
About This Preview

Target Trajectory Monitor (TTM) is an analytical brief focused on the political and institutional dynamics shaping Central Asia. It identifies trajectories — the underlying political directions gradually reshaping the region. Each issue covers all five Central Asian states through a consistent four-part framework: a Regional Trajectory Assessment, Signals in Focus, Risk Flags, and an Analytical Footnote highlighting a structural insight.

This document is an edited preview of Issue 0, published in March 2026. It presents selected sections to illustrate TTM's analytical scope and editorial register. Current issues are distributed to a select group of institutional readers. Enquiries are welcome at office@target-research.org.

REGIONAL TRAJECTORY ASSESSMENT

Consolidation at Home, Hedging Abroad

Central Asia is entering a phase defined by two intersecting dynamics: internal consolidation of presidential systems and a rapidly tightening external geopolitical environment. Governments across the region are consolidating presidential authority — not through crude power grabs but through deliberate institutional redesign: reconfiguring parliaments, managing elite networks, and adjusting legal frameworks to reduce uncertainty within ruling systems. This is not a new pattern, but the current cycle is notable for its simultaneity and ambition.

In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev called a nationwide referendum on a new constitution — the country's second in four years — compressing the public review period to just over a month. The proposed changes replace the bicameral parliament with a unicameral Kurultai elected through party-list proportional representation, create a vice-presidential office with authority defined by the president, and remove the constitutional priority previously granted to ratified international treaties over domestic law. Taken together, they point toward a more structured presidential system — not a redistribution of authority, but a more efficient concentration of it.

In Kyrgyzstan, President Japarov dismissed Kamchybek Tashiev — his closest political ally and head of the State Committee for National Security — in one of the most consequential elite shifts since 2020. For several years the two operated as a de facto duumvirate, creating structural ambiguity for actors seeking political support for major investments or commercial decisions. For investors navigating Kyrgyzstan's political economy, a single authoritative interlocutor is operationally preferable to a dual-headed structure in which alignment between the two principals could not be assumed.

Externally, the environment that has long enabled Central Asian balancing strategies is deteriorating fast. The US-Israel war with Iran, which began on 28 February, is not a distant geopolitical crisis but a major hot conflict unfolding in a region central to Central Asia's external connectivity. Multi-vector diplomacy remains the region's default posture, but the space in which it operates is narrowing in real time. The erosion of Western normative leverage, the preoccupation of major powers with conflicts elsewhere, and the apparent unravelling of the rules-based order all reduce the costs of domestic consolidation — sovereignty-oriented constitutional provisions are easier to defend when the international order itself looks predatory.

Central Asian governments are consolidating during a moment when the actors most likely to object are least positioned to do so. The harder question is whether the institutional architecture being built now will absorb external pressure — or amplify it.

SIGNAL IN FOCUS

The Iran War Exposes Central Asia's Corridor Vulnerability

For the past decade, Central Asian governments pursued a connectivity strategy built on diversification — reducing dependence on Soviet-era northern routes through Russia by developing alternatives in multiple directions. The

southern corridor through Iran was a central element of that strategy. The Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan–Iran railway, completed in 2014, created a direct north-south link to Persian Gulf ports. Chabahar was promoted as a gateway to the Indian Ocean bypassing congested Gulf routes. By 2025 these were not aspirational projects — they carried significant freight volumes and anchored real trade relationships.

The US-Israeli strikes on Iran beginning 28 February disrupted this corridor without warning and without a clear timeline for restoration. Turkmenistan, which shares a land border with Iran and has no near-term substitute for daily cross-border food and energy flows, is feeling it first. Uzbekistan is redirecting freight that normally transits Iranian ports. Kazakhstan’s exposure is more indirect but real: rising oil prices generate stronger export revenues while feeding domestic inflation simultaneously.

The deeper issue is what the disruption reveals about Central Asia’s alternatives to Russian transit. The same conflict that disrupted the southern corridor has already produced a security incident on Azerbaijani territory — a drone strike that Iran officially denied. Central Asia is discovering that one war revealed the connectivity opportunity; another is revealing the limits.

ANALYTICAL FOOTNOTE

Regional Cooperation Isn’t Failing — The Benchmark Is Wrong

Much of the commentary on Central Asian regional cooperation frames the current situation as a work in progress — promising momentum that has yet to produce institutional depth. The implicit benchmark is a structured multilateral architecture with binding agreements, permanent secretariats, and enforceable mechanisms. By that standard, Central Asia continues to underdeliver.

But that benchmark reflects observer expectations more than regional realities. Much of the Western policy literature — and many donor-funded assessments — implicitly evaluate Central Asian cooperation against an EU-style template of formalized integration. Applying that framework to a region with different historical trajectories, state capacities, and political incentives produces a misleading picture of failure.

What exists today — informal consultative summits, expanded cross-border mobility, and pragmatic issue-by-issue coordination — is not necessarily a transition toward deeper institutional integration. It is the intended destination. Regional leaders have developed a format that resolves practical problems while avoiding binding commitments that could constrain domestic political flexibility. For governments that must simultaneously manage Russian expectations, Chinese economic penetration, and Western engagement, preserving that flexibility is not a weakness of regional diplomacy. It is the point.

There is a further caution. Much of the progress achieved since 2016 has been driven by Uzbekistan’s foreign policy reorientation under President Mirziyoyev, which unlocked bilateral and multilateral dynamics that had long been frozen. Progress since 2016 has been meaningful, yet it rests on political choices that could be reversed as easily as they were made.

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