

Strategic Perspectives on South Korean Foreign Policy in Central Asia

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Abstract: The paper studies the foreign policy of South Korea in Central Asia in the context of regional cooperation. There are analyzed past, and present periods such as after the 1990s when Central Asian countries got their independence and current situation of cooperation. A significant aspect of the research entails a comprehensive examination of the collaboration between Korea and Central Asia, encompassing both bilateral and multilateral aspects. The Republic of Korea is prompted to take on certain initiatives that are relevant to its partners because of the imbalance in the two-way contact between Korea and the Central Asian countries. In addition, Korea uses multilateral cooperation to foresee potential future partnerships in important domains including digital policy, health, and the environment. There is an important point is the “Republic of Korea and Central Asia” Forum which helps to straighten cooperation between Korea and Central Asia. At the last, there are given future perspectives related to extending the scope of cooperation and some suggestions.

1 INTRODUCTION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan emerged as independent nations in Central Asia. These countries began to assert their domestic and foreign policies as sovereign states. During this period, there was a growing interest in the Republic of Korea in Central Asia. However, initially, Korea continued to perceive these countries as still part of the USSR, as well as the countries of Southeast Asia.

There are various aspects of Korea's ongoing cooperation with Central Asian countries. Firstly, many experts highlight the advantageous economic collaboration. From the early '90s to the mid-'90s, Korea achieved a high level of economic development. Korea viewed Central Asia as a potential market for product expansion and a place to invest capital.

Secondly, the Central Asian region is rich in energy resources such as oil, gas, uranium, and others. Due to Korea's need for raw materials to meet increasing demand, Central Asia has been recognized as an important region for the supply of potential raw materials.

Thirdly, Central Asia was of interest from the perspective of the national policy of the Republic of Korea. Particularly in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, there is a large Korean diaspora, numbering about 300 thousand people.

According to some experts, such as Bulanakova M.F., Korea finds cooperation with Central Asian states appealing not only because of the region's rich resource base but also due to the unique relationship that Korea is forming with these states within the larger framework of Eurasian continental processes. The structure of this collaboration invariably aligns with the dynamics of ties between Russia and Korea, as well as considerations for the presence of Japan and North Korea in the area.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This constitutes a qualitative analysis of Korean policy toward Central Asian countries, spanning distinct periods such as the 1990s and post-2000s. A critical aspect of this analysis involves examining relevant literature sources to gather essential information for a thorough exploration of historical

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processes. The deductive method is employed to collect information, complemented by a theoretical approach. This approach is crucial to assess the viability and alignment of theoretical expectations with the information collected during the course of the analysis.

3 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Typically, the initiation of official relations between countries begins with the establishment of diplomatic ties. Since the commencement of diplomatic relations in 1992, Korea and the Five Central Asian Countries have fostered a highly cooperative collaboration based on mutually beneficial economic structures and cultural affinities. Over this period, there have been 16 summits between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Uzbekistan, 14 between ROK and Kazakhstan, 5 between ROK and Turkmenistan, 2 between ROK and Kyrgyzstan, and 3 between ROK and Tajikistan (Korea). Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are particularly promising and dynamically developing partners for the Republic of Korea in Central Asia, possessing rich natural resources and significant potential for transit and transportation. Notably, summits between Korea and Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, hold greater significance.

Interest in Central Asia waned somewhat due to the financial crisis of 1997. However, since 2000, there has been a growing trend of Korean interest in the region. The first decade following the fall of the USSR saw a period of limited cooperation between the Republic of Korea and the nations of Central Asia (M.A.). Uzbekistan emerged as Korea's most reliable ally in Central Asia during this time, partly due to the sizable Korean ethnic group residing in Uzbekistan. Economic and cultural ties were established prior to the initiation of collaboration. As economic cooperation developed, major Korean companies such as Daewoo and Samsung began investing in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Daewoo concentrated its investments mainly in Uzbekistan, particularly in the construction of an automobile plant, while Samsung heavily invested in the development of copper deposits in Kazakhstan. The different marketing policies of Daewoo and Samsung led to significant variations in investment directions, with Daewoo's investments being more decisive. Following the entry of large Korean companies into Central Asia, the Republic of Korea opened embassies in Tashkent and Almaty, subsequently establishing cultural centers in these countries. This laid the foundation for educational and cultural relations.

In the 2000s, during the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak, the situation underwent a radical change. In 2007, under the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun, the State Comprehensive Strategy for Promoting the Republic of Korea into Central Asia was adopted. This marked the beginning of what can be considered active collaboration between the Republic of Korea and Central Asian nations, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Arts Master). A notable achievement for Korea in Central Asia is the establishment of a regional cooperation format involving all Central Asian states under the "C5 + 1" formula. Many experts consider this development a significant accomplishment for Korea's foreign policy. In the 1990s, newly sovereign Central Asian states embarked on the journey of statehood, leading to a certain distance between them rather than bringing them closer. This historical trend continues to influence interactions among Central Asian players to this day, posing challenges to state-building and contributing to the perception of Central Asia as a fragmented region.

