PIVOT TO THE EAST:

What Armenia and Azerbaijan Can Learn from Central Asian Cooperation?

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Executive Summary

Policy analysis of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has relied, often unreflectively, on a narrow set of Western-brokered settlements as its comparative reference points. Yet these cases carry with them assumptions that bear little resemblance to the post-Soviet realities of the region. The result has been a policy conversation that is well-furnished with precedent but poorly matched to context.

This paper makes the case for a different comparative orientation: Central Asia has generated a body of cooperative practice over the past three decades that is both more structurally analogous and more substantively instructive than the Western canon typically consulted. Yet it has been almost absent from the analytical frameworks applied to the Armenia-Azerbaijan case.

The paper draws on 12 semi-structured interviews conducted with practitioners and policy analysts working across both regions. It examines four domains in which Central Asian states have developed cooperative mechanisms despite persistent distrust: transboundary water governance; the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border delimitation; cultural heritage diplomacy; and regional connectivity infrastructure.

A consistent pattern runs through all four cases. Cooperation did not emerge from comprehensive political settlements. It was driven, instead, by sectoral negotiations around shared technical necessities that no single state could manage alone.

1. Introduction

Over three decades, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has accumulated a substantial body of diplomatic practice, academic scholarship, and policy prescription. The most recent phase, from the military escalation in September 2023 through the initialling of a peace agreement at the White House in August 2025, has redrawn the strategic landscape in ways that few anticipated even two years ago. Normalisation is now proceeding on multiple tracks simultaneously, but it is doing so under conditions of acute regional instability: the war in Ukraine continues to reshape the security architecture of the post- Soviet space, while the military confrontation between Iran and Israel/the US has brought military operations to the South Caucasus's immediate southern neighbourhood. The region sits, for the first time in its post-Soviet history, at the intersection of two major armed conflicts whose dynamics both complicate and, in ways that are not yet fully understood, accelerate the search for a settlement.

Throughout three decades of internationally mediated negotiation, a broadly consistent set of comparative frameworks has been applied to the Armenia-Azerbaijan case. The Northern Ireland peace process has served as a reference point for discussions of power-sharing and identity politics. The Balkan wars and the internationally administered statebuilding projects that followed them have informed thinking about post-conflict institutional (re)construction. The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have provided a template, however strained and increasingly discredited, for discussions of phased implementation.

None of these comparisons is without analytical value. But their repeated and often uncritical invocation has produced something close to an analytical path dependence: a condition in which the same mediating concepts circulate through policy discussions without serious scrutiny of whether the structural conditions that gave them purchase elsewhere actually obtain in the South Caucasus. The comparative imagination available to policymakers working on this conflict is, paradoxically, both well-stocked and insufficiently diverse.

This paper proposes a different orientation. Central Asia, a region that shares with the South Caucasus a Soviet institutional inheritance, a history of territorial disputes rooted in early Soviet national delimitation, the persistent influence of competing external powers, and a set of unresolved transboundary resource dilemmas, offers a body of cooperative precedent that is structurally more analogous to the Armenia-Azerbaijan situation than the Western cases that dominate the existing discourse. Yet it has been almost entirely ignored.

The case for this reorientation rests on a set of structural parallels that the literature has not adequately examined. Both regions inherited borders drawn during the early Soviet period that cut across ethnic, linguistic, and economic communities - producing enclaves, exclaves, and contested territories that became vectors of interstate conflict once those borders acquired sovereign significance. Both experienced armed confrontation[1] in the 1990s and 2000s, followed by prolonged periods of frozen or semi-frozen hostility. Both have served as arenas of overlapping influence by Russia, Türkiye, China, Iran, and Western powers. And both face transboundary challenges that create functional pressures for cooperation regardless of the political appetite for it.

Despite these parallels, the two bodies of scholarship and policy analysis have developed in near-complete isolation from one another. Work on the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict rarely engages the Central Asian cooperation literature; work on Central Asian regionalism has had little reason to address the South Caucasus. The result is that a significant body of relevant institutional experience remains untapped. This paper is an attempt to begin bridging that gap.

The argument should be stated plainly. It is not that Central Asian cooperation models can or should be transplanted to the South Caucasus. The political economies, conflict trajectories, and external actor configurations of the two regions differ in ways that matter. Central Asia's cooperative experiments have been partial and shaped by resource interdependencies, particularly around shared river systems, that have no direct equivalent in the Armenia-Azerbaijan dyad. The claim, rather, is that specific mechanisms of cooperation that have emerged in Central Asia over three decades contain transferable procedural and institutional insights: insights about how to sequence agreements incrementally, how to depoliticise technical engagement, how to link issues across sectors to construct composite bargains, and how to build professional networks that sustain cooperation through periods of political deterioration. It is this procedural knowledge that the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization process most conspicuously lacks.

The paper draws on documentary analysis of policy reports, scholarly literature, and institutional records, combined with 12 semi-structured expert interviews conducted

[1] Author's note: compared to the South Caucasus, episodes of armed violence in post-Soviet Central Asia have generally remained more limited in scale and duration, never reaching the levels of sustained interstate warfare observed in the South Caucasus, where exist/ed ethno-territorial rivalries of Armenia-Azerbaijan, Georgia-Abkhazia, Georgia-South Ossetia, and Georgia-Russia.

between February and March 2026. Interviewees were selected to represent a range of professional positions and regional expertise. All interviews were conducted under the Chatham House Rule.

2. Central Asia as an Understudied Laboratory of Regional Cooperation

Central Asia's post-independence trajectory resists any straightforward narrative of regional integration or disintegration. What has unfolded since 1991 is better described as an oscillation - between the centrifugal pressures of sovereignty consolidation and the centripetal pull of infrastructure, resources, and populations that were never designed to function within five separate states. The dissolution of the Soviet Union left the region with borders drawn during the national-territorial delimitation campaigns of 1924–1936. As scholars such as Hirsch (2005) and Khalid (2021) note, these processes were designed to produce administratively coherent units within a broader federal framework, even as they intersected in complex ways with existing social, economic, and cultural linkages across the region. The consequences of that exercise are still being worked out. The Fergana Valley alone, home to some 15 million people, divided roughly 60-15-25 among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, was left with a patchwork of enclaves, exclaves and overlapping land-use claims that would produce more than 150 documented violent incidents along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border between 1991 and 2022 (Powers 2025).

The material infrastructure inherited from the Soviet period made things worse. Central Asia's irrigation network - the largest in the post-Soviet space, servicing over 8 million hectares of arable land across the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins - had been built and operated as a single hydrological system under central management from Moscow (Weinthal 2006; Menga 2018). The unified Central Asian Power System connected all five republics in a synchronised electricity grid. The railway network ran outward through Russia, with minimal direct links between Central Asian capitals. None of this had been designed to function across sovereign borders. Independence did not simply change who governed these systems. It turned every shared canal, every transmission line, every railway junction into a potential site of leverage, grievance, or breakdown.

The 1990s tested this fragility in ways that were both predictable and severe. Uzbekistan under the late President Islam Karimov pursued what Cooley (2012, 112) has aptly termed a strategy of “sovereignty maximisation”: mining stretches of its borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, imposing visa regimes that overnight severed communities which had moved

freely for generations, and using gas supply as an instrument of coercion. Tajikistan was consumed by a civil war between 1992 and 1997 - the deadliest conflict in the post-Soviet space before Ukraine, with an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 killed and over a million displaced - that effectively removed the country from regional politics for the better part of a decade (International Crisis Group 2011; Heathershaw 2009). Turkmenistan withdrew behind a doctrine of "permanent neutrality," formalised by a 1995 UN General Assembly resolution, that in practice amounted to a rationale for comprehensive disengagement from regional institutions. Kazakhstan, the largest economy in the region, was the one consistent advocate for multilateral frameworks - most visibly through late President Nazarbayev's recurring proposals for a Central Asian Union - but these initiatives were widely read as instruments of Astana's bid for regional leadership and won limited support from smaller neighbours wary of exchanging one centre of gravity for another (Laruelle 2022; Cummings 2005).

