



The Development Of Regionalism And Political Pluralism In Central Asia

Sharaf Agabaev

Uzbekistan State University of World Languages
Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science (PhD),
Associate Professor, Department of Political Sciences
E-mail: sharofagabaev@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This scientific article focuses on further expanding regional cooperation in Central Asia amidst the current globalization process, including further developing political dialogue, jointly developing programs and projects in trade, investment, transport-logistics, energy, agriculture, and addressing environmental issues, and further increasing activity in the cultural and humanitarian spheres. It emphasizes that these efforts serve as a crucial foundation for ensuring socio-political stability in the region. Furthermore, the article scientifically reveals that the concept of regionalization, the process of developing cooperation in economic, political, cultural, and security spheres among states in a specific geographical area, is interpreted based on theories such as neofunctionalism, intergovernmentalism, and constructivism. It also explores the formation of regional organizations, norms, and cooperation mechanisms, as well as regional issues at various levels, from free trade zones to political alliances.

Keywords:

Concept of regionalism; regional culture; politics; economics; geopolitics; globalization; ecology; investment; cooperation; sustainable development; regional identity; regional leadership

Historically, Central Asia has been known as a crossroads of civilizations, a region where peoples and cultures have converged. The history of statehood in this region has developed over millennia, witnessing the rise and growth of great empires and states. In the 20th century, the period during which Central Asia was part of the Soviet Union constituted a unique chapter in the evolution of statehood in the region. During this time, national borders were defined, modern political institutions were established, yet opportunities for independent political development remained limited.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of a new historical era in Central Asia. Five states—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—gained independence, and new

republics emerged in the region, embarking on a path toward sovereignty. In the early years of independence, these states faced complex challenges, such as consolidating national statehood, undertaking economic transformation, establishing new political systems, and securing a distinct position in the international arena. Each country chose its own political path, leading to the formation of diverse models of development across the region.

The stability and progress of the region are key factors in ensuring global stability. Additionally, cooperation among the peoples of Central Asia holds great significance, as the region's nations have lived in harmony and unity for centuries, fostering mutual understanding and progress. As the first

President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, once stated: "History is driven forward not by conflicts and hostility, but by cooperation and trust between peoples."¹

In recent years, the process of regionalization in Central Asia has intensified, paving the way for new formats of interstate cooperation, integration processes, fresh approaches to ensuring regional stability, and defining scenarios for the geopolitical evolution and development trajectory of the region. Significant differences exist among the Central Asian states. Kazakhstan leads the region in terms of land area and economic indicators, while Uzbekistan stands out due to its large population. Turkmenistan possesses vast natural gas reserves, whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are distinguished by their mountainous terrain and hydro-energy potential.

Regionalization in Central Asia refers to the geopolitical, geo-economic, and cultural-humanitarian integration process, encompassing the institutional formation of interstate cooperation, the strengthening of regional identity, and the development of the region as a unified complex. The process of regionalization is shaped by both external and internal factors and can be interpreted either as a tool for external powers to exert influence or as a means of ensuring regional stability and security.

In the context of modern geopolitical and geo-economic processes, regionalization represents the growing interconnectedness of Central Asian states, the deepening of integration, and the formation of regional institutions and mechanisms. This process strengthens the region's position in the international arena, facilitates the resolution of internal conflicts, and enables collective solutions to shared challenges. Today, regionalization is developing in multiple directions, including political, economic, cultural-humanitarian cooperation, security collaboration, and more. The regular summits²

of Central Asian leaders, regional-format meetings, and the increasing number of joint projects indicate that regional integration is reaching a new stage.

The words of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, reflect this reality: "We are bound together by a shared history and culture, a common sacred religion, similar mentalities, moral and ethical values, traditions, and an inseparable friendship. All of this serves as a strong foundation for mutually beneficial cooperation aimed at uniting the potential of Central Asian states for the prosperity and well-being of our peoples."³

As a country located at the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan serves as a crucial link among the region's states and acts as a key catalyst for regional cooperation.

At this point, it is important to highlight that the process of regionalization in Central Asia has developed through the following stages and continues to evolve:

- First stage (1991-2000): Gaining independence, establishing the foundations of national statehood, and the necessity of creating regional cooperation mechanisms.
- Second stage (2000-2010): Formation of regional organizations, cooperation in the field of security, and the importance of initiating integration processes.
- Third stage (2010-2020): Revision of regional strategies, the emergence of new cooperation formats, and the necessity of strengthening bilateral relations.
- Fourth stage (2020 – up to now): A new phase of regional cooperation, increased engagement among Central Asian states, and the strengthening of regional identity.

