

INTRODUCTION

The CAREC region — encompassing Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and two provinces of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region) — represents a critical land bridge on the Euro-Asian supercontinent, connecting Asia with Europe as well as North Asia with South Asia. It provides important overland transport corridors that facilitate trade across the entire Euro-Asian continental space. Improved connectivity across the region is also critical for the integration of the CAREC regional markets and for linking the land-locked member countries to global markets.

The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program was created in 2000 by six countries (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, PRC, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) with the support of six international institutions (ADB, EBRD, IMF, Islamic Development Bank, UNDP, and the World Bank) to encourage regional cooperation among the member countries, especially in the areas of transport and transport facilitation, trade and trade facilitation, and energy. Since then CAREC has expanded its membership to 11 members and broadened its mandate to cover a wide range of substantive topics, including not only its traditional focus areas, but also agriculture, education, health, water, tourism, gender, and ICT/digital. Under the CAREC umbrella, as of December 2021, member governments and development partners have invested USD41 billion in improved infrastructure, capacity building, and policy reform.

The CAREC Institute was established by the CAREC member countries in 2009 as an international organization, initially operating virtually, but since 2015 functioning as a physical entity with its headquarters in Urumqi, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (PRC). The goal of the institute is to assist CAREC and its member countries with research, knowledge sharing, and capacity building to support economic cooperation and integration among CAREC countries. One of the key events organized by the CAREC Institute is its Annual

Research Conference, with the second CAREC Institute Research Conference having taken place on 11-12 April 2022 on the theme 'Resilience and Economic Growth in Times of High Uncertainty in the CAREC Region.' This volume compiles selected research papers presented at the second research conference.

This introduction briefly traces the history of research on regional cooperation and integration in Central Asia, by revisiting a milestone report prepared by UNDP in 2005 in partnership with ADB and the World Bank, the '2005 Central Asia Human Development Report: Bringing down barriers: Regional cooperation for human development and human security' (CAHDR). By highlighting the main findings and messages of the CAHDR, by assessing which of them remain relevant for the CAREC region today, and by identifying gaps in the analysis of the report, the stage is set for an overview of the papers in this volume and their contribution to further advance the understanding of regional cooperation opportunities and challenges in the CAREC region.

THE 2005 CENTRAL ASIA HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT: FINDINGS AND LESSONS FROM PAST RESEARCH

The CAHDR was the first report of its kind for Central Asia. It covered the five former Soviet Republics of Central Asia and was prepared by an interdisciplinary team of international experts for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), with strong participation of Central Asia experts and national advisory groups for each country. The focus of the report was on regional cooperation for human development and security. The coverage of issues was broad, including: (i) history and human development trends; (ii) trade and investment; (iii) natural resources: water, energy, and the environment; (iv) regional threats: natural disasters, drugs, crime, and terrorism; (v) the social development challenge:

migration, health, education, and gender; (vi) political and institutional constraints and opportunities; and (vii) cooperation with neighbors and international partners.

Overarching messages

The report's overarching messages include the following:

- Central Asia is a pivotal region and land bridge at the heart of Euro-Asia, surrounded by some of the world's largest and most dynamic economies;
- Increased regional cooperation and economic integration will produce big gains with a regional economy potentially twice as large as in 2015 relative to 2005; costs of non-cooperation are high (lost economic opportunity, disease, natural disasters, environmental destruction, conflict, and insecurity);
- The most important areas for cooperation are trade and transit, water, energy, disaster preparedness;
- Border barriers need to be drastically lowered — CA needs borders with a 'human face';
- Domestic policy reforms (including social policy) and good governance need to complement regional cooperation; and
- The UN Secretary General should appoint a special envoy and representative to follow up on the recommendations in this report.

These overarching messages were buttressed by a set of sector and theme-specific messages.

