

**THE BARRIERS TO INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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**Abstract.** Institutional integration in Central Asia faces multifaceted barriers. This research delves into the region's historical, political, and socio-economic dynamics that hinder collaboration among its states. By analysing the underlying power struggles, trust deficits, and divergent development agendas, this study unveils the complexities impeding Central Asian cohesion.

**Key words.** Central Asia, Central Asian Union, institutional integration, regional integration, regional cooperation, barriers, Russia in Central Asia, China in Central Asia, national interests.

In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union caused the formation of 15 newly independent states on the political map of the world, and in this study, five of them - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan - that form the Central Asian region are the subject of the research paper. The evolution of the Central Asian region is complex and multifaceted, and it has been shaped by various political, economic, and cultural factors over a dozen centuries. Each historical era has contributed to the region's integration and has had an indelible impact on the historical trajectory of Central Asia. First, the Mongol Empire and, later, the Timurids played an essential role in the political consolidation of the region. When the Mongols conquered the Central Asian territories, the region's population became one of the parts of Pax Mongolica. It became representatives, inhabitants, or, in the modern sense, citizens of a single state. This trend continued into the era of Tamerlane, which was influential in the political integration of Central Asia.<sup>1</sup>

The modern history of regional integration in Central Asia has been tremendously influenced by the "Soviet experience." All five states of the region were part of the Soviet Union from the 1920s until its dissolution in 1991. During the Soviet era, Central Asia was integrated into a planned economic system, which led to a high degree of economic interdependence among the republics. Although this period was marked by political repression and economic exploitation, it laid the foundation for a common language, economic ties, and institutional links that continue to influence the region today. The Soviet Union instantly disappeared from the world's political map in a very short period, but the Soviet way of life, the institutions formed over decades,

<sup>1</sup> Barthold, W. (1962). *Four Studies on the History of Central Asia*. Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill.

and the social contract continued to exist deep within society. Unlike state borders, location on the political map, or agreements between countries, human organizations' worldviews, and formed institutions cannot be changed or adjusted quickly by a single decision. After the collapse of the Soviet state, the same elites continued to rule in the countries of the former Soviet Union with the same population as a couple of months or a couple of years ago. That is, a change of names does not mean a change of system and institutions. An authoritarian regime renaming and proclaiming itself democratic does not become a democracy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states gained independence and embarked on a difficult path of state-building.

Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, initiated regional integration in Central Asia from the first days of independence, as reflected in his 1993 concept of "Turkestan - our common home." This concept was supposedly aimed at encouraging the Central Asian states to see themselves not as isolated entities but as interconnected parts of a broader regional family with a common heritage and destiny.

In July 1993, the Republic of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on deepening economic integration for 1994-2000.<sup>2</sup> In January 1994, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed an agreement in Tashkent on establishing the Central Asian Economic Community. Kyrgyzstan later joined this agreement.<sup>3</sup> The vision of a shared future for the countries of the region can be traced back to the establishment of the Central Asian Bank for Cooperation and Development, with an initial capital of \$9 million,<sup>4</sup> and the creation of the Intergovernmental Council, the Council of Foreign Ministers, the Council of Defence Ministers, and a peacekeeping battalion. In December 1997, in Astana, the countries' leaders signed a protocol establishing an international consortium on energy, water resources, food, mineral, and raw material resources. Later, in 1998, Tajikistan joined this group, after which the countries signed an agreement on creating a hydropower consortium and agreed on the general principles of creating a single market. However, these efforts have encountered numerous problems, including national priorities, economic disparities, unresolved border disputes, and power asymmetries, especially between the larger and more resource-rich states, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Several international organizations filled the vacuum created by the failed regional union. The most universal platform for interregional dialog with Russia's participation was the CIS, which was created after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It is important to note that at first, this organization had an essential role in the

<sup>2</sup> National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan. First volume. Tashkent, 2000

<sup>3</sup> Zaynab Dost. Will Central Asia learn from Europe and will Europe help it? UzAnalytics, 2019.