The regionalization process is in constant evolution, passing through various stages, each with its own characteristics, challenges, and objectives. Its dynamics are influenced by political changes in the region, external factors, and the strategic priorities of regional states.

¹ Karimov I.A. O'zbekiston XXI asr bo'sag'asida: xavfsizlikka tahdid, barqarorlik shartlari va taraqqiyot kafolatlari. – T.: O'zbekiston. 1997. - B.323.

² <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/6660>

³ Sh.Mirziyoyev. "Markaziy Osiyo davlatlari rahbarlarining ikkinchi Maslahat uchrashuvi". Toshkent. 2019 yil, 29-noyabr.

In recent years, Uzbekistan's policy of fostering good relations with neighboring countries has given new momentum to regional cooperation. Regular meetings among Central Asian leaders have become a tradition, elevating relations to a new qualitative level, while cooperation continues based on new mechanisms to address regional challenges.

Regional institutions form the institutional foundation of the regionalization process. They serve as key mechanisms for regulating interstate cooperation, developing relations, and addressing common issues. Central Asian states are members of various regional organizations and alliances, which enables them to diversify their foreign policy and economic relations while fostering cooperation in different formats. The evolution of regional institutions reflects the dynamics of interstate relations in the region, as well as their geopolitical priorities and strategic interests.

For example, the Central Asian Cooperation (CAC)⁴ was initially focused on economic integration, the development of trade and economic relations, cooperation in energy and transport, and the coordination of regional economic projects. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)⁵ is a regional organization dedicated to security, counterterrorism efforts, and economic cooperation, bringing together Central Asian states along with Russia, China, and other countries. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)⁶ aims at economic integration, the creation of a single economic space, and ensuring the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor.

Regarding Uzbekistan's political stance, the country's leader defines it as follows: *"When discussing issues related to security and stability*

in Central Asia, we cannot overlook such important matters as the rational use of the region's shared water resources. In this regard, we fully support the statement of UN Secretary-General António Guterres that 'Water, peace, and security issues are closely interconnected.'"⁷

Cooperation in the field of security is developing within both bilateral and multilateral formats. In recent years, military and military-technical cooperation among regional states has intensified, with joint military exercises and training programs being implemented.

Central Asia + Russia⁸ – Cooperation based on historical, political, and economic ties, integration within the Eurasian space, collaboration in security, strengthening economic relations, and addressing migration issues through legal frameworks.

Central Asia + China – Cooperation under the *"Belt and Road Initiative"*⁹, investment and infrastructure projects, collaboration in the energy sector, and the development of trade and economic relations.

Central Asia + the United States – The C5+1¹⁰ format, focusing on security, economic development, democratic institutions, and human rights, as well as joint efforts to address the Afghanistan issue.

Central Asia + the European Union – The *EU's Central Asia Strategy*¹¹, promoting the rule of law, democratic reforms, and economic modernization.

The regular meetings of Central Asian leaders have become an important mechanism in the regionalization process. This format has made it possible to determine strategic directions for regional cooperation in all areas—political, economic, security, and

⁴ Markaziy Osiyo rahbarlarining Olmaota uchrashuvida "Markaziy Osiyo hamkorligi" (MOH) tashkilotini tuzish haqidagi Shartnomasi. 2002-yil, 28-fevral.

https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Markaziy_Osiyo_hamkorligi_tashkiloti

⁵ Shanxay hamkorlik tashkiloti (SHHT) - Xitoyning Shanxay shahrida 6 mamlakat — Qozogʻiston, Xitoy, Qirgʻiziston, Rossiya, Tojikiston va Oʻzbekiston davlat rahbarlari uchrashuvida tuzilgan. 2001 yil, 15-iyun.

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⁶ Yevroosiyo Iqtisodiy Ittifoqi (YOII) — 29-may 2014-yilda tashkil etilgan.

https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevroosiyo_iqtisodiy_ittifoqi

⁷ Oʻzbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti Shavkat Mirziyoyevning Birlashgan Millatlar Tashkiloti Bosh Assambleyasining 72-sessiyasida soʻzlagan nutqi. 2017 yil, 19-sentabr.

