

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: February

Year: 2026

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Negi, Chandra Prabha. "No TitleaCentral Asia's Energy Diplomacy in the Global South Amid Great Power Competition." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S2, 2026, pp. 190–95.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-Feb.10211>

# Central Asia's Energy Diplomacy in the Global South Amid Great Power Competition

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## Abstract

*The Global South has emerged as an important analytical lens for understanding contemporary international relations in the context of shifting power structures and the transition toward a multipolar world order. (Acharya, 2018) Within this framework, energy diplomacy has become a crucial instrument through which Global South countries pursue development, security, and greater strategic autonomy. This paper examines Central Asia's energy diplomacy from a Global South perspective, focusing on how the region navigates growing competition among major powers while advancing its own political, economic, and developmental priorities. (Pomfret, 2019).*

*Historically located at the crossroads of civilizations, Central Asia occupies a distinctive position in global politics due to its post-Soviet transformation, strategic geography, and shared developmental challenges with other regions of the Global South. Despite its geopolitical and energy significance, Central Asia remains underrepresented in Global South framework, which has largely focused on Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This paper seeks to address this gap by situating Central Asia more firmly within Global South discourse.*

*Much of the existing literature interprets Central Asia primarily through a geopolitical lens, portraying the region as a passive arena of great power rivalry over energy resources. Such approaches tend to overlook the agency of Central Asian states and their capacity to shape external engagements. Adopting a Global South perspective, this study emphasizes historical experience, development concerns, and state agency to better understand how Central Asian countries employ energy diplomacy to pursue national interests, diversify partnerships, and reduce external dependence.*

*The paper argues that Central Asia's energy diplomacy reflects broader Global South strategies aimed at balancing external pressures while asserting autonomy in international affairs. By engaging with multilateral platforms and South-South cooperation initiatives, Central Asian states are increasingly contributing to alternative forms of global governance. Overall, the study offers a more nuanced understanding of Central Asia as an active participant in international relations and contributes to wider debates on development, power, and cooperation within the Global South.*

**Keywords:** Global South, Central Asia, Energy Diplomacy, International Relations, South- South Cooperation

## Introduction

Central Asia has emerged as a strategically significant energy-producing region in contemporary global politics, particularly within the evolving dynamics of the Global South. Rich in hydrocarbons

and located at the crossroads of major geopolitical regions, Central Asian states increasingly deploy energy diplomacy as a tool to enhance sovereignty, development, and international standing.

Energy has long been a defining factor in international relations, shaping geopolitical strategies, economic interdependence, and patterns of global governance. In the contemporary era, the politics of energy has acquired renewed significance due to rising demand from emerging economies, concerns over energy security, and the transition toward a multipolar international system. Within this evolving global context, the Global South has gained analytical prominence as a category that captures the political, economic, and developmental aspirations of states seeking greater autonomy and influence in world affairs. (Strange,1998)

Central Asia, endowed with substantial oil, natural gas, and uranium resources, occupies a critical yet often under-theorized position in this transformation. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have been compelled to redefine their foreign policies, manage external dependencies, and integrate into global markets under conditions shaped by historical legacies and structural constraints. Energy diplomacy has emerged as one of the most important tools through which these states engage the international system.

Despite its strategic relevance, Central Asia is frequently portrayed in international relations literature as a passive space of great power competition, particularly in relation to energy transit and resource control. Such narratives marginalize the agency of Central Asian states and obscure their active participation in shaping diplomatic and economic outcomes. This paper challenges these interpretations by adopting a Global South perspective that foregrounds development, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy.

By examining Central Asia's energy diplomacy within the Global South framework, this study seeks to re-conceptualize the region as an active actor navigating great power competition while pursuing its own developmental priorities. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on Global South agency, multipolarity, and the political economy of energy.

### **The Global South as an Analytical Framework**

The concept of the Global South emerged from post-colonial and dependency theories that sought to explain enduring inequalities in the global political economy. (Santos,1970) Traditionally associated with regions that experienced colonial domination and economic marginalization, the Global South today represents a more dynamic and heterogeneous grouping of states navigating globalization, development, and power asymmetries.

