



## СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ МИР MODERN WORLD

DOI: 10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-2-137-157

EDN: ZZQHVG

Research article / Научная статья

### A Critical Analysis on the Impediments of Regional Integration in Central Asia

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**Abstract.** Central Asia emerged as an internationally important region after the five republics gained their independence from the USSR in 1991. The new regional identities that gained independence in Central Asia soon had the potential to motivate the regional integration process in this region. Until recently, the region's independent identity was often blurred by Eurasia, as it was not unanimously recognized as a separate geopolitical region. At present, nearly three decades after independence, these countries yet could not break the spell of traditional interstate interaction. Central Asia is the only region in the world that lags behind other regions in terms of indigenous regional integration. The purpose of this article is primarily to emphasize that Central Asia is an influential regional entity with an independent identity. Second, it focuses on the factors behind the regional integration process or situation and the absence of an indigenous regional institution. It is argued that regional distinctive features and influence of interregional actors have frozen the regional integration process in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Regional Integration, Regionalism, Organization, Relations, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan

**Article history:** Received: 17.09.2022. Accepted: 09.02.2023.

**For citation:** Ateed E.H., Özel Özcan M.S. Critical Analysis on the Impediments of Regional Integration in Central Asia. *RUDN Journal of World History*. 2023;15(2):137–157. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-2-137-157>

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## Препятствия к осуществлению региональной интеграции в Центральной Азии: критический анализ

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**Аннотация.** Важность региона Центральная Азия существенно возросла после того, как пять республик обрели независимость в процессе распада СССР в 1991 году. Вскоре у этих постсоветских стран появилась возможность стимулировать процесс региональной интеграции. До недавнего времени восприятие Центральной Азии как независимого образования зачастую оставалось расплывчатым вследствие влияния континента Евразия. Она не была однозначно признана как отдельный геополитический регион. В настоящее время, спустя почти три десятилетия после обретения независимости, эти страны все еще не сумели отказаться от традиционного межгосударственного взаимодействия. Центральная Азия — единственный регион в мире, который отстает от других в процессе осуществления внутренней региональной интеграции. Цель статьи — продемонстрировать, что Центральная Азия является влиятельным региональным образованием с собственной идентичностью. Помимо этого, в работе уделено особое внимание факторам, лежащим в основе процесса региональной интеграции, а также причинам отсутствия соответствующих местных организаций и объединений. Авторы считают, что данный процесс был заморожен вследствие особенностей региона и влияния межрегиональных акторов.

**Ключевые слова:** Центральная Азия, региональная интеграция, регионализм, организация, взаимоотношения, Казахстан, Кыргызстан, Таджикистан, Туркменистан, Узбекистан

**История статьи:** Поступила в редакцию: 17.09.2022. Принята к публикации: 09.02.2023.

**Для цитирования:** *Ateed E.H., Özel Özcan M.S. A Critical Analysis on the Impediments of Regional Integration in Central Asia // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Всеобщая история. 2023. Т. 15. № 2. С. 137–157. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8127-2023-15-2-137-157>*

### Introduction

Since the 1980s, various efforts have been made in the world towards regional integration. At present, the absolute majority of neighboring countries in the different regions have established joint institutions for cooperation. However, Central Asia is one of the handful regions that is lagging behind. It is a vast region stretching from eastern mountainous regions of Tajikistan to the Caspian Sea to the west. It has a total area of 4,003,451 km<sup>2</sup> and 10,035,185 dwellers [1]. The five countries of the region are divided into two parts in terms

of natural resources. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are rich in oil and gas resources. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are hubs of water resources and minerals like precious jewels. Central Asia appeared as a political region after the Russian Empire established Governor-Generalship of Turkestan. Prior to this administrative establishment, there was no common political identity in the region and the people were divided among three different Khanates. It was Soviets who worked to give a common comprehensive regional identity to the people of this region [2]. The policy of Soviet was aimed at the intra-regional economic integration in Central Asia. According to constructivists, the post-Tsarist attempt to give a common identity to the region resulted in the disintegration of the former Russian regionalism. Central Asia is regarded to be a “natural region” due to the historical commonalities between the people of the region in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, religion etc. During USSR era, the five republics embarked upon multiple attempts to make institutional arrangements for regional cooperation but they failed to realize their initiatives. The nature of inter-state relations and the influence of foreign actors were the major barriers to this process.

The immediate effect of independence of five republics of Central Asia was a new political identity of the region. Subsequently, the region emerged as a significant geopolitical arena (as it was underpinned by western authors) attracted the attention of regional and global powers who intended to establish their own version of regional arrangements. The newly emerged states of the region attempted to overcome their internal challenges and begin cooperation within a regional framework. However, these attempts have not resulted in any fruitful outcome. The region which shares various commonalities (culture, social structure, history etc.) has failed to organize regional integration. Central Asian Union (CAU) was the only regional organization, exclusively established by the Central Asian states in 1994. Tajikistan joined it as an observer in 1996 while Turkmenistan did not join due to its neutral foreign policy. The short lived CAU was ultimately dissolved in 2004 [3].

