THINK ROAD FORUM 2026

Global Transformation and Regional Dynamics: Central Asia in the Emerging International Order

Tashkent, November 4-5, 2026

CONCEPT NOTE

The international system is undergoing a period of profound transformation. Intensifying geopolitical tensions, the fragmentation of global economic relations, and growing pressure on established mechanisms of multilateral cooperation are reshaping the foundations of international order. Recent conflicts and shifting alignments have reinforced a more uncertain and complex global environment, where predictability is increasingly limited.

These developments do not signify the end of cooperation, but rather its reconfiguration. As global institutions face constraints, regions are assuming a more prominent role as platforms for managing interdependence, mitigating risks, and sustaining dialogue. In this context, regional dynamics are becoming central to understanding how states adapt to systemic change.

Central Asia is gaining renewed relevance within this evolving landscape. While exposed to external pressures, the region has in recent years demonstrated relative stability, a growing commitment to regional cooperation, and a pragmatic approach to external engagement. The intensification of intra-regional dialogue, alongside the continued pursuit of multi-vector foreign policies, reflects an emerging pattern of regional consolidation. This positions Central Asia as a meaningful case for examining how regions respond to global transformation under conditions of uncertainty.

The Think Road Forum 2026 aims to provide a high-level platform for examining the interaction between global trends and regional responses, with a particular focus on Central Asia. Bringing together representatives of think tanks, academia, government institutions, and international organizations, the Forum will explore how geopolitical, economic, and security developments are reshaping regional environments and influencing policy choices.

Objectives of the Forum

- To assess key trends shaping the evolving international order, including geopolitical competition, geoeconomic fragmentation, and shifting security dynamics
- To examine how regions adapt to increasing uncertainty and what forms of cooperation emerge in response
- To analyze Central Asia's role within this environment, with particular attention to regionalism, stability, and multi-vector engagement
- To facilitate policy-oriented dialogue among international and regional stakeholders

- To strengthen partnerships and foster collaborative initiatives among participating institutions

Format and Participation

The Think Road Forum 2026 will be organized as a multi-format platform combining:

- High-level plenary sessions
- Thematic panel discussions
- Partner-led and co-organized sessions
- Closed-door expert roundtables

A key feature of the Forum is its emphasis on **collaborative agenda-setting**. Participating institutions will have the opportunity to co-organize sessions within the thematic framework, contributing to the content and direction of discussions while showcasing their expertise.

For instance, two of the sessions is Co-organized in partnership with the British Academy, the University of Oxford, and Mapping Global China and linked to a forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Current Chinese Affairs.

Closed-door roundtables will complement the public program by providing a space for focused, off-the-record discussions on sensitive and emerging issues, including regional security, geopolitical risks, and policy coordination.

Thematic Framework

To guide discussions while maintaining flexibility for partner contributions, the Forum will focus on the following interconnected themes:

- Global transformation and the reconfiguration of the international order
- Regional responses to uncertainty and evolving patterns of cooperation
- The development of regionalism in Central Asia
- Connectivity, trade, and geoeconomic shifts across Eurasia
- Security challenges and resilience in a volatile regional environment
- Long-term pressures related to climate, energy, and resource management

Partnership Opportunities

The Think Road Forum 2026 is designed as a collaborative platform offering partner institutions the opportunity to:

- Co-organize thematic sessions and contribute to agenda-setting
- Nominate speakers and share research expertise
- Convene closed-door roundtables on priority topics
- Engage with a diverse network of policymakers, experts, and practitioners

Through this partnership-oriented approach, the Forum seeks to promote meaningful dialogue and develop sustained cooperation among institutions working on global and regional issues.