And yet, beneath this surface of competitive sovereignty, a stratum of cooperative practice survived - not because governments wanted it, but because the physical infrastructure of interdependence was too consequential to abandon. The Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), established in September 1992, barely nine months after independence, provided a framework for annual water-allocation planning across the two major river basins. Its institutional design was deliberately modest: a rotating chairmanship, consensus-based decision-making, no enforcement mechanism, and a small permanent secretariat (the Scientific Information Centre) based in Tashkent. The Commission's shortcomings are extensively documented. Upstream states have consistently challenged allocation norms that favour downstream irrigation at the expense of upstream hydropower generation, and compliance with agreed schedules has been episodic at best (Wegerich 2008). But the ICWC has met continuously for over thirty-three years; a record of institutional survival unmatched by any other Central Asian multilateral body and rivalled by very few post-Soviet cooperative institutions anywhere.

As one Central Asian foreign policy analyst put it during the author's research: "the ICWC was never a powerful institution. It had no enforcement capacity and no independent budget worth mentioning. But it kept people in the same room, year after year, at a time when every other regional forum was collapsing." That, the analyst observed, mattered more than anyone recognised at the time (author's interview, February 2026).

The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), created in 1993 at the level of the five heads of state, carried a higher political profile but occupied a similarly ambiguous institutional space. Its rotating presidency, transferred among heads of state on a five- year cycle, had the effect of keeping the Aral Sea crisis on the presidential agenda even during periods when bilateral relations were at their lowest ebb. The IFAS framework also served as a coordination platform for international financial institutions: the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and several UN agencies channelled technical assistance and project financing through the Fund, reinforcing the institutional infrastructure of cooperation even as the political relationships above it deteriorated (World Bank 2014).

The regional dynamic shifted qualitatively after September 2016 with the death of Islam Karimov and the succession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The speed of the reversal was striking. Within eighteen months, Tashkent had reopened 17 border crossing points with Tajikistan that had been sealed since 2001 - crossings that were handling 20,000 daily transits within weeks of reopening (Kobilov 2025). Direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe resumed after a quarter-century hiatus. The A-377 highway linking Samarkand to the Tajik cultural centre of Penjikent was restored. The Galaba-Amuzang railway, a critical freight corridor between the two countries, returned to operation. Bilateral trade surpassed $500 million by 2020, having been negligible for years under Karimov (Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United Kingdom 2022).

Mirziyoyev's policy also produced effects well beyond Uzbekistan's own bilateral relationships. By completing its border delimitation with Kyrgyzstan in 2023 and positioning itself as a facilitating presence in the Kyrgyz–Tajik dispute, Tashkent demonstrated that a single state's strategic reorientation could alter the incentive structures of an entire region. As one analyst at a Tashkent-based policy institute observed to the author, the normalisation of border issues across the Fergana Valley was enabled by Uzbekistan's constructive regional posture under Mirziyoyev - a dynamic in which bilateral moves by Tashkent created permissive conditions for trilateral and multilateral cooperation that had previously been blocked (author's interview 2026).

What emerges from this three-decade trajectory is not a story of regional integration. In fact, Central Asia remains one of the least economically integrated regions in the world.

It should be read more about a set of procedural characteristics that distinguish the region's cooperative practice and that carry analytical relevance for

other post-Soviet contexts. Four are particularly salient.

The first is *incrementalism.* Agreements were reached section by section, issue by issue, with each settled question creating a baseline for the next round rather than being held hostage to a comprehensive package. The second is *sectoral compartmentalisation*: water governance, border management, energy exchange, and cultural cooperation were treated as distinct negotiating tracks, so that progress in one domain was insulated from setbacks in another. The third is the *primacy of technical framing*. Cooperative initiatives were presented as responses to engineering problems rather than as political concessions, which allowed officials to participate without bearing the full domestic political costs of engaging with adversaries. The fourth is a *tolerance for asymmetric bargains*: states accepted agreements whose distributive effects were manifestly unequal when the alternative - no agreement at all - imposed greater costs on everyone.

These four characteristics are precisely what the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalisation process has found most difficult to develop. The prevailing tendency in the South Caucasus has been toward comprehensive package negotiations in which every issue is linked to every other, technical cooperation is subordinated to the sequencing of political concessions, and the domestic political costs of compromise are front-loaded. The Central Asian experience does not resolve these difficulties. But it demonstrates that an alternative procedural logic exists, one that has been tested under comparable structural conditions, and that it deserves more serious analytical attention than it has so far received.

3. Case Study I: Water Diplomacy and Technical Cooperation in Central Asia

3.1 Basin management in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya

The two river systems that dominate Central Asian hydrology - the Syr Darya, running 2,212 kilometres from the Tian Shan mountains to the remnants of the Aral Sea, and the Amu Darya, stretching 2,540 kilometres from the Pamir highlands through the Karakum Desert - together constitute one of the longest-running experiments in post-Soviet transboundary resource governance. The numbers alone convey the scale of what is at stake: the two basins drain approximately 1.55 million square kilometres, supply irrigation water to over 8 million hectares of cultivated land, and directly sustain the livelihoods of an estimated 45 million people across five countries (Micklin 2007). Both rivers rise in the glaciated highlands of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, states that between them hold roughly 80 per cent of

Central Asia's freshwater but generate less than 15 per cent of its GDP, before flowing through the lowland territories of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, where Soviet-era cotton monoculture and the irrigated agriculture that succeeded it remain the backbone of the rural economy (Menga 2018).

The structural tension that has organised Central Asian water politics since 1991 is by now well established in the scholarly literature, though its implications for comparative conflict analysis remain underexplored. The core dynamic is a hydrological asymmetry: upstream states want to release water from their major reservoirs - principally Toktogul on the Syr Darya (Kyrgyzstan, capacity 19.5 billion cubic metres) and Nurek on the Vakhsh tributary of the Amu Darya (Tajikistan, 10.5 billion cubic metres) - during winter, when domestic energy demand peaks and hydroelectric generation is most valuable. Downstream states need those same reservoirs to hold water through the winter and release it during the April-to-September growing season, when cotton and food crops require irrigation (Wegerich 2008; Asian Development Bank 2019). The two calendars (energy and agriculture) impose contradictory demands on the same finite stock of water. This asymmetry has been the defining axis of interstate bargaining in the region for over three decades.

Under Soviet rule, the contradiction was managed by a centralised seasonal exchange administered from Moscow. The Ministry of Land Reclamation and Water Resources set annual release schedules for the major reservoirs, and upstream republics received compensatory deliveries of coal, gas, and electricity from their downstream neighbours during winter. As Weinthal (2002) has shown, this was not a cooperative arrangement among equals but a centrally commanded regime in which the republics exercised little autonomous bargaining power. What independence did in 1991 was not simply to decentralise the system. It transformed every element of the exchange into a sovereign transaction, subject to the full range of political leverage, renegotiation, and outright coercion that interstate relations can produce. As one policy specialist in Bishkek put it to the author, the physical infrastructure of the Soviet period forced continued engagement, you cannot, after all, unplug an irrigation canal, but the institutional architecture that had made that infrastructure function as a single coordinated system had vanished overnight (author’s interview, February 2026).

The consequences followed quickly. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which had depended on downstream fuel shipments that were now priced at market rates and subject to political conditionality, faced chronic winter energy shortages.

The rational response: releasing water from upstream reservoirs to generate hydroelectric power during the cold months, deprived downstream irrigators of the summer flows on which their harvests depended. Uzbekistan, the region's most populous state and its largest cotton producer, bore the downstream effects most directly and responded with a combination of diplomatic pressure, gas supply restrictions, and, under Karimov, thinly veiled threats of military action. Between 1991 and 2010, annual disputes over the Syr Darya's release schedule became a recurring fixture of Central Asian politics, with several episodes producing localised water shortages that affected hundreds of thousands of farming households (International Crisis Group 2014).

