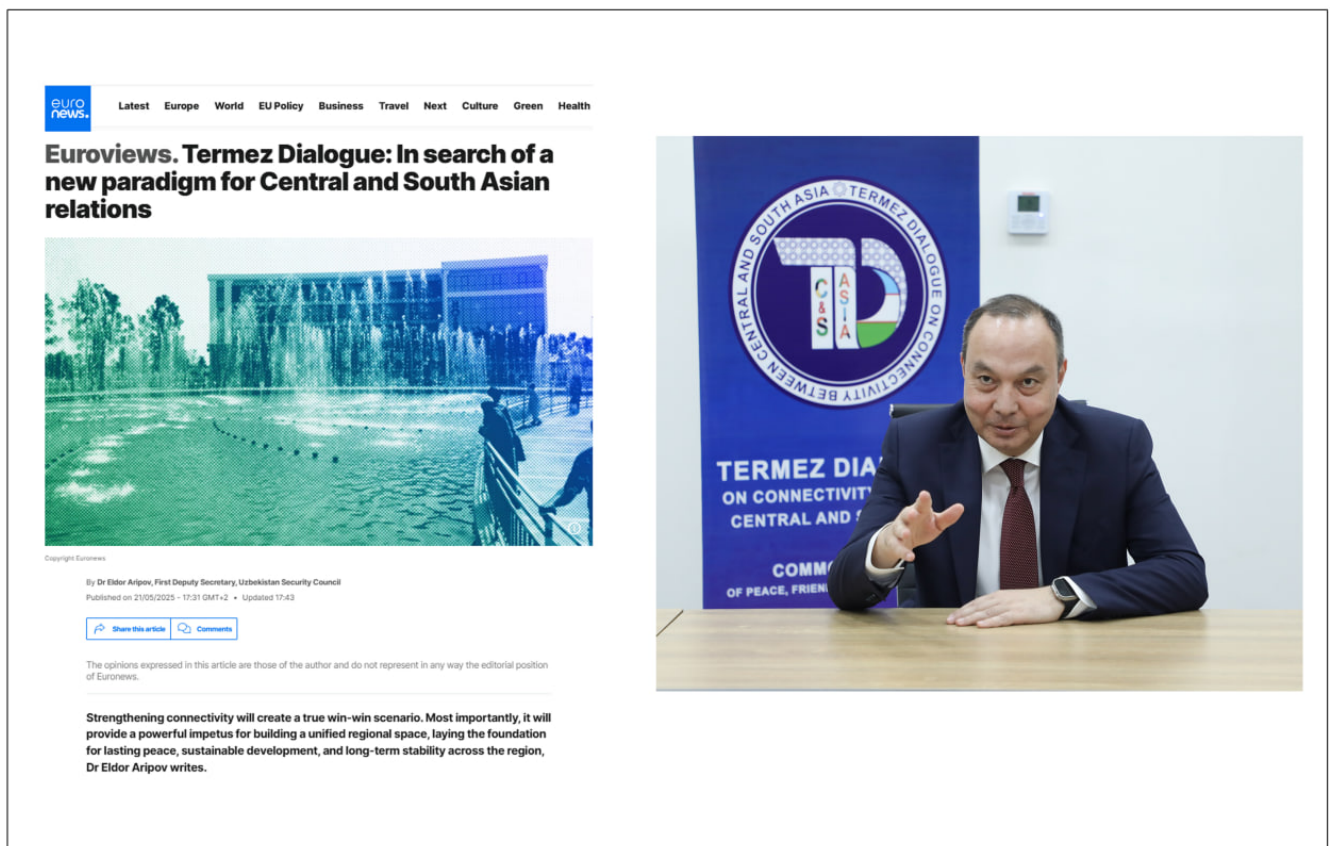


Termez Dialogue: In search of a new paradigm for Central and South Asian relations



Strengthening connectivity will create a true win-win scenario. Most importantly, it will provide a powerful impetus for building a unified regional space, laying the foundation for lasting peace, sustainable development, and long-term stability across the region, Dr Eldor Aripov writes.

From Monday to Wednesday, Uzbekistan's historic city of Termez will host the inaugural meeting of the Termez Dialogue on Connectivity between Central and South Asia, bringing together a wide and diverse range of participants from nearly every part of the world.

Focusing on "Building a Common Space of Peace, Friendship, and Prosperity," it will include representatives of foreign ministries, chambers of commerce and industry, heads of international and regional organisations, as well as distinguished scholars and policy experts from leading research institutions and think tanks.

It is essential to highlight that the Termez Dialogue is not an isolated initiative. Rather, it is a natural and strategic continuation of Uzbekistan's long-term efforts to deepen the connectivity between Central and South Asia.

In July 2021, at the initiative of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan hosted the High-Level International Conference "Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity – Challenges and Opportunities."

A year later, building on the momentum of that conference, Uzbekistan led the adoption of a special resolution by the United Nations General Assembly titled "Strengthening Connectivity between Central and South Asia." This resolution laid the conceptual groundwork for enhanced engagement and cooperation between the two regions.

The forum in Termez serves as the practical embodiment of that resolution. It is designed to become a standing platform for dialogue — one that will define future pathways for interregional integration, and

contribute to the maintenance of peace, security, and long-term stability across the vast Eurasian space.

The high level of participants and the multilateral format of the Termez Dialogue are clear indicators of its global relevance and timeliness.