PROGRAM

Conference Language: *English*

DAY 1, November 4

09:30 – 10:00	Registration
OPENING SESSION **Chair: Akram Umarov**, First Vice-Rector, University of World Economy and Diplomacy / Director, Institute for Advanced International Studies	
10:00 – 10:20	Welcoming remarks by: - **Sodyq Safoev**, First Deputy Chairman, Senate of Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan / Rector, University of World Economy and Diplomacy - **Maulen Ashimbaev**, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Taldau AI Analytics - **Renata Wrobel**, Deputy Head of Mission, Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Uzbekistan - **Maria Adele Carrai**, Associate Professor, University of Oxford *(video address)* - **Askar Kushkunbayev,** Senior Grants Manager, CAPS UNLOCK
10:20 – 10:40	Keynote Address by: - **Javlon Vakhabov**, Deputy Advisor to President of Uzbekistan / Director, International Institute for Central Asia
SESSION I: Global Disorder and Regional Responses: Central Asia in the Emerging International Order **Chair: Odil Gafarov**, Deputy Director, Institute for Advanced International Studies	
10:40 – 11:40	**Panelists:** - **Akram Umarov**, First Vice-Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies - **Andrew Kuchins**, Senior Fellow, Center for the National Interest - **Shao Yuqun**, Senior Fellow, Center for American Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies - **Stanislav Pritchin**, Head of the Central Asia Division, Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Russian Academy of Sciences - **Liliana Śmiech**, Director General for International Affairs, Ludovika University of Public Service
11:40 - 12:00	Coffee Break
SESSION II: Great Power Presence in Central Asia *Co-organized in partnership with the British Academy, the University of Oxford, and Mapping Global China. Linked to a forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* **Chair: Maria Adele Carrai**, Associate Professor, University of Oxford	
12:00 – 13:00	**Panelists:** • **Abbos Bobokhonov**, Head of Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Institute for Advanced International Studies • **Jessica Neafie**, Assistant Professor, Nazarbayev University • **Frank Maracchione,** Postdoctoral Fellow, SOAS, University of London • **Qu Qiang**, Deputy Dean, Area Studies Institute, Minzu University of China

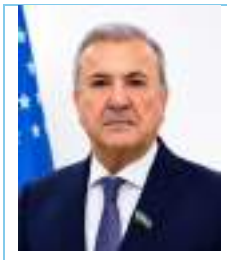
	• **Jildiz Nicharapova,** Associate Professor, American University of Central Asia *(online)*
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch
SESSION III: Encounters with China—Infrastructure, Investment, and Public Attitudes *Co-organized in partnership with the British Academy, the University of Oxford, and Mapping Global China. Linked to a forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* **Chair: Jessica Neafie**, Assistant Professor, Nazarbayev University	
14:00 – 15:00	**Panelists:** • **Bekzod Zakirov**, Associate Professor, Center for Policy Research and Outreach at Westminster International University in Tashkent • **Assel Bitabar**, Teaching Professor, Maqsut Narikbayev University • **Mubin Abduvaliev**, National Consultant, Asian Development Bank • **Jian Lian**, Distinguished Adjunct Research Fellow, Area Studies Institute, Minzu University of China • **Irna Hofman**, Lecturer, Leiden University
15:00 – 15:20	Coffee Break
SESSION IV: Strengthening resilience via regional cooperation *Co-organized in partnership with Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan* **Chair: Lea Tries**, Programme Manager, European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments	
15:20 – 16:20	**Panelists:** - **Aziza Umarova**, Head of the Zero Bureaucracy and Innovation Office, Agency for Strategic Development and Reforms under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan - **Azamat Sulimanov**, Head of Department, Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan - **Lucile Bardin**, Afghanistan and Central Asia Programme Officer, Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (CMI) - **Barbara Bernsmeier**, Director, Goethe-Institut Uzbekistan - **Oksana Antonenko**, Professor, European University Institute
SESSION V: Connectivity in a Fragmenting World: Opportunity or Vulnerability for Central Asia? *Co-organized in partnership with Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan* **Chair: Asel Uzagalieva**, Deputy Head of the TCTC Capacity Development Programme, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)	
16:20 – 17:20	**Panelists:** - **Abdulla Abdukadirov,** Deputy Director, Agency for Strategic Development and Reforms under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan - **Grégory Lecomte**, Head of Unit, Eurasia Division at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - **Shairbek Juraev**, Co-Founder & President, Crossroads Central Asia - **Bhavna Davé**, Senior Lecturer in Politics of Central Asia, SOAS, University of London
17:20 – 17:40	Wrapping up of the first day of the conference
18:00 – 21:00	Dinner (by invitation only)