Trade and investment

Central Asia's economies were found to suffer from severe formal and informal border barriers, with the report providing estimates of the time and cost implications. These barriers were reinforced by complex and opaque trade policies, by poor and poorly

maintained transport infrastructure (road, rail, air), by wasteful investments to avoid border crossings, and unsupportive 'behind the border' business and transit conditions. The report included the following recommendations:

- WTO accession and possibly a Central Asia common market as a long-term goal;
- Trade and transport facilitation (TTF) policies;
- Improved infrastructure nationally and regionally;
- Reform of behind border business conditions;
- Creation of an effective regional organization; and
- International support for regional cooperation.

In the years following the report's publication, CAREC picked up on this agenda with the development of the CAREC corridors, transport investments, and some progress on the TTF agenda. The UNDP followed up with more analytical work on Central Asian regional trade, migration, and remittances (UNDP 2015). Investments under the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative also supported infrastructure development; however, significant barriers remain at the borders, reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Water, energy, environment

The report showed dramatic inefficiencies in the domestic management of water and energy that needed to be rectified. It further noted that regional cooperation was essential to optimize the development, sharing, and export of water and energy. It also highlighted a large number of water and environmental hotspots, including the Aral Sea disaster, dam safety, water-related cross-border community conflicts, radioactive tailings, and water and air pollution. The report quantified the potential losses from the mismanagement of the region's natural resources as well as the benefits from remedial action. It recommended the following steps:

- Improvement in national water, energy, and environmental management;

- Regional cooperation on cross-border water, energy, and environmental issues;
- Engagement with civil society in addressing these issues and cross-border community cooperation;
- Regional and international organizations to focus on these issues (including support for the adoption of global conventions).

Progress made on these issues has been limited. CAREC has focused on support for recreating the regional electricity grid and its effective management and recently prepared an energy strategy (CAREC 2010). The World Bank and other international funders supported the development of a major electricity transmission line from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan (CASA1000). CAREC did not deal with water issues until recently but is now focused squarely on this issue with its 'Water Pillar'; many fundamental challenges remain in managing national and regional water resources and environmental threats.

Natural disasters, drugs, crime, and terrorism

The CAHDR identified significant regional threats from major natural disaster risks (especially earthquakes), from cross-border drug trade and drug-related crime, terrorism threats emanating especially from Afghanistan, limited national and regional risk preparedness and response capacity and a narrow focus on security solutions, rather than on risk preparedness and on underlying societal drivers of these regional threats. The report made the following recommendations:

- Development of comprehensive national risk response and reduction strategies, balancing security and social aspects;
- Building capacity for national disaster preparedness and response;
- Cooperation with neighboring countries and preparation of regional disaster responses;
- A response from regional and international organizations focusing on these risks.

The UNDP engaged in a follow-up program of work on disaster risk that culminated in the publication of a synthesis report in 2013 (Thurman 2013). However, many of the risks identified in the CAHDR remain today and will need continued attention on a national and regional basis.

Migration, health, education, gender

The CAHDR report highlighted that Central Asia faces common challenges in managing migration, restoring quality health services and responding to epidemic threats, improving education and advanced skills acquisition, and stemming the erosion of women's rights. The region's migration and health threats have important regional dimensions, while education and gender issues are predominantly national in nature. The report recommended regional action in a number of areas, including:

- Exchange of experience on best practice, establishment of common standards and norms, and support for information and knowledge exchange;
- Allowing cross-border access to education and health services for border communities; and
- Regional and international organizations to support regionwide initiatives to improve social conditions, including migration and gender related.

As noted earlier, UNDP (2015) focused on migration and remittances in Central Asia, building on the analysis of CAHDR. CAREC prepared a health strategy (CAREC 2021) and a gender strategy (CAREC 2022). However, the social issues identified in CAHDR remain important today, reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing challenges in education and health systems, and continued migration pressures and gender equality issues.

