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## GUEST COMMENTARY

# From Steppes to Seas: Is There Potential for Closer Ties between Central Asia and ASEAN?

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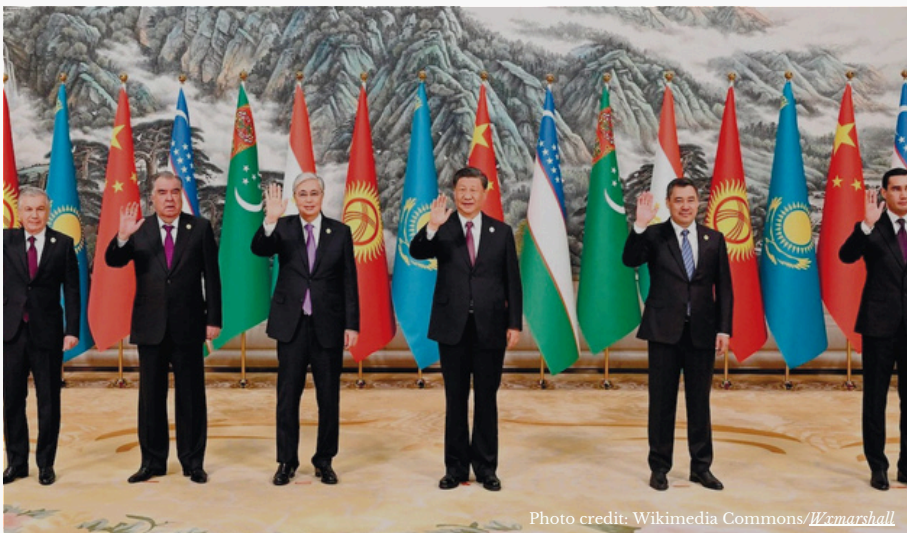


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In Central Asia, people often ask what ‘ASEAN’ is, and even International Relations scholars there generally have only limited knowledge of Southeast Asian affairs, let alone the broader public. Similarly, in Southeast Asia, the idea of ‘Central Asia’ holds little meaning for most locals. This is understandable, given the geographical distance and the near absence of historical ties between the two regions. At first glance, Central Asia and ASEAN may appear to be unlikely partners. Yet, they share more similarities than one might expect, and considerable untapped potential exists for deeper cooperation between the two regions. At the same time, expectations for such cooperation should remain realistic and focus on issue-specific areas of collaboration.

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## Unlikely Partners?

Central Asia lies in the very heart of Eurasia and is made up of five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region borders Russia to the north, China to the east, and Afghanistan and Iran to the south. Although strategically located between major powers, Central Asia remains landlocked and far away from the world's main economic hubs and global value chains.

Yet, Central Asia's strategic position between China, Russia, and Europe makes it a vital transportation hub linking East-West and North-South corridors across Eurasia. The region plays a central role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while the EU's Global Gateway also places strong emphasis on connectivity projects there. In addition, Central Asia's vast natural resources, including reserves of critical raw materials (CRMs), position it as a potentially key supplier of CRMs in an era of intensifying technological competition.

However, while events in Central Asia might initially seem remote from ASEAN's concerns, making closer cooperation between the two regions appear unlikely, the two actually share several important similarities that could provide a foundation for stronger and more meaningful collaboration.

First, both regions are caught between

major power rivalries: Russia-China dynamics in Central Asia and US-China competition in Southeast Asia create significant political and economic pressures. In response, both regions seek to diversify their external relations beyond reliance on great powers.

Second, and relatedly, amid intensifying geopolitical competition, states in both regions practice various forms of hedging. They often occupy the 'middle ground' by advocating international norms and institutions, promoting multipolarity, and working to strengthen their own autonomy and resilience.

Finally, both regions show a willingness to enhance regional cooperation within their own frameworks and to coordinate some responses to global challenges, though this remains a difficult and uneven process.

### Potential for Deeper Cooperation

Despite the currently low level of practical engagement, these shared strategic outlooks could create meaningful opportunities for closer interaction between the two regions. While a major boost in region-to-region collaboration may be difficult to envision, deeper engagement between individual states in specific issue areas remains much more feasible.

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In the economic sphere, for instance, Vietnam has emerged as one of the closest trade partners of some Central Asian states. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as members of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), have benefited from Vietnam's free trade agreement with the EAEU signed in 2015, which significantly boosted trade volumes.