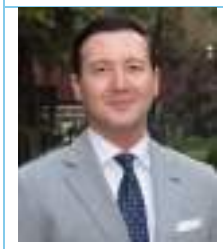
DAY 2, November 5

09:30 – 10:00	**«WHAT MAKES US "US"? REGIONAL IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE OF CENTRAL ASIA»** Keynote Address by: **Prof. Timur Dadabaev**, Vice Rector for Research and Innovation, UWED (Uzbekistan); Director of the Special MA and PhD Program for Eurasian and the Japanese Studies, University of Tsukuba (Japan) and Swedish Research Council Guest Professor, Lund University (Sweden)
UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SOLUTIONS NETWORK UZBEKISTAN LAUNCH EVENT *Co-organized in partnership with SDSN Uzbekistan* **Chair: Odilbek Manabov**, Leading Research Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Institute for Advanced International Studies	
10:00 – 10:30	**Introducing SDSN Uzbekistan: vision, priorities and opportunities** - **Akram Umarov**, First Vice-Rector, University of World Economy and Diplomacy / Director, Institute for Advanced International Studies / Co-Managing Director, SDSN Uzbekistan - **Bakhtishod Hamidov**, Deputy Director, Institute for Macroeconomic and Regional Studies / Co-Managing Director, SDSN Uzbekistan **Insights from SDSN Kazakhstan** - **Serik Orazgaliyev**, Associate Professor, Nazarbayev University / Co-Chair, SDSN Kazakhstan **Stakeholders Discussion**
SESSION VI: Building a Sustainable Central Asia: Climate, Resources, and Resilience **Chair: Saida Safaeva,** Head of the Center for Sustainable Development, Institute for Advanced International Studies at UWED	
10:30 – 11:30	**Panelists:** - **Shakhboz Akhmedov**, Founder, Sustainability Nexus Solutions / Director, Green University's Climate Residency Programme - **Liliana Śmiech**, Director General for International Affairs, Ludovika University of Public Service - **Selbi Hanova,** Development Coordination Office-Partnership Officer, United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office in Uzbekistan - **Jian Lian**, Distinguished Adjunct Research Fellow, Area Studies Institute, Minzu University of China - **Serik Orazgaliyev**, Associate Professor, Nazarbayev University / Co-Chair, SDSN Kazakhstan
11:30 – 11:50	Coffee Break
SESSION VII: Foreign Trade in Central Asia: Transformation or Status Quo? *Co-organized in partnership with CAPS Unlock* **Chair: Azimzhan Khitakhunov**, Senior Research Fellow, CAPS Unlock	
11:50 – 12:50	**Panelists:** - **Umid Yakubhodjaev**, Member of the Legislative Chamber, Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan

	- **Gavkhar Sultanova**, Head of the Center for Economic Diplomacy, Institute for Advanced International Studies - **Zalina Enikeeva**, Research Fellow, Institute of Public Policy and Administration, University of Central Asia - **Kassymkhan Kapparov**, Chairman, Central Asia International Business Council
12:50 – 14:00	Lunch
SESSION VIII: AI and the Future of Statecraft: What It Means for Central Asia? *Co-organized in partnership with CAPS Unlock* **Chair: Filip Noubel**, Non-Resident Research Fellow, CAPS Unlock	
14:00 – 15:00	**Panelists:** - **Abdulaziz Abdulakhadov**, Head of the Information Analytics Department, Digital Government Projects Management Center in Tashkent - **Mirkomil Boboyorov**, CEO, SOS Group - **Lola Jabbarova**, Chief Inspector, Department of Financial Technologies, Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence, Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan / Researcher, University of World Economy and Diplomacy - **Moldir Utegenova**, Project Manager, International Centre for Journalism “MediaNet” - **Zuhra Halimova**, Senior Advisor, CAPS Unlock - **Altynbek Abishev**, Chairman, “Birlese Damu” Social Entrepreneurship Development Foundation
15:00 – 15:20	Coffee Break
SESSION IX: Central Asia 2030: Stability, Fragmentation, or Strategic Consolidation? **Chair: Islomkhon Gafarov**, Senior Lecturer, University of World Economy and Diplomacy	
15:20 – 16:20	**Panelists:** - **Rustam Makhmudov**, Leading Research Fellow, Institute for Advanced International Studies at UWED - **Assel Bitabar**, Teaching Professor, Maqsut Narikbayev University - **Shairbek Juraev**, Co-Founder & President, Crossroads Central Asia - **Rustam Azizi**, Research Director, PO “Tahlil” - **Selbi Hanova,** Development Coordination Office-Partnership Officer, United Nations Resident Coordinator’s Office in Uzbekistan
CLOSING SESSION	
16:20 – 16:40	Concluding Remarks by: - **Akram Umarov**, First Vice-Rector, University of World Economy and Diplomacy / Director, the Institute for Advanced International Studies

