governmental multilateral consultative body established in July 2007. Furthermore, in order to ensure the stable operation of the forum and the systematic implementation of projects identified through it, the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat was established in Korea in 2017. According to the Secretariat, cooperation projects between Korea and Central Asia are organized across six priority areas: transportation and logistics, energy, industrial modernization and diversification, climate change and the environment, health and medical services, and education and culture.

Beyond visits by Korean presidents to Central Asia, the leaders of Central Asian countries have also frequently visited Korea. As most Central Asian heads of state remain in office for extended periods, they have visited Korea under successive Korean administrations to discuss ways to enhance bilateral cooperation.

The number of trade transactions and the volume of trade between Korea and Central Asian countries have shown steady growth, although there are some variations by country. In 2024, Korea recorded 178,230 export transactions to Central Asia with a total export value of approximately USD 6.09 billion, and 2,277 import transactions totaling approximately USD 1.28 billion. As a result, Korea posted a trade surplus of approximately USD 4.8 billion. Among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan is Korea's largest trading partner. In 2023, bilateral trade between Korea and Kazakhstan amounted to approximately USD 5.5 billion, with Korea recording a trade deficit of about USD 1.6 billion. In 2024, the reduction in crude oil imports from Kazakhstan resulted in a trade surplus.

<Table 2> Exports and Imports Status between Korea and Central Asian Countries (2024)

Unit: Cases/Thousand USD

country	Number of exports	Export amount	Number of imports	Import amount	Trade balance
Kazakhstan	58,424	2,345,105	813	1,260,022	1,085,082
Kyrgyzstan	75,897	1,785,815	545	3,424	1,782,391
Uzbekistan	20,614	1,719,862	887	15,621	1,704,240
Tajikistan	23,025	188,907	20	6,012	182,895
Turkmenistan	270	56,825	12	38	56,788
Total	178,230	6,096,514	2,277	1,285,117	4,811,396

* Data: Compiled by the author based on Korea Customs Service, "Export and Import Trade Statistics." <https://tradedata.go.kr/cts/index.do>(access: December 11, 2025).

In trade with Kazakhstan, Korea's major export items include automobiles, automobile parts, and electronic products, while imports are concentrated on energy resources such as crude oil and natural gas, as well as mineral resources including uranium, ferroalloys, titanium, and chromium. Uzbekistan is one of Korea's major export destinations in Central Asia and a country with a steadily growing trade surplus for Korea. Korea exports automobile parts, textile machinery, chemical products, and industrial machinery to Uzbekistan, while importing cotton and agricultural products.

Kazakhstan, which possesses abundant mineral and energy resources and whose national economy is highly dependent on natural resources, has pursued economic reforms and openness to foster manufacturing and other industries in order to diversify its industrial structure. As a result, Korean companies have steadily expanded their presence in the country. Uzbekistan, where manufacturing accounts for a large share of the overall industrial structure, requires Korea's advanced technologies and operational capabilities to modernize and upgrade its manufacturing sector, leading to active participation by Korean companies. Korean companies are particularly active in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, achieving

tangible results in areas such as automobiles, logistics hub development, plant construction, and information technology(IT) sector.

4. Cooperation with Major Powers

1) The United States

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States established diplomatic relations with the five newly independent Central Asian countries and continuously provided support for their transition to market-based economies. However, after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the strategic importance of Central Asia became more pronounced, as the region borders China, Russia, and Afghanistan designated by the United States as a state sponsor of terrorism at the time. Accordingly, the United States strengthened military cooperation with the five Central Asian countries. Despite opposition from Russia, U.S. forces were stationed in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, allowing the United States to use these two countries as logistical bases until 2005 and 2014.

Since 2015, the United States has convened the C5+1 Forum (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the United States), which serves as a core diplomatic platform between the United States and Central Asian countries. Through this forum, the parties discuss issues related to energy, the economy, security, and the environment. In 2020, the U.S. government released the strategy report, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.”³⁾ This strategy emphasizes enhancing the capacity of Central Asian countries to respond flexibly to short and long-term threats, strengthening their independence, and expanding cooperation with the United States in political, economic, and security domains.

3) U.S. Government, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity.” (U.S. Government,2019) , <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-CEN-Strategy-Glossy-2-10-2020-508.pdf>(access: 2025. 12.16).