3.2 Institutional arrangements and confidence-building effects

The institutional response to these pressures has been uneven, but considerably more durable than the political analysis of the region typically acknowledges. The ICWC, established by agreement of the five Central Asian water ministers in September 1992, operates through two Basin Water Organisations (the BVO Syr Darya in Tashkent and the BVO Amu Darya in Urgench) and a Scientific Information Centre (SIC-ICWC) that functions as the Commission's analytical secretariat. Its core business is the preparation of annual and seasonal water-allocation plans, negotiated each autumn on the basis of projected river flow, reservoir storage levels, and irrigation demand estimates provided by national water agencies. The Commission convenes quarterly at the deputy-minister level, with more frequent working meetings at the BVO level (ICWC 2008).

The ICWC's institutional weaknesses are significant and extensively documented. It operates by consensus, which gives any member state an effective veto over allocation decisions. It has no independent monitoring capacity, relying on national data submissions of variable reliability. The allocation norms it applies - which broadly reproduce Soviet-era distribution ratios favouring downstream irrigation - have been persistently challenged by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as inequitable under post-independence conditions in which upstream states bear the opportunity costs of foregone hydropower generation (Menga 2018). Wegerich (2008) has argued persuasively that the ICWC functions less as a governance institution than as a coordination platform: a forum for information exchange and norm articulation that lowers transaction costs without resolving the underlying distributional conflicts.

What demands analytical attention, however, is not the Commission's limitations but its persistence. The ICWC has met

regularly for over thirty-three years - through Uzbekistan's near-total closure of its borders with Tajikistan, the 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, and multiple breakdowns in bilateral relations among the riparian states. It has outlasted the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation, which was dissolved in 2005, and the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty negotiation, which required twelve years of drafting before its conclusion in 2009. No other multilateral body in Central Asia can claim a comparable record of institutional continuity. A senior expert from Central Asia described the Commission's durability to the author as a function of what he called "structural indispensability": the physical infrastructure of shared irrigation compels a minimum level of coordination regardless of political conditions, and the ICWC, for all its deficiencies, provides the lowest-cost vehicle for that coordination (author's interview, February 2026).

The confidence-building effects of this sustained technical engagement are difficult to measure but consistently attested in practitioner accounts. Decades of water-allocation negotiations have produced a cadre of mid-level technical officials (hydrologists, irrigation engineers, dam operators) across all five states who maintain regular professional contact with their counterparts irrespective of the political climate between their capitals. Several interviewees confirmed that these professional networks have, on occasion, served as informal back-channels for broader diplomatic communication when formal political relations were suspended. The shared Soviet-era training culture of Central Asian water professionals, most were educated at the same institutions, work with the same hydrological models, and use the same technical vocabulary, creates a baseline of professional legibility that does not depend on political goodwill (author's interviews, February-March 2026).

The 1998 Syr Darya Framework Agreement, signed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, represented the most ambitious attempt to codify the seasonal water-energy exchange in treaty form. Under its terms, Kyrgyzstan was to limit winter releases from Toktogul in exchange for compensatory fuel deliveries from downstream states during the heating season. The agreement was never consistently honoured - fuel shipments were frequently delayed, reduced, or withheld, prompting Bishkek to resume unilateral winter releases - but the negotiation process itself proved more consequential than the treaty. It established procedural precedents for joint technical monitoring and dispute arbitration that have been drawn upon in subsequent arrangements, including the Syr Darya water-energy protocols of 2004 and 2008 (Burghart and Sabonis-Helf 2004).

International financial institutions have played facilitative roles that, while constrained by the politics of the region, have reinforced the institutional foundations of cooperation in ways that merit recognition. The World Bank's multi-year technical assessment of the Rogun Dam project in Tajikistan (2011–2014) - commissioned jointly by the Bank and the Tajik government in the face of intense Uzbek diplomatic opposition - demonstrated that international financial institutions can function as credibility-enhancing intermediaries in technically complex resource disputes. The assessment did not resolve the bilateral disagreement over the dam, but it did produce a shared body of technical evidence that narrowed the factual basis for contestation and gave both sides a common analytical reference point (World Bank 2014). The Asian Development Bank's financing of transboundary water monitoring infrastructure through the CAREC framework has made a parallel contribution, building the technical preconditions for cooperative governance even in the absence of the political preconditions (Asian Development Bank 2018).

3.3 Lessons for conflict-affected regions

Central Asian water diplomacy yields several findings with transferable analytical value. It also reveals limitations that constrain the scope of any cross-regional application. Both deserve candid treatment.

The first finding concerns the autonomy of technical cooperation from political resolution. The ICWC's thirty-three-year record demonstrates that functional cooperation can be designed with sufficient institutional autonomy to survive, and in some cases to outlast, severe deteriorations in the political relationships of participating states. The operative condition, however, is demanding: the costs of non-cooperation in the relevant technical domain must be high enough, and visible enough to domestic constituencies, that governments face stronger incentives to preserve the cooperative framework than to sabotage it for political advantage. In Central Asia, the dependence of millions of farming livelihoods on coordinated water releases produced exactly this cost structure. The Armenia-Azerbaijan context presents a different configuration. The two economies are not functionally interdependent in the way that Central Asian riparian states are, which means that the political costs of non-cooperation in any given technical domain are lower and the incentive structure for sustained engagement correspondingly weaker.

The second finding is that the depoliticisation of expert engagement (creating settings in which water engineers and basin specialists interact as technical professionals rather than as

national delegates defending predetermined positions) has been effective at building interpersonal trust and procedural habits of cooperation that carry over into broader bilateral relations. The author's interviews consistently confirmed that Central Asian water professionals tend to identify more strongly with their technical discipline than with their national delegations in ICWC settings, and that this professional solidarity enables problem-solving behaviour that would be inadmissible in a foreign ministry context (author's interview with a former senior official from Kyrgyzstan, March 2026).

Third, the role of international organisations has been most productive when they have acted as conveners and providers of technical legitimacy rather than as mediators or enforcers of governance reform. The most effective international engagements in Central Asian water politics have been those that strengthened local technical capacity and provided neutral platforms for data sharing. Attempts to introduce governance models from other basins, the EU Water Framework Directive, and various OECD templates have gained little traction, in part because they presuppose institutional capacities and political cultures that do not yet exist in the region (Sehring 2009).

Fourth, and perhaps most significant for the comparative argument of this paper, water cooperation in Central Asia has generated what might be called a sociological infrastructure of cooperation: a professional stratum whose career trajectories, institutional affiliations, and occupational identities are bound up with the cooperative frameworks in which they participate. Hydrologists who attend ICWC meetings, engineers who manage jointly operated infrastructure, environmental scientists who contribute to World Bank assessments - these individuals develop stakes in the continuation of cooperative institutions that are distinct from, and sometimes at odds with, the political positions of their governments. This professional constituency for cooperation has proven resilient across leadership transitions, diplomatic crises, and armed border confrontations. Its existence suggests that the most durable foundations of interstate cooperation may lie not in the agreements that political leaders sign but in the professional communities that form around the institutions created to implement them.

These findings must be set against the Central Asian model's significant limitations, which are not incidental but structural. The ICWC's allocation norms have been persistently contested by upstream states as biased toward downstream interests - a criticism that reflects a genuine asymmetry in the framework's design, which reproduces Soviet-era priorities

that privileged irrigated cotton production over hydroelectric development (Xenarios 2019). The construction of the Rogun Dam, at 335 metres upon completion of its latest phase, the world's tallest, proceeded over decades of sustained Uzbek objection, financed initially through a compulsory domestic bond programme and subsequently through World Bank lending (World Bank 2017). The dam's construction demonstrates, unambiguously, that cooperative frameworks cannot prevent unilateral action by states with sufficient domestic political motivation and access to alternative financing. And the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea - whose surface area contracted by approximately 90 per cent between 1960 and 2010, in what a United Nations assessment panel (1993) described as "one of the planet's worst environmental disasters" - stands as a systemic indictment of a cooperative architecture that managed the distribution of water without ever effectively constraining the total volume extracted (Micklin 2007). A framework that allocated a shrinking resource with reasonable efficiency while presiding over its destruction is a sobering precedent for anyone inclined to treat institutional survival as a proxy for institutional success.