PROFILES

	**Sodyq Safoev** is a prominent Uzbek statesman, diplomat, economist and academic, with extensive experience in international relations, foreign policymaking and parliamentary diplomacy. He currently serves as First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED). Throughout his professional career, Prof. Safoev has occupied several senior positions in Uzbekistan's government and diplomatic service. He served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan from 2003 to 2005 and represented the country as Ambassador to the United States, Canada, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, as well as to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). His contributions have been recognised through several national distinctions, including the Mehnat Shuhrati Order (2004), the Do'stlik Order (2011) and the Fidokorona xizmatlari uchun Order (2019). He is fluent in Uzbek, Russian and English.
	**Javlon Vakhabov** is an Uzbek career diplomat who currently serves as the Deputy Advisor on Foreign Policy to the President of Uzbekistan and Director of the International Institute for Central Asia. Prior to his appointment, Mr. Vakhabov has served as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Uzbekistan to the United States (since 2017), as well as to Canada (since 2018) and Brazil (since 2021) with residence in Washington, D.C. Previously, in August of 2013, Mr. Vakhabov served as the Director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies. In November 2013, he joined the Foreign Ministry as one of four deputy ministers of foreign affairs. In July 2015, he was promoted to the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs.
	**Akram Umarov** is the First Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) and Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies at UWED. Dr. Umarov has a great interest in security studies, conflict management, public diplomacy, Afghanistan, Central Asian studies, CIS countries and development. Before joining IAIS, Dr. Umarov was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Center for Governance and Markets, University of Pittsburgh in the United States, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies and Academy of Public Administration under the President of Uzbekistan. Dr. Akram Umarov has earned an MA and PhD in International Relations from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. He also received an MA degree in Governance, Development and Public Policy from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex in the United Kingdom.
	**Maulen Ashimbayev** is a distinguished figure in Kazakhstan's political and institutional landscape, whose career has encompassed senior leadership roles in government, strategic policy development, legislative affairs and international parliamentary cooperation. He served as Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan from May 2020 to July 2026. He currently serves as the Chairman of Board of Trustees at Taldau AI Analytics (Kazakhstan). Throughout his professional career, he served as Director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2002–2005), Deputy Secretary of the Security Council (2005–2006), Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration (2006–2011), and Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security of the Mazhilis (2012–2018). He subsequently served as First Deputy Chairman of the Nur Otan Party (2018–2019) and First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration (2019–2020).

