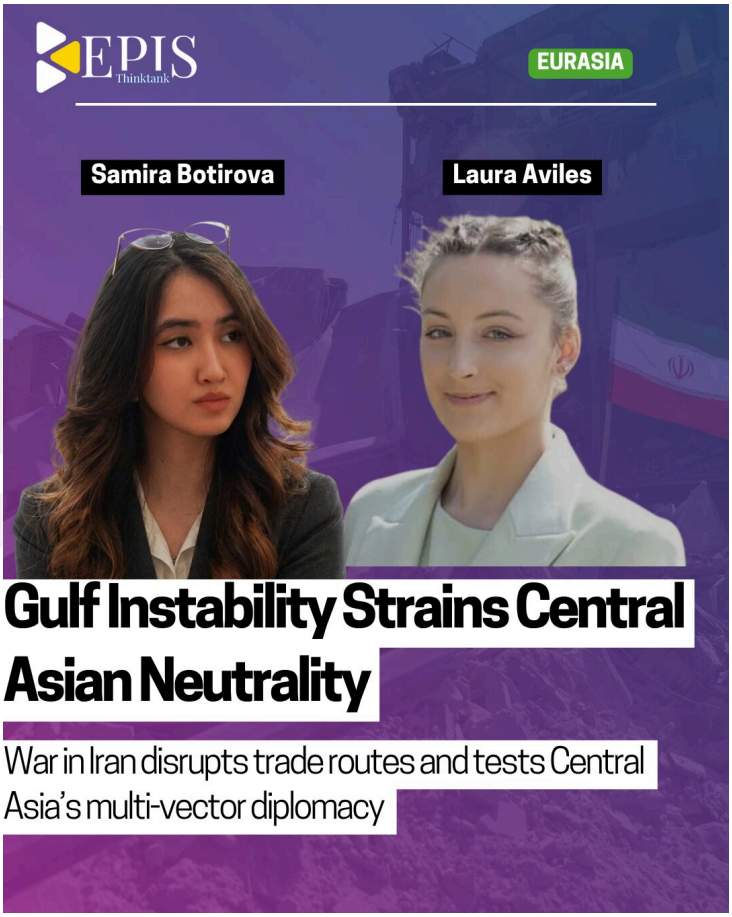
Gulf Instability Strains Central Asian Neutrality

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Samira Botirova and Laura Aviles



Gulf Instability Challenges Central Asian Neutrality

On February 28th 2026, the United States of America and the State of Israel collectively launched a series of airstrikes on multiple locations across Iran, resulting in the killing of the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Iranian government responded by launching a series of missile attacks against Israel, US bases, and US-allied countries in the region. The war escalated quickly, and the consequences of such a geopolitical event had their own effects on everyone in the world, including

the C5 (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) countries.

Before the tragic attack of the United States and Israel on Iran on February 28th, the relationship between the C5 countries and Iran had been a very successful partnership on diplomatic, economic, and industrial levels. The economic relationship between Tehran and Central Asian nations had a positive trajectory, especially within the Eurasian Economic Union, with Iran finalizing the free trade agreements, which came into force in May 2025. This agreement focuses on removing barriers and aligning trade standards. Additionally, Iran's geographical position played a very beneficial role for Central Asian countries by connecting with the Middle East, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. This gave Central Asia direct paths to global maritime trade. Thus, it can be concluded that the positive relationship between Central Asia and Iran was not merely due to linguistic and cultural aspects, but also from a pragmatic geopolitical perspective, as Iranian territory serves as the most efficient way to southern global markets. It became a necessity for this relationship to be maintained due to the landlocked features of Central Asian countries.

Thus, it is important for C5 countries to maintain positive ties with Iran as economic and geopolitical relationships have been established for decades. However, it is challenging as Central Asia cannot turn its back on the United States and Israel due to similar reasons. This paper will focus on the main diplomatic and economic consequences the war in Iran has had so far on Central Asian countries.

