

# South Korean Foreign Policy In Central Asia: Analysis Of Past, Present And Future

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## Abstract

This paper studies Korea's foreign policy in Central Asia from the perspective of regional cooperation. It analyzes the past, the present and the current state of cooperation, including after the 1990s when the Central Asian countries became independent. An important element of this study is a detailed analysis of cooperation between Korea and Central Asia on a multilateral and bilateral scale. Asymmetries in two-way exchanges between Korea and Central Asian countries encourage Korea to implement specific projects suitable for its partners. At the same time, Korea is leveraging multilateral cooperation and anticipating future prospects for cooperation in key areas such as health, environment, and digital policy. Importantly, the "Korea-Central Asia" forum will help strengthen cooperation between Korea and Central Asia. Finally, future prospects and some suggestions on expanding the scope of cooperation were offered.

**Key Words:** Central Asia, South Korea, foreign policy, cooperation, "Republic of Korea and Central Asia" Forum.

## Research Methods

This research employs a qualitative analysis to examine South Korea's policy towards Central Asian countries, focusing on distinct periods: the 1990s and post-2000s. A critical component of this analysis involves a thorough review of relevant literature to gather essential information for understanding historical processes. A deductive approach is used to collect data, complemented by a theoretical framework. This theoretical perspective is crucial for evaluating the alignment of theoretical expectations with the empirical findings.

## Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, several independent countries emerged in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. These newly independent states began to pursue their own domestic and foreign policies. During this period, South Korea's interest in Central Asia began to grow. However, in the initial stages, South Korea continued to view these countries as part of the former USSR and Southeast Asia. [1]

Several factors contributed to South Korea's ongoing cooperation with Central Asian countries. Firstly, many experts highlighted the potential for mutually beneficial economic cooperation. South Korea, having achieved significant economic development in the early to mid-1990s, saw Central Asia as a market for its goods and a region for investment. Secondly, Central Asia's rich energy resources, such as oil, gas, and uranium, were of great interest to South Korea, which lacked sufficient energy resources to meet its growing demand. Thirdly, Central Asia held strategic importance for South Korea's national policy due to the presence of a sizable Korean diaspora, particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, numbering around 300,000 people.

As noted by experts like Bulanakova M.F., South Korea's attraction to Central Asia is not solely driven by the region's resource base but also by the unique pattern of relations it is building with these countries within the broader Eurasian context. The architecture of this cooperation is influenced by both South Korea-Russia relations and the presence of North Korea and Japan in the region. [2]

### ***Dynamics of Cooperation Between South Korea and Central Asia***

Typically, official relations between countries commence with the establishment of diplomatic ties. Building upon a foundation of mutually beneficial economic structures and cultural affinities, South Korea and the Five Central Asian Countries established a strong cooperative partnership following the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992. During this period, there have been numerous summits between South Korea and each of the Central Asian countries. Notably, South Korea has had more frequent summits with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, reflecting their greater prominence in South Korea's Central Asia policy. [3]

The 1997 financial crisis led to a temporary decline in South Korea's interest in Central Asia. However, since the early 2000s, there has been a resurgence of interest and a gradual expansion of cooperation. While the initial decade after the USSR's collapse saw less active cooperation, South Korea's most stable partner in Central Asia during this period was Uzbekistan, largely due to the significant Korean diaspora residing there. Early cooperation focused on establishing economic and cultural relations, with South Korean companies like Daewoo and Samsung making significant investments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The differing marketing strategies of these companies led to varying investment priorities, with Daewoo focusing more on Uzbekistan and Samsung on Kazakhstan. The entry of these large South Korean companies into Central Asia prompted the South Korean government to open embassies in Tashkent and Almaty, followed by the establishment of cultural centers in these countries.

During the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak in the 2000s, South Korea's Central Asia policy underwent a significant transformation. In 2007, under President Roh Moo-hyun's administration, the State Comprehensive Strategy for Promoting the Republic of Korea into Central Asia was adopted. This was followed by the adoption of the "New Asian Initiative" in 2009, which aimed to expand South Korea's role in the Central Asian region and establish it as a global player. [4]

The annual Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, initiated in 2007, has played a crucial role in promoting comprehensive and diversified regional cooperation. The establishment of the Korean-Central Asia Cooperation Forum Secretariat in 2017 further solidified multilateral cooperation between South Korea and Central Asia. Another significant achievement was the establishment of the "C5 + 1" format, involving all Central Asian states and South Korea. This regional cooperation format is widely recognized as a major foreign policy accomplishment for South Korea.

