

# Trains, Planes, and Automobiles: Central Asia Is Reconnecting With Itself

Mapping newly created, resurrected, and proposed transport routes across Central Asia provides insight into regional connectivity drives.

*By Austen Dowell*

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Inside the Samarkand Train station, Uzbekistan Railways posters advertise tourist destinations.

Much like the unhappy pair of travelers from the 1987 Steve Martin classic, the countries of Central Asia are discovering that the process of transportation can bring both tangible and more abstract benefits to even the most begrudging and cantankerous of relationships. The relatively bonhomie rhetoric between the leaders of the five nations (led by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev) about bringing the countries together and developing good neighborliness in the last two years has been backed up by a raft of newly created or proposed transport routes between regional neighbors. A closer look at these routes points to a change geared primarily toward attempts to attract international tourism and stimulate economic growth, but also hesitantly allows for heightened movement and initiatives for long-separated family groups and cross-border communities.

The Central Asia Watch project (run under the aegis of the Eurasian Research and Analysis Institute think-tank) tracks regional developments through the national media outlets of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan along with other regional media with the goal of identifying and analyzing events and

trends in regional affairs. CAW researchers have looked at border cooperation through the lens of increasing travel between the countries of Central Asia, and have identified 26 routes that have been created, resurrected, or proposed between January 2017 and December 2018.

The creation of these routes is very much a surprise, even to those who are familiar with the long-simmering regional rivalries and jockeying that have dogged the five nations since their birth upon the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. With borders between the five republics drawn along Stalinist principles of divide and rule, citizens of the Soviet brother-nations could be forgiven for not paying much attention to borders or not questioning if the transport routes across them would be permanent. However, their leaders would prove to be less interested in maintaining strong physical and diplomatic ties in the face of the political and economic turbulence that wracked the region in the decade following independence.

The air travel industry was one of the first to suffer in the years following the retraction of Soviet power, with the state-monopoly Aeroflot divided into hundreds of so-called “Babyflots” servicing these new countries. Customers struggling in the economic turmoil of the 1990s could not afford airline prices, while impoverished governments grappled with how to pay for upkeep and servicing of the expensive systems. The flagship programs would also represent political interests, as in the case of the cutting of service between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 1992, following a freeze in relations associated with the start of the Tajik Civil War. Anyone hoping to make the trip between the two capitals would have to take the 9-hour journey through rough mountain passes.

Train lines were similarly cut back on or simply blocked. Following the 1999 bombings in Tashkent and then-President Islam Karimov’s increasingly aggressive rhetoric about Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, border crossings with Uzbekistan’s neighbors were reduced to a paltry number. In the clearest instance of route manipulation, Uzbekistan actually blocked the transport of goods to Tajikistan along rail lines running through its territory around 2007, after a mysterious bombing on the rail line that linked the two countries. While leaders claimed that it took months to clear the tracks, most Tajik leaders and international analysts interpreted the move [as pressure](#) to impede or halt the construction of Tajik hydroelectric projects that could impact Uzbek irrigation systems. When confronted about the issue, then-Prime Minister Mirziyoyev [stated that](#) the Uzbek position was “absolutely justified, fully compliant with international law, and any claims of the Tajik parties are baseless.”

Border disputes have dogged almost all of the relationships between the five countries, and as the most fragile and transitory of the routes, long-distance buses fell victim to political disagreements despite their low cost for customers. Lines were interrupted between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the late 1990s, with lines between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan similarly strained. The visa regime imposed by Uzbekistan and mirrored by its neighbors meant that the passengers who were allowed in would have to disembark from buses, go through long crossings, and then find some sort of transport to take them to their final destination on the other side.

For many observers of the region, the main obstacle to greater regional economic integration and cooperation has been the lack of political will on the part of regional leaders to take the plunge and open paths for trade and for the movement of their citizens across national borders. The death of Islam Karimov and rise to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev seem to be obvious drivers of new routes being opened, with a whopping 24 of the 26 new routes involving Uzbekistan. On the one hand this speaks to the levels of isolation the country was kept under before 2016, ensuring that the lion's share of growth would come from new Uzbek routes. However, President Mirziyoyev phrased his goals in a [speech to the UN](#) as creating “a zone of stability, sustainable development, and good-neighborliness” for the region.

It is important to consider whether these new routes are organic, market-driven responses to demand in a liberalized playing field (locals or authority figures demanding more options to get them from point A to point B) versus politically-driven decisions (leaders thinking that it is important to show goodwill by symbolically opening a route or hoping to stimulate particular industries). The growth of these connections is likely to inspire similar outreach on the parts of other governments or local authorities who do not want to be left out of the loop.

Of the 26 routes, 13 are air-related, with 11 involving Uzbekistan. The other two air routes consist of a proposed Dushanbe-Ashgabat route that has not been followed up on after a test flight, and a route between Dushanbe and Astana. The remaining flights would link the top four tourist centers of Uzbekistan (Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Urgench, the closest airport to Khiva) to capitals (Astana, Bishkek) and to other major urban centers (Almaty, Osh), as well as temporary service to Tamchy in Kyrgyzstan. This route was opened for the summer of 2018 and is aimed at taking holiday-makers to the well-developed facilities on the shore of popular tourist destination Issyk-Kul.

The [stuttering start](#) to the Tashkent-Dushanbe air route (dropped from twice-weekly to once a week due to a lack of demand) is a reminder that air travel is still an expensive and exotic option for many. Indeed, the original maiden flight had to be postponed due to a lack of bookings, while the eventual flight only transported 29 passengers to Dushanbe and returned with a paltry dozen. However, the agreement signed between Air Astana and Uzbekistan Airways to increase the regularity of flights from three times a week to daily between Tashkent and Astana/Almaty highlights at least some sort of commercial viability.