4. Case Study II: The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan Border Delimitation

4.1 Background: a century of contested boundaries

The Kyrgyz-Tajik border - roughly 975 kilometres of frontier running across the Fergana Valley floor, the Alay range, and a series of narrow river valleys connecting Kyrgyzstan's Batken province to Tajikistan's Isfara district - was, until its resolution in 2025, among the most violence-prone boundaries in post-Soviet Eurasia. The origins of the dispute are well documented in the historiography of Soviet nationality policy (Hirsch 2005; Khalid 2021; Haugen 2003). The national-territorial delimitation of 1924–1936 created the Tajik ASSR within the Uzbek SSR in 1924 (upgraded to a full union republic in 1929) and the Kyrgyz ASSR in 1926 (full republic from 1936), locking in administrative boundaries that deliberately cut across the valley's historically integrated systems of land use, irrigation, and seasonal migration. The border that resulted contained two Tajik enclaves within Kyrgyz territory - Vorukh, roughly 130 square kilometres with a population of 40,000 to 50,000, and the smaller Kayragach - along with at least 70 sections where the two republics' administrative lines had never been formally reconciled (Reeves 2014).

At independence, only 519 of the 975 kilometres had been demarcated, on the basis of commission records from 1958-1959 - the most recent cartographic

exercise that both sides recognised, though neither accepted without reservation (Powers 2025). The remaining 456 kilometres fell under overlapping Soviet-era maps drawn in different decades and reflecting different administrative realities. Tajikistan favoured the 1924- 1927 delimitation records, which allocated larger portions of the valley floor to Tajik- majority communities. Kyrgyzstan preferred maps from the 1950s, which captured subsequent administrative transfers and population movements. The problem was not merely technical. Two legitimate but mutually incompatible cartographic bases, each embedded in a distinct narrative of historical entitlement, meant that every attempt at border negotiation was simultaneously a contest over how to read Soviet administrative history (The Diplomat 2024).

The human costs of this ambiguity accumulated over three decades. Between 1991 and 2022, at least 150 documented violent incidents occurred along the border, concentrated in the Batken-Isfara corridor where population density is highest and enclaving patterns most complex (Kaktus Media 2022). The overwhelming majority of these clashes began as local disputes - over a road, an irrigation intake, access to seasonal pasture - that escalated when border guards from both sides intervened, security services mobilised, and the confrontation was eventually defused through ad hoc contact at the deputy- minister or security-chief level. Reeves (2014) and Megoran (2017) have documented this escalation dynamic in detail; what made it so persistent was its rootedness in everyday resource competition among communities that shared infrastructure but increasingly did not share a state.

The pattern broke, violently, in 2021 and 2022. In April 2021, a Tajik attempt to install surveillance cameras near a disputed water distribution facility at the Golovnoy canal intake triggered a military engagement involving mortars, armoured vehicles, and helicopter gunships. At least 55 people were killed on both sides and approximately 40,000 Kyrgyz civilians were displaced (International Crisis Group 2022). The September 2022 confrontation was of a different order entirely. Fighting extended across multiple districts of Batken province, involving heavy artillery, aerial drones, and coordinated infantry operations. Kyrgyzstan reported 59 killed and 198 wounded; Tajikistan acknowledged 41 dead and 100 wounded - figures widely considered conservative. Over 136,000 Kyrgyz citizens were evacuated from the border zone. Schools, health facilities, and homes were destroyed on both sides. It was the deadliest interstate military engagement in post-Soviet Central Asia.

4.2 The negotiation process

The September 2022 violence produced what Zartman (1989) would recognise as a "mutually hurting stalemate" a situation in which both sides conclude, at roughly the same time, that continued confrontation has become more costly than the compromises required to end it. In Kyrgyzstan, the scale of civilian displacement generated public fury at the government's failure to protect its own border communities. In Tajikistan, the international reputational fallout and the fiscal burden of sustained border militarisation compounded pressures on a government already managing deep economic constraints. Regionally, the violence unsettled Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, both of which had direct economic and security interests in Fergana Valley stability (author's interview with foreign policy analyst, March 2026).

When negotiations resumed in late 2022, they were entrusted to an unusual channel. Rather than proceeding through the foreign ministries or the dedicated border commissions that had managed the dispute for two decades, the talks were placed in the hands of the two countries' national security chiefs: Kamchybek Tashiev of Kyrgyzstan's GKNB and Saimumin Yatimov of Tajikistan's State Committee for National Security. The logic was blunt: both men held direct presidential mandates, both had the institutional weight to override bureaucratic resistance, and both possessed the operational capacity to manage the security consequences of any territorial adjustment. The negotiations were conducted behind closed doors, with no public disclosure of interim positions or concessions.

Three procedural features of the process carry analytical significance that extends beyond the bilateral case.

First, the negotiators adopted an explicitly incremental approach. Rather than pursuing a comprehensive settlement of all contested sections at once, they resolved the border in stages - beginning with less sensitive mountainous terrain and working progressively toward the politically charged valley-floor segments where population density and enclave complexity were greatest. By December 2023, roughly 90 per cent of the border had been agreed. This rose to 94 per cent by July 2024. The final and most contentious sections, including the future of the Vorukh enclave and the Kyrgyz village of Dostuk, were resolved in December 2024 at a meeting in St. Petersburg (Eurasia Magazine 2025). Each resolved section created political momentum and a demonstrated record of feasibility, while the deferral of the hardest issues bought time for domestic opinion management and the quiet exploration of creative solutions.

Second, the two sides broke a procedural deadlock that had paralysed the process since 2011 by agreeing to a dual cartographic basis. The impasse had been straightforward: each side insisted on a different set of historical maps, and neither would accept the other's documentary basis as legitimate. The breakthrough came when negotiators agreed to treat both the 1991 independence-era maps and the current territorial realities on the ground as co-equal reference points, with specific adjustments negotiated section by section (Radio Azattyk 2025; Jamestown Foundation 2025). An analyst closely familiar with the process explained to the author that the critical insight was not cartographic but procedural: insisting on a single historical truth was less productive than constructing a framework capable of accommodating two legitimate but incompatible claims without requiring either side to disown its own documentary record (author's interview with foreign policy analyst from Kyrgyzstan, March 2026).

Third, the border agreement was explicitly bundled with parallel agreements on water infrastructure and transport connectivity. The protocol that Tashiev and Yatimov signed in February 2025 comprised three instruments: the border delimitation itself, an agreement on the division and joint management of water infrastructure along the frontier, and an agreement on reopening road, rail, and air links between the two countries (Powers 2025). This issue-linkage transformed the political economy of the negotiation. A border agreement in isolation would have been domestically indefensible for whichever side was seen to have conceded more. By packaging territorial adjustments with gains in water access, infrastructure investment, and economic connectivity, the negotiators created a composite bargain in which each element offset the political costs of the others. The final terms included an equivalent land exchange: the transfer of the Kyrgyz village of Dostuk to Tajikistan was offset by cession of Tajik territory of equal area, with affected residents receiving larger plots at their new locations (Euronews 2025).

4.3 Uzbekistan's facilitating role and the regional dimension

The Kyrgyz-Tajik settlement was not a purely bilateral achievement. Uzbekistan, under Mirziyoyev's reoriented regional policy, played a facilitating role that several analysts have characterised as decisive. By 2023, Tashkent had already completed its own border delimitation with Kyrgyzstan (treaty of 3 November 2022, completing a process initiated in 2017 across 1,170.5 kilometres) and resolved outstanding Uzbek-Tajik

border sections through a 2018 treaty (Eurasia Magazine 2025). Uzbekistan thus approached the Kyrgyz- Tajik dispute with two assets: the diplomatic credibility of a state that had recently concluded its own border processes, and a material interest in stability across a valley of which approximately 60 per cent lies within its own borders.