The aim of this study is to examine the power centers in the Central Asian geography after the Cold War period. In other words, it will be examined the extent to which Central Asia has progressed and developed in the post-Soviet period. The theoretical framework of the study focuses on regionalism and regional integration in order to understand regional development and integration. Therefore, this study focuses on the question why a dynamic regional integration has not been institutionalized in Central Asia despite having common background, huge economic potential and significant geostrategic location as well as passing through 1/3 of a century after independence? The nature and level of political, economic and social relations, imbalance of power, nature of communication, the structure of relations as well as roles of foreign actors are the factors decelerating regional integration in Central Asia.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

In International relations there are many approaches to a study of regionalism and regional integration. According to Ernst Haas, integration is a “process whereby political actors in several distinct national settings are persuaded to shift their loyalties, expectations and political activities towards a new larger center whose institutions possess or demand jurisdiction over preexisting nation-states” [4]. In his next work, E. Hass redefined integration as a process whereby an objective and determinate international system transforms to an indeterminate system in the future [5]. According to Amitai Etzioni, integration is a process whereby political units increase or strengthen the bonds among themselves. For him an integrated community (organization) has an effective control over the use of means of violence, central decision-making unit who has the obligation to allocate resources and rewards throughout a community [6]. Leon Lindberg defines it as the development of devices and processes for making collective decisions by means which are different from autonomous actions by national governments [7]. Hence, integration is a process whereby nations give up their independent direction of foreign and domestic policies and instead of it attempt to make common decisions or give the decision-making task to a new central institution. Thus, integration is a process through which states associate with each other to achieve a consensus situation. Despite the question whether integration is a process or a situation, it is commonly agreed that integration requires states to waive some of their national sovereignty in favor of a transnational institution. Therefore, integration can be defined as a process and situation whereby states as the main actors of international system submit to a transnational institution by giving up some of their sovereignty.

The mainstream theories of International relations hold different positions regarding regional integration. Even though realism acknowledges cooperation between states but when it comes to the concept of integration, it does not find suitable place in this scientific school. Looking at regionalism in terms of power-based approaches, it is seen that they make a state-centered evaluation. With a focus on studies based on power, realism examines regionalism within the framework of regional dominance. Rationalists argue that actors handle with similar decisions against external problems. Power-based approaches explain regionalism in the context of international and regional power distribution [8]. Perhaps, cooperation differs from integration as the former is a mere cooperation without waiving the sovereignty while the later requires a “high compromise” [9].

It is liberalism school of International relations that conceptualizes integration. Some researchers such as David Mitrany, Karl Duetsch and Joseph Nye, Louis Cantori and Steven Spiegel are the proponents of the concept of integration. While Mitrany and Duetsch’s functionalism theory is more eurocentric the Nye and Hass’s neo-functionalism can be applied to non-European situations [10]. Apart from the power-oriented realist approach, a society-centered approach also draws attention. Here regionalism, economic and social interests are brought to the forefront

[8. P. 122–123]. In the context of this paper (which examines the reasons behind failure of Central Asian countries in the development of regional integration and promotion of regionalism) the neo-functionalism theory of Joseph Nye and Cantori and Spiegel Model is applied. Ernst Hass (neo-functionalism) regards integration as a political process and argues if the leaders believe that integration does not fulfill their interests they will abandon it. According to neo-functionalism, four independent variables are required for materialization of integration: economic symmetry and equality, intercomplementary values of elites, pluralism and integration abilities of states [11].

In addition to the above-mentioned four factors, the Cantori and Spiegel Model form the basis of this paper. That theory studies factors of divergence from regional and trans-regional perspectives. The trans-regional factor relates the presence of international actors with different intentions and motives while the regional factors are focused on four dimensions that are also the foremost causes of divergence in Central Asia. These factors are analyzed by nature and level of cohesion, structure of communication, relations and level of power [12].

### **Nature and Level of Cohesion**

First of all, the effects of nature and level of cohesion have to be analyzed. Although the countries of the region have historical ties, the changes experienced in the Soviet period should not be left aside. In this respect nature and level of cohesion includes social, political and economic factors. Despite having common background and sharing cultural commonalities, the countries of Central Asia are divergent along several social directions. The main reason behind this divergence is the artificial social values injected by Russian Empire followed by Soviet Union. Social convergence is a decisive factor in regional integration. The indicators of social cohesion are language, religion and ethnicity. The language of Central Asian countries is traditionally dominated by Russian as during the Soviets times the Cyrillic alphabet was introduced to this region. Despite the fact that these countries use Cyrillic alphabet and priority is given to the Russian language, the indigenous languages of these countries remain different. By the end of the Soviet rule over Central Asian countries, each country started to promote its own national linguistic identity [13]. For multilingual identity of Central Asia, it is sufficient to list each republic by dominancy of linguistic population residing in that particular country. Following independence, the national languages of each country was incorporated into a Constitution and a process of de-Russification started [14]. Except Kyrgyzstan (that declared Russian and Kyrgyz language as two official languages of the state in 2000) other countries allowed usage of Russian only in inter-ethnic communications [15].

