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EMERGING REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE OF COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Central Asia has defied early conflict predictions by moving towards peaceful regional integration through treaties, hydro-diplomacy, and institutional cooperation.

The C5 framework (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), now expanding to include Azerbaijan, reflects growing regional unity and subjectivity.

This self-driven shift from hotspot to hub offers valuable lessons for conflict-prone regions on how local diplomacy can replace external intervention.

However, internal imbalances or external shocks still pose risks to this nascent regionalization.

KEYWORDS:

Regionalism, institutionalisation, hydrodiplomacy, Eurasian integration

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Zentralasien hat frühere Erwartungen von Konflikten widerlegt und bewegt sich zunehmend in Richtung einer friedlichen regionalen Zusammenarbeit – durch Abkommen, Hydrodiplomatie und gemeinsame Institutionen.

Das C5-Format (Kasachstan, Kirgisistan, Tadschikistan, Turkmenistan und Usbekistan), das nun auch Aserbaidschan einbezieht, zeigt den wachsenden Zusammenhalt und das stärkere Selbstbewusstsein der Region.

Der Wandel vom Krisengebiet zum regionalen Knotenpunkt liefert wichtige Anregungen für andere konfliktanfällige Regionen, wie lokale Diplomatie äußere Eingriffe ersetzen kann.

Dennoch bleiben interne Ungleichgewichte und äußere Schocks Risiken für diese noch junge regionale Entwicklung..

KEYWORDS:

Regionalismus, Institutionalisierung, Hydrodiplomatie, eurasische Integration

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FROM FRACTURE TO FRAMEWORK: THE TURN TO COOPERATION

In the early 2000s, Central Asia was widely feared to be on the brink of conflict. Analysts routinely predicted new intra- or inter-state violence. The collapse of the Soviet Union had left behind arbitrary borders that split vital infrastructure, ethnic groups, and even families, fueling concern. In the early 2000s, a Brookings report warned that on three fronts—borders, militants, and water—the prospect of conflict between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan seemed increasingly likely (Hill, 2002). However, contrary to these predictions, recent development in these areas mark the subtle shift towards stronger regional cooperation.

Those fears were not unfounded. In the years that followed, the regions witnessed violent clashes—notably along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. For instance, tension over the planting of apricot trees in disputed territory led to the “Apricot War” between border communities. Border clashes erupted again in 2021 and 2022, killing and displacing thousands. According to the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs, over 230 armed border incidents occurred between 2010 and 2022. Meanwhile, ethnic tensions and violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan deepened during the 2010s, with many speculating that civil war, or even a broader regional conflict, was likely (CBS News, 2010). A report from that year concluded that the violence had escalated from an internal issue to a “regional crisis involving Uzbekistan, and the regional power, Russia”

(Stratfor, 2010).

Despite this volatile history, 2025 marked a turning point. On March 13, 2025, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed a landmark treaty demarcating their border. By March 31, the last unsettled segments between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were formalized in the Khujand Declaration on Eternal Friendship and a “Treaty on the Junction Point of State Borders.” President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s remark, “the borders that once divided us have become bridges of friendship and cooperation,” captures this shift (Mirziyoyev, 2025). Notably, these agreements were achieved regionally, with no external mediation. In short, the regional trend has reversed previous predictions: rather than rising towards war, the Central Asian states are steadily institutionalizing peace and integration.

Another historical fault line was water. Conflict seemed impending between “energy-poor but water-rich” upstream countries—Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—and “energy-rich but water-poor” downstream countries—Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Kocak, 2015). In 2012, Uzbekistan’s former President Islam Karimov warned that a dispute over water risked provoking conflict in the region (Reuters, 2012). However, as for the demarcations of their shared borders, Central Asian states are now resolving these tensions regionally. Joint projects such as the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric dam between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and collaborative reservoir management agreements among Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan highlight this

shift. Cooperation on the Amu Darya between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and shared climate initiatives like glacier monitoring point to a broader regional understanding: environmental security challenges transcend borders and require collective, regional solutions.

These developments suggest a notable shift in regional dynamics. Issues that once defined Central Asia as a zone of instability are increasingly being managed through regionally driven arrangements. Together, they indicate a quiet but meaningful move toward regional coordination and institutionalized cooperation.

Anchoring Integration: Institutions and Forums

While Central Asia has long engaged in broader regional bodies like the CIS, CSTO, SCO, and CICA, the C5 format marks a distinctly home-grown initiative, an attempt to institutionalize cooperation strictly among Central Asian states. Since 2018, the presidents of the five republics Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan gather annually to participate in the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of States. Beyond internal talks, the C5 regularly engages external partners (EU, US, China, Russia) in dedicated formats. During the 6th Consultative Meeting, the strategy “Central Asia 2040” was adopted, which outlines shared long-term priorities, such as strengthening the “international subjectivity of Central Asia” (Eurasian Research, n.d.). Unlike the ad hoc bilateralism of the past, this represents a more assertive, collective diplomatic posture.