<https://www.uzanalytics.com/xalqaromunosabat/4643/>

<sup>4</sup> Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan on the establishment of the Central Asian Bank for Cooperation and Development of July 8, 1994

[https://base.spininform.ru/show\\_doc.fwx?rgn=25319](https://base.spininform.ru/show_doc.fwx?rgn=25319)



post-Soviet space, as the modern Central Asian states, which yesterday were part of a vast political unit, were highly interdependent and could not immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union to go "their own way." The failure of the Soviet Union left a void in the governance and political structure of the region, and the CIS served as a mechanism for the smooth management of this complex transition and as a platform for systemic political dialog among post-Soviet countries. While the CIS provided a framework for cooperation, there was a need for a more specific and specialized mechanism to deepen economic integration among post-Soviet states, and EurAsEC sought to fill this gap. The purpose of the Eurasian Economic Community was to create favourable conditions for the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour between member states, develop a legal and regulatory framework, and reduce barriers to economic cooperation. The SCO was another platform with the original goal of enhancing border security and settling territorial disputes among its members. Since then, it has expanded its scope of activities from dealing exclusively with security issues to economic and cultural issues. However, with China's increasing role and influence in global politics, the organization has become the leading platform for political dialogue between the "Celestial Empire" and the region under Moscow's watch. Suppose one can say that the SCO has become Beijing's "door" to Central Asia as the years have passed. In that case, China has used the SCO to strengthen its political, economic, and security presence in Central Asia. Meanwhile, with its historical ties and considerable influence in Central Asia, Russia also sees the SCO as an essential tool for pursuing its regional interests. From all of this, it can be assumed that the SCO has become a "bargaining table" between Moscow and Beijing, where their interests and influence in Central Asia are regulated with the participation of representatives of the region to engage in a constructive dialog among themselves and prevent the escalation of potential conflicts of interest. The presence of a steadily troubled Afghanistan, the civil war in Tajikistan,<sup>5</sup> periodic coups in Kyrgyzstan,<sup>6</sup> and political, economic, and religious conflicts within the communities in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan became a prerequisite for the signing of the Collective Security Treaty in 1992, and the establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2002.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize the dynamics of integration in the region through participation in several organizations, it can be assumed that the catch was that there was a powerful external force with its national interests, which by its "nature" could not give free rein to its former wards. That is, even after gaining independence, the Central Asian post-

<sup>5</sup> Akiner S. (2001). Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.  
[https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-74024-6\\_279](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-74024-6_279)

<sup>6</sup> Cohen A. (March 2005) Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution. The Washington Times.  
<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2005/mar/26/20050326-103550-7473r/>

<sup>7</sup> Multilateral Treaty on collective security. Concluded at Tashkent on 15 May 1992  
<https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201894/volume-1894-I-32307-Other.pdf>

Soviet states operated according to the patterns of Soviet traditions, where serious state decisions required the approval of the centre. The development of regional integration in Central Asia is characterized by a cycle of consolidation, disintegration, and reintegration, determined mainly by state interests and pressure from external forces (primarily Russia and China). Of course, this tradition did not manifest itself in a pure form; this does not mean that the official Kremlin directly determined the policies of these states, but a certain invisible subordination, a sense of the presence of an assertive Russia, had its pressure on the leaders of the five Central Asian republics. Despite repeated failed attempts to build sustainable regional institutions, it is clear that the need for regional cooperation exists, especially given the expected economic and security challenges facing Central Asian countries. This fact underscores the importance of learning from past attempts at integration by building a more robust institutional framework that considers national differences while capitalizing on common interests and shared cultural heritage.

Although shared history, geographic proximity, cultural ties, and common challenges have become some of the driving forces of integration, Central Asia faces unique obstacles that impede this integration process. These obstacles are multifaceted, ranging from the historical and political legacies of the past to the economic and geopolitical complexities of the present. True democracy, characterized by regular free and fair elections,<sup>8</sup> freedom of the press<sup>9</sup> and an active civil society, remains elusive in much of Central Asia.

Based on an analysis of the political institutions, current ruling regimes, and political culture of contemporary Central Asia, as part of a consideration of the obstacles to integration, it can be assumed that:

- Authoritarian and hybrid regimes often prioritize regime survival above all else.<sup>10</sup> This can lead to a lack of trust between states, with each regime sceptical of the other's intentions and wary of interference, provocations, and attempts to destabilize its power.