Multilingual profile of the countries of Central Asia played an obstacle role in the process of integration. According to Joseph Nye, in the process of integration

states are required to give up some of their values. It seems if a regional arrangement is supposedly established in Central Asia, the countries will not be ready to accept other country's language as an official dominant language.

Religion is another indicator of social cohesion. In Central Asia, however, this factor could not play a constructive role in regional integration. It is estimated that Islam is the dominant religion in Central Asia with 81 % of adepts [16]. Turkmenistan has the largest volume of Muslim population (93 %), while in Kazakhstan 70.2 % of the total population practice Islam [17]. The bitter Russian hegemony over this region suppressed religion in order not to play a unifying role among these countries. The legacy of Soviets in the region has been systematic suppression of Islam [18]. This process was triggered after the call of global war on terror and the emergence of threat of extremism from the southern border of Central Asia. Tajikistan's Civil War was inspired by Islamic ideology and the consequent repression of Islamic movements in these countries prevented this factor to contribute to the regional integration. Tajikistan is the leading country in terms of religious suppression which is followed by Uzbekistan. For example, in 2015 Tajikistan banned the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) which was the sole political opposition in this country. Recently, in late December 2021, it was reported that Uzbekistan police forced Muslim men to shave beards [19].

The ethnic indicator of social cohesion in Central Asia is more complexed. Just like distinction on the linguistic part, Central Asian countries are also ethnically divergent. All countries of Central Asia host multiple minority groups in their territory who hold substantive ethnic loyalty to their original mainland. This ethnic fragmentation roots back to I. Stalin's policy of *Dekulakization* in the 1930s. In this process, hundreds of Kulaks who belonged to the different ethnic groups were either massacred or forcefully resettled [20]. For example, Kazakhstan which nominally represents Kazakh ethnic group has only 68 % of Kazakh population followed by Russians (19.3 %), Uzbeks (3.2 %), Ukrainians (1.5 %) [21]. In addition, the independence occurred along the Soviet demarcated boundaries resulting in a complex ethnic conflict. Fergana Valley designed by I. Stalin is home to ethnic minorities of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. There are seven exclaves in this region. Tajikistan has two exclaves in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as well as Uzbekistan has four exclaves in Kyrgyzstan followed by a Kyrgyz exclave in Uzbekistan. This differential geographic demarcation of boundaries without consideration of ethnic settlements resulted in a long-lasting ethnic conflict between these three countries [22].

For example, Sokh is geographically located within the territory of Kyrgyzstan but the population is Tajik whereas it is politically controlled by Uzbekistan. This character of Fergana Valley has made it to experience ethnic conflict alongside the trihedral border. The same is the case with Samarkand and Bukhara cities of Uzbekistan which are warily claimed by Tajikistan. Tajik ethnic minority in these two cities is more than the total population of mainland Tajikistan and constitutes

30 % of Uzbekistan's population [23]. Prior to improving the relations between the two countries after 2016, E. Rahmon (President of Tajikistan) has often spoken about Uzbekistan's treatment of Tajik minorities. In 2009, he even claimed that Tajiks would someday recapture Samarkand and Bukhara [24].

The second reason that hinders the process of regional integration in Central Asia is related to the political factors. This point is analyzed both in terms of domestic political system as well as foreign policy orientations. All countries of Central Asia except Kyrgyzstan (that started to move towards democracy after the Tulip Revolution in 2005) practice authoritarian rule. Martha Brill Olcott argues that the local leaders perceive regionalism and regional integration as a threat to their power and authority. National security is replaced by regime security and the policies are aimed at survival of the leadership [25]. As E. Haas and J. Nye point out that submitting some extent of sovereignty to a transnational actor is pre-requisite for regional integration. This process does not serve the personal interests of the leaders of Central Asian countries. Their political system fall in the category of "illiberal democracies" [26]. Though, election is held in all countries of Central Asia and some democratic rights are given to political parties but this practice lacks liberal elements In the Constitution of all these countries separation of power, parliament, presidential term and other democratic mechanisms are stipulated but they are not practically enforced.