The "Central Asia - Republic of Korea" Forum aimed to establish comprehensive collaboration between Korea and the five Central Asian nations. The forum, with stable dynamics, convenes annually for participating countries to discuss crucial issues related to the development and cooperation of Central Asian states. The forum's significant focus areas include social and economic development in fields such as medicine and healthcare, green economy and ecology, energy resources, and cooperation in culture and interaction for the development of cooperation between the Republic of Korea and Central Asia. The Secretariat of the Cooperation Forum "Central Asia - Republic of Korea" has identified six promising areas for cooperation, namely transport and logistics, energy, modernization and diversification of industry, climate change and ecology, healthcare and medicine, culture and education.

On October 25, 2022, the 15th Cooperation Forum "Central Asia - Republic of Korea" took place in Busan, Republic of Korea. Foreign ministers from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Korea, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan discussed priority areas of cooperation, drawing from South Korea's advanced experience in ensuring the socio-economic development and well-being of the Central Asian region. The forum participants acknowledged the special significance of this year, marking the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Central Asian countries and the Republic of Korea, and the 15th anniversary of the beginning of this form of cooperation. The cooperation results indicated

significant achievements, with ongoing work within the framework of various projects contributing to the development of the region through the exchange of technological and personnel expertise in areas such as industry, transport and logistics, agriculture, e-government, information technology, education, reforestation, standardization, and human resources development ("Yangi O'zbekiston").

In the current year, on November 1st and 16th, the South Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum was held in Turkmenistan. Co-hosted by the Korean and Turkmenistan Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the forum brought together foreign ministers from the five Central Asian countries, along with approximately 200 experts from various sectors representing both Korea and the Central Asian countries. Themed "Pursuing Cooperation through the Realization of Youth's Potentials for a Sustainable Future of Korea and Central Asia," the forum explored avenues for Korea-Central Asia collaboration in areas such as transportation and logistics, public healthcare and pharmaceuticals, climate change and environment, information and communications technology (ICT), education and science, and tourism. As a result of the forum, parties agreed to strengthen Korea-Central Asia relations and identify avenues for mutually beneficial cooperation (Wonju, 2023).

4 DISCUSSIONS

In the framework of the regional cooperation model that Korea is developing in interaction with the Central Asian states, the bilateral relations of the Republic of Korea with these same players appear asymmetrical and distinct. Undoubtedly, this asymmetry is influenced by the varying attractiveness of the resource base of a particular state and the possibilities for industrial development in these countries. The historical connections and impact of the Korean minority in other Central Asian nations, particularly Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, also hold significant importance.

Trade turnover indicators reveal that the most notable partners of the Republic of Korea in Central Asia are Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (refer to Table 1). As shown in Table 1, it is evident that the trade turnover between the Republic of Korea and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan forms the foundation of Korea's economic interest in Central Asia, with the volume of trade with these countries significantly surpassing that with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Table 1: Export and Import between South Korea and Central Asian countries (USD).

| Country | Export Value (2022) | Import Value (2022) | Export Value (2023, OCT) | Import Value (2023, OCT) |
|--------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Uzbekistan | 2 183 539 | 27 932 | 1 986 177 | 88 319 |
| Kazakhstan | 1 655 098 | 4 869 471 | 1 663 150 | 3 252 920 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 372 854 | 541 | 983 730 | 2 076 |
| Tajikistan | 92 676 | 368 | 101 868 | 165 |
| Turkmenistan | 8 543 | 35 | 9 674 | 3 |

South Korea is considering the idea of establishing a free trade zone with Uzbekistan to strengthen the special status of ties and foster closer commercial engagement with this nation. Recent governmental meetings between both countries have not only aimed to systematize cooperation with Uzbekistan but also to initiate joint negotiations on the creation of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and provide assistance to the Central Asian republic in this direction (Khakimov, 2021).

Given the varying levels of development among Central Asian states, Korea must tailor its cooperation strategies, creating trajectories that align with the different speeds of development. The focus should be on executing targeted projects closely aligned with the distinct development goals of each country. For instance, during the 16th South Korea-Central Asia Cooperation Forum in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin highlighted the importance of increasing cooperation in vital areas such as energy, resources, supply chains, health, education, and defense. The Korean side sought assistance from the Uzbek side to open doors for South Korean enterprises to actively participate in major infrastructure projects, such as building highways. A similar discussion took place between Korean and Tajik partners on creating a business environment in Tajikistan and realizing new projects in energy and infrastructure with Korean companies. In meetings with Turkmenistan, the Korean side sought support for facilitating investments from South Korean industries in key sectors, including fertilizer plants, natural gas liquefaction, and desulfurization. Presently, South Korean companies are actively pursuing two projects for the construction of fertilizer factories in the Balkan region and the city of Turkmenabat, collectively valued at an estimated US\$2.5 billion. Hyundai Engineering Co. of South

Korea entered into a memorandum of understanding with Turkmenistan in November for the establishment of an ammonia and urea fertilizer plant in the Balkan region (Wonju, 2023).