Russia's diminished engagement amplified Uzbekistan's regional role. In October 2022, President Putin publicly stated that Russia had "no intention of playing a mediating role" in the Kyrgyz–Tajik dispute, offering only to make Soviet-era cartographic archives available. Moscow's reluctance reflected both its absorption in the Ukraine war and a wariness of investing political capital in another post-Soviet territorial dispute it might not be able to resolve. The result was a pattern that analysts have termed "regional self-resolution": the settlement of intra-regional disputes through intra-regional diplomatic resources, without reliance on external great-power arbitration (The Europe Today 2026). Whether this pattern proves durable or is merely a by-product of Russia's temporary distraction remains to be seen, but in the Kyrgyz-Tajik case it produced a more effective outcome than three decades of internationally supported negotiation had managed.

The trilateral summit in Khujand on 31 March 2025, attended by Presidents Japarov, Rahmon, and Mirziyoyev, formalised both the bilateral border treaty and a trilateral agreement defining the junction point where the three states' borders converge, at the intersection of Uzbekistan's Fergana region, Kyrgyzstan's Batken, and Tajikistan's Isfara district. A "Friendship Stele" erected at the tri-junction point was a deliberately constructed symbol - significant less for what it commemorated than for what it materialised: a permanent physical marker of agreed boundaries among three states that, barely three years earlier, had been fighting over those same boundaries with heavy weapons (Eurasia Magazine 2025). The UN Secretary-General welcomed the agreement as "historic" (UN Secretary-General 2025), and the accompanying Khujand Declaration on "eternal friendship" extended the border settlement into a framework for trilateral economic and infrastructure cooperation.

4.4 Implications for the Armenia-Azerbaijan border process

The Kyrgyz-Tajik delimitation offers a body of procedural knowledge with direct bearing on what is arguably the most technically demanding and politically sensitive element of the Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization: the delimitation of an interstate border that has never been formally defined and that runs through areas

shaped by three decades of military operations.

The procedural parallels are immediately apparent. Both processes have relied on high- level commissions with direct executive mandates. Both have adopted incremental approaches, resolving less contested sections first. And both confront a version of the same cartographic problem - competing historical baselines, each carrying political weight, none dispositive - that the Kyrgyz-Tajik negotiators addressed through their dual-reference framework.

But the more analytically productive comparison lies in the areas where the two cases diverge. The Kyrgyz-Tajik process succeeded, in substantial part, because the negotiators treated the border not as an isolated legal question but as one element of a composite package that included water infrastructure and transport connectivity. This issue-linkage changed what the negotiation was about: instead of a zero-sum contest over territory, it became a multi-dimensional bargain in which losses in one domain could be offset by gains in another. The Central Asian evidence suggests that separation may be a missed opportunity. Explicit linkage between territorial adjustment and connectivity investment could provide both sides with domestic political cover for concessions that would be untenable if presented in isolation, precisely the function that issue-linkage performed in the Kyrgyz-Tajik case.

The Kyrgyz-Tajik case also carries cautionary lessons that the Armenia-Azerbaijan process has already begun to validate. The negotiation was conducted with minimal transparency and no meaningful consultation with affected communities. Residents of Dostuk learned of their transfer to Tajik sovereignty through news reports. Civil society groups in both countries have raised concerns about displacement and the absence of accountability for the 2021-2022 violence (The Young Diplomats 2025). President Japarov acknowledged the necessity of mutual concession – “when resolving border disputes between two countries, it is impossible to take into account only one-sided interests” (Kaktus Media 2025) - but acknowledgement is not the same as consultation, and the communities most directly affected had no seat at the table.

The Armenia-Azerbaijan border process has already encountered its own version of this problem. The bilateral commission’s first operational outcome - Armenia's withdrawal from four border-adjacent villages that fell on the Azerbaijani side of the recognised administrative line - was legally sound, and Baku reciprocated by agreeing not to assert control over a road segment that, while formally Azerbaijani, serves as a critical transport artery for Armenian

communities in the area. Yet the domestic reaction in Armenia was sharp. Protests erupted in Tavush province and in Yerevan, driven partly by genuine community grievance and partly by opposition groups, several linked to the pre-2018 political establishment, who framed the withdrawal as capitulation (author's interview with foreign policy analyst, Armenia, March 2026). The episode illustrates a dynamic that the Kyrgyz-Tajik experience confirms at a regional scale: border processes conducted by executive mandate, behind closed doors, without structured community engagement, generate efficiencies that come at a measurable cost in legitimacy - and that cost can be politically exploited by actors who have no interest in the success of the process but every interest in its domestic delegitimisation.

5. Case Study III: Cultural Heritage Diplomacy in Central Asia

5.1 The Uzbek-Tajik cultural rapprochement

The transformation of Uzbekistan-Tajikistan relations after 2016 is analytically significant not simply because cultural initiatives accompanied a broader diplomatic opening, that much is common in post-conflict normalization, but because of the specific role those initiatives played. They did not follow the political rapprochement; in important respects, they constituted it. The mechanism was distinctive: a deliberate intervention into a symbolic conflict over civilisational heritage that had, for a quarter- century, functioned simultaneously as a cause of interstate hostility and as its principal legitimating discourse.

The depth of the antagonism that preceded the opening needs to be understood if the speed and scale of the reversal are to be properly assessed. Under Islam Karimov, who governed Uzbekistan from independence until his death in September 2016, relations with Tajikistan amounted to what the International Crisis Group (2008) termed an "undeclared cold war." The conflict had tangible dimensions - sealed borders, gas cut- offs, visa restrictions, mined frontier segments - but its most corrosive element was a sustained contest over who could claim cultural ownership of Samarkand and Bukhara. Both cities sit within Uzbek territory. Both possess deep and extensively documented Tajik cultural, linguistic, and demographic roots. As late as the 1920s, Tajik speakers constituted the majority population in both; the national-territorial delimitation that placed them within the Uzbek SSR was understood by Tajik intellectuals and political figures as an act of civilisational dispossession (Bergne 2007).

Under Karimov, the state promoted an ethno-national historiography that presented Samarkand and Bukhara as quintessentially Uzbek

achievements - a narrative that could be sustained only by systematically downplaying the Persian-Tajik contributions to the cities' architecture, literature, and intellectual life. Dushanbe responded by constructing a counter-narrative centred on the Samanid dynasty and the classical Persian literary tradition, and positioning Tajikistan as the legitimate heir to Central Asia's pre-Turkic civilisation (Heathershaw 2009; Nourzhanov and Bleuer 2013). The result was what scholars of the region have called a "war of ancestors" - a competition over historical memory that operated not only at the level of high-level rhetoric but permeated educational curricula, the naming of public spaces, monumental architecture, and official historiography in both countries. This was not a background irritant to bilateral relations; it was, for many within both political establishments, the core of the dispute.

The reversal under President Mirziyoyev was striking in both its velocity and its intentionality. The physical infrastructure of reconnection was re-established within eighteen months of his accession: direct flights between Tashkent and Dushanbe were restored in 2017 after a quarter-century suspension; 17 border crossings sealed since 2001 were reopened, with daily traffic reaching an estimated 20,000 within weeks; the A-377 highway linking Samarkand to Penjikent - a major Tajik cultural centre barely 60 kilometres away but entirely inaccessible under the previous president - was put back into service (Lowy Institute 2018). Bilateral trade surpassed $500 million by 2020, up from negligible levels, and 51 joint enterprises with Uzbek capital were operating in Tajikistan.

What distinguished this opening from a standard diplomatic thaw was the centrality of its cultural dimension. President Mirziyoyev did not treat cultural engagement as a decorative accompaniment to economic and political normalization. He used it as the primary instrument of discursive reframing. His public characterisation of the bilateral relationship – "the Uzbek and Tajik peoples are like two branches of one tree, two tributaries of one river" (Embassy of Uzbekistan to the United Kingdom 2022) - was not diplomatic pleasantry but a calculated repudiation of the zero-sum heritage competition that Karimov had cultivated for two decades. The metaphor of shared roots, delivered by a head of state, carried performative weight: it made shared civilisational ownership a matter of official policy rather than a concession to be avoided.