The train routes (three involving Uzbekistan/Kazakhstan/Tajikistan and one between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan) have experienced less explosive growth than air or bus options, but still are encouraging signs of further cooperation. The opening of the Ghalaba-Amuzang border crossing point is a welcome gesture after a history of Uzbek manipulation of Tajik freight, with Tajikistan completely reliant on transiting goods through Uzbekistan to reach the other Central Asian countries. While the route is initially going to carry materials and goods, it was indicated that it would eventually be used for passenger service as well. The other routes are of the more classical rail variety, able to bring passengers between capitals (Dushanbe, Tashkent,

Astana) or large urban centers (Samarkand, Almaty) quickly and at a relatively affordable price. The nature of rail lines suggests that the existing infrastructure for these routes was in place and was thus low-hanging fruit in terms of finding ways to show goodwill, but the opening of the Tajik-Uzbek line in particular marks at least a temporary split with Uzbekistan's political policies of the past.

The bus routes seem to fulfill more prosaic needs than the air routes, focusing more on shorter-distance, cross-border transport. Of the nine routes, all involve Uzbekistan. These routes are a good example of what improved transportation was supposed to be all about: bringing people across the border closer together. The four routes linking Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan will move passengers across the Fergana Valley, with the three planned routes from Fergana, Margilan, and Andijan all going to the nearby Kyrgyz city of Osh. The south of Kyrgyzstan has a large Uzbek diaspora, with the city of Osh a specific (and at times tragic) center for the mingling of the two peoples. Beyond giving long-separated families the chance to reconnect, these routes are also the best example of a renewed commitment to the "shuttle trade" that has marked the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. The connections with Kazakhstan are similar to a large extent, with four routes connecting Tashkent (as well as Chirchiq, about an hour outside Tashkent) to the relatively close urban centers of Turkestan, Shymkent, and Kyzylorda, and the more distant Almaty.

On one hand, this is the perfect chance for neighboring communities to develop the close ties that authorities like the World Bank [view as integral](#) to fostering economic cooperation and meaningful integration. Interestingly, when locals were interviewed by reporters, they would invariably comment on how good it would be to see their relatives across the border again. However, this trend virtually disappeared within the articles of the five national media outlets themselves, replaced with a completely different theme – tourism.

After a closer look, it would seem that even these more locally focused options are tied into the narrative of increased transportation as a means of facilitating tourism. Taking as example the Turkestan-Tashkent bus route, we find that the route was actually facilitated and agreed to [by tourism operators](#) from the adjacent territories as part of the "Workshop-Tourism on the Silk Road" event in Tashkent. While the location or "Silk Road" tag does not necessarily imply direct government oversight, it certainly challenges our view of these developments as a more natural, grassroots coming together of peoples.

The term "tourism" is tricky, however, despite it showing up in many of the announcements about opening new routes. To have expanded tourist complexes and transport lines in hopes of attracting more tourists would seem to be putting the cart before the horse. Rather, tourism in this context may be a term meant to target local populations in a way that extends beyond simply spending a day walking around the old city of Khiva or marveling at the beauty of the Registan. As the largest ethnic minority in every Central Asian country besides Kazakhstan, the Uzbek diaspora has long been divided by rigid borders and forbidding visa regimes. Now that these

controls are loosening, families see the chance to reconnect with their kin in ways that blur family visits and vacation, work and pleasure.

Furthermore, familial visits can often transition over into work-related travel, as with [Farkhad Berdiyev](#), an Uzbek baker who works in the South Kazakhstan province, who has to cross the border to visit his family in Uzbekistan. We are thus faced with a difficulty in distinguishing between pure family visits, pure tourism, pure job-seeking travel (moving across the border to find employment in a different region), and pure work-related travel (transporting goods/services).

While it is hard to ascertain who or how many people are taking advantage of these new routes, there does seem to be a genuine swell of interest. According to *Kazinform*, the international news outlet of Kazakhstan, around [50,000 or so](#) people have utilized the five bus routes alone linking Uzbek cities to various regional destinations in the months between July and November 2018. Ever more tellingly, the Uzbek ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Komil Roshidov, claimed that in 2017 around [1.25 million tourists](#) had visited Samarkand, with 249,000 of them international tourists. This begs the question, who are these mystery 1 million regional tourists?

While the opening of these new avenues should be understood as the natural consequence of a thaw in the relationships between Uzbekistan and its neighbors, they could also represent a key development in moving Central Asian integration forward. In combination with increasingly liberal visa regimes, they create the ideal environment for larger numbers of cross-border movement. This travel can take the form of tourism, connecting with family, searching for work, or work-related travel. All of these options draw populations together, a crucial step toward the acclimation that typifies, for example, [Euroregion borders and cross-border integration](#). Whether national leaders are willing to let this trend continue and accelerate is up for debate, but cross-border transport could eventually lead to decentralized decision-making as neighbors on either side of a border seek to explore options for expanding or expediting transport.

The appearance of these new transportation options over the past two years is an important development that is both a result of Uzbekistan's pivot to regional engagement as well as a potential future driver of cooperation and integration among the Central Asian states. Only time will tell if political decision-makers will continue to encourage their snowballing usage or clamp down on their potentially unpredictable or destabilizing results. The countries of Central Asia are reconnecting with each other in order to draw in outsiders and make political statements, but they might just end up rediscovering themselves.

*Austen Dowell is a Research Associate with the ERA Institute, focusing on analyzing regional affairs as part of the Central Asia Watch project. He has studied in Central Asia as a Boren Scholar, while also living and working in Russia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. Austen currently serves as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ukraine.*