In contemporary international relations framework, the Global South is increasingly understood not merely as a condition of underdevelopment but as a site of political agency and normative innovation. States within the Global South actively shape international institutions, promote alternative development models, and challenge Western-centric frameworks of global governance. This shift is particularly evident in the growing emphasis on South-South cooperation and multipolar diplomacy. (Acharya 2018)

Applying the Global South framework to Central Asia allows for a reinterpretation of the region's international engagement. Although Central Asia does not share a colonial history identical to that of Africa or Latin America, its post-Soviet experience of economic restructuring, political transition, and external dependency parallels many Global South trajectories. The

Global South lens thus provides a conceptual bridge for situating Central Asia within wider debates on development, sovereignty, and global power. (Ayoob,1995)

## **Energy Diplomacy in International Relations**

Energy diplomacy refers to the strategic use of energy resources, infrastructure, and markets to advance national interests and foreign policy objectives. (Cherp & Jewell, 2014) In international relations theory, energy diplomacy intersects with realism, liberal institutionalism, and political economy approaches.

From a realist perspective, energy resources are strategic assets that enhance state power and bargaining capacity. Control over production and transit routes can shape geopolitical outcomes, particularly in regions characterized by competition among major powers. Liberal approaches, by contrast, emphasize interdependence and cooperation, viewing energy diplomacy as a means of fostering stability and mutual benefit. Political economy perspectives highlight how energy markets reproduce patterns of dependency or enable pathways to development. (Strange, 1998).

For Global South states, energy diplomacy is often closely linked to development strategies. Resource revenues finance infrastructure, social welfare, and state-building efforts, while external partnerships provide access to technology and investment. However, reliance on energy exports also creates vulnerabilities, making diversification and strategic autonomy central concerns. These dynamics are especially pronounced in Central Asia, where geography and historical legacies shape energy choices. (Ayoob,1995)

## **Central Asia's Energy Profile and Strategic Context**

Central Asia possesses some of the world's largest reserves of oil and natural gas, particularly in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These resources form the backbone of national economies and constitute a primary source of export revenue. (Promfret,2019) At the same time, the region's landlocked geography imposes significant constraints, requiring reliance on cross-border infrastructure and external transit routes.

Historically, Central Asia's energy exports were oriented toward a limited set of markets, reinforcing patterns of dependency. Since independence, regional states have sought to diversify export routes and partners as part of broader efforts to assert sovereignty and reduce vulnerability. Energy diplomacy thus became a central component of multi-vector foreign policies aimed at balancing external relationships.

The strategic significance of Central Asia's energy resources has attracted the attention of major powers, intensifying geopolitical competition. However, focusing solely on external rivalry risks overlooking the ways in which Central Asian states actively negotiate, resist, and shape these interactions to serve domestic and regional priorities. (Narlikar,2010)

## **Central Asia and the Global South: Shared Developmental Concerns**

Central Asia shares several structural and developmental characteristics with other regions of the Global South, including dependence on primary commodities, state-led development strategies, and concerns over economic diversification. These similarities underpin the region's growing engagement with Global South partners and multilateral platforms.

Energy cooperation within the Global South is often framed in terms of mutual benefit, sovereignty, and non-interference. Central Asian states increasingly adopt this discourse in their external engagements, presenting energy partnerships as development-oriented rather than extractive. Such narratives resonate domestically and enhance diplomatic legitimacy. (Acharya,2018).

By aligning energy diplomacy with Global South norms, Central Asian states seek to reposition themselves within the international system as equal partners rather than peripheral suppliers. This repositioning reflects broader efforts to construct alternative forms of global governance that prioritize development and autonomy. (Hurrell,2007)

### **Energy Diplomacy amid Great Power Competition**

Great power competition remains a defining feature of Central Asia's strategic environment. Competing interests over energy resources, infrastructure, and regional influence create both opportunities and constraints for Central Asian states. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single power, regional governments pursue multi-vector diplomacy to maximize autonomy. (Buzan & Weaver, 2023)

Energy diplomacy plays a crucial role in this balancing strategy. By diversifying export markets and attracting investment from multiple partners, Central Asian states reduce dependence on any one actor. This approach enhances bargaining power and mitigates risks associated with geopolitical volatility.