The "Central Asia - Republic of Korea" Forum aimed to build comprehensive cooperative relations between South Korea and the five Central Asian countries. The forum has a regular schedule, with annual meetings to discuss pressing development issues in the region. Key topics discussed at the forum include social and economic development, healthcare, green economy, energy resources, culture, and cooperation between South Korea and Central Asia. The Secretariat of the Cooperation Forum has identified six priority areas for medium-term and long-term cooperation: transport and logistics, energy, industrial modernization and diversification, climate change, healthcare, and culture and education. [5]

The 15th Cooperation Forum "Central Asia - Republic of Korea," held in Busan in 2022, marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations and the 15th anniversary of the forum. During this forum, foreign ministers from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan discussed priority areas for cooperation, focusing on South Korea's experience in socio-economic development and well-being. The forum highlighted achievements in various areas, including technological and personnel exchange, industry, transport and logistics, agriculture, e-government, information technology, education, reforestation, standardization, and human resources development. [6]

The 16th South Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, held in Turkmenistan in 2023, focused on "pursuing cooperation through the realization of youth's potentials for a sustainable future of Korea and Central Asia." The forum identified potential areas for collaboration in transportation and logistics, public healthcare, climate change, ICT, education and science, and tourism. The forum resulted in an agreement to strengthen South Korea-Central Asia relations and explore avenues for mutually beneficial cooperation. [7]

**Current Status of Relations**

Within the regional cooperation model South Korea is developing with Central Asian states, bilateral relations with individual countries exhibit varying levels of asymmetry. These differences are influenced by factors such as the resource base of each country, its potential for industrial development, and historical ties and the size of the Korean diaspora in specific countries.

In terms of trade turnover, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are South Korea's most prominent partners in Central Asia (see Table 1). As shown in Table 1, trade with these two countries significantly exceeds trade with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, reflecting the core of South Korea's economic interest in Central Asia.

**Table 1**

<b>Export and Import between South Korea and Central Asian countries (USD)</b>				
<b>Country</b>	<b>Export Value (2022)</b>	<b>Import Value (2022)</b>	<b>Export Value (2023, OCT)</b>	<b>Import Value (2023, OCT)</b>
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	2 183 539	27 932	1 986 177	88 319
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	1 655 098	4 869 471	1 663 150	3 252 920
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	372 854	541	983 730	2 076
<b>Tajikistan</b>	92 676	368	101 868	165
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	8 543	35	9 674	3

Table was compiled by the author based on an analysis of the website of the Korean Trade International Association.

<https://kita.org/kStatistics/country/countries/countriesList.do>

**South Korea's Efforts to Deepen Ties with Uzbekistan**



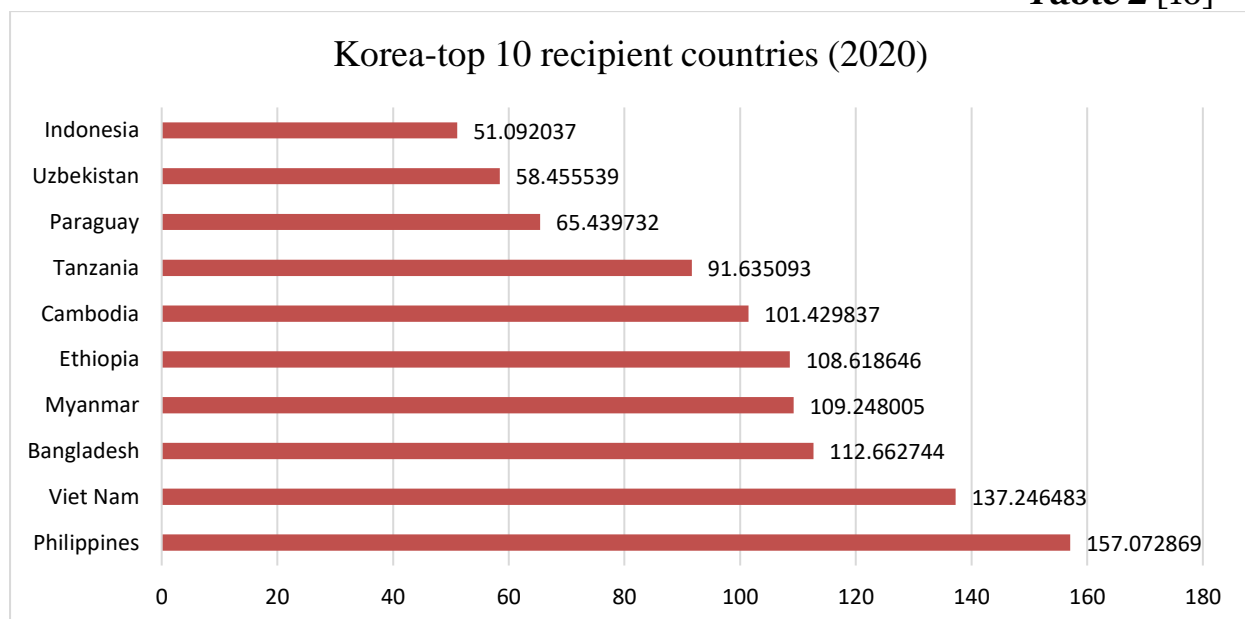
To strengthen its special relationship and trade partnership with Uzbekistan, South Korea is exploring the possibility of establishing a free trade zone (FTA). Recent government meetings between the two countries have focused on systematizing existing cooperation and initiating joint negotiations for an FTA, with South Korea offering support to Uzbekistan in this endeavor. [8]