	**Renata Wróbel** graduated from the Department of German Philology of the University of Wroclaw and the Trade Department of the Oskar Lange Academy of Economics in Wroclaw. Upon completion of her studies, she worked on development and humanitarian aid projects in Mozambique and Malawi. In 2002-2006, she worked in the Administrative Department of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw. After Poland's accession to the EU, she was recruited by the Polish Economic and Legal Affairs Section of the European Commission's Directorate General for Translation in Luxembourg. Following her keen interest in foreign affairs, in 2007 she joined the European Commission's Directorate General for External Relations in Brussels (EU relations with Russia). In 2010-2018 she was posted to EU Delegations to Georgia and Belarus. After two years in the European External Action Service – Central Asia Division (2019-2021) in Brussels, she was posted to the EU Delegation to Turkmenistan. Currently she works as the Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to Uzbekistan.
	**Maria Adele Carrai** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations and the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA) at the University of Oxford, and a Fellow of St Cross College. She previously served as Assistant Professor of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai and taught as an adjunct at NYU School of Law. She has been an Associate at the Harvard University Asia Center since 2021 and an Adjunct Associate Research Scholar at Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute since 2019. Carrai is the founder and Executive Director of Mapping Global China, a research initiative that combines data and storytelling to build public-facing maps, datasets, and narrative outputs to better understand China's global presence. The project has received support from the British Academy, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Ford Foundation, and New York University (including NYU Shanghai). She has also a track record as an institution-builder and convener, developing collaborative research infrastructures and multi-stakeholder events that connect academic research with policy and public debate.
	**Askar Kushkunbayev** oversees strategic grantmaking and fundraising initiatives to advance the mission and strengthen the impact of CAPS Unlock. He supports program teams in developing high-quality projects, fosters effective collaboration with partners, and ensures that the grant portfolio aligns with the organization's strategic priorities. Askar also leads due diligence, risk assessment, and capacity-building processes for grantees and partners. He brings over ten years of experience in transparency, accountability, and civil society development.
	**Odil Gafarov** is a Deputy Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies at UWED. His research interests include unconventional warfare, counter-terrorism, and China's foreign policy and military strategy. He is a recognized security expert for the United Nations Office on Counter-terrorism (UNOCT), the European Commission, and other international organizations. Before pursuing his Ph.D. at Southern Illinois University, he coordinated projects in Uzbekistan on preventing violent extremism, including the rehabilitation and resocialization of repatriated Uzbek nationals from conflict zones. Previously, he managed youth development projects under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. He holds an M.A. in Economics and Management from Peking University, an M.A. in International Relations from Renmin University of China, and a B.A. in International Relations from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy.

	**Andrew C. Kuchins** is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the National Interest and Adjunct Professor at Johns Hopkins University SAIS. Dr. Kuchins has extensive experience in Central Asia, most recently serving as the President of the American University of Central Asia. He has also worked closely with the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs in two previous similar study tours in 2009, as part of a project he led at CSIS on the Northern Distribution Network, and in 2014 for a country study report on Uzbekistan as part of a large project on "Eurasia Reconnecting" also at CSIS**.**
	**Shao Yuqun** is a Senior Fellow of the Center for American Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, which is one of the leading think tanks in China on international relations, China's foreign policy and international strategy. Dr. Shao Yuqun's main research area includes US global strategy & foreign policy in general and its policy towards Asia Pacific in particular, US policy, and the cross-strait relations, China–US relations and US domestic politics. She also teaches US foreign policy for the SIIS MA program. She is a regular commentator for the CGTN in Beijing, Oriental TV in Shanghai, and contributes articles and comments for newspapers and websites in China.
	**Stanislav Pritchin** is the Head of the Central Asia Division at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) of Russian Academy of Sciences. He holds a PhD in History and serves as Head of the Central Asia Sector at the Center for Post-Soviet Studies of the IMEMO. His research focuses on political and economic developments in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, great-power relations in Eurasia, regional energy policies, and the geopolitics of the Caspian Sea. Previously, Dr. Pritchin worked at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and was a research fellow at Chatham House under the Robert Bosch Academy programme. He holds a Master of Advanced Studies in International and European Security from the University of Geneva.
	**Liliana Śmiech** serves as Director General for International Affairs at Ludovika University of Public Service *(Hungary)*. She is also Chairwoman of the Foundation Council of the Warsaw Institute, Research Assistant at the Krakow University of Economics, and a member of the Polish Economic Society. Previously, she was President of the Warsaw Institute and continues to serve on the Foundation Council of the Central and Eastern European Council. Additionally, she is a member of the Advisory Board of the Future Potentials Observatory. An alumna of International Business at the Krakow University of Economics and Energy Studies at the Warsaw School of Economics, Śmiech brings professional experience from the European Parliament and leading multinational corporations. Her main areas of interest include energy transition, security, and geopolitics, and she has co-authored research on energy poverty in the household sector.
	**Abbos Bobokhonov** is Head of the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies at the institute for Advanced International Studies at UWED. Dr. Abbos Bobokhonov obtained his Bachelor's degree, followed by a Master's degree from the National University of Uzbekistan. Previously, he served as a Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. From August 2024 to January 2025, he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Georgia State University (Atlanta, USA). His interests encompass contemporary Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, SCO, China's soft power initiatives, BRI, AIIB. He has authored over 15 research articles. At UWED he teaches various courses on Chinese studies, as well as on Chinese foreign policy.

