

Railways in Central Asia

The central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan (Kirghizstan) and Tajikistan became independent in 1991 after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. They are all landlocked countries and Uzbekistan is unique because none of its neighbours has a coastline either. They have vast territories, but large areas are deserts. The underdeveloped road network means the railway still plays a major role in land transport. *(Photographs by S. Otsuka)*



The vast grass-covered plain and nomadic lifestyle in Eastern Kazakhstan is typical of Central Asia.



A busy bazaar in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, is a common distribution method in Central Asia.



The origin and destination of the Silk Road Express are shown in four languages: Kazakhstani (top left), Russian (bottom left), Chinese (top right) and English.



The Silk Road Express runs in Eastern Kazakhstan linking Almaty (Alma-Ata), the capital of Kazakhstan, with Urumqi, the provincial capital of Xinjiang Uygur Zizhiqu, China.



Ashkhabad Station, Turkmenistan



Almaty (Alma-Ata) Station, Kazakhstan

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Some parts of the Central Asian railways are well maintained, but others are not. The former Soviet Union regarded north-south links as the most important to integrate this region into the Moscow-oriented centralization. The rolling stock is all Soviet-built, and electric locomotives and EMUs are still sent to Russia and Ukraine for overhaul. *(Photographs by S. Otsuka and K. Terado)*



This non-electrified double track in Uzbekistan linking Samarkand with Tashkent is well maintained.



Track maintenance in Uzbekistan



The ballast on this single track in Eastern Kazakhstan which runs from Aktogay to Druzhba (and further east to China) has been left unattended for 30 years.



The Aktogay-Druzhba Line running along a lake side. The track is often flooded, and a new diversion line is being planned.



Diesel locomotive workshop in Uzbekistan

(K. Terado)



Soviet-built Class VL80 electric locomotive in Uzbekistan

The railways in Central Asia were built by the Soviet Union to link these countries with Moscow, but today, the link with China and Europe is becoming increasingly important. Expectations for the second land-bridge from the Far East to Europe via Central Asia is growing, but one difficulty is two break-of-gauge points: at the Chinese-Kazakhstan border, and at the Europe-Belarus/Ukraine border.

(Photographs by S. Otsuka)



A bogie-changing track at Druzhba Station, Kazakhstan. Bogies are removed and replaced while coaches are lifted by hydraulic jacks.



The passenger platform at Druzhba Station, has a four-rail track to receive both Chinese (1435-mm gauge) and Kazakhstani (1520-mm gauge) trains.



The Silk Road Express standing at Druzhba Station. The train stops nearly 4 hours for immigration and customs checks as well as for the bogie change.



The freight reloading platform at Druzhba Station still depends on heavy labour.