For example, according to the constitution of Uzbekistan, president can run for two terms of five years each, but Islam Karimov held the presidency of the country from 1991 to his death in 2016 establishing a lifetime presidency practice in the country. In Tajikistan the situation is worse than Uzbekistan. Emomali Rahmon has banned all opposition political parties and holds the power since independence. Dynasticism prevails in Tajikistan as its lifetime leader appointed his son as Speaker of Parliament and his daughter as ambassador to the United Kingdom. In the Constitution amendment of 2016, Emomali Rahmon minimized the age criterion of running for presidential election to 30 years age, paving the way to his son's nomination [27].

There are similar situations in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. On the one hand, the recent move of the Turkmenian President Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov to hold early election on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2022 and to voluntarily step down from office is an indication of breaking the political tradition in Central Asia. On the other hand, nomination of his son Serdar Berdymukhamedov in this election with the aim to replace his father consolidates dynasticism in the country. As a result of this, he was declared the winner of the presidential election by obtaining about 73 % of the votes [28]. In 2005, a revolution towards democracy was triggered in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan but due to Russian quick intervention this process failed and did not spread to other countries of the region. The 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2022 massive protests in Kazakhstan and the regime's crackdown also clearly indicate how authoritarian regimes of Central Asia are sensitive to any democratic uprising.

Therefore, at domestic level lack of liberal democratic political system, suppression of political parties, discouraging civil society and media censorship have undermined any potential for regional integration. The leaders of these countries have failed to balance between national security and regime security.

Foreign policy orientation of these countries also differs at great level. The countries of Central Asia hold contradictory approach in their foreign relations. Since independence, Turkmenistan has followed policy of neutrality which hinders it to join any regional arrangement. In the regional organizations established by the trans-regional powers, Turkmenistan is the only country that withhold to join. Tajikistan with its devastated background of civil war and fragile economy is dependent on Russia. Kazakhstan is also a strategic ally of Russia due to 19.3 % [21] of Russian population living in this country, geographical proximity, tendency of Kazakh political elites and economic-military dependency. Kyrgyzstan again differs in its foreign policy orientation. After the Tulip Revolution, it approached the West and provided Manas Airbase to the US forces. In the context of foreign policy, Uzbekistan has a challenging position. In the late 1990s, it suspended its membership in CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and entered GUAM (Georgia–Ukraine–Azerbaijan–Moldova, acting as an Organization for Democracy and Economic Development) under auspices of the West and provided military base to the US. The Andijan protests of 2005 again shifted the foreign policy direction of Uzbekistan by suspending its membership in GUAM and reorientation to Moscow [29]. It also closed the US military base in Khanabad. However, in the light of the recent developments in Afghanistan it attempts to balance its relations with both the US and Russia. Currently, all countries of Central Asia except Tajikistan hold common view regarding Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Given this divergence in the foreign policy orientations of Central Asian countries, it can be easily observed that different foreign policy orientations affect establishment of a common regional organization.

According to E. Hass's neo-functionalism theory of integration, existence of a common need among countries of a particular region encourages them to cooperate on the selected sector which subsequently bears a spillover effect on other sectors. Economy (as the most important factor of regional integration) has not played a constructive role in Central Asia. In this context, there are few economic variables that affected regional integration. However, Cantori and Spiegel Model explains how economic powers of states, pattern of foreign trade, and nature of economic relations affect regional integration in a particular region.

Even distribution of resources can contribute to the establishment and consolidation of regional integration but uneven distribution of resources can result in economic disparity between states. Central Asian countries greatly differ from each other in terms of economic power. For example, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan lack oil and gas as two core energy resources in Central Asia while Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are hubs of so-called black gold. Despite Tajikistan

and Kyrgyzstan possess rich hydropower resources, contribution of these resources to the national economies of these countries is not comparable to oil and gas of the above-mentioned three countries. Tajikistan is the most disadvantageous country in this region in terms of economic resources [30]. 92.9 % of its land is occupied by mountains and only the remaining 6.1 % is ripe for cultivation. Perhaps, one can argue that hydropower could be alternative to oil and gas as energy resources, but due to the unfavorable weather during the almost six months of the year, Tajikistan faces shortage of hydropower and cannot fulfill its energy needs [31]. On the contrary, all three oil rich countries enjoy their energy resources without any interruption while majority of their agricultural needs is also domestically supplied. Given the most important indicators, economic disparity of Central Asian countries is illustrated in the following table.