- Democratic regimes tend to be more flexible in their negotiating positions and political bargaining due to the diversity of interest groups, public opinion, and institutional checks and balances. Authoritarian regimes, by contrast, can be more rigid, reflecting the interests and whims of narrow elites. Also, by their nature, they are often opaque in their decision-making. This opacity can cause misunderstandings and

<sup>8</sup> Free and fair elections index. Our World In Data. 2022 <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/free-and-fair-elections-index?region=Asia>

<sup>9</sup> 2023 World Press Freedom Index. Reporters Without Borders. 2023 <https://rsf.org/en/index>

<sup>10</sup> Magaloni, B., & Kricheli, R. (2010). Political order and one-party rule. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13, 123-143.



breed mistrust between neighbouring states.<sup>11</sup> This can make compromise and consensus difficult to achieve.

- Central Asian regimes are largely in transition and are often centred around strong leaders. This means that national decisions, including those related to integration, can be strongly influenced by personal interests, ambitions and conflicts rather than broader national and regional interests. In many of these countries, a small group of political elites control a significant portion of the economy and political power. Their interests may not always coincide with regional integration, especially if it threatens their dominance within the country.

- Public support is essential for the long-term success of institutional integration. The lack of democracy means that public participation in decision-making is limited and decisions are made from the top down. This may yield results in the short term due to the lack of resistance within the regime but will lead to an accumulation of problems in the future. If the public feels that integration agreements are imposed without their participation or against their interests, the legitimacy and sustainability of integration efforts will be undermined.<sup>12</sup>

- Non-democratic regimes may fear that integration will spread democratic ideas and practices from more liberal states and integrated institutions. They may therefore hesitate to deepen integration. Soft power, including the spread of democratic values, media influence, and cultural appeal, may be perceived as a threat by authoritarian regimes.<sup>13</sup>

- Hybrid and authoritarian regimes in Central Asia may be vulnerable to major powers that support or tolerate the lack of democracy in the region. If these great powers have different views on regional integration, this may affect the direction and depth of integration efforts.

- In authoritarian countries, economic interests are often closely linked to political power. Consolidation that disrupts established economic patterns and potentially benefits one sector more than another may be resisted if it threatens the economic interests of the ruling elite.

- Different countries often have different economic programs depending on the dominant industry, natural resources, and level of development. Also, historical experience and cultural considerations can shape a country's vision of an alliance. Past conflicts, rivalries or alliances can influence today's perceptions and decisions.<sup>14</sup> Not all Central Asian states have the same vision of what an alliance should be and achieve.

<sup>11</sup> Hollyer, J. R., Rosendorff, B. P., & Vreeland, J. R. (2011). Democracy and transparency. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(4), 1191-1205.

<sup>12</sup> Beetham, D., & Lord, C. (1998). *Legitimacy and the European Union*. Longman.

<sup>13</sup> Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public Affairs.

<sup>14</sup> Acharya, A. (2017). *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*. Routledge.

Leaders promoting a particular vision may face resistance from countries with different priorities and goals.

- Inefficiency, corruption and lack of transparency in government and bureaucracies can delay or even derail integration efforts.<sup>15</sup>

- Moving toward regional integration involves tensions between national sovereignty and shared governance. Given the defensive attitudes of most Central Asian regimes toward sovereignty, there may be resistance to transferring any form of control to supranational institutions.

- Delegating decision-making power to supranational bodies is a difficult task for many countries, especially when national leaders are accustomed to unbridled power. They may view such delegation as a weakening of their own authority.

The nature of international politics is such that states will always view regional integration through the lens of their strategic interests. Gradually moving from intraregional to extra-regional barriers of regional institutional integration, we will then consider what concerns other countries may have about how an integrated Central Asia fits into their broader regional strategies. The Russian Federation, as the successor to the Soviet Union, maintains historical, cultural, economic, and political ties with Central Asia. These ties have often been used to keep Central Asia within Russia's sphere of influence. Russia views Central Asia as its traditional zone of influence and considers the stability and orientation of this region important for Russia's security and geopolitical interests. From this point of view, as long as these countries remain sovereign, Russia as a former metropolis has a certain privileged status in terms of influence. On the other hand, the unification of Central Asia could change this dynamic, presenting a united front that would challenge Russia's traditional role in the region. An independent Central Asia oriented toward the West, particularly NATO would be a strategic failure for Russia. In addition, a unified institutional entity in the region may have a stronger civil society or political dynamism, which could be seen as a potential challenge to both regional autocratic regimes and Russian interests. In simple words, if a Central Asian states experience democratic consolidation, which is usually accompanied by a strengthened civil society, media freedom, and active public discourse, such a society will be better equipped to hold its leaders accountable, protect rights, and influence political decisions. This challenges both internal authoritarian tendencies and attempts at external influence. Democratic countries tend to prioritize transparency and good governance. This makes opaque backdoor deals, which have historically been a tool for larger powers to exert influence in the region, much more difficult. Russia, under its current political structure, may find it difficult to exert the

<sup>15</sup> Corruption Perceptions Index(2022). Transparency International.