⁸ <https://davr24.uz/archives/3261>

⁹ https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bir_makon_bir_yo%CA%BBl_tasha_bbusi

¹⁰ <https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/C5%2B1>

¹¹ https://tashcoe.uwed.uz/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Yelning_Markaziy_Osiyo_boyicha_Yangi_strategiyasi_Ozbek_tilida.pdf

cultural-humanitarian relations—while also providing a platform for discussing pressing issues.

On March 15, 2018, the first consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders was held in Astana (Kazakhstan), where discussions focused on developing regional cooperation, deepening economic integration, and addressing security concerns¹². The second meeting took place on November 29, 2019, in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), during which the Regional Cooperation Action Plan for Central Asian countries was adopted, and agreements were reached to expand trade and economic ties.¹³ The third meeting was held on August 6, 2021, in the "Avaza" National Tourist Zone (Turkmenistan), where agreements were signed regarding regional security, water resource management, and cooperation in the field of the "green economy".¹⁴ The fourth meeting, which took place on July 21, 2022, in Cholpon-Ata (Kyrgyzstan), addressed issues such as the development of regional transport corridors, the creation of a common electricity market, and the strengthening of cultural-humanitarian relations;¹⁵ On September 14, 2023, the fifth meeting in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, discussed issues of ensuring peace and stability in the region and strengthening cooperation in the field of security, in the context of increasing geopolitical turbulence¹⁶.

Throughout these meetings, important decisions have been made regarding the institutionalization of regional cooperation, the strengthening of its mechanisms, and the implementation of joint projects. This format serves to elevate interstate relations in the region to a qualitatively new level and to strengthen the region's geopolitical and geo-economic position.

Taking into account global trends and the changing dynamics of geopolitics, it would be beneficial for Central Asian countries to unite

around common values and goals, similar to regional blocs such as ASEAN¹⁷ or the Nordic countries. The five Central Asian states share a common history, religion, culture, and worldview, and they are currently facing similar socio-economic and political challenges, making the strengthening of regional cooperation an urgent necessity. The need for strong regional cooperation in Central Asia is manifested in several key aspects: Strengthening regional independence and guaranteeing the inviolability of state sovereignty in the face of globalization; jointly combating the negative consequences of globalization while preserving the unique identity of the region's peoples; enhancing the region's status in global civilization; ensuring that the legacy of figures like Beruni and Avicenna continues to inspire new generations; addressing the threat of moral and cultural decline by fostering the rich spiritual heritage of Central Asia, thus creating the intellectual and moral potential to counteract this decline; securing Central Asia's rightful place, influence, and prestige on the international stage, while contributing to the formation of a multipolar world order.

In light of these factors, strengthening regional integration and cooperation is not only a necessity but also a strategic imperative for the future of Central Asia.¹⁸

Trade and economic cooperation is a crucial aspect of the regionalization process in Central Asia. In recent years, the volume of trade among Central Asian countries has increased significantly, trade barriers have been reduced, and border openness has been ensured. Key sectors of regional trade and economic cooperation include the exchange of agricultural products, textiles, oil and gas, chemical industry products, and construction materials. The growth in regional trade volume has strengthened economic interdependence

¹² <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/1571>

¹³ <https://president.uz/oz/3093>

¹⁴ <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/4530>

¹⁵ <https://president.uz/oz/lists/view/5350>

¹⁶ https://uza.uz/oz/posts/markaziy-osiyo-davlatlari-rahbarlarining-beshinchi-maslahat-uchrashuvi-umummintaqaviy-xavfsizlik-shakllanadi_520360

¹⁷ https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janubi-Sharqiy_Osiyo_davlatlari_uyushmasi

¹⁸ Sirojov O. Markaziy Osiyo mintaqasida hamkorlik jarayonlari (tajriba va istiqbol). B-204.

among Central Asian countries and contributed to deeper economic integration.

The energy sector is another strategic area of regional cooperation in Central Asia. The countries of the region possess complementary energy potential: while some nations are rich in energy resources, others serve as key transit corridors. However, there are challenges in energy cooperation, including water-energy balance issues, the use of transboundary rivers, energy resource pricing, and transportation tariffs. To address these challenges, Central Asian countries are engaged in negotiations, signing agreements, and developing new cooperation mechanisms to ensure sustainable energy partnerships.

Transport and logistics cooperation plays a vital role in regional integration. Central Asian countries are working to revive the modern version of the ancient Silk Road, overcoming the region's landlocked status and integrating into the global transport system. Several major infrastructure projects are being implemented in the region, including:

- The “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) led by China,
- The Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA)¹⁹ transport corridor,
- The North-South International Transport Corridor.