Table 1

**Comparative Data on the Economic Indicators  
of Central Asian Countries (2021)**

Country/ Indicator	GDP	GDP (per capita)	Unemployment Rate	Exports	Imports	FDI
Kazakhstan	\$169.84 b	\$9,056	6.05 %	\$66.20b	\$51.63b	\$3.32b
Uzbekistan	\$57.71b	\$1,686	5.97 %	\$15.18b	\$21.20b	\$2.32b
Turkmenistan	\$45.23b	\$7,612	4.38 %	\$9.24b	\$5.09b	\$2.17b
Tajikistan	\$8.19b	\$859	7.50 %	\$1.40b	\$3.13b	\$0.21b
Kyrgyzstan	\$7.74 b	\$1,174	7.89 %	\$2.42b	\$4.00b	\$0.28

Source: Macrotrends. Global Comparative Data — Topics Overview | MacroTrends. Macrotrends.net. Accessed September 5, 2022. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/topic-overview>

One of the most important pre-requisite of regional integration is that the states should have complementary economy. In other words, the level of economic interdependence should be sufficient enough that could tie their needs for cooperation between each other. The pattern of economic relations should also be intra-regional rather than trans-regional. The economy of Central Asian countries is neither complementary nor intra-regional. These states are economically more dependent on trans-regional countries. The pattern of foreign trade represents fewer figures among the countries of Central Asia. Majority of exports and imports of these countries are done conducted beyond the boundaries of the region. The most important exports of Central Asia are oil, gas and minerals while these countries import machinery and industrial equipment. The industry sector of none of these countries is a competing market for local oil and gas in Central Asia. In other words, the economic needs of Central Asian countries are not fulfilled inside the region; instead they import their needs from trans-regional countries. The following table demonstrates the major export and import partners of Central Asian states.

Table 2

**Major Export and Import Partners of Central Asia (2015–2019)**

Kazakhstan		Uzbekistan		Turkmenistan		Tajikistan		Kyrgyzstan	
Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports
Italy	Russia	Unspecified	China	Russia	Russia	Russia	Uzbekistan	UK	China
China	China	Russia	Russia	Italy	Turkey	Netherlands	Russia	Kazakhstan	Russia
Russia	S. Korea	China	S. Korea	Iran	Ukraine	Uzbekistan	Ukraine	Russia	Kazakhstan
Netherlands	Italy	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Turkey	UAE	Switzerland	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkey
France	Germany	Turkey	Turkey	Ukraine	Japan	Italy	Azerbaijan	Turkey	Uzbekistan

Source: World Bank. World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS). World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) | Data on Export, Import, Tariff, NTM. Accessed September 10, 2022. <https://wits.worldbank.org/Default.aspx>

As shown, no regional country is among the top five trade partners of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan is the fourth export and import partner of Uzbekistan while the same export position is replaced by Switzerland in trade with Tajikistan. However, Kazakhstan holds its position as fourth importing partner of Tajikistan. Only Kyrgyzstan has a favorable situation in intra-regional trade. Regionally, Kazakhstan is the second largest exporting and third importing partner. Uzbekistan ranks fifth as importing partner of Kyrgyzstan.

Therefore, these indicators well illustrate that economic cooperation in Central Asia is below average and the similar economic needs of these countries make them to supply their needs from international markets and deem the regional integration unnecessary.

### Nature of Communication

It is argued that the more communication between leaders of states in a given region, the more common trust develops. This variable is essential but an insufficient factor for regional integration [32]. Diplomatic meetings, construction of transportation routes, human contacts etc. can be mentioned as the most common indicators of inter-state communication. In the context of Central Asia, the level of communication between leaders is below average. For example, since 2000 Islam Karimov (the President of Uzbekistan) never visited its neighboring Tajikistan. It was not until Shavkat Mirziyoyev broke the existing situation and restarted bilateral visits in 2016 [33]. Since independence the official high diplomatic visits have been taking place in the sideline of multilateral gatherings under the auspices of a trans-regional state. Only after 2018 the countries of Central Asia started to have multilateral visits without any role of trans-regional catalysts.

The uneven construction of road and rail connectivity in the region designed by the Soviets also brought about disadvantages to these countries. Road and rail infrastructures were designed to connect three energy-rich countries to Moscow. The road and rail connectivity in the countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan that

lacked substantial energy resources remained limited to transfer of cotton to other regional countries. The mountainous terrain in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has been another major barrier to rail and road connectivity. Kyrgyzstan's connectivity infrastructures were constructed along its northern border with Russia paying less attention to its southern Central Asian neighbors [34].

### **Structure of Relations**

This parameter indicates the nature of relations between countries of a region in terms of cooperation or a conflict. In Central Asia the nature of relations between countries has been fluctuating between difference, tension and dispute spectrums. There are many factors that potentially trigger a dispute between these countries. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have turned out unfriendly relations over water resources. The water crisis in Central Asia is becoming a decisive factor for the future of relations between these countries. The uneven distribution of water resources due to Soviet's water policy and lack of water agreement among all five countries are the main potential factors for political divergence. Soviet's legacy of the diverted flow of Syrdarya and Amudarya to the Fergana Valley (which was the major producer of cotton of the time) led to draining of Aral Sea in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Though, the new leadership of Uzbekistan started to demonstrate amiability to upper-stream Tajikistan by waiving its resistance against construction of Rogun Dam but the developing water crisis scenario potentially fosters dispute between two countries. Tajikistan holds 75 % of Amudarya headwater that goes downward to Uzbekistan. Since Tajikistan's share from geo-politics is headwaters, it continues to build water dams on its rivers most notably on Vakhsh and Panj rivers [35].

