



Photo Source: [Foreign Ministry of Oman](#) (2023)



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Central Asia and the GCC: From Historical Ties to Strategic Partnership

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager & Dr. Eldor Aripov
April 2025



@Gulf_Research Gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter gulfresearchcenter

25
Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All



Central Asia and the GCC: From Historical Ties to Strategic Partnership

Dr. Eldor Aripov

Former Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan

Dr. Abdulaziz Sager

Chairman, Gulf Research Center (GRC)

In recent years, relations between Central Asia (CA) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have shown a steady and positive dynamic. The economic potential of the CA and GCC countries, complemented by a deepening political dialogue, mutual interest in cultural and historical ties, and advantageous geostrategic positioning, is enhancing the strategic importance of this partnership format.

A turning point in this process was the first historic Summit of the Heads of State of the GCC and Central Asian countries in Jeddah held on July 19, 2023, which laid the foundation for long-term strategic cooperation. The second summit of the said dialogue is scheduled for May 2025 in Samarkand. The choice of Samarkand as a venue for such an important summit is not coincidental. For centuries, this famous city, located at the intersection of the main roads of the Great Silk Road, has been an important center for the dialogue of civilizations, and diplomatic, trade, and cultural exchange between the East and the West. In this regard, holding the event in Samarkand is intended to give new impetus to historical ties.

1. Historical Ties and Their Transformation

Many centuries of relations between Central Asia and the Arab Peninsula create a strong foundation for the revival of mutually beneficial cooperation. Since the 2nd century BC, the Great Silk Road ensured active trade: silk, paper, jewelry, and horses were supplied from Central Asia to Arabia, and incense, spices, and jewelry were carried back. This established the basis for our civilizational interconnectedness.

With the spread of Islam in the 8th century, interaction reached a new level. A special place in this process was occupied by the famous House of Wisdom ("Bait-ul-Hikma") in Baghdad, where outstanding scholars of Central Asia and the Arab world together laid the foundations of global science.

Samarkand, Bukhara, and Merv became not only trade centers but also intellectual centers in the Islamic world. Scholars of the region made a great contribution to theological and secular knowledge: al-Bukhari and at-Tirmidhi systematized the hadith, al-Khwarizmi developed algebra, and al-Farabi and Ibn Sina combined ancient philosophy with Islamic thought. The cities of Mecca and Medina played a special role in the development of Islamic science, becoming key centers for the study of hadith, where scholars such as Ibn Abbas and Malik ibn Anas developed a methodology for collecting and verifying hadith, which became the foundation for all Islamic jurisprudence. This network of intellectual centers, stretching from the Arabian Peninsula to Central Asia, enabled a process of regular circulation of knowledge, forming a unified scientific space in the Islamic world.



However, beginning in the 16th century, traditional connections began to weaken due to a number of geopolitical and geoeconomic changes. The discovery of maritime trade routes during the Age of Exploration altered global trade patterns, rendering overland routes less significant. In the 20th century, the impact of international processes on the regions and the emergence of ideological barriers further distanced them from one another.

The year 1991 marked a new starting point in developing international relations in Central Asia, as the independence of the region's states created conditions for the revival of centuries-old partnerships. This stage is characterized by the GCC's political and diplomatic solidarity with Central Asia and limited but meaningful economic interactions. The Gulf states were among the first to officially recognize the sovereignty of the new republics of Central Asia.

At the same time, the opening of embassies in Central Asian capitals was not only a formal action but also served as a special political signal of the GCC's readiness to support the Central Asian countries in their peaceful development.

2. Current dynamics of interregional relations

Since 2020, a qualitatively new stage of interaction between Central Asia and the Gulf countries has been taking place. A significant trend of this period was the development of institutional forms of cooperation. This is confirmed by the first summit of heads of state and two ministerial meetings held in 2022, 2023, and 2024.

As a result of these meetings, a Joint Action Plan for 2023–2027 was adopted, which today serves as the first conceptual document defining the long-term directions of mutually beneficial partnership. This has led to tangible progress in the dynamics of multilateral relations, evidenced by a notable increase in trade, tourism, and investment exchanges.

The total volume of investments from GCC countries into Central Asia has grown steadily in recent years, increasing nearly threefold since 2022. Financial cooperation is also developing within the framework of Islamic financing mechanisms. The Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) has invested \$9.1 billion in CIS countries, with 60% of these funds directed to Central Asia.