At the bilateral level of cooperation with Central Asian countries, Korea has been successful in utilizing the policy instruments of Official Development Assistance (ODA). According to Korea's Official Development Assistance, the Korean government is enhancing the coherence and effectiveness of assistance by synchronizing the application cycle of partner countries' national development strategies with its Country Partnership Strategy (CPS). Presently, Korea's ODA core partner countries number 27, and among them, Uzbekistan is included as one of the recipient countries. These funds are allocated to the social infrastructure and services sector (including education, health, water supply, government and civil society, and other sectors). The next sector is the economic infrastructure sector, with more foreign aid allocated mainly to transport, energy, communication, finance, and business sectors (ODA Korea).

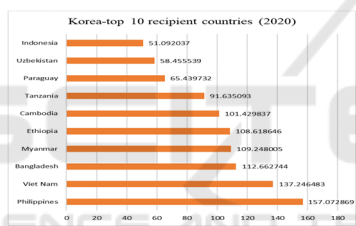


Figure 1: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Apart from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan are also recipients of official assistance from Korea, albeit on a relatively smaller scale. While the Korean International Cooperation Agency has a presence in Kyrgyzstan, its operations are notably smaller compared to the agency's activities in Uzbekistan. The primary focus in Kyrgyzstan is to provide support for local projects.

South Korea is actively positioning itself as a noteworthy participant seeking to strengthen its presence in Central Asia, amidst the involvement of major international powers such as China, Russia, and the United States, as well as significant regional players like Turkey, Iran, India, and the Gulf Arab monarchies.

The prior engagements between Seoul and the Central Asian nations, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, highlight the necessity for these countries

to diversify their commercial and trade partnerships. This imperative is driven by the increasing influence of Chinese and Russian enterprises, prompting Central Asian nations to attract foreign investors and broaden their economic horizons (Bifolchi, 2023).

Observing the development trends in Central Asia-Korea cooperation, it becomes evident that relations are strengthening year by year. South Korea stands as a reliable partner for Central Asian countries, with a particular focus on Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The engagement between Korea and Central Asian nations is structured through regional cooperation in the C5+1 format and through direct bilateral interactions. The success of Korea in this context can be attributed to its ability to accumulate a shared understanding of the challenges faced by Central Asian countries and to develop collaborative approaches to address them.

If the meetings in the C5+1 format are elevated to the level of heads of state, they can lead to the resolution of regional problems and the strengthening of bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, as well as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The multilateral and bilateral relationships that Korea has fostered with regional countries hold the potential for robust ties with Central Asia in the forthcoming decades. For the countries in this region, Korea serves as an exemplary model for achieving economic development and establishing a resilient democracy. The process of learning new techniques and embracing contemporary, progressive strategies can prove instrumental for their own development. Conversely, Korea sees a valuable opportunity to apply its engineering and manufacturing expertise and showcase its companies on the global stage through engagement with this region. Furthermore, any shifts in Korean politics, especially with regard to liberal approaches, could impact the dynamics of these relationships.

5 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the post-Soviet independence of Central Asian nations marked the beginning of a dynamic partnership with the Republic of Korea. This relationship has evolved significantly since the early 1990s, driven by economic, resource-based, and cultural interests. Korea's initial perception of these countries as remnants of the USSR shifted as the strategic importance of Central Asia became evident. The rich energy resources and emerging markets in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, along with the presence of a significant Korean diaspora, made these

countries particularly attractive to Korean investors. Over the years, Korea has leveraged its economic growth to forge robust trade and investment links, with major companies like Daewoo and Samsung playing pivotal roles. The establishment of diplomatic relations and cultural exchanges has further solidified Korea's presence in the region.

As we move into the 21st century, Korea's engagement with Central Asia has deepened, especially under the strategic frameworks developed during the presidencies of Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak. The adoption of the State Comprehensive Strategy for Promoting Korea into Central Asia in 2007 marked a significant milestone, reflecting a more structured and proactive approach to cooperation. Forums like the "C5+1" have been instrumental in addressing regional challenges and fostering multilateral collaboration. Korea's ongoing commitment to development assistance, exemplified by projects in transport, energy, and healthcare, underscores its role as a reliable partner. This multifaceted relationship is poised to strengthen further, providing mutual benefits and positioning Korea as a key player in the socio-economic development of Central Asia.

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