The tense relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan arise from ethnic tension in the exclave of Tajikistan inside Kyrgyzstan. The differences that exist here have their origin in the village of Vorukh (an outer region of Tajikistan on the territory of Kyrgyzstan) where live the majority of Tajiks. About 32,000 Tajiks reside in this region as well as there is a fertile area of 130 square kilometers. Legally, Vorukh is part of Tajikistan. However, this area remained a residential area within a distance of about 20 kilometers in Kyrgyzstan as a result of the borders being redrawn in the past. For this reason, the region is still disputed between the two countries and military conflicts periodically strain their relations [36]. The most recent frontier clash between the two countries happened on September 16, 2022 resulted in 24 killed Kyrgyz [37]. This incident happened just when the leaders of these countries were gathered at the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Tashkent. Previously, the three days military confrontation between the two countries occurred between 28 April and 1 May 2021 whereby 55 people were killed and 40,000 were displaced [38].

One of the major factors that hinder regional integration in Central Asia is the hegemonic contest of the two relatively dominant powers of the region.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan develop a “cold competition” over the hegemony in the region [39]. Kazakhstan is the largest country in Central Asia in terms of territory while Uzbekistan is the largest country by population. It has a central location in the region with the advantage of having common border with all Central Asian countries. The dominancy of Kazakhstan in Central Asia is on the whole unquestionable but not unchallengeable. Under Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s hegemonic challenge to Kazakhstan was explicit but since the rise of Mirziyoyev to power, Tashkent pursuing the same goal adopted the smarter method. The idea of annual leadership summit of Central Asian countries was proposed by Shavkat Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan which was realized since 2018.

### Level of Power

The last regional factor holding the barriers of regional integration in Central Asia is the imbalance of power between these states. All countries of Central Asia are different in terms of physical indicators of power. In this context, this level can be measured by the national economy and military. As discussed earlier, five countries of Central Asia suffer from huge differences when it comes to economic power. Kazakhstan being the largest economy of the region is capable to compete in the international markets while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still depend on the foreign international aids mainly on Russia.

The next indicator of national power is military capabilities. There again, Uzbekistan with \$15 billion military budget is the region’s biggest military power followed by Kazakhstan with \$4 billion. The smallest military in terms of budget is Kyrgyzstan with \$20 million military budget and only 1100 military forces. Regional integration which is appeared by institutional organization requires active and equal participation of states. The imbalance of power in Central Asia caused to the lack of this criterion in the regional integration.

Table 3

**Main Indicators of Military Power in Central Asia**

Country/ Indicator	Military Budget	Active Personnel	Available Manpower	Rank in the World
Uzbekistan	\$15 b	50,000	15,894,014	51
Kazakhstan	\$4,00 b	135,000	8,591,377	61
Turkmenistan	\$800 m	22,000	2,666,600	86
Kyrgyzstan	\$20 m	11,000	3,042,097	93
Tajikistan	\$79 m	9,000	4,081,888	99

Source: Global Firepower. 2022 Military Strength Ranking. World Military Strength. Accessed August 30, 2022. <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php>

This huge disparity between Central Asian countries creates a core-periphery political environment in Central Asia. Smaller countries fearing exploitation by powerful countries did not show interest in regional arrangements. According to Robert Keohane, however, existence of a hegemon in a region can contribute to the creation and consolidation of regional integration providing that this hegemon should intend to go for integration and secondly its hegemony should be accepted by others [40]. In Central Asia this assumption is not relevant. First, Uzbekistan acts as a counter-hegemon against Kazakhstan and secondly due to the emerging nationalism the hegemonic domination of none of these countries is favored by other countries.

### **Trans-regional Factors**

Central Asia has been an arena of competition between the different alien powers since the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Russian Empire and Great Britain were the two main rival actors on the political, military and geopolitical fronts. The Bolshevik (October) Revolution of 1917 ended the existing colonial Great Game, but it did not stave off the upcoming episode of great power's competition in the region. Soon after disintegration of the USSR and independence of the Central Asian republics the new trans-regional actors entered the region. Great powers such as the USA, Russia and China started to influence the region with their own version of regionalism. This trend, however, is not driven by cooperation but competition. In the absence of an indigenous regional integration in Central Asia, the ground became ripe for trans-regional actors to exploit the opportunity and lead collective regional arrangements.