Political and institutional constraints

The CAHDR noted a number of political and institutional constraints to regional cooperation. National authorities were more concerned with protecting than with sharing national sovereignty in the early years after independence. Legitimate cross-border activities were often stifled (especially for small businesses and traders), while illegal ones (smuggling, drug trade, and so on) were overlooked by the authorities. Corruption was pervasive. This could lead to a potential vicious cycle, as poor governance leads to rising popular resentment and opposition is in turn crushed by increasing government control. These factors were seen to limit regional cooperation. The report recommended the following actions:

- Liberalization of economic and political systems with greater transparency and accountability;
- Pursuit of regional cooperation as part of a beneficial cycle, with economic and social gains underpinning reforms;
- Regional organizations to organize peer reviews of reforms, conflict resolution, and support for CSOs; and
- International organizations to support governance and institutional reforms.

Many of these problems persist today and still interfere with effective regional cooperation.

Cooperation with neighbors and international partners

The report noted that Russia and (increasingly) China are the principal neighbors for Central Asia with many political and economic ties, but also that Afghanistan and Iran are important neighbors. The International Monetary Fund, multilateral development banks (MDBs), and UN agencies are the principal international partners, and their support for CAREC is a significant opportunity. All neighbors and partners are fundamentally interested in a stable, prosperous, transit-friendly CA region, but have a limited focus on supporting

regional economic integration and cooperation and are constrained in addressing key governance obstacles. The report made the following recommendations:

- An expanded scale of engagement, especially by the international development partners;
- A focus by partners not only on national economic and social development, but also on regional economic cooperation;
- Support governance reforms;
- More coordination across partners;
- Help for building strong regional organizations (including CAREC);
- Appointment of a UN special envoy to encourage and support the authorities in increasing their regional cooperation.

In fact, no UN special envoy was appointed and no regional organization with an exclusive focus on the five Central Asia republics was established, while CAREC expanded its membership as noted earlier. Selective regional initiatives for Central Asia have been developed by multilateral and bilateral development partners, focused on specific areas of cooperation (such as, in the area of disaster prevention and early warning). ADB focused much of its attention and resources on supporting CAREC and the CAREC Institute.

Scenarios

The CAHDR developed five scenarios of possible cooperation, ranging from a most pessimistic one with largely closed borders, very weak regional institutions, and very narrow and superficial cooperation to the most optimistic one, leading to deep integration, with open borders, strong formal regional organizations, and broad and deep cooperation. Both extreme scenarios — the most pessimistic and the most ambitious (deep integration) — were regarded as unlikely. The most likely scenario was seen to be an intermediate one (cluster integration) with a subset of countries in the region cooperating more closely than others. A more optimistic was also considered,

involving more universal cooperation among the countries, with relatively open borders, strengthened regional institutions, and a wider range of areas with relatively intensive cooperation. The actual outcome over the last 15 years falls in the middle range of the scenarios. Since Uzbekistan opened up its economy and developed a more cooperative approach after a change in government in 2016, the prospects for improved cooperation have brightened considerably, but many challenges remain.

Lessons for research on Central Asian regional cooperation

In retrospect, the CAHDR had some strengths worth remembering for research on Central Asia. It had a clear focus on regional cooperation at a time when nation-building was still the principal focus for national authorities. It had a comprehensive coverage and interdisciplinary approach and team, and an explicit focus on social and governance aspects. It took an 'inside-out' perspective by relying extensively on experts from Central Asia, and it drew on an opinion survey to bring in the views of the wider population on the issues. In terms of an 'outside-in' perspective, the report relied on cooperation between UNDP, ADB, and the World Bank. The CAHDR argued not only in qualitative terms, but also tried to quantify the benefits of cooperation and of costs/losses of non-cooperation/inaction. It explored alternative cooperation scenarios and their implications and tailored its recommendations to national governments, regional organizations, and the international community. As a result of these strengths, the report represents a useful 'baseline' for researchers who are today working on regional cooperation and economic integration in Central Asia.