Central Asia is turning into an attractive destination for tourists from the GCC region. For example, in 2023, more than 8,300 tourists from the GCC visited Uzbekistan; in 2024, this number rose to 12,000 (a 44.5% increase compared to 2023). The most significant increases came from Saudi Arabia (71%) and the UAE (51%).

All this became possible due to fundamental changes in interstate relations in Central Asia.

This is confirmed by the launch of the mechanism of Consultative Meetings between the heads of state of Central Asia and the rapid finding of mutually acceptable solutions to all contentious issues.

As a result, in a fairly short period of time, Central Asia has transformed from a potential hotbed of conflicts into a zone of stability, good-neighborliness, and prosperity. This has a positive effect



on the region's overall economic indicators. Over the past 7 years, the total GDP of the Central Asian countries has grown by 6.3%, intraregional trade has increased by 4.4 times, and the volume of mutual investments has nearly doubled.

Another significant trend is the growing political subjectivity of Central Asia. This is evidenced by the creation of the dialogue formats “CA Plus,” which allows for the combination of various interests of external partners, directing them in a constructive way in the interests of the sustainable development of Central Asia. Today, more than 10 such dialogue platforms are developing fruitfully, six of which were created in the last five years, including CA-GCC.

Summarizing the above factors, it can be stated that recent years have passed under the sign of restoring historical ties between the two regions, building conceptual and institutional forms of multilateral cooperation, and identifying key areas of mutually beneficial partnership.

3. Strategic Goals of Partnership

Central Asia and the GCC countries have similar goals in political, economic, and social development and common approaches to international and regional issues.

The countries of the two regions continue their policy of mutual support within the framework of such influential international structures as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Both regions strive to diversify their economies, reduce dependence on raw materials, and create sustainable growth models. For the Central Asian countries, this means the development of industry, agriculture, and transport infrastructure, while for the Gulf states it means the promotion of innovative technologies, a "green" economy, and tourism.

The strategic development programs of countries in both regions align in terms of goals and objectives: Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Oman's Vision 2040, Bahrain's Economic Vision 2030, We the UAE 2031, Qatar's National Vision 2030, Kuwait's Vision 2035, and the national development strategies of Kyrgyzstan through 2040, Kazakhstan through 2050, and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan through 2030 all open up wide opportunities for mutually beneficial partnerships.

In other words, the countries of the two regions are united by common goals of ensuring a qualitative transformation of their economies – from a resource-based development model to an innovation-driven model, which emphasizes high production concentration, scientific and technological knowledge, and new technologies.

Both the GCC and Central Asia are experiencing positive economic growth dynamics. On average, the economy of Central Asia grew by 4.7% annually from 2022 to 2024. According to the Eurasian Development Bank, the nominal GDP of Central Asia in 2024 reached around \$520 billion.



A similar situation is observed in the economies of the Gulf Arab states. In particular, in 2023, the collective GDP growth of GCC countries was estimated at 1.5%, following a record 7.9% growth in 2022. In 2024, regional GDP growth reached approximately 2%.

Another unifying factor is the complementarity of the two regions' economies. The Gulf occupies a key position in the architecture of global energy security. The GCC is also a major international investment hub, serving as a financial pillar for developing economies.

Central Asia holds around 20% of the world's uranium reserves, 7% of oil and natural gas, significant deposits of rare earth metals, and strong hydropower and solar energy potential. At the same time, Central Asia is rich in a growing pool of labor resources.

Both the GCC and Central Asia enjoy strategically important geographic positions. While the Gulf is located at the crossroads of major maritime trade routes between Europe, Asia, and Africa, Central Asia sits at a strategic junction of key overland transport corridors. In other words, from a geostrategic perspective, both regions are positioned to serve as connectors in global production and supply chains.

All the factors above make the countries of the two regions natural partners, creating favorable conditions for intensifying trade and investment cooperation and implementing large-scale joint projects in various sectors. Recognizing this, Central Asia and the GCC have already begun establishing long-term cooperation in several mutually beneficial areas.

4. New Horizons of Partnership

While the level of cooperation that has been achieved in the last 7-8 years is notable, the possibility for additional advancements exists. In this regard, future joint efforts can be focused on the following strategic areas, which can together, produce a multiplier effect.