These projects significantly enhance the transit potential of Central Asia and create new opportunities for domestic and foreign trade. If successfully implemented, the TRACECA project will benefit all Central Asian countries, with Uzbekistan being one of the biggest beneficiaries, as it would connect the West and the East through a modernized transport network.

The management of transboundary water resources is one of the most urgent issues in Central Asia. Water resources are unevenly distributed in the region:

- The upper reaches of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers are located in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,
- The main water consumers—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—are situated in the lower reaches.

Water resource management is a complex negotiation process that has strategic significance for regional stability and security. In recent years, mutual understanding among Central Asian countries regarding water-energy balance issues has improved, leading to new agreements and cooperation mechanisms. International organizations and donors are also actively supporting cooperation in transboundary water resource management, recognizing its importance for regional peace and development.

Cooperation in the field of environmental security is also developing both at the regional level and within international organizations. Central Asian countries are joining efforts to address environmental challenges and ensure ecological security. The President of Uzbekistan once stated: *“In accordance with the Action Strategy, we have identified the prevention of environmental problems that harm the natural environment, public health, and the gene pool as one of our top priorities.”*²⁰ Joint environmental programs in the region cover air protection, biodiversity conservation, waste management, disaster preparedness, and mitigation of natural disaster consequences. Additionally, cooperation in implementing green economy principles and developing environmentally friendly technologies is strengthening.

Cultural and humanitarian cooperation is an important element of regional integration. A shared historical and cultural heritage, linguistic and value similarities contribute to regional identity and foster cooperation among Central Asian nations. Currently, cultural and humanitarian ties among Central Asian states are expanding, particularly in the fields of

¹⁹ Yevropa-Kavkaz-Osiyo transport yo‘lagi, TRACECA - Yevropani Kavkaz orkali Osiyo bilan bog‘laydigan avtomobil va temir yo‘llari majmui. https://uz.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yevropa-Kavkaz-Osiyo_transport_yo%CA%BBlagi

²⁰ O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining “O‘zbekiston Respublikasini yanada rivojlantirish bo‘yicha Harakatlar strategiyasi to‘g‘risida” Farmoni PF-4947-son. Toshkent, 2017 yil, 7-fevral.

traditional culture, arts, and the preservation of common cultural heritage. In the education and science sectors, cooperation is actively developing, especially through youth exchange programs. Similarly, collaboration in healthcare has gained strategic importance, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regional identity refers to the awareness of Central Asian populations of their belonging to a common geopolitical, cultural-historical, and socio-economic space. This process serves as the spiritual and psychological foundation of regionalization. Several factors contribute to regional identity, including common historical experiences, cultural and linguistic proximity, religious ties, and familial or kinship connections.

However, as nation-states consolidate and national identities strengthen, regional identity is undergoing transformations. Strengthening regional identity can become a crucial factor in enhancing regional cooperation, addressing regional challenges, and ensuring regional stability.

Regional leadership plays a significant role in relations among Central Asian countries. Differences in geography, demography, economic and military potential, as well as historical and cultural influence have led to competition for regional leadership. More specifically, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the two main contenders for leadership in the region:

- Kazakhstan holds a leading position in economic and territorial aspects.
- Uzbekistan is a key player due to its demographic strength and strategic location.

In recent years, particularly under Uzbekistan's new foreign policy, competition between the two nations has given way to strategic cooperation, shaping a new dynamic in regional affairs.

In conclusion, to further develop regional cooperation, deepen regional integration processes, and strengthen regional identification in Central Asia, it is necessary to enhance political dialogue between states, improve institutional mechanisms, deepen economic integration, develop transport and

logistics links, ensure water and energy balance, strengthen security cooperation, and develop cultural and humanitarian ties.

Overall, the regionalization process in Central Asia is complex, and its development depends on many factors. From 1991 to 2025, this process has followed an evolutionary path from free integration formats to closer integration projects. In the future, cooperation between Central Asian states will remain a key priority, and participation in cooperation initiatives with external partners will actively continue.

At the same time, the deepening of economic cooperation, ties in education and science, and cooperation on ecology and water issues can continue regularly. Cooperation in the areas of digital transformation, innovation, and the green economy creates new opportunities. This will serve to strengthen the region's role in the global arena, ensure sustainable development, and increase the well-being of the population.

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