	**Jessica Neafie** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Nazarbayev University. Prior to her hiring at Nazarbayev University, Dr. Neafie finished her Ph.D. at the University of Oregon (USA) in 2020 and served as a Non-Tenure Assistant Professor at Western Oregon University. Dr. Neafie also has an M.A. in Climate Science and Policy from Columbia University (2012), an M.A. in Diplomatic Studies from Westminster University (U.K., 2009) and a B.A. in Asian Studies and Political Science from the University of Florida (2003). Dr. Neafie's research focuses on various issues, including the impact of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) on the environment, the interactions between society and Multinational Corporations (MNCs), and the impacts of the Chinese Belt and Road initiative in Developing Countries. She has authored a peer reviewed article for Politikon.
	**Frank Maracchione** is a critical political economist and an International Relations scholar focusing on Global China and Central Asia. He is currently ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Studies, SOAS University of London, where he is working on a book manuscript based on his PhD on agency and coloniality in China's normative encounter with Uzbekistan, which he obtained at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. He has previously held a postdoc position at the University of Kent and was a visiting scholar at George Washington University, UWED Tashkent, Nazarbayev University, Universidad Austral. He is currently visiting Harvard University's Davis Centre. Frank's research looks at how local sociocultural norms and actors shape Global China with a regional focus on Central Asia (particularly Uzbekistan) and Latin America. He is board member and journal co-editor at the ASIAC Association for Studies of Central Asia, and co-convener of the East Europe and Eurasia working group at the British International Studies Association (BISA). Frank hosts the 'Ground Level: Everyday Political Economy' podcast series for the SPERI Presents podcast.
	**Qu Qiang** is Vice Dean of the School of Journalism and Communication and Vice Dean and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Area Studies, Minzu University of China, as well as Assistant Director of the International Monetary Institute at Renmin University of China. His research focuses on macroeconomics, international finance, area studies, international communication and artificial intelligence. He has been a Visiting Professor at the Center for Digital Economy and Big Data Analysis, Moscow State University (2022), a Visiting Scholar at the MIT Sloan School of Management (2019) and an Exchange Young Scholar at the University of Oxford (2011). He serves as an expert on international issues for the Premier's Office of the State Council, the Central Party School, the People's Bank of China, Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group, and is a regular commentator for CGTN, Russia-1, Bloomberg, SCMP, Phoenix TV and CNA, among others. He holds a PhD in Economics from Renmin University of China.
	**Jildiz Nicharapova** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), where she has taught since 2023, and a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Central Asia Program, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University (2026–2027). She holds a doctorate in Political Science from Sciences Po Aix, Aix-Marseille University, France, and has been an invited professor at universities in France, Germany and Poland. Her research focuses on the SCO, the BRI, the EAEU, China–Kyrgyzstan relations, Russia and China in Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy.