However, with the benefit of hindsight, the report revealed some important blind spots, or areas that could and perhaps should have been explored in greater depth:

- Sectoral and functional perspectives — agriculture, industry, services, labor and financial markets, urban-rural dimensions and tourism were not addressed;
- Climate change — the adaptation challenge was mentioned only in passing, not as a focus of serious exploration, and there was no mention of climate change mitigation,

limiting the carbon footprint, pursuit of renewable energy, and so on;

- Internet connectivity — this, too, was mentioned in passing, but not as a significant force of connectivity, of change, and with associated risks;
- Pandemic threats — epidemic threats were mentioned (SARS, avian flu, HIV/AIDS), but pandemic threats for COVID-19 were not envisaged;
- Threats to sovereignty — the influence of neighbors was largely presented as beneficial; potential risks to the sovereignty of the Central Asian republics from its large neighbors were not considered;
- Concepts and terminology — the report, understandably, did not incorporate much of today's terminology, including green economy, economic corridors, land-linked (instead of land-locked), (climate) smart cities, digital transformation, e-commerce, and so on.

Revisiting a comprehensive report that was prepared almost 20 years ago provides an opportunity to consider how the perspective of analysis, research, and policy shifts with time and the limits on the ability of researchers to identify the key issues on the horizon that will have to be addressed by future generations. Looking back today, an honest assessment would admit that the challenges of climate change, pandemic threats, and internet connectivity were on the horizon, and should have been identified more clearly, at least as part of a horizon scanning exercise. Subsequent reports on Central Asia, involving some of the same authors as the CAHDR, did address many of the issues that the CAHDR missed, while also building on some of the strengths of the CAHDR. These include the following: 'Kazakhstan 2050: Toward a Modern Society for All' (Aitzhanova et al. 2014), 'Central Asia 2050: Unleashing the Region's Potential' (Nag et al. 2016), and 'The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road' (Pomfret 2019). What is more, CAREC and the CAREC Institute have worked intensively on many important regional issues requiring cooperation, including in energy, water, agriculture, climate, health, gender, and e-commerce.

Despite its limitations, the CAHDR correctly identified the cooperation agenda at the time as a critical opportunity which, if acted on consistently by the authorities, could have substantially improved the economic and social trajectory of the region. But, again seen with the benefit of hindsight, an honest assessment would conclude that the report had only limited impact. Why? One reason was its limited dissemination and that a core recommendation — the appointment of a UNDP special envoy — was not implemented. There was follow-up with CAREC as the report's findings were presented to the CAREC Senior Officials Meeting and the CAREC Ministerial Conference in 2005 and the CAHDR project leader and principal author served as special adviser to CAREC during 2005 to 2010. This meant that some of the messages of the report were included in the work of CAREC during these years. But beyond this there was little follow-up; in particular, other development partners, aside from the ADB, did not systematically focus on regional cooperation as a priority of their engagement with Central Asian countries. Moreover, the regional water agenda was too controversial at the time (especially for Uzbekistan), the social agenda not inherently 'regional,' and the governance agenda politically sensitive. Moreover, proposals for strengthening regional organizations were too optimistic, and the widening of the membership of CAREC beyond its Central Asia core probably weakened the interest of the Central Asian member countries in CAREC as an instrument for their cooperative endeavors. Finally, one must recognize that the economic argument and quantification of benefits and costs carried little weight when faced by political reality, where regional cooperation and the policy changes it might require are often not seen as serving the interests of important national stakeholders.

What, then, are the lessons for current and future research on regional cooperation in Central Asia? Most importantly, economists must not be discouraged by the apparently overwhelming power of politics; they need to hammer away at the message that economic benefits and losses are real, computable, and make a difference in people's lives. CAREC and the CAREC Institute are excellent platforms for this. At the same time, economists have to pay more attention to politics, have to understand who are winners

and losers, and have to find ways to compensate deserving losers. They must realize the need for constituency and coalition building, must reach and convince leaders, and must be patient and build on opportunities for action when these arise. In their research, economists must not forget the 'old' issues over the 'new' — trade and infrastructure investment remain critical; water and energy resources need better management; the operation and maintenance of infrastructure assets remain a major challenge; seismic risks remain high; and longstanding environmental challenges are still important. At the same time, the 'new' issues — such as, climate change, pandemic threats, and the impact of the digital revolution — need to be addressed. Moreover, researchers have an obligation to scan the horizon for important new issues or for new aspects of current or 'old' issues, explore them, and bring them to the attention of policy makers in real time. Finally, the publication of academic papers, books, and reports is only the beginning of the process of achieving results; if researchers want their ideas to have an impact, they — and their organizations — need to find ways to influence public opinion, policy, and programs that are being designed and implemented by national authorities, by private business, by civil society, and by international development partners.