Position of C5 countries

C5 countries are historically known for their multi-vectoral political strategy, which involves balancing between the major powers and using the stance of political neutrality during the conflicts. Both of the leading C5 countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have not issued official statements of picking sides as their international trade and political support are important to maintain with all the actors of this war.

Kazakhstan

Astana calls for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Iran. However, in its official statements, it issues its security concerns for the leaders of the Gulf, thus showing solidarity with the United States and Israel. President Tokayev sent a message in support of the leaders of the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan. Simultaneously, on the other side, Astana expresses its condolences to Iran for the civilian casualties without issuing condolences for the death of Ayatollah Khamenei. Thus, playing with both sides. Important to mention that Kazakhstan also proposed to provide its territory as a venue for the peace negotiations. President Tokayev is highly likely to continue taking the pragmatic multi-vectoral foreign policy strategy.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is mainly focusing on humanitarian needs and placing emphasis on the "Muslim Ummah". This gives Tashkent a way to sympathise with Iran over its civilian casualties without condemning the actions of the United States and Israel. Meanwhile, President Mirziyoev also issued a search to find alternative routes via the Caspian Sea and to China via Kyrgyzstan, as for Uzbekistan, 60% of routes of its European and Turkish transit lies through Iran. Furthermore, Tashkent sent trucks with flour, rice, sugar, pasta, sunflower oil, canned goods, and medical supplies to Iran as a humanitarian need.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has raised great concerns over its citizens being caught in the conflict territories. Over 22,000 Kyrgyz are located in the Middle Eastern region, mainly in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while over 150 are located in Iran and Israel. The Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry has issued its complaints over several hotels and airlines in the UAE and Saudi Arabia, ignoring government requests for help.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan has very close cultural and linguistic aspects shared with Iran. This can also be observed in its official position regarding the conflict. Tajikistan has sent a convoy of 110 trucks with humanitarian aid, with 3,610 tons of cargo, which includes 45 tons of medicines, hygienic products, children's clothes, food supplies, tents, and construction materials to the "brother state". The President Emomali Rahmon published a photo of the numerous trucks on social media "X" (formerly Twitter). This is so far one of the most tangible acts of solidarity with Iran from C5 countries.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has a very difficult geopolitical situation, which makes its neutral stance much louder compared to the rest of the C5 countries. Turkmenistan shares a 1,000 km border with Iran, thus risking the high refugee flows. Especially, considering that there is a Turkmen population living in the northern territories of Iran. However, as of March 2026, Turkmenistan has not permitted any Iranian civilians to enter as refugees due to the limited capabilities of the country. Important to mention that Turkmenistan has issued humanitarian aid, emphasizing that supporting its close neighbours has always been a noble Turkmen tradition. Turkmenistan opened four checkpoints on its border with Iran. Through which it has transitioned over 200 foreign citizens from 16 countries during the beginning of the conflict.

Iran and Azerbaijan's tension

According to Azerbaijan's official statement, on March 5th, the two drones attacked the Nakhchivan exclave, resulting in civilian injuries. The attacked territory in Azerbaijan is located in the South Caucasus, where the strate-

gic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline is located. The pipeline carries a small volume of Kazakh crude – around 2-3% of Kazakhstan's overall exports. Any further escalations on the BTC pipeline will force Kazakhstan to deepen its dependency on a Russian-controlled route through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. Important to highlight that Iran's military forces denied responsibility for this drone attack and accused Israel of the attack, with the main goal of disrupting relations between Muslim countries.

Implications for the C5 countries

With the tension in the region increasing, it becomes significantly harder to hold the stance of neutrality. The drone attack on Nakhchivan demonstrates that Iran's war has reached the South Caucasus, which serves as a Middle Corridor, the main alternative route for C5 for trade and oil transit, replacing the primary source – Iran. Furthermore, as Azerbaijan expands its strategic partnership with C5 countries in the emerging C5+1 diplomacy, Baku's stance on planning to respond to this attack puts enormous pressure on Central Asian governments to either issue support for their ally or continue with neutral silence, which will inevitably bring diplomatic and economic consequences between the allies. On the other side, aligning with Azerbaijan against Iran puts at risk Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, whose economic interdependence relationship with Iran is strong.