The programmatic initiatives that followed were designed to give institutional substance to this rhetorical shift. A joint film project on the medieval poets Alisher Navoi (the central figure of Uzbek literary identity) and Abdurrahmon Jami (his Persian-Tajik contemporary

and, in the Tajik tradition, his equal) was announced as part of the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations. Navoi and Jami were not merely literary figures but symbols of the two traditions''historical entanglement, and a joint cinematic treatment enacted the principle of shared heritage at a level of cultural specificity that no diplomatic communiqué could match. Reciprocal Film, Culture, and Festival Days were institutionalised as annual bilateral events. Educational grants for Tajik students at Uzbek universities were expanded. National cultural centres for ethnic minorities - Tajiks in Uzbekistan, Uzbeks in Tajikistan - received renewed state support.

A practitioner based in Uzbekistan characterised these initiatives to the author not as gestures but as interventions aimed at the foundational source of bilateral hostility: the question of who owns the shared heritage of Central Asian civilisation. By publicly conceding shared ownership, Mirziyoyev defused a symbolic conflict that had poisoned political relations for twenty-five years and that neither economic reopening nor border normalisation could, on their own, have resolved (author's interview, March 2026).

5.2 Heritage cooperation and UNESCO engagement

The bilateral cultural opening acquired a multilateral institutional dimension through Uzbekistan's engagement with UNESCO - an engagement that has been both more ambitious and more strategically calculated than is commonly recognised outside the heritage policy community.

The most significant collaborative project has been the joint nomination of the Silk Roads: Zarafshan-Karakum Corridor for UNESCO World Heritage inscription - a transboundary serial dossier developed by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, encompassing approximately 15 sites along the ancient trade route (UNESCO 2023). The nomination's analytical significance lies less in its heritage content than in what it demanded of its participants. Preparing a transboundary serial nomination requires sustained working- level collaboration: joint archaeological surveys, harmonised conservation standards, coordinated documentation, and agreement on shared management frameworks for sites that straddle international borders. For states that had, until recently, been in active competition over the same heritage assets, these procedural requirements created something that no amount of presidential rhetoric could have produced on its own - institutional habits of cooperation among the national heritage agencies and professional communities responsible for implementation.

Uzbekistan's investment in cultural infrastructure over this period has been substantial and deliberately calibrated to serve foreign policy

objectives. The Center of Islamic Civilization in Tashkent, a 10-hectare complex centred on a 65-metre dome, scheduled to open in March 2026, has been developed as the country's most ambitious cultural- diplomacy project, with an explicit mandate to position Uzbekistan as a custodian of Central Asia's Islamic intellectual and artistic tradition. The scale of international engagement has been considerable: over 1,500 specialists from 40 countries have contributed to the project, and approximately 1,000 artefacts have been donated by the World Society WOSCU, a scholarly network of more than 400 researchers across 20 countries (Euronews 2025). Uzbekistan's successful bid to host UNESCO's 43rd General Conference in Samarkand in October-November 2025 - the first time the event had been held outside Paris in four decades - marked a further step in the country's repositioning as a cultural-diplomacy actor with global reach (The Europe Today 2026).

An institutional innovation worth noting is the International Advisory Committee for World Heritage Sites in Uzbekistan, initiated by Mirziyoyev in 2019 and formally launched in 2021. Comprising international experts alongside representatives of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, ICOMOS, and ICCROM, the IAC provides a structured mechanism for translating World Heritage Committee decisions into national-level implementation - the only such arrangement in Central Asia. Its creation signalled a shift from the defensive posture toward international heritage oversight that had characterised the Karimov period - when external monitoring missions were obstructed or refused - to a stance of proactive engagement with international conservation standards. The shift is significant because it illustrates a broader pattern: under Mirziyoyev, cultural heritage governance has moved from being a domain of sovereignty assertion to one of international institutional integration.

5.3 Relevance for the Armenia-Azerbaijan context

Any application of the Central Asian cultural diplomacy model to the South Caucasus must begin by acknowledging a structural difference that limits direct transfer. The Uzbek-Tajik rapprochement was possible in part because both sides could draw on a framework of shared civilisational heritage that, however bitterly contested in its national attributions, provided a genuine basis for mutual recognition once the political obstacle to acknowledging it was removed. The Armenia-Azerbaijan situation is configured differently. The two countries' primary heritage narratives are anchored in distinct religious and civilisational traditions that do not lend themselves to the kind of shared-ownership discourse. This does not

make cultural cooperation impossible, but it does mean that the institutional channels through which it is pursued matter considerably more - and that multilateral frameworks offering procedural neutrality and technical standards are likely to prove more productive than bilateral initiatives that risk becoming entangled in the very sovereignty disputes they are meant to transcend.

Within this constraint, several concrete avenues are worth pursuing, each building on existing institutional infrastructure rather than requiring new institutional creation.

The most promising entry point is the UNESCO World Heritage framework, which has already demonstrated, through the Zarafshan-Karakum nomination, its capacity to structure professional cooperation among states with contested heritage claims. The South Caucasus possesses a substantial body of material culture that resists exclusive national attribution and that could support joint or parallel nomination processes. Silk Roads heritage is the obvious starting point: the South Caucasus served as a major node in trans-Eurasian trade networks for centuries, and both Armenia and Azerbaijan possess caravanserais, trade-route infrastructure, and merchant-quarter architecture associated with those routes. A serial transboundary nomination modelled on the Central Asian Zarafshan-Karakum dossier, potentially including Georgian sites, which would reduce the bilateral political intensity, could create structured opportunities for professional cooperation among heritage agencies around material culture that genuinely resists exclusive national ownership.

A second pathway runs through ecological and natural heritage. Azerbaijan's work on the Khinalig Migration Route with UNESCO points toward a category of heritage cooperation that is inherently cross-border and that operates in the comparatively depoliticised register of environmental conservation and biodiversity. Migratory bird corridors, shared mountain ecosystems, and transboundary protected areas offer cooperation opportunities whose cross-border character is dictated by ecology rather than politics. A coordinated nomination of shared ecological assets could function as a low-risk first step, generating institutional habits (joint field surveys, shared monitoring protocols, coordinated data management) that are transferable to more politically sensitive heritage domains as conditions permit.

Third, the intangible cultural heritage domain offers possibilities that have been underexploited and, at times, actively mismanaged. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan hold UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage inscriptions in traditions that are overlapping or

cognate,(carpet-weaving, musical forms, culinary practices, craft techniques) reflecting the South Caucasus's long history as a zone of cultural exchange and reciprocal influence. The predominant approach has been to treat these inscriptions as markers of national distinctiveness, a framing that has periodically generated bilateral friction when one state perceives the other's nomination as an appropriation of shared heritage. A more productive orientation would emphasise the transnational character of certain practices and make use of UNESCO's multinational inscription mechanism, under which multiple states jointly nominate shared intangible heritage. The joint Nowruz inscription, submitted by multiple countries in 2009 and expanded in 2016, provides a direct procedural precedent. Whether the current political environment permits exploration of this pathway is an open question; that the institutional mechanism exists and has been successfully used in analogous contexts is not.

6. Case Study IV: Regional Infrastructure and Connectivity

6.1 Transport corridor development in Central Asia

The Soviet transport system in Central Asia was built to move goods and people between the periphery and the centre, not across the periphery itself. The major rail lines ran northward through Russia - Tashkent to Moscow via Orenburg, Almaty to Moscow via Chelyabinsk - while direct connections between Central Asian capitals were either rudimentary or absent altogether. As recently as 2016, there was no rail link of any kind between Dushanbe and any neighbouring Central Asian capital. Freight moving between Tajikistan and Kazakhstan had to transit Uzbek territory, under conditions that Tashkent could and periodically did restrict for political reasons (Pomfret 2019). The road network followed the same radial logic: the M39, the region's principal east-west highway, crossed international borders multiple times on the route between Almaty and Tashkent, subjecting commercial traffic at each crossing to visa controls, customs inspections, and the informal rent-extraction that accompanies them. The World Bank estimated in 2020 that Central Asia's intra-regional trade was running at approximately 60 per cent below its potential, with transport costs and border-crossing inefficiencies the principal constraints - burdens that fell disproportionately on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two of the fifteen most trade-constrained economies in the world by the Logistics Performance Index (World Bank 2020).