FAULT LINES IN REGIONAL UNITY

Despite progress towards regionalization, the process remains vulnerable. While treaties and

shared infrastructure signal long-term cooperation, the architecture of regional unity is still relatively young—and not immune to disruption.

First, internal asymmetries could strain cohesion. Kazakhstan’s economic heft and Uzbekistan’s diplomatic dynamism give them disproportionate

While treaties and shared infrastructure signal long-term cooperation, the architecture of regional unity is still relatively young—and not immune to disruption

influence. If smaller states perceive dominance by Astana or Tashkent, trust could erode.

Second, leadership changes may shift priorities. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev’s regionalist stance was a welcome departure from previous disengagement. But future leaders may lack the same commitment.

Third, environmental stress remains acute. Water flow disruptions—intentional or accidental—could trigger renewed disputes, especially when paired with additional stress factors such as droughts, population growth, and underdeveloped infrastructure.

Fourth, instability in Afghanistan still poses risks. Tajikistan is especially exposed to Taliban activity, drug trafficking, and potentially militant spillover. In early December 2024, two incidents of cross-border shelling from the Afghan side occurred, killing five people. While the Taliban have assured their cooperation, any escalation may prompt unilateral security actions, potentially disturbing C5 cohesion.

Finally, while expanding the format to a C6 with Azerbaijan enhances connectivity, it also risks diluting focus. Some analysts warn that a pivot toward the Caucasus could introduce divergent interests, weakening internal coherence.

In sum, Central Asian regionalization stands at a promising but precarious crossroads, with estimations of integration over the next ten years being rated as moderate to high. However, experts warn that in order for it to succeed, it needs to keep the momentum (Cornell, 2025).

LOOKING AHEAD: SCENARIOS OF REGIONALIZATION

Bloc in the Making

In this optimistic scenario, Central Asia achieves unprecedented unity. The Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia revitalised the region's integration process, which had been stalling for nearly ten years, while leaders primarily maintained bilateral connections or engaged in various other regional organisations (CIS, EUCA or CSTO).

Recent developments hint at this trajectory. By 2024, all five presidents adopted a joint "Central Asia 2040" strategy, outlining closer economic, energy, and transport ties, and also specifically included strengthening a "joint Central Asian cultural identity" (Cornell, 2025). Furthermore, the program mentions the institutionalization of the meetings of the heads of state into a formal regional structure. Rather than being torn apart by multiple suitors, Central Asian leaders have largely approached them collectively and strategically. Insisting on formats where they negotiate as a group, with the C5+1 format, and seeking deals that benefit the region without excluding any

major power.

Fragmentation and Imbalance

This scenario sees regional integration falter, yielding only fragmented or ineffective coordination among the C5. The previous attempts at creating a Central Asian Union failed due to infighting caused by water and border issues, and regional dominance (Zhambekov, 2015). Those old suspicions could resurface, causing joint initiatives to stall. Promising agreements might be signed with fanfare, only to languish without implementation. For example, hopes for unity were dashed in mid-2022 when Tajikistan and Turkmenistan refused to sign a Friendship Treaty at a high-profile summit, citing unresolved domestic procedures (Najibullah and Asankojeva, 2022). Most analysts deemed this a pretext. C5 cooperation will be tested. Conflict with Afghanistan, leadership crises, or economic shocks like global recession or a drop in remittances from Russia could put the region under domestic stress, potentially turning it inward as governments prioritize regime stability over regional commitments. In this stalled integration scenario, regional architecture remains weak: summits continue, and rhetoric endures, but collective decisions are rare, and a true Central Asian "union" remains out of reach.

Collapse of Cohesion

The worst-case scenario envisions the complete collapse of regional institutionalization under intense external and/or internal pressures. A severe external shock—such as a major security crisis or geopolitical confrontation, could unravel the nascent Central Asian bloc. Divergent national priorities and old rivalries could amplify this disintegration. Historically, attempts at Central Asian unity have crumbled due to infighting and mistrust. Ultimately, Central Asia would revert to a geopolitical fragmented space, with each republic

absorbed into external spheres of influence, and the vision of a C5 regional order effectively dismantled.

FROM HOTSPOTS TO HUBS: WHAT THE WORLD CAN LEARN

The transformation of Central Asia from a conflict-prone region to a rising example of cooperative regionalism offers instructive lessons for the broader international community. What makes this shift remarkable is that it emerged not through the imposition of supranational institutions or interference of external forces, but through homegrown diplomacy and pragmatic cooperation. Unlike internationalized peace processes, Central Asia's border resolutions were primarily driven by the region's own political leadership. This suggests a model where localized legitimacy and dialogue can outperform externally imposed solutions.

Ultimately, Central Asia's evolution from hotspot to hub is not just developing as a success story—if momentum is maintained, it could be a case study in regional diplomacy, resource sharing, and balance of power management. The region's leaders have begun to turn a once brittle map into a working model for collaboration. If this trend continues, Central Asia may offer important lessons for others seeking homegrown paths to peace and partnership.

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