The research papers in this volume help fill important gaps in knowledge

The research papers presented at the Second Annual Research Conference of the CAREC Institute and collected in this volume provide a valuable compilation of research results, mostly by experts from the CAREC region. They offer a fitting response to the 'blind spots' of the CAHDR identified earlier, by addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, looking at key aspects of climate change and green economy, exploring important policy issues relevant to agriculture and food security, and looking at regional connectivity from the perspective of e-commerce development.

Understanding current uncertainties about businesses and households

The first three papers in this part focus on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first chapter, by Brendan Duprey and Aizhan Salimzhanova, analyzes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) in the five Central Asian republics. It finds that the impact has been severe, especially for SMEs in the tourism, hospitality, services, transport, construction, and manufacturing sectors. Lockdowns, supply-chain disruptions, border closures and so on resulted in reduced SME activity and employment loss. The authors note that governments responded with various policy packages designed to support SMEs, including finance, grants, and relief from taxes and utility charges. However, this provided only a partial cushion and continued support (such as tax deferrals and financial assistance) will be needed.

The next chapter, by Dina Azhgaliyeva, Ranjeeta Mishra, Trinh Long, Peter Morgan, and Wataru Kodama, estimates the impacts of COVID-19 on household businesses, employment, and education in ten CAREC countries (minus the PRC) drawing on household interviews (1,000 interviews per country). The paper confirms the negative impact on SMEs and employment noted by Duprey and Salimzhanova. It also notes that there were significant losses in education owing to school closures, with increased dropout rates and rising educational gaps. However, the analysis shows that the impact differed significantly across countries and households. For example, households with higher education, older household heads, and paid employment experienced less joblessness; household businesses with access to digital communication, which were able to adjust in response to the drop in demand, were less severely affected; and older children as well as children from educated households were more likely to attend virtual classes.

A third chapter by Kamalbek Karymshakov, Dastan Aseinov, and Burulcha Sulaimanova focuses specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on household income in Georgia and

Mongolia, based on in-depth household interviews. The authors found that households with younger and male heads as well as households with lower assets, greater job losses, and less access to the internet tended to experience greater household income losses. They also noted that households receiving government support experienced smaller losses than those without access to such support. The authors recommend close monitoring of the household-level impact of pandemics and government responses that are targeted to the specific needs of households — especially those with fewer assets. Improved digital connectivity will also help contain the negative impact on income from the pandemic.

New imperatives for green economic growth

This part of the book includes two papers addressing the issues relevant for incorporating social and environmental issues into company business decisions, the green development, and climate change challenges in the CAREC countries. Chapter four, developed by Aigerim Tleukhanova, Yelif Ulagpan, Ablay Dosmaganbetov, Anastassiya Vorobyeva, Akbota Batyrkhan, and Stefanos Xenarios, focuses on the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Kazakhstan and the implications for Mongolia. It focuses especially on the mining industry and the application of CSR principles by selected firms. It concludes that CSR is relatively well known and understood as a concept in larger mining firms, but there is limited information on its actual implementation. In Kazakhstan, state agencies support CSR standards in principle, but there is no regular monitoring and regulatory standards remain unclear. In Mongolia, there is no CSR legal framework (although Mongolia belongs to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [EITI]), limited reporting, and hence little information on CSR practices. In conclusion, the authors note that CSR should play an important role in both countries, and that firms do accept CSR as a regulatory standard where required. They recommend that incentives (including tax incentives) be deployed for wider acceptance and compliance with CSR standards.