### **Russian-led Regional Arrangements in Central Asia**

In the 1990s, Russia as successor of the USSR abandoned its traditional orbit of influence in Central Asia due to internal economic challenges and the Atlanticist views of Boris Yeltsin. This trend encouraged other global and regional actors to fill the vacuum of great power's influence in the region [41]. It was not until Vladimir Putin's rise to power in Moscow made Central Asia to be reconsidered as an important geopolitical periphery for both security and economy of Russia. The Eurasianism approach of Russia during V. Putin's era resulted in return of the Russian influence to Central Asia. Russian concern about Central Asia rises from political considerations, national security, drug trafficking and energy security [42].

In 1992 Russia established Commonwealth of Independent States with the inclusion of all five countries except Turkmenistan. This organization, however, does not denote the essence of regional integration with respect to Central Asia thanks to membership of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova and Belarus. The next Russian led regional arrangement in Central Asia is Collective Security Treaty

Organization (CSTO) which was established on 14 February 1992. The organization which was solely aimed at military and security issues prohibits its members from engaging in any military activities with foreign countries. According to Article 7 of the charter, no member of CSTO is permitted to host any foreign military base in its territory without consent of other member states [43]. Indeed, Russia which shares 50 % of the total budget of CSTO enjoys more influence when it comes to decision-making [44]. In addition, all Central Asian countries are not members of this organization. Turkmenistan due to its neutral foreign policy never joined the organization and Uzbekistan with its fluctuated regime-centric foreign policy suspended its membership twice. Tashkent withdrew from organization in 1999 after the perception of conflict of interests between Uzbekistan and Russia. It rejoined the organization in 2006 after the Andijan Crisis of 2005. This partnership again was unilaterally suspended by Uzbekistan in 2012 when it again approached the US bloc after mistrust developed between Tashkent and Moscow.

Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) is the third Russian-dominated regional arrangement which was officially established on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2015. In the context of Central Asian regional integration, this organization also cannot be considered as a full-fledged regional arrangement due to the certain reasons. Russia's approach in this organization is to integrate the industrial Central Asian and Eurasian countries. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are not members of this organization and Uzbekistan holds the status of an observer. Armenia and Belarus as two trans-regional members alter the essence of Central Asian indigenous regionalism while Cuba and Moldova take part as observer states [45]. It means that the status of Uzbekistan as a regional country in Central Asia is equal to a trans-continental (alien) country i.e. Cuba.

Table 4

#### Russian-led Trans-regional Institutional Structures

Organization/ Platform	CIS	CSTO	EAEU	SCO	5+1
Members/ Observers	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Moldova	Russia Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan (Uzbekistan 2006–2012) Belarus, Armenia	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Armenia, (Observer Status) Uzbekistan, Moldova	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China India, Pakistan	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan Tajikistan
Non-members	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan and Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	

Source: Wilson JL. Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship. *Acta Via Serica*. 2021;6(1):55–90. <https://doi.org/10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.003>

As illustrated, the only regional arrangement in which all countries of Central Asia take part is “Russia + 5” Format meetings launched in 2019. This initiative, however, firstly started by Japan in 2004 followed by other great powers, lacks organizational structure and is limited to multilateral summits of the foreign ministers. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is another foreign-driven regional arrangement in Central Asia that functions as a medium of influence for both Russia and China [46].

Despite the fact that CIS, CSTO, EEU, SCO and “Russia + 5” Format function as regional arrangements in Central Asia, but due to the dominance of Russia as a trans-regional power and legislative restrictions stemming from membership in these organizations, it appears that the Central Asian countries less likely to go for the indigenous regional integration in the near future.

### **Chinese-led Regional Arrangements in Central Asia**

Since 2001, China started to pay the significant attention on Central Asia thanks to its dire need for raw materials and energy as well as its concern over military security. The establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization with the initiative of China in 2001 highlights the intense interest of China in the region. Turkmenistan again left a gap in this arrangement by not joining the organization. Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), however, was China’s initiative but due to the Russian traditional hegemony in the region, the inevitable conflict of interest between China and Russia eventually would influence foreign policy orientations of Central Asian countries. Membership of Central Asian countries in this organization contradicts the spirit of regional integration for Central Asian member states of CSTO. For example, Tajikistan is traditionally dependent on Russian military support, but its membership in SCO makes it to favor China as well.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the second Chinese-led regional approach in Central Asia which was launched in 2013. Though BRI lacks institutional structure but this deficiency is covered by SCO. All countries of Central Asia except Turkmenistan have written Memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China. Even though BRI has the potential to act as a catalyst of regional interdependence between Central Asian countries, but the Chinese concentration on oil-rich countries is a disadvantage for countries like Tajikistan. Thus, China plays the role of splitter among Central Asian countries and unintentionally increases the already existing power disparity in the region. China’s economic ambition in Central Asia turns off the efforts of regional integration on the grounds that two first stages of regionalism [47] can only be operationalized when domestic products are exported. Under BRI, the influx of cheap Chinese goods to Central Asia would replace domestic goods resulting in decrease of the intra-regional trade [48].