The strategy outlines six major objectives: (1) continued support for strengthening sovereignty and independence at both the national and regional levels in Central Asia; (2) reducing the threat of terrorism in the region; (3) supporting stability in Afghanistan; (4) promoting connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan; (5) advancing rule of law reforms and respect for human rights; and (6) expanding U.S. investment to support Central Asia's development.⁴⁾

An examination of the policy goals outlined in the Central Asia strategy formulated during the first Trump administration indicates that the United States pursued close cooperation with Central Asian countries, particularly by engaging in discussions aimed at strengthening economic and trade ties and developing transportation infrastructure between Central Asia and Afghanistan in support of Afghan stability. After the launch of the Biden administration and following the outbreak of the Ukraine war, C5+1 Leaders' Summit was held in New York in September 2023. At this summit, the United States agreed to continue cooperation with Central Asian countries on defense and counter-terrorism while proposing the launch of the "C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue" to promote the development of mineral resources and the establishment of critical mineral supply chains.⁵⁾

While several C5+1 meetings were held during the first Trump administration, no C5+1 leaders' summit took place at that time. In contrast, during the Biden administration, a C5+1 leaders' summit was convened, although bilateral summits with individual Central Asian countries were not held. Amid the ongoing Ukraine war and intensifying strategic competition with China, the second Trump administration has

4) U.S. Government, "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity." (U.S. Government,2019) , <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FINAL-CEN-Strategy-Glossy-2-10-2020-508.pdf>(access: 2025. 12.16).

5) "C5+1 Leaders' Joint Statement," <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/09/21/c51-leaders-joint-statement/> (access: 2025.12.16.)

further deepened its strategic engagement with Central Asia. During the first Trump administration, summits were held with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 2018. Subsequently, on November 6, 2025, a C5+1 Leaders' Summit was held in Washington, D.C. At the White House, President Trump and the presidents of the five Central Asian countries issued a joint statement of intent to cooperate in the development of critical minerals and raw materials, supply chain collaboration, and cooperation in digital and artificial intelligence(AI) sectors.

The participating countries agreed to expand trade and investment through improvements in the business environment and regulatory reforms, enhance investment and trade in energy and critical minerals, establish a trusted digital environment and AI ecosystem. And strengthen connectivity and resilience in the secure movement of goods, information, and energy. In the industrial sector, cooperation was emphasized in non-military nuclear energy, critical mineral development and value addition, digital infrastructure and the adoption of international standards, AI research and education, and the development of the Trans-Caspian trade corridor. The parties also announced plans to actively utilize issue-specific platforms such as the B5+1 Business Forum led platform to promote economic partnerships between the United States and Central Asia and the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue. In the cultural heritage sector, agreements were reached on cultural exchanges, sharing expertise in cultural heritage preservation, and cooperation through the Council of National Museums.⁶⁾

Through this summit, President Trump expressed a strong commitment to advancing cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan among the five Central Asian countries. The United States and Kazakhstan agreed to deepen the “Enhanced Strategic Partnership Dialogue” and expand cooperation on critical minerals.⁷⁾ Meanwhile, President Mirziyoyev of

6) US Department of State(2025. 11. 7.),“Joint Statement of Intent in the Field of Cultural Heritage.”<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/joint-statement-of-intent-in-the-field-of-cultural-heritage/> (access: 2025. 12.19).

Uzbekistan expressed his intention to significantly increase investments in the United States, announced the introduction of visa-free travel (up to 30 days) for U.S. citizens starting in 2026, and agreed to strengthen cooperation with the United States in critical minerals, methanol production, and security-related areas such as combating illicit drugs and transnational crime.⁸⁾ In addition, the U.S. Department of Commerce announced that more than USD 25 billion in commercial deals had been concluded with the five Central Asian countries across sectors including aircraft, agricultural machinery, AI, finance, mining, and railway infrastructure.⁹⁾

These developments indicate a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Central Asia. Whereas the United States previously prioritized security cooperation with the region, it is now expected to expand partnerships with Central Asian countries as economic partners and key suppliers of critical minerals.