	**Bekzod Zakirov** is the course leader of International Relations and Law at Westminster International University in Tashkent. He was a director of the Center for Policy Research and Outreach (CPRO) at the same university. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the University of Tokyo, where he specialized in political economy of economic decision making in Russia and China. His academic background includes a Master's degree in Law from Nagoya University and dual Bachelor's degrees in Law and Business Administration from both Nagoya University and the National University of Uzbekistan. Dr. Zakirov's research focuses on the political economy of Central Asian countries, Chinese investment in Central Asia and critical minerals strategies.
	**Assel G. Bitabar** is a Teaching Professor at Maqsut Narikbayev University, where she teaches international relations, and a Fellow at the SAIS China Research Center, Johns Hopkins University. Her research focuses on contemporary Sino-Central Asian relations, with broader interests in China's foreign policy and international politics in Central Asia. She is a co-author of Bridging Borders: Central Asian Cross-Border Cooperation in a Comparative Global Perspective (Springer, 2025).
	**Mubin Abduvaliev**, PhD, is a scholar and expert in regional integration and migration with a focus on Central Asia. He has worked as a consultant and project coordinator for the Asian Development Bank, the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, the Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia and the OSI Foundation. He holds a PhD from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Spain. His research has been supported by the Fulbright Visiting Scholar Program, Erasmus, the ADB–CAREC Institute, the Belt and Road Initiative Program and the International Visitor Leadership Program.
	**Jian Lian** is a Distinguished Adjunct Research Fellow at the Institute for Area Studies, Minzu University of China. A graduate of the National School of Development at Peking University, he has worked since the late 2000s at major international and Chinese investment banks and, in the later 2010s, at Chinese national-level venture capital funds. He was closely involved in the implementation of the "Made in China 2025" initiative and played a role at critical stages in the development of China's electric vehicle industry. Drawing on extensive knowledge of the history and trajectories of Chinese industrial sectors, he has also conducted original research in monetary theory, developing a systematic framework known as the "Theory of Monetary Circulation." He has advised several developing countries on their cooperation with China and has spoken at international forums in Russia, Hungary and China on global trends, infrastructure development and BRICS cooperation, including as an invited adviser to the National Center Russia.
	**Irna Hofman** is a Lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, and an Honorary Research Associate at the School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford. She is a rural development sociologist specialising in social and agrarian change in Central Asia, and has undertaken extensive fieldwork in rural Central Asia centred on agrarian change and the everyday politics of Global China. Her current project examines Chinese agri-tech in Central Asia. From 2019 to 2022 she was a postdoctoral research associate at the University of Oxford in the ERC-funded "China, Law and Development" project. She received her PhD from Leiden University in 2019.

	**Lea Tries** is a European Union official specialising in foreign policy cooperation, international partnerships and the implementation of EU-funded initiatives. She currently serves as Programme Manager at the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), which supports the implementation of the European Union's external policy priorities, particularly in the areas of peace, security, conflict prevention and regional stability. Her professional activities include engagement with Central Asian countries and cooperation with international organisations and regional institutions. She has also been involved in institutional dialogue between the European Union and Uzbekistan, including discussions on expanding cooperation between European and Central Asian diplomatic, academic and research institutions.
	**Aziza Umarova** is the Head of the Zero Bureaucracy and Innovation Office at the Agency for Strategic Development and Reforms under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, where she oversees initiatives aimed at reducing administrative barriers, strengthening government performance and improving public service delivery. Previously, she held senior positions within UNDP, including responsibilities for governance programmes in Uzbekistan and public sector innovation at UNDP's Global Centre for Public Service Excellence in Singapore. She has also worked as an international consultant on public administration reform and participated in governance-related initiatives associated with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). A Chevening Scholar, Ms Umarova holds a Master's degree from the University of St Andrews. She was a Visiting Fellow at Harvard University's Davis Center and pursued executive education in Strategy and Innovation at the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School.
	**Azamat Sulimanov** is the Head of Department, Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Throughout his professional career, Mr. Sulimanov has contributed to policy research and expert discussions examining Uzbekistan's foreign policy priorities, regional integration, cross-border cooperation and the development of strategic partnerships with neighbouring countries. His research and analytical publications address Central Asian political and economic cooperation, transport and logistics connectivity, regional security and the institutionalisation of multilateral dialogue. Mr. Sulimanov holds a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from Kazan Federal University and a Master's degree in International Relations from Saint Petersburg State University.
	**Lucile Bardin** serves as Afghanistan and Central Asia Programme Officer at CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation. Since joining CMI in 2016, Ms Bardin has worked across several conflict contexts within the OSCE region, including the South Caucasus and Moldova, contributing to initiatives aimed at strengthening dialogue, confidence-building and sustainable peace. In her current role, she supports CMI's engagement in Afghanistan and its expanding activities in Central Asia. Earlier in her career, she contributed to French public and cultural diplomacy as Language and Education Officer at the French Embassy in Chisinau, Moldova. Based in Brussels, Ms Bardin holds a dual Master's degree from Sciences Po Lille and the University of Münster, as well as a Master's degree in Nationalism Studies from Central European University in Budapest. She is also a member of the Steering Committee of Women in International Security (WIIS) Brussels and speaks French, English, Russian and German.

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