From a Global South perspective, this strategy reflects broader efforts by developing states to navigate structural asymmetries while retaining agency. Central Asia's experience demonstrates that even in contexts of intense great power rivalry, smaller states can shape outcomes through strategic choice and diplomatic flexibility. (Acharya, 2018)

### **Central Asia's Energy Diplomacy with the Global South Asia**

Asian economies constitute the most significant partners for Central Asian energy exporters. Rapid industrialization and urbanization have increased demand for stable energy supplies, making long-term cooperation mutually beneficial (IEA, 2022). Energy pipelines and infrastructure investments have strengthened regional connectivity and reduced reliance on traditional routes. From a Global South perspective, these partnerships are framed as mutually beneficial development projects rather than hierarchical dependencies. This framing enhances Central Asia's diplomatic leverage and reinforces its role in South-South cooperation (Narlikar, 2010).

### **West Asia and Africa**

Engagement with the West Asia and Africa remains limited but symbolically important. Investment cooperation, financial flows, and technology transfer reflect emerging South-South linkages beyond traditional geopolitical alignments (Mawdsley, 2012).

Such engagements diversify Central Asia's diplomatic portfolio and support its aspiration to function as a bridge between different regions of the Global South (Acharya, 2018).

### **South-South Cooperation and Multilateral Engagement**

South-South cooperation has become an increasingly important dimension of Central Asia's external relations. Energy partnerships with emerging economies, participation in regional organizations, and engagement with multilateral development frameworks illustrate the region's expanding diplomatic repertoire. (Mawdsley, 2012)

These initiatives serve both practical and symbolic purposes. Practically, they provide access to markets, finance, and technology. Symbolically, they reinforce Central Asia's identification with the Global South and its commitment to alternative development pathways.

Multilateral engagement also allows Central Asian states to amplify their voices in global forums and contribute to debates on energy governance, sustainability, and development. Through such participation, the region increasingly influences norms and practices beyond its immediate neighborhood. (Ayooob, 1995)

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven research methodology. It relies on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy analyses, international organization reports, and

official government documents. (Creswell,2014) The focus is on interpretive analysis rather than quantitative measurement.

The methodological approach combines Global South theory with international relations perspectives on energy diplomacy and strategic balancing. By synthesizing these frameworks, the study captures both structural constraints and state agency. Comparative analysis is employed to situate Central Asia alongside other Global South regions while recognizing its unique historical and geopolitical context. ( George & Bennett, 2005)

This approach is particularly suited to examining the normative, political, and strategic dimensions of energy diplomacy, which are not easily reducible to empirical indicators alone.

### Implications for International Relations

Central Asia's energy diplomacy has important implications for international relations theory and practice. First, it challenges state-centric and great-power-dominated narratives by highlighting the agency of smaller states. (Hurrell,2007) Second, it expands Global South to incorporating post-Soviet regions into its analytical scope. (Acharya,2018)

The region's experience also illustrates the interconnectedness of development, energy security, and diplomacy. Energy is not merely an economic resource but a political instrument that shapes international alignments and governance structures.

Finally, Central Asia's engagement with the Global South contributes to the gradual reconfiguration of global order, supporting multipolarity and pluralism in international relations. (Strange, 1998)

### Conclusion

Central Asia's energy diplomacy reflects a broader Global South strategy of navigating external pressures while asserting autonomy and pursuing development. Rather than serving as a passive arena of great power competition, the region demonstrates significant agency in shaping its international engagements. (Narlikar,2010)

By leveraging energy resources through multi-vector diplomacy and South-South cooperation, Central Asian states enhance strategic flexibility and contribute to alternative forms of global governance. This study underscores the importance of rethinking Central Asia's place in international relations and recognizing its role as an active participant in the evolving Global South.

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