In chapter five, Bakhrom Mirkasimov, Etenesh Asfaw, Zohid Askarov, and Azizakhon Mukhammedova consider the determinants of carbon emission and the potential economic impact of 'green' economy strategies in Central Asia by focusing on Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Their analysis confirms that increased reliance on renewable energy lowers carbon emission, as does higher forestry cover. Higher population growth, urbanization, net exports, and primary energy use raise emissions. Interestingly, higher economic growth is associated with an inverted U curve for emissions, with higher growth initially raising emissions, but after a threshold value leading to lower emissions, in part because higher economic growth rates make it easier to manage the energy transition. The authors note that while, in the long term, decarbonization can also result in higher growth rates, in the short term it presents the authorities with difficult choices because of the potential negative social impact of higher energy prices. In conclusion, they stress the importance of green cities, forestry, and increased energy efficiency.

Climate change risks for agriculture and food security

Climate change inevitably weakens agricultural resilience in the CAREC region unless active countersteps are taken. This issue has taken on increased urgency as a result of the current food security crisis in the world, which also has the CAREC region in its grip. In chapter six Iroda Amirova and Etenesh B Asfaw present the results of an empirical study of agricultural productivity and resilience to external shocks in selected CAREC countries by considering the impacts of the 2008 and 2020 economic crises on agricultural productivity. They analyze that changes in total factor productivity are owing to technological change and changes in efficiency. They define resilience in terms of whether agricultural productivity is robust and adaptable in response to crises. They noted that resilience to external shocks varied across countries, with Azerbaijan and Mongolia being the least resilient. They conclude that maintenance of agricultural productivity is important during crises, that measures to improve technological change and efficiency are critical for enhancing resilience, and that it is important that governments support agriculture in times of crisis, rather than ignoring it.

The chapter by Zhanel Sembayeva, Lilia Mussina, Madina Kazbek, Ablay Dosmaganbetov, and Stefanos Xenarios focuses on sustainable land-use resources in drought-prone regions of Kazakhstan and the implications in the wider Central Asia region. The authors note that climate change is reinforcing land degradation owing to rising aridity, salinization, and more intensive droughts. This reduces agricultural yields, leads to food insecurity, and constrains the achievement of key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inadequate sustainable land and water resource management systems and insufficient attention to land use laws and regulation compound the climate threats. Increased attention to these challenges by national governments and international development partners is therefore a high priority.

E-commerce development in CAREC

Increasing connectivity through regional cooperation remains at the core of the mandate of CAREC and the CAREC institute. The final chapter in this volume takes up the digital connectivity challenge in the CAREC region. Written by Ghulam Samad and Soo Hyun Kim, the chapter looks at the development potential of e-commerce in the CAREC region by considering the e-commerce infrastructure and regulations, by exploring the role of financial technology (fintech) and by highlighting the need for e-certification for sanitary and phytosanitary clearance of goods that cross borders in the region. The main conclusion of the paper is that e-commerce, fintech, and e-certification could play a major role in supporting increased commercial connectivity for the region by significantly lowering transaction costs and access to trade and finance, but much remains to be done to strengthen the infrastructure and regulatory practices in all three areas.

THE WAY FORWARD

There has undoubtedly been progress in improving regional connectivity in the CAREC region and in developing the knowledge base through research and analysis of many policy areas highlighted in the Central Asia Human Development Report, as well as in important areas that the report did not address, including the response to pandemics and climate change, agriculture and food security, and digital connectivity. This volume exemplifies the deepening of research capacity and activity in core areas of development for the CAREC region. The role of the CAREC Institute in serving as a knowledge and networking platform and in strengthening the capacity for research and policy analysis in the CAREC region is of growing importance and visibility. It is critical that all the Institute's stakeholders — its member countries, its partner think tanks and research centers in the CAREC countries, and its international development partners — work closely with the management of the CAREC Institute to ensure that it has the capacity, resources, and support to deliver on its promise as a central knowledge hub for regional economic cooperation and integration in the CAREC region.

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