Economic consequences threatening the C5

The ongoing war in Iran has had other consequences for C5 countries, notably economic ones, though the extent of those disturbances varies per country. While Turkmenistan shares a long border with Iran, different C5 economies depend on trade routes and energy markets that have clearly taken a hit from the ongoing conflict.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' blocking of the Strait of Hormuz has halted the passage of one-fifth of global oil and liquified natural gas (LNG) trade. It has also jeopardized the Southern Corridor, in which Jebel Ali in Dubai serves as a main re-export hub for Central Asia. Many imported goods arrive there, cross the Strait of Hormuz to Iranian ports, such as Bandar Abbas, and are then transported north by land into Turkmenistan and the rest of the C5 countries. The closure of Hormuz not only disrupts key energy markets but also is a primary supply line for electronics, medicines, and other consumer goods entering Central Asia.

Directly exposed transit states: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan

Some C5 countries, as is the case of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, are particularly exposed to disturbances in trade. In Turkmenistan, the halting of trade through Sarakhs and other main crossings has left border regions like Balkan especially vulnerable. Residents there have begun to point out the effects: "Five liters of Iranian cooking oil used to be 150 manats, and

today it's 200". In Ashgabat, residents also noticed an increase in the price of tomatoes, eggs, chicken, and other basic items. In political systems where state legitimacy partly depends on keeping basic goods affordable, price shocks like these can become a source of social discontent and political pressure.

The situation in Uzbekistan isn't much different. Since the beginning of the war, distributors have warned that "storage facilities are emptying fast" and that the prices of household goods and especially dairy products are expected to rise. Although not Uzbekistan's biggest supplier, Iranian imports have always ensured access to affordable products. "The primary driver for Iranian dairy is its affordability, often priced 20-40 percent lower than competitors. Now, access to affordable everyday goods is under threat.

Indirect but important spillover cases: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan

Other states are affected indirectly but still experiencing "spill-over" consequences. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, security expert Taalaibek Jumadylov has warned that the country could soon face rising prices for food, clothing, and other essential goods. Similarly, Tajikistan could face substantial import costs from the closing of the Strait. Tajik-Iranian trade has grown substantially in the past five years. In 2025, imports from Iran exceeded $371 million, giving the country a 4.5% share of Tajikistan's total foreign trade turnover, leaving the country vulnerable to supply disruptions and inflationary pressure if the conflict further interrupts Iranian trade routes. Prolonged disruption could also expose Tajikistan's dependence on Iranian-linked infrastructure and investment.

Kazakhstan's imports from China, 29.2% of all Kazakh imports, are substantially higher than those from Iran. However, while household goods are less exposed, oil-price volatility triggered by the conflict could still generate visible exchange-rate pressures.

Long-term outlook

Although unlikely at this stage, the prolonged disruption of Iranian trade could push Central Asian states towards greater reliance on Chinese goods, financing, and transport corridors, accelerating a broader reshaping of regional patterns. Some experts also highlight the potential strengthening of Kazakhstan's role in the Trans-Caspian corridor, using the region's geographic positioning between Europe and Asia as a key opportunity.

However, if this conflict continues to expand beyond Iran and further affects the South Caucasus and its major trade corridors, it will become increasingly difficult for Central Asian states to preserve their traditional neutral and multi-vectoral foreign policy stance. The disruption of Iranian trade routes, the Strait of Hormuz, and alternative transit corridors underscore the region's vulnerabilities to external geopolitical shocks. Although

the consequences vary across the C5, each of these states is experiencing rising pressure to balance political neutrality with strategic economic interests while diversifying trade routes and partnerships to reduce long-term dependency and regional vulnerability.

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