2) China

China first announced the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) during a visit to Kazakhstan in 2013. As a result, Central Asian countries emerged as China's most important partners in the construction of the land-based Silk Road. The "One Belt" component of the BRI envisions transportation networks extending from China through Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan to the Middle East and Europe, positioning Central Asia as a core region in China's logistics network. Accordingly, cooperation between China and Central Asian countries has deepened in

7) US Department of State (2025. 11. 7.), "A New Era in U.S.-Kazakhstan Relations." <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/a-new-era-in-u-s-kazakhstan-relations> (access: 2025. 12.19).

8) US Department of State (2025. 11. 7.), "Elevating U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations." <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/11/elevating-u-s-uzbekistan-relations> (access: 2025. 12.19).

9) International Trade Administration (2025. 11. 6.), "Commerce Celebrates \$25 Billion C5+1 Deal Zone." (access: 2025. 12.19).

trade and infrastructure development. In 2024, trade between China and Central Asian countries reached a record high of USD 94.8 billion.

China had already begun importing crude oil through pipelines connecting Kazakhstan's oil fields to China in the mid-2000s, prior to the formal launch of the BRI. Since 2010, China has imported natural gas through pipelines connecting Turkmenistan to China. As a result, China's share of Turkmenistan's natural gas exports increased to 74.8% in 2021 and 80.8% in 2022. Kazakhstan has also exported natural gas to China through pipelines built between Turkmenistan and China since 2018, with China accounting for 48.6% of Kazakhstan's total gas exports in 2020 and 56.4% in 2022.

China's investment in Central Asia varies by country and period. While Chinese investment in Kazakhstan's energy sector has declined, sustained investments have continued in Turkmenistan's energy and chemical sectors. In Uzbekistan, large-scale investments have been made in solar power plants and electric vehicle factories, with recent growth in new investments in manufacturing. Central Asian countries have attracted steady investment not only from China and Russia but also from European countries. The Netherlands is the largest investor in Kazakhstan, primarily in agriculture and transportation, followed by the United States, Switzerland, Russia, and China. In Uzbekistan, foreign investment has increased significantly following President Mirziyoyev's second term, driven by an active policy of external openness. Since 2015, foreign investment in Kyrgyzstan has declined overall, although investment from China and Russia has continued, particularly in manufacturing, mining, and logistics. Foreign direct investment in Tajikistan has also declined, but China continues to invest in mining, power transmission networks, and manufacturing, thereby increasing its influence over the Tajik economy. Investment by various countries in Turkmenistan has gradually decreased since 2014.

Meanwhile, China designated Central Asia is historically a core route of the ancient Silk Road as the “Belt” component of the BRI. After negotiations with the relevant countries, commenced construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan(CKU) Railway in December 2024. Although the CKU railway project aligns with China’s BRI strategy, it is not a new initiative. Since China, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed a memorandum of understanding on railway construction in 1997, the project has taken decades to materialize. The project involves the construction of a 532.53 km railway linking Kashgar in China to Andijan in Uzbekistan via the Torugart Pass(on the China-Kyrgyzstan border), Makmal and Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁰⁾

Upon completion, the CKU railway will become the second rail route connecting China and Central Asia and is expected to have a significant impact on transportation and trade networks across Eurasia. China anticipates that the project will promote the development of the Xinjiang Free Trade Zone, launched in 2023, and further integrate the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region into domestic and international markets. Kyrgyzstan views the project as an opportunity to expand its limited railway network, which currently totals only 424km. Of the 532.53km CKU railway, approximately 312km pass through Kyrgyzstan, and the project is expected to contribute significantly to increased transit revenues and domestic infrastructure development.¹¹⁾ Uzbekistan also expects substantial benefits from the project, including a significant reduction in logistics transit times with China and a strengthened role as a cargo transshipment hub in Central Asia.

Cooperation between China and Central Asian countries has further intensified following the outbreak of the Ukraine war. While Russia has

10) Azimzhan Khitakhunov, “The New Era of Central Asia-China Cooperation: The Case of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway,” Eurasian Research Institute.
<https://www.eurasian-research.org/publication/the-new-era-of-central-asia-china-cooperation-the-case-of-the-china-kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-railway/> (access: 2025.12.20).