Given the varying levels of development among Central Asian states, South Korea recognizes the need to tailor its cooperation strategies accordingly. The focus should be on implementing targeted projects that align with the specific development goals of each country.

During the 16th South Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum in Turkmenistan, South Korea's Foreign Minister Park Jin discussed with Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister the importance of expanding cooperation in key areas such as energy, resources, supply chains, health, education, and defense. South Korea encouraged Uzbekistan to support initiatives that would enable South Korean companies to participate in significant infrastructure projects, including highway construction. Similar discussions took place between South Korea and Tajikistan, with a focus on creating a favorable business environment in Tajikistan and implementing new energy and infrastructure projects. South Korea also sought Turkmenistan's support for South Korean investments in sectors like fertilizer plants, natural gas liquefaction, and desulfurization. Currently, South Korean companies are pursuing two fertilizer plant projects in Turkmenistan, with a combined estimated value of US\$2.5 billion. In November, Hyundai Engineering Co. signed a memorandum of understanding with Turkmenistan to establish an ammonia and urea fertilizer plant in the Balkan region. [7]

At the bilateral level, South Korea has effectively utilized Official Development Assistance (ODA) to enhance its cooperation with Central Asian countries. The Korean government aligns its ODA with the national development strategies of partner countries, ensuring coherence and effectiveness. Uzbekistan is one of South Korea's core ODA partner countries, receiving funds primarily allocated to social infrastructure and services sectors, as well as economic infrastructure sectors. [9]

Table 2 [10]





Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Development Cooperation Profiles 2022*. <https://www1.compareyourcountry.org/dev-coop-profiles-2022/en/o/4163/default/all/742?embed=noHeaderDAC>.

### **South Korea's Expanding Engagement in Central Asia**

Beyond Uzbekistan, South Korea has also provided official development assistance to Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan, although on a smaller scale. While the Korean International Cooperation Agency operates in Kyrgyzstan, its activities are more limited compared to those in Uzbekistan, primarily focusing on local projects.

Amid the growing influence of major international powers like China, Russia, the United States, and regional players like Turkey, Iran, India, and the Gulf Arab monarchies, South Korea is actively positioning itself as a significant participant in Central Asia.

The previous engagements between South Korea and the Central Asian nations underscore the need for these countries to diversify their commercial and trade partnerships. The increasing presence of Chinese and Russian enterprises has prompted Central Asian nations to seek foreign investment and expand their economic horizons. [11]

### **Perspectives on Cooperation**

The development trends in Central Asia-Korea cooperation demonstrate a growing relationship over the years. South Korea has emerged as a reliable partner for Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The engagement between South Korea and Central Asia is structured through regional cooperation in the C5 + 1 format and direct bilateral interactions. South Korea's success in this region can be attributed to its ability to understand the challenges faced by Central Asian countries and develop collaborative solutions.

Elevating the C5+1 format meetings to the level of heads of state could contribute to resolving regional problems and strengthening bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

The multilateral and bilateral relationships South Korea has fostered with regional countries have the potential to lay a strong foundation for enduring ties with Central Asia in the coming decades. Central Asian countries can learn from South Korea's model of economic development and resilient democracy, adopting new techniques and progressive strategies for their own advancement. Conversely, South Korea can leverage Central Asia as a platform to showcase its engineering and manufacturing expertise and expand its global reach. Moreover, any shifts in South Korean politics, particularly toward more liberal approaches, could influence the dynamics of these relationships.

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