First, it is necessary to intensify trade exchanges. In 2024, the volume of trade turnover between the countries of Central Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states amounted to about \$4 billion. This is less than 1% of the GCC trade with the outside world, and less than 2% of the trade turnover of Central Asian states with foreign partners. This situation actualizes the need to develop and adopt a multilateral trade agreement initiated by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan during the first Central Asia - Gulf Cooperation Council summit.

Second, building an effective model of interregional connectedness is impossible without linking the countries of the two regions through a reliable and extensive transportation network. The underdevelopment of transport and logistics infrastructure remains a major barrier to the intensification of trade and economic exchanges.

In this regard, Uzbekistan advocates for the development of interregional transport projects. Among them, the Trans-Afghan Corridor project – proposed by the President of Uzbekistan at the very first Central Asia-GCC Summit – holds key significance. According to experts, its successful implementation would enable the diversification of trade routes and reduce logistics costs.



Thus, Central Asia could become a “gateway” for the entry of Gulf goods and services into the vast Eurasian market. This would give a powerful impetus to developing the emerging non-oil sector of the Arab states. At the same time, the Central Asian states would gain the shortest access to the world market through the GCC seaports.

Third, investment cooperation is mutually beneficial. Central Asia is a capacious market with growing investment attractiveness. The region offers resources, transit corridors, and demographic potential, which are becoming a natural focus for investment funds from around the world. The Central Asian states are distinguished from other markets by their internal political stability and neutrality in foreign policy, which makes them a safe haven for long-term investments.

All of the above factors, combined with the opportunities for the Gulf states to diversify their investment portfolio, make the Central Asian region a potentially natural place for Arab investments to concentrate. Such a perspective requires systematization of the current level of investment cooperation. The countries of the two regions could create specific financial cooperation mechanisms that will facilitate major projects in infrastructure, energy, and high technology.

Fourth, the development of cooperation in the field of agriculture is a promising area. The Central Asian countries could be key in ensuring food security in the GCC region. This direction is of vital importance for the Arab States of the Gulf. In particular, the GCC imports 85% of food products. It is expected that by 2028, the needs of the GCC food market will reach 59.6 million tons annually. In this regard, the GCC and Central Asian countries could establish joint agricultural clusters, with the final products intended for export to the Gulf region.

Fifth, Central Asia and the GCC could also strengthen cooperation in the promotion of digital technologies by creating specialist exchange programs and joint projects in e-government, cybersecurity, and fintech. A further step could be the joint development of telecommunications infrastructure in Central Asia, including the construction of 5G networks and data centers. This would provide additional incentives for companies and investment funds from the Gulf states to carve out a niche in the technology sector of Central Asian countries.

Another important area is strengthening scientific and intellectual interaction. Research institutes and analytical centers of the two regions should play a special role in determining priority areas for the development of relations. In this regard, the first Forum of Think Tanks from Central Asia and the GCC countries will be held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, on April 28 and 29, 2025 under the overarching theme: “Strengthening Strategic Partnership between Central Asia and the GCC: From Historical Ties to Comprehensive Cooperation.” Leading think tanks from both regions are attending this event.

The organizers of the first interregional forum are the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Saudi based “Gulf Research Center.” The idea is for such a forum to become a regular expert interaction. The platform created can become one of many tools that promote more effective interaction between Central Asia and the Gulf countries, complementing the official cooperation mechanisms.



In general, cooperation between Central Asia and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf opens real strategic prospects. The unifying principle is not only the cultural and historical proximity, but also the complementary nature of the economies. Together, these two regions can build a mutually beneficial partnership model, where sustainable development, food and energy security, and digital transformation will become the basis of a new format of multilateral interaction.



Gulf Research Center

Knowledge for All



مركز الخليج للأبحاث
المعرفة للجميع



Gulf Research Center Jeddah (Main office)

19 Rayat Alitihad Street
P.O. Box 2134
Jeddah 21451
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 12 6511999
Fax: +966 12 6531375
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Riyadh

Unit FN11A
King Faisal Foundation
North Tower
King Fahd Branch Rd
Al Olaya Riyadh 12212
Saudi Arabia
Tel: +966 112112567
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Center Foundation Geneva

Avenue de France 23
1202 Geneva
Switzerland
Tel: +41227162730
Email: info@grc.net



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

University of Cambridge
Sidgwick Avenue,
Cambridge CB3 9DA
United Kingdom
Tel: +44-1223-760758
Fax: +44-1223-335110



Gulf Research Center Foundation Brussels

Avenue de
Cortenbergh 89
4th floor, 1000
Brussels
Belgium