11) Ibid.

sought to dramatically increase gas exports to China through projects such as the Power of Siberia-2 pipeline. But China has remained cautious about expanding gas imports from Russia from an energy security perspective. Instead, China has increased liquefied natural gas(LNG) imports from the United States and Qatar while steadily expanding natural gas imports from Central Asia. The China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline Lines D, connecting Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China, began construction in 2014 and is scheduled for completion in 2026. Once completed, the project will enable China to import up to 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan over a 30-year period.¹²⁾

At the first China-Central Asia Summit held in May 2023, the Xi'an Declaration reaffirmed the participating countries' commitment to accelerating these projects and expanding trade in energy resources. In June 2025, the second China-Central Asia Summit was held in Kazakhstan, attended by the leaders of the five Central Asian countries and Chinese President Xi Jinping. The summit adopted treaties and joint statements and established the "China-Central Asia Spirit," which is based on four core principles: decision-making through consultation grounded in mutual respect and equality; deepening mutual trust and mutual support for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national dignity; pursuit of common development through mutual benefit and win-win cooperation; and joint responses to regional security and stability challenges while supporting each country's chosen development path.¹³⁾

With the China-Central Asia Summit being held for the second time in 2025 following its inaugural meeting in 2023, cooperation among the participating countries has expanded in substantive terms. As the third

12) Монголоор дамжуулах хийн хоолойн төслийг хэрэгжүүлэх Оросын саналд Хятад ха риу өгсөнгүй." IKON, March. 22, 2023.

13) Lee Kyung-eun, "The Second China-Central Asia Summit: Establishing the 'China-Central Asia Spirit' and Strengthening Belt and Road Cooperation," EMERiCs Russia and Eurasia. <https://www.kiep.go.kr/aif/issueDetail.es?brdctcsNo=383058&mid=a10200000000&systemcode=04> (access: December 29, 2025)

summit is scheduled for 2027, cooperation between China and Central Asia is expected to continue to broaden and deepen across multiple dimensions.

3) Russia

Russia seeks to maintain its influence over Central Asian countries, particularly by strengthening regional security and economic ties. In 2002, Russia established the Collective Security Treaty Organization(CSTO) with Central Asian countries and has conducted joint military exercises to jointly respond to regional security threats while countering the expansion of Western influence and demonstrating Russia's military presence. In addition, except Turkmenistan, most Central Asian countries except are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation(SCO), established in 2001, through which Russia promotes deeper security and military cooperation with the region.

Economically, Russia has led the Eurasian Economic Union(EAEU) since 2015, promoting the elimination of internal tariffs and the formation of a single market. The EAEU consists of five member states: Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Its objective is to establish an EU-like single market by enabling the free movement of capital, goods, services, and labor within the Eurasian region. Through the EAEU, Russia seeks to maintain political and economic influence over former Soviet states. At the same time, Russia views the EAEU as a means of counterbalancing China's expanding influence in Eurasia through the BRI and as a potential avenue for circumventing Western sanctions that have intensified following the Ukraine war.

Through these military and economic frameworks, Russia emphasizes its traditional friendly relations with Central Asian countries and seeks to maintain its geopolitical influence. Central Asian countries have attempted to maintain economic and political balance between China and Russia through participation in these mechanisms.

In the early stages of the Ukraine war, Central Asian countries did not

join sanctions against Russia and abstained or refrained from voting in five UN resolutions condemning Russia in 2022. In 2023, all five Central Asian leaders attended Russia's 'Victory Day' celebrations, signaling continued support for Russia despite the ongoing conflict.

Central Asian countries long dependent on Russia for security and economic support by Soviet Union until now. But these days, gradually begun to shift their positions. Uzbekistan publicly opposed Russia's hostile actions and violence, announcing that it would provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine.¹⁴⁾ Kazakhstan formally rejected Russia's request for troop deployment and stated that it would not recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.¹⁵⁾ Central Asian countries have also refused to accept Russia's policy of annexing Ukrainian territory as a condition for ending the war. As multiethnic states neighboring Russia, Central Asian countries are deeply concerned about the implications of Russia's territorial annexation of neighboring states for their own national security.

As a result, since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, the relationship between Russia and Central Asia has become less strong than in the past. Nevertheless, cooperation between Russia and Central Asian countries is expected to continue. In January 2022, at the request of President Tokayev to suppress anti-government protests in Kazakhstan, approximately 2,500 Russian troops were deployed to Kazakhstan by CSTO. More recently,

14) "Russia ally Uzbekistan calls for swift halt to Ukraine conflict," Reuters, March 17, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/russia-allyuzbekistan-calls-swift-halt-ukraine-conflict-2022-03-17/> (access: April 7, 2023). (Reprinted from Kang Jeong-il (2023), "Prospects for Russia-Central Asia Relations after the Ukrainian War: Focusing on Geopolitical Theory and the Lessons of the Crimean War (1853-1856)," National Security and Strategy, Vol. 23(2), p. 95.)