Notable guests include Roza Otunbayeva, Head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Kakha Imnadze, Head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and Sabina Machel, the UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan.

Senior officials from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, and other major international bodies will also participate.

In addition, the Forum will feature experts from some of the world's most respected think tanks, including the Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute (US), the Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (Finland), the Berghof Foundation (Germany), the Indian Council of World Affairs, the Observer Research Foundation (India), the Pakistan Institute for Strategic Studies, and the Institute of Russia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, among others.

A critical node of interregional connectivity In a world increasingly marked by fragmentation and crises, fostering connectivity, cooperation, mutual trust, and open, constructive dialogue is not merely idealistic — it is essential. Strengthening regional linkages creates a foundation for identifying mutually acceptable solutions to shared challenges and enhances our collective ability to counter threats and disruptions.

Hosting the forum in Termez is especially symbolic. Situated at the confluence of Central and South Asia, Termez occupies a critical node of interregional connectivity.

For centuries, Termez has served as a crossroads of civilisations and a centre for intercultural, interfaith, and cross-border dialogue. The traditions of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all took root and flourished in this city.

It was once a meeting point of ancient empires, including the Greco-Bactrian and Kushan kingdoms. Under the rule of the Timurid dynasty, Termez reached its zenith as a center of administration, trade, and scientific inquiry.

Thanks to its strategic location, Termez historically secured its status as a vital transit hub. Long before the Silk Road became famous, the ancient northern trade route known as Uttarapatha connected India with Central Asia, passing directly through Termez. The city played a critical role in safeguarding the main crossing over the Amu Darya River, supporting countless caravans, and emerging as a thriving regional trade centre.

Today, Termez is undergoing a remarkable period of modernisation, reclaiming its historical role as a bridge between Central and South Asia. It now proudly serves as the southern gateway of Uzbekistan.

Year by year, new infrastructure projects transform the city, creating favourable conditions for strengthening regional connectivity. For example, last year, the 36-hectare Airtom International Trade Center was opened in Termez. Citizens of Pakistan and Afghanistan can stay visa-free for up to 15 days in the centre. The complex houses production facilities, retail shops, restaurants, hotels, clinics, and advanced training centres.

This project plays a crucial role in facilitating trade and the export of industrial and consumer goods produced by businesses in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other neighbouring countries.

The Termez-Cargo Centre, an international multifunctional transport and logistics hub, also plays a critical

humanitarian role. It serves as a key intermediary for the delivery of international aid, not only to Afghanistan but also to Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan.

Since 2021, over 144,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid — including essential food supplies such as flour and grain, medicines, tents, solar lamps, and other necessities — have been dispatched through this hub.

The agenda of the Termez Dialogue addresses a wide range of topics, from trade and economic cooperation to cultural and humanitarian collaboration, as well as pressing issues of regional security.

At the heart of these discussions is the economic agenda, which remains the cornerstone and driving force behind cooperation between Central and South Asia. The growing interest in South Asia is no coincidence—it is the fastest-growing region in the world.

In 2024, South Asia's GDP reached \$4.9 trillion, accounting for approximately 4.5% of global output. If the current pace of economic development continues, South Asia is well-positioned to take a leading role in shaping Asia's economic future. According to the Boao Forum for Asia's Economic Outlook and Integration Progress in Asia – 2025, South Asia's economy is projected to grow by 5.9% this year, outpacing Western Asia (2.9%), Eastern Asia (4.3%), and even Central Asia (5%).

Yet, despite this proximity and immense economic potential, trade between Central and South Asia remains modest. Annual trade turnover stands at just \$5 billion — a fraction of the \$55 billion in trade between Central Asia and the much more distant European Union.

To unlock the full potential of this relationship, it is crucial to simplify trade procedures, establish diversified and efficient transport corridors, and expand regional energy infrastructure. Attracting mutual investments for major infrastructure projects, developing the digital economy, and fostering innovation will also play a vital role.

Trade volumes are already on the rise. Expanding trade and economic ties depend directly on improving transportation connectivity. However, current transport and logistics routes between Central and South Asia remain underdeveloped, and existing infrastructure cannot support the growing demand for cross-border trade. This remains a significant obstacle to deeper economic ties.

For the landlocked nations of Central Asia, diversifying trade and transport routes is a strategic imperative. Creating new pathways will provide a powerful boost to regional economic growth.

In this context, the timely implementation of the Trans-Afghan Corridor has become a top priority. This project holds strategic importance not only for Central Asia but also for South Asia. Once completed, it will offer the shortest access to the seaports of the Indian Ocean, connecting South Asia with the markets of Central Asia, Russia, China, and Europe.

Encouragingly, trade volumes through this corridor are already on the rise. Between 2021 and 2024, the volume of cargo transported along the Trans-Afghan Corridor — with Uzbekistan's active participation — more than doubled, growing from 1.8 million tonnes to 4 million tonnes.

In this way, strengthening connectivity will create a true win-win scenario. Most importantly, it will provide a powerful impetus for building a unified regional space, laying the foundation for lasting peace, sustainable development, and long-term stability across the region. All nations stand to benefit from this shared vision.

In this spirit, the Termez Dialogue will offer a new paradigm for relations between Central and South Asia — one built not on conflict and confrontation, but on the principles of cooperation and shared prosperity.

It is expected that the Termez Dialogue will conclude with the adoption of a joint communiqué, reaffirming the shared commitment of all participants to strengthen trust and cooperation for the collective good of Central and South Asia.

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