[https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022?gclid=Cj0KCQjwrfymBhCTARisADXTabnnDkVnyVFXNof\\_GGIRlu\\_XG\\_nltwTJZPcUKaugzqAoUAQmWHvz-Q8aArD9EALw\\_wcB](https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022?gclid=Cj0KCQjwrfymBhCTARisADXTabnnDkVnyVFXNof_GGIRlu_XG_nltwTJZPcUKaugzqAoUAQmWHvz-Q8aArD9EALw_wcB)



same influence on democratic Central Asia. Moreover, in geopolitical terms, democracies tend to lean toward other democracies in their foreign relations. This could lead Central Asia to align itself with Western democracies, which Russia would likely, as discussed earlier, view with concern. Thus, while the development of a unified, democratic Central Asia could bring enormous benefits in terms of governance, rights, and opportunities for its citizens, it would undoubtedly create problems for external powers that have historically benefited from the current political situation in the region.

The fact that the countries of the region, having formed a harmonious Central Asian Union, have more opportunities for negotiations worries not only Russia but also China. But the main headache from the formation of the Central Asian Union for China is the preservation of its territorial integrity and internal stability. Beijing is concerned about the spread of radical ideologies from their perspective and potential disorder near its western border, especially given its own Uighur population in Xinjiang. The Uighurs' quest for independence could deprive China of a sixth of her territory. The Uighurs share Turkic roots with people from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. In addition, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan border XUAR. An integrated Central Asia, inspired by pan-Turkic ideology, could, if it wished, provide shelter and other forms of support to Uighurs fleeing repression. This poses a serious problem for China, especially if perceived as a joint effort by the Central Asian Union.

Delving into a more pragmatic assessment of Russia's potential responses to the prospect of a unified Central Asia, Russia could intensify its bilateral relations with individual Central Asian states by offering economic incentives or political support to leaders who resist or remain sceptical of regional unification efforts. Russia could use its dominant position in the energy sector, especially concerning gas pipelines, as leverage. It can offer favourable deals to those resisting integration or use energy exports to exert pressure. Russian state media may publish stories emphasizing the potential dangers of unification or highlighting historical conflicts and differences between Central Asian states. Moscow may seek alliances with other global players, such as China, which is also wary of Central Asian unification, to create a broader front against the move. Russia may secretly support political factions, leaders, or groups in Central Asian countries that oppose unification. Russian intelligence services may engage in operations to gather compromising information on pro-unification leaders or destabilize integration initiatives. In fact, given Russia's deeply entrenched interests in the region, Moscow is likely to use economic, diplomatic, security, and covert measures to influence the trajectory of Central Asian integration, ensuring that it is aligned with Russia's strategic interests. China's approach may be more nuanced than Russia's, focusing primarily on economic influence and soft power. China may decide to inject investments into those countries or regions that show reluctance to unite, as

well as loans, trade deals, or infrastructure investments, thereby creating economic imbalances and possibly sowing discord in the integration process. China can emphasize and prioritize bilateral agreements over multilateral ones. Tailoring its approach to each country allows China to negotiate from a position of strength. Beijing can strategically accelerate loans or initiate large-scale projects in individual countries to increase their indebtedness, make them more susceptible to Chinese influence, and thus more cautious in promoting a unified Central Asia.

In conclusion, the movement towards institutional integration in Central Asia is not simply a regional initiative, but a consequence of global geopolitical currents. The historical, economic, and strategic importance of the region has constantly attracted the attention of world powers, each with its own interests and reservations. In the dynamic geopolitical landscape of the 21st century, as major powers realign alliances and regions redefine their roles, Central Asian integration is not just a profitable strategy, it is vital. Uniting their strengths, addressing their collective challenges and emerging on the global stage as one can usher in a new era of prosperity and relevance for Central Asian countries. On this basis, political integration in Central Asia is not just a strategic choice; it is a logical and necessary evolution of the region's political landscape.

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