The most sustained multilateral attempt to address this deficit has been the Asian Development Bank's Central Asia Regional Economic

Cooperation programme. CAREC was launched in 1997 with six members, expanded to eleven by 2010, and has facilitated cumulative investments exceeding USD 41 billion across six designated transport corridors - financing road construction, railway upgrades, border-crossing modernisation, and trade facilitation measures (ADB 2017; CAREC 2022). But CAREC's significance lies at least as much in its institutional architecture as in its investment volume. The programme operates through sector coordinating committees in which national planning ministries, transport agencies, and customs authorities participate jointly in needs assessments, investment prioritisation, and performance monitoring. The Transport and Trade Facilitation Strategy adopted in 2020 set harmonised targets for reducing average goods clearance from 57 hours to under 6 at priority crossings, introduced standardised customs documentation, and established coordinated investment sequencing across national boundaries (ADB 2018; CAREC 2023). What CAREC created, in other words, was not just a funding mechanism but a procedural environment.

Two specific episodes illustrate how transport reconnection works in practice - and what it reveals about the political economy of infrastructure in the region.

The first is the reopening of the Galaba-Amuzang railway between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2017. This freight link had been closed under Karimov as part of Tashkent's broader campaign of economic pressure on Dushanbe. For Tajikistan, the consequences were not trivial: the railway was a critical export corridor for the country's aluminium industry, which accounts for roughly 60 per cent of industrial output and a large share of foreign-exchange earnings. Its closure forced Tajik exporters onto more expensive and circuitous routes through Kyrgyzstan or Afghanistan. Reopening the line was one of Mirziyoyev's first bilateral gestures, and it carried symbolic weight well beyond its immediate commercial significance. It was a signal that Uzbekistan would no longer treat shared infrastructure as a weapon (Lowy Institute 2018; World Bank 2019).

The second is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, a project first discussed in the 1990s and stalled for the better part of three decades by disagreements over routing (through the Torugart or Irkeshtam pass), gauge standards (Chinese standard gauge versus the post-Soviet broad gauge), financing terms, and revenue distribution. An intergovernmental agreement was finally reached in June 2024, with construction expected to begin in 2025 at an estimated cost of USD 4.7 billion (The Diplomat 2024). The CKU railway is analytically

instructive less for the agreement itself than for the thirty years it took to reach it. Each round of failed negotiations, as a regional integration specialist explained to the author, left behind a residue of institutional learning - a progressively refined understanding, on all three sides, of each other's constraints, red lines, and areas of flexibility. The eventual breakthrough in 2024 was built on that accumulated procedural capital as much as on any shift in political will (author's interview, March 2026).

6.2 Energy interconnection and regional electricity markets

The Central Asian Power System offers a parallel case, and, in some respects, a cautionary one, of what happens when inherited infrastructure interdependence is first disrupted and then, slowly, rebuilt.

The CAPS was a synchronised electricity grid connecting all five Central Asian republics, managed from a central dispatch facility in Tashkent. Under Soviet administration, it operated on a logic of seasonal complementarity that mirrored the water-energy nexus: Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan exported their summer hydroelectric surplus to the lowland states, which reciprocated with coal- and gas-fired thermal power during winter. The system's total installed capacity exceeded 25 GW, and the interconnection provided frequency regulation and emergency backup capacity that no individual national system could replicate on its own (World Bank 2013; Marat 2010).

After independence, the grid fragmented as each state prioritised energy sovereignty over regional efficiency. The decisive break came in November 2009, when Uzbekistan formally withdrew from the synchronised system, citing uncompensated frequency deviations by Tajikistan - a technical rationale for what was universally understood as a political decision bound up with the Rogun Dam dispute (Marat 2010). The consequences were immediate, severe, and unevenly distributed. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, cut off from winter thermal imports, endured years of chronic electricity shortages; residential rationing in Dushanbe and Bishkek became routine through the mid-2010s. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, better endowed with domestic generation capacity, nonetheless lost the grid flexibility - reserve sharing, frequency balancing, emergency interconnection - that the CAPS had provided, with measurable effects on system reliability and operating costs (International Crisis Group 2014; World Bank 2013).

The gradual restoration of the grid, beginning with Uzbekistan's reconnection in 2018, has been technically demanding and institutionally generative in equal measure. Reconnection required negotiation of transmission tariffs,

grid-code harmonisation, metering and settlement protocols, and the allocation of maintenance responsibilities - each a subject of sustained technical interaction among energy ministries, national grid operators, and regulatory authorities. The World Bank's Central Asia Energy-Water Development Program provided technical assistance and financed physical rehabilitation, while the USAID-funded Central Asia Regional Electricity Market programme supported institutional framework development for cross-border trading (World Bank 2022; USAID 2023). By 2024, cross-border electricity volumes had recovered to approximately 4 TWh annually - well below Soviet-era levels, but a substantial recovery from the near-zero trade of the 2010–2017 isolation period (Asian Development Bank 2024).

The CAPS experience carries a broader analytical lesson. It demonstrates, first, that infrastructure interdependence can be rebuilt after disruption - but only through institutional investment that extends far beyond the physical reconnection of transmission lines. And second, as with water governance, it shows that the technical imperatives of grid operation - frequency stability, load balancing, maintenance scheduling - provide a depoliticised basis for sustained engagement. The energy officials and grid operators involved in these negotiations develop professional relationships and institutional routines that acquire a degree of autonomy from the political dynamics between their governments - the same pattern of "sociological infrastructure" identified in the water governance analysis above.

6.3 Parallels with South Caucasus connectivity debates

The August 2025 Washington Joint Declaration affirmed the importance of opening communications between Armenia and Azerbaijan, including what it described as "unimpeded connectivity between the main part of the Republic of Azerbaijan and its Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic through the territory of the Republic of Armenia" (White House 2025). The Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity - a proposed 43-kilometre corridor through Armenian territory, with US development rights extending 99 years and planned infrastructure potentially encompassing rail, energy pipelines, fibre-optic cables, and electricity transmission - has converted what was once a bilateral transport question into a focal point of major-power competition across the region.

But the TRIPP is better understood as a symptom of the South Caucasus's connectivity politics than as their origin. The underlying structural divergence has been building for over a decade.

Since the mid-2010s, Azerbaijan has consolidated its position as an

indispensable node in virtually every major transit architecture crossing the region. The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (the "Middle Corridor" linking China and Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian) runs through Baku as its principal South Caucasus waypoint. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, operational since 2017, gave Azerbaijan a direct rail connection to Türkiye and, through it, to European markets - a corridor in which Armenia has no presence and from which, given the state of bilateral relations, it was excluded by design. The Southern Gas Corridor (the South Caucasus Pipeline, TANAP, and TAP) established Azerbaijan as Europe's non-Russian alternative gas supplier, a position whose strategic salience increased dramatically after 2022 when the EU accelerated its diversification away from Russian hydrocarbons. Each of these projects reinforced Azerbaijan's hub position. Taken together, they created a regional network architecture from which Armenia is not merely absent but structurally bypassed.

The bypassing follows a compounding logic that is worth stating explicitly, because it shapes the conditions under which any future connectivity cooperation will have to operate. Each major corridor routed through Azerbaijan and Georgia rather than Armenia raises the fixed costs of future rerouting, deepens the institutional and commercial relationships among the connected parties, and reduces the marginal return to investors or multilateral lenders of developing alternative routes through Armenian territory. Armenia, landlocked, with two of its four borders closed and its remaining connections running through Georgia and an increasingly unstable Iran, sits adjacent to but disconnected from the transit architectures operating in its immediate neighbourhood. This is not a temporary condition that a single infrastructure project can reverse.

Exogenous shocks have accelerated this divergence without altering its direction. The war in Ukraine and the Western sanctioning of Russian logistics infrastructure redirected substantial volumes of east-west freight and air traffic southward. Azerbaijan, already positioned along the Great Circle air routes connecting Europe to South and East Asia, was among the principal beneficiaries. Middle Corridor rail and shipping volumes surged as shippers sought alternatives to the Northern Corridor through Russia. The escalating Iran–Israel confrontation, including the disruption of Iranian and parts of Persian Gulf airspace since mid-2025, has further reinforced Baku's role as a regional aviation and transit hub.