15) "One of Russia's closest allies denies request for troops," NBC news, 2022. 02.27. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/live-blog/russia-ukrainelive-updates-n1289976/ncrd1289985#liveBlogCards> (access: April 7, 2023). (Reprinted from Kang Jeong-il (2023), "Prospects for Russia-Central Asia Relations after the Ukrainian War: Focusing on Geopolitical Theory and the Lessons of the Crimean War (1853-1856)," National Security and Strategy, Vol. 23(2), p. 95.)

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have cooperated with Russia on nuclear power plant construction projects. Kazakhstan is building Central Asia's first commercial nuclear power plant, while Uzbekistan has begun construction of a small modular reactor(SMR).¹⁶⁾ While Russia's influence in Central Asia is clearly declining, particularly in economic sectors mutually beneficial cooperation is likely to persist.

5. Policy Measures

In order to promote mutually beneficial cooperation with Central Asian countries, it is essential to develop mid-to long-term cooperation strategies that align with each country's national development strategy. Among the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has established the Kazakhstan-2050 Strategy and the Concept for the Development of Manufacturing Industry of Kazakhstan (2023-2029). Uzbekistan has formulated the New Development Strategy for 2022-2026 and the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy, setting development goals across multiple sectors. Kyrgyzstan has adopted the National Development Strategy 2018-2040. Tajikistan has established the National Development Strategy of Tajikistan 2030, while Turkmenistan has formulated the Socio-Economic Development Program of Turkmenistan for 2011-2030.

Central Asian countries have established national development strategies that reflect their respective domestic conditions and are making concerted efforts toward their implementation. Beyond an approach focused solely on strengthening Korea's economic security, Korea should formulate cooperation agendas that correspond to the national development strategies of each Central Asian country in order to create a model of mutual and sustainable development. Through this approach, cooperation with Central

16) "Russia's Rosatom to explore construction of high-capacity nuclear plant in Uzbekistan," Reuters, June 21, 2025.

https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russias-rosatom-explore-construction-high-capacity-nuclear-plant-uzbekistan-2025-06-20/?utm_source=chatgpt.com (access: 2025.12.30.).

Asian countries can be deepened not only in economic fields but also in social, trade, and security sectors.

Align with the national development strategies and cooperation demands of Central Asian countries include energy, mineral resources, urban infrastructure development, ICT, healthcare and medical services, and the automotive sector. In recent years, alongside efforts to strengthen economic security, global demand has increased for energy resources such as oil and natural gas, as well as for mineral resources from resource-rich Central Asian countries.

Korea should pursue mid- to long-term multilateral cooperation that serves the shared interests of Korea and Central Asian countries by promoting investment, development assistance, technology transfer, human exchanges, and public diplomacy not only in energy and mineral resources, but also in infrastructure construction and power generation and railways. Digital infrastructure is also major interest for most Central Asian countries like ICT, AI, healthcare, smart farming, and the automotive sector. Strengthening mutually beneficial relationships and deepening partnerships with these countries will not only expand opportunities for Korean companies to success Central Asian markets but also facilitate the diversification and stabilization of supply chains for energy and mineral resources. Furthermore, such cooperation will help Korea secure strategic footholds for expansion into the Caspian region, the Middle East, and Europe. At the same time, enhancing interdependence with Central Asian countries will contribute to strengthening Korea's diplomatic and security capabilities within the broader region.

All Central Asian countries are recipients of Korea's Official Development Assistance(ODA). By strategically allocating ODA funds that support each country's economic structure and industrial diversification strategies, Korea can build trust as a reliable development partner and a partner in shared growth. In addition, Korea should enhance the implementation capacity of

intergovernmental agreements by effectively utilizing mechanisms such as the Supply Chain Stabilization Committee and the Supply Chain Stabilization Fund administered by the Ministry of Economy and Finance(MOEF).