Similarly, Indonesia and Singapore have been negotiating their own agreements with the EAEU, whereas Thailand and Malaysia have also expressed interest in starting a dialogue with the EAEU. There is also a separate ASEAN-EAEU dialogue, although its scope remains rather limited.

In this sense, the EAEU framework can serve as a useful vehicle for expanding trade relations between selected ASEAN members and Central Asia states.

Similarly, certain sectors of Central Asian economies could become attractive investment destinations for ASEAN countries. Opportunities are particularly strong in energy (including renewables), critical raw materials, and agriculture. Singapore, for example, has signed a services and investment treaty with Kazakhstan, which took effect on March 1, 2025, and has already invested in several

projects in the region.

Another area where deeper collaboration is both feasible and necessary is people-to-people exchange. Central Asia is one of the youngest regions in the world, and demand for high-quality education is rising every year. Several ASEAN countries with strong higher education systems could become attractive destinations for Central Asian students, especially given their favourable quality-price ratio compared to more expensive Western universities. At the same time, many Central Asian governments are investing in domestic higher education reforms, seeking partnerships with international institutions and encouraging foreign universities to establish joint programs or branch campuses. This creates a timely opportunity for ASEAN universities to expand their outreach and build long-term academic linkages with Central Asia.

Tourism is another area with strong potential for deeper cooperation. In recent years, the number of Central Asian tourists visiting Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia has been steadily increasing, leading to the opening of more direct flight connections. Conversely, Central Asia itself, with its rich cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and adventure tourism opportunities, could also become an attractive destination for travellers from ASEAN countries.

Finally, the ASEAN model of regionalism itself can serve as an attractive reference point for Central Asia. Once divided by serious internal disagreements and conflicts, Central Asia has, in the past decade, shown a positive trend toward strengthening intra-regional cooperation and finding joint solutions to longstanding challenges. Nonetheless, the region still faces the task of upgrading internal connectivity, institutionalising cooperation, and enhancing its agency as a well-organised regional actor. In this respect, the ASEAN model offers valuable lessons for Central Asia. Formal experience-sharing between the two regions could provide a new avenue for dialogue, with potential spillover effects into other areas of cooperation.

### Existing Challenges and A Way Forward

It is also important to recognise the existing challenges and constraints. The biggest barrier to closer trade relations remains logistical: the vast distance between the two regions cannot be overcome without major investment in both hard and soft connectivity infrastructure. Still, some opportunities are emerging through China's Belt and Road Initiative. Kazakhstan, for instance, has been using the Lianyungang terminal in China, its first gateway to the Pacific Ocean. In 2024, the country also opened a major terminal in Xi'an, which further boosted container traffic from China to Kazakhstan. These logistical hubs are designed to help Kazakhstan diversify its

trade beyond China, extending to Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN countries. In September 2025, Kazakhstan shipped its first batch of wheat to Vietnam via the Lianyungang terminal. With further investment and coordination, such corridors hold promise for strengthening trade links between Central Asia and ASEAN.

It is also important to acknowledge that Central Asia currently lacks a regional institutional framework, and unlike ASEAN, the five Central Asian states cannot act as a single economic entity. This fragmentation reduces the region's overall attractiveness to external partners, who must engage with five separate states on most issues rather than with a unified regional body. That said, recent efforts to strengthen intra-regional dialogue and cooperation suggest a gradual move toward greater coordination, which, if sustained, could eventually improve the region's appeal as a collective partner.

Another important constraint is the lack of mutual awareness between the two regions. With business-to-business, university-to-university, and people-to-people exchanges still limited, an information vacuum persists regarding potential opportunities. This challenge, however, is relatively easier to address. A stronger diplomatic presence, combined with a more proactive role for embassies and consulates, could help bridge this gap and facilitate initial contacts among actors interested in cooperation.

Finally, deeper high-level political dialogue can set the tone for business, academic, and societal actors, opening new opportunities for cooperation. Recent examples include mutual visits between Singapore and Kazakhstan, as well as between Singapore and Uzbekistan, which resulted in tangible agreements. Likewise, the visit of Vietnam's president to Kazakhstan in May 2025 delivered practical economic and political dividends for both sides. Sustaining such diplomatic engagement will be essential for building momentum and expanding cooperation between Central Asian and ASEAN countries in the future.

At the same time, expectations for such cooperation should remain grounded and realistic, guided by a pragmatic, step-by-step, and issue-specific approach.

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