The Central Asian experience offers three analytical entry points for understanding this asymmetry - though the honest assessment is that it offers more by way of diagnosis than prescription.

The first concerns the relationship between institutional frameworks and connectivity politics. CAREC's architecture created procedural conditions in which connectivity could be governed as a shared challenge rather than a bilateral contest. Individual projects remained contentious (the CKU railway's three decades of stalemate are evidence enough), but the overarching framework constrained zero-sum dynamics by establishing norms of mutual benefit and joint planning. The South Caucasus possesses nothing comparable. The EU's Eastern Partnership investment plan and the World Bank's regional programmes provide project financing but not the institutional scaffolding - the joint planning mechanisms, the harmonised standards, the performance benchmarking - that CAREC built over a quarter-century. More fundamentally, CAREC operated in a context of relative multipolarity: no single Central Asian state held the degree of connectivity dominance that Azerbaijan now commands in the South Caucasus. That multipolarity generated cooperative incentives that a unipolar structure - in which one state is already the established hub and the other is negotiating from a position of structural exclusion - does not naturally produce.

The second concerns infrastructure investment as a commitment device. The logic is straightforward and the Central Asian evidence supports it: joint investment in shared infrastructure creates sunk costs that raise the price of future disruption. As a regional specialist in Astana observed to the author, once states have invested together, the costs of defection rise sharply (author's interview, March 2026). Uzbekistan's reopening of the Galaba-Amuzang railway, followed by further joint investments in border infrastructure and trade facilitation, created a bilateral economic interdependence between Tashkent and Dushanbe that made political deterioration materially more expensive for both sides. But the South Caucasus inverts the sequencing problem. In Central Asia, the task was to persuade states with existing but underutilised connections to reinvest in them. In the Armenia-Azerbaijan case, the task is to build interdependence from virtually nothing, in a context where one party already commands robust alternative connections and therefore faces weaker structural incentives to make the technical and procedural concessions.

The third insight is the most cautionary. The CAPS collapse in 2009 demonstrated that infrastructure interdependence, absent shared governance norms and credible dispute resolution mechanisms, can be turned into a weapon. Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the synchronised grid was, in operational terms, an exercise of infrastructure leverage - a unilateral disruption of shared systems designed to impose costs on Tajikistan over the Rogun dispute.

The Central Asian experience suggests that connectivity cooperation is most durable when it is embedded in a multilateral institutional framework, distributed across multiple corridors and sectors, and designed to generate the kind of diffuse interdependence that makes any single disruption manageable.

8. Policy recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish institutional channels for cross-regional procedural knowledge transfer.

The near-complete isolation between Central Asian and South Caucasus policy communities represents an addressable analytical deficit with practical consequences.. A standing practitioner exchange, convened either by international or local organizations and organised around the sectoral domains examined in this paper, would create the cross-regional professional community through which procedural knowledge can be transmitted.

Recommendation 2: Constitute environmental cooperation as an institutionally autonomous track.

The Central Asian evidence establishes a design principle that the Armenia–Azerbaijan architecture has not yet absorbed: technical cooperation survives political deterioration only when its institutional mandate is operational rather than contingent on diplomatic progress. Environmental cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be given a comparable institutional structure.

Recommendation 3: Establish connectivity governance frameworks prior to infrastructure development.

The TRIPP corridor is advancing without any institutional framework for governing South Caucasus connectivity as an integrated system. The Central Asian experience demonstrates that the sequence matters: infrastructure built in the absence of shared governance norms generates rather interdependence. A connectivity coordination mechanism should be constituted now, with a mandate covering joint technical planning, regulatory harmonisation.

Recommendation 4: Initiate water cooperation through shared data infrastructure rather than governance frameworks.

Previous proposals for Armenian-Azerbaijani water cooperation have failed because they were politically overloaded from inception. The Central Asian precedent suggests an alternative entry point: begin not with governance but with measurement. The ICWC's Scientific Information Centre provides a tested model - a platform that collects hydrological data, maintains shared datasets, and makes them available to technical

users across the basin, without allocating water or adjudicating disputes. An equivalent platform for the Kura-Araks watershed, staffed by hydrologists and mandated in narrowly operational terms, would create a structured basis for regular professional interaction around concrete technical problems.

Recommendation 5: Employ cultural heritage cooperation as a diagnostic instrument for institutional capacity.

Direct bilateral cultural engagement between Armenia and Azerbaijan remains politically unviable and is likely to remain so in the near term. The Uzbek-Tajik precedent indicates an alternative pathway: cooperation channelled through multilateral frameworks where procedural neutrality and established technical standards reduce bilateral political exposure. A transboundary Silk Roads serial nomination for the South Caucasus, incorporating Georgian sites to diffuse bilateral intensity, would test whether professional cooperation among heritage agencies can be sustained around material culture that resists exclusive national attribution. The UNESCO multinational inscription mechanism for intangible heritage offers a further avenue.

Recommendation 6: Prioritise sustained investment in cross-border professional networks.

The most consistent finding of this paper is that cooperation is carried by the professional communities that form around the institutions created to implement them. In Central Asia, these communities proved more durable than any political settlement. The Armenia-Azerbaijan context lacks this sociological infrastructure almost entirely: three decades of conflict have severed virtually every cross-border professional relationship. Their consolidation requires multi-year core funding rather than project-cycle grants, institutional design that connects them to the formal peace architecture while insulating them from instrumentalisation, and a recognition that these networks are not ancillary to the peace process but constitute the institutional substrate on which its durability will ultimately depend.

9. Conclusion

This paper has advanced a specific claim: that the procedural repertoire available to those working on Armenia-Azerbaijan normalization is unnecessarily narrow, and that Central Asian cooperative practice contains transferable institutional knowledge that could broaden it. The claim rests not on an argument about outcomes but about process. How cooperation is initiated under conditions of low trust, sustained through political deterioration, and carried forward by professional networks whose resilience proves, in practice, greater than that of any political settlement.

The four cases examined each illustrate a different facet of this procedural logic. Transboundary water governance in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins demonstrates that technical cooperation frameworks, if designed with sufficient institutional autonomy, can outlast the political crises of their member states. The ICWC has met continuously for over thirty-three years, through border closures, ethnic violence, and diplomatic ruptures. The Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border delimitation shows that incremental sequencing, dual cartographic referencing, and explicit issue-linkage can convert zero-sum territorial disputes into positive-sum packages - but also that executive-led processes conducted without community consultation generate legitimacy deficits whose political costs accumulate over time.

The Uzbek-Tajik cultural rapprochement reveals that symbolic conflicts over civilisational heritage, once addressed through deliberate discursive reframing and multilateral institutional channels, can be defused with a speed that material negotiations alone cannot achieve. And the infrastructure and connectivity experience - from CAREC's institutional framework to the CAPS collapse and restoration - demonstrates that joint investment creates structural incentives for sustained cooperation, but that infrastructure interdependence without shared governance norms produces leverage rather than partnership.

Each case also reveals the limits of cross-regional transfer. Central Asia's cooperative mechanisms operated under conditions that do not straightforwardly obtain in the South Caucasus: hydrological interdependence that has only micro-level Armenian-Azerbaijani equivalent; a multipolar connectivity landscape unlike Azerbaijan's hub dominance; and a set of power asymmetries that were cross-cutting rather than compounding.

The transferable element, accordingly, is not any particular institution but the procedural principles that underpin them - the primacy of technical framing in early-stage cooperation, the design of institutional autonomy that insulates sectoral engagement from political sequencing, the cultivation of professional constituencies whose career incentives align with cooperative frameworks, and the tolerance for incremental asymmetric bargains that are individually imperfect but collectively preferable to non-agreement.

The timing matters. The Washington summit established a political framework for peace; it did not establish the institutional architecture yet. Central Asia has just completed its most productive period of regional cooperation since independence. There is much to learn from and reflect on between

these two regions that are geographically close but epistemologically distant from each other.

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