In 2023, Korea enacted the Framework Act on Supporting Supply Chain Stabilization for Economic Security(the Supply Chain Stabilization Act) in response to supply chain risks and disruptions arising or likely to arise from domestic and external factors. Based on this legislation, the government established the Supply Chain Stabilization Committee within the Ministry of Economy and Finance in 2024 to serve as a control tower for securing supply chains, and separately created the Supply Chain Stabilization Fund at the Korea Eximbank as a dedicated policy fund. Government support mechanisms for overseas resource development can provide companies with opportunities to initiate related projects. Korea should continue to promote cooperation with Central Asian countries to enhance economic security by leveraging both ODA resources and the Supply Chain Stabilization Fund.

There is also a need to institutionalize regular summit-level meetings between Korea and Central Asian countries. The Korea-Central Asia Summit, scheduled to be held in the second half of 2026 for the first time. The summit should be established as a regular platform to further strengthen intergovernmental cooperation. There is ministerial-level consultation mechanism “The Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum”, it upgraded into an interministerial platform involving relevant ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy, and the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Each ministry should identify cooperation agendas and develop related policies, while linking these efforts with public-private cooperation networks such as the Supply Chain Stabilization Committee to enhance the implementation of agreed initiatives.

In addition, it is necessary to revitalize and strengthen the substance of

the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, which was established in July 2017 for the five Central Asian countries and elevated to a ministerial-level in November 2020. Although the Secretariat of the Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum has categorized cooperation projects into areas such as transportation and logistics, energy, industrial modernization and diversification, climate change and the environment, healthcare, and education and culture, it has not sufficiently presented detailed explanations or performance outcomes for these projects. Taking the first Korea-Central Asia Summit as an opportunity, the Secretariat should formulate a comprehensive implementation plan for follow-up measures and function as a substantive institution responsible for execution and coordination.

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국문초록

한국과 중앙아시아의 협력체계 구축을 위한 제언

박 정 후

오늘날 전 세계의 경제통상 정책은 변화의 기로에 접어들었다. 지난 30여 년간 통용되었던 자유무역주의 질서는 위협받고 있으며, 경제 강국을 중심으로 보호무역주의가 대두되고 있다. 코로나19 팬데믹과 우크라이나 전쟁을 거치며, 이와 같은 경향은 더욱 두드러졌으며 이른바 경제안보 시대가 도래하게 되었다. 이와 같은 세계사적 변화와 더불어 중앙아시아의 전략적 가치가 더욱 높아지기 시작했다. 우크라이나 전쟁 이후로 러시아를 경유하지 않는 물류망이 활성화되고, 새로운 유통망 구축이 진전되는 등 중앙아시아 국가들에 대한 러시아의 영향력이 줄어들기 시작하면서, 미국, 중국, EU 등 주요국들의 대 중앙아시아 협력 사업들이 구체화되고 있다. 한국과 중앙아시아는 2007년부터 정부간 다자협약체인 ‘한-중앙아 협력포럼’을 개최하며 협력방안을 논의해 왔다. 또한 중앙아시아 국가들과의 협력을 위해 ‘한국-중앙아시아 정상회의’ 개최를 추진하는 등 중앙아시아와의 협력 관계를 진전시켜 나가고자 한다. 수교 이래, 한국은 중앙아시아의 자원 부국인 카자흐스탄, 우즈베키스탄, 투르크메니스탄 등에 관심을 집중하였으나, 중앙아시아 국가들의 연계성의 강화되는 현황을 감안하면 중앙아시아 5개국 전체와 협력을 심화시킬 필요가 있다.

한국과 중앙아시아와의 지속적인 협력과 신뢰관계 구축을 위해서는 중앙아시아 각국의 발전전략에 부합하는 상호 호혜적인 협력체계를 구축해야 한다. 에너지, 운송 인프라 건설 투자 및 사업에 참여하는 것을 비롯하여 중앙아시아 국가 대부분의 관심 사안인 디지털 인프라 구축, ICT, AI, 보건·의료, 스마트팜, 자동차 분야 등에 대한 투자와 원조를 제공할 필요가 있다. 이 밖에 기술 이전, 인적교류 협력, 공공외교 등을 망라하여 한국과 중앙아시아 국가들의 공

동 이익을 위한 중장기 다자협력 사업을 발굴해야 한다. 아울러 이를 안정적으로 이행할 수 있도록 현재 한국이 대외협력을 위해 운영하고 있는 각종 지원 체계를 활성화하고 제도적 기반 또한 마련해야 한다.