China also grasped Central Asian countries by its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) established in 2016. Weak economies of Central Asia like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are increasingly depending on the Chinese loan. In 2020, 52 % of the total foreign debts of Tajikistan came from AIIB followed by Kyrgyzstan with 45 % [46. P. 62]. This dependency on Chinese-led bank further complicates the process of indigenous regional integration as each country's economic tendency diverts from intra-regional countries to trans-regional economies.

Table 5

### Chinese-led Regional and Trans-regional Institutions and Platforms

Organization/Platform	SCO	BRI	5+1
Members/Observers	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China India, Pakistan	China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan	China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan Tajikistan
Non-members	Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	

Source: Wilson J.L. Russia and China in Central Asia: Deepening Tensions in the Relationship. *Acta Via Serica*. 2021;6(1):55–90. <https://doi.org/10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.003>. P. 60

In addition to SCO, BRI and AIIB, China also influences the region by its “China + 5” Format meeting. This initiative which was launched in 2020 aimed at increasing the Chinese major impact in Central Asia. Like “Russia + 5” Format, in “China + 5” Format also participate all countries of Central Asia. This initiative also has an adverse impact on the intra-regional integration. It is argued that under this framework, China is intended to convince Central Asian countries to fight any ethnic-religious sympathy with the culturally and linguistically close neighbors across the border. This will consequently further increase the ethnic rift between Central Asian countries [47].

### US-led Regional Arrangements in Central Asia

Despite the United States has been the major proponent of regionalism across the globe, due to political dynamics of Central Asia it was not able to establish any institutional arrangement in the region. The first foothold of the US in Central Asia dates back to 1989 when its Chevron Company invested in the petroleum industry of Kazakhstan [48]. But the landmark of US engagements in Central Asia is more clearly observed in the 2000s after the US activities in the region were

shaped by the bilateral agreements. Since 2011, the US relations with Central Asian countries have become more organized by introduction of the US “New Silk Route (North-South)” and “1+5 Joint Project”.

Central Asia as a region was highlighted in Washington after Hillary Clinton’s official visit to Central Asia and South Asia in 2011. In the context of regional integration, the most prominent outcome of the visit was the introduction of “New Silk Road Initiative”. Unlike Russian and Chinese patterns of regionalism in Central Asia, the United States focused on the three passive countries of the region. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which were less involved in the Russian and Chinese-led regional arrangements are centurms of the US-led initiatives. This situation is best represented by the two notable connectivity projects initiated and partially funded by the US. The first project known as CASA-1000 transfers hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan. The second is a gas pipeline project between Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India [49]. Even though, this initiative was aimed at inter-regional integration between Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan, but its impact on the Central Asian indigenous regional integration is inevitable.

The “C5+1” was launched in 2015 as the US main dialogue platform with Central Asian states. It is a ministerial level summit that is held annually between the foreign ministers of five republics and United States. Underpinned by the US Strategy for Central Asia (2019–2025), the “C5+1” is aimed at supporting sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Central Asian countries. The C5+1 platform channeled \$34 million US assistance to fund projects in the areas of security, economic connectivity and environment [50]. In the latest summit between the foreign ministers which was held in April 2021, Antony Blinken (the US Secretary of State) reiterated the US commitment to the aforementioned three sensitive discourses in Central Asia. Based on the discourse analysis, it can be argued that the US “C5+1” platform intend to trigger the creeping nationalistic trends in Central Asia. Consequently, it will result in further divergence among the Central Asian countries.

## **Conclusion**

Passing through thirty years of independence, Central Asian countries have failed to integrate in the form of establishing a regional institution. The Cantori and Spiegel Model well illustrates how intra-regional and trans-regional factors hindered regional integration in Central Asia. Nature and level of cohesion, nature of communication, structure of relations and level of power are regional indicators of divergence among these countries. Despite the fact that difference as a natural phenomenon in international relations cannot be accounted as the sole factor of regional divergence among Central Asian countries, the nature of international relations in Central Asia tend to be characterized by tension. Illiberal democratic

regimes of the region whereby regime security is more prioritized than national security as well as uncomplimentary economies of the region prevents establishment of any indigenous regional organization in Central Asia.

The great power vacuum in the region after the collapse of the USSR paved the way for trans-regional powers to enter the region with the different political and economic objectives. The influence of three great powers in the region i.e. Russia, China and the US shapes the foreign policy choices of these countries. This divergence of political tendency is well-illustrated in Uzbekistan as it shifted from Russian spectrum to the US within a decade. The institutional arrangements led by these three powers do not fulfill the regional needs of Central Asia. The interests often overlap or contradict each other as illustrated by CSTO and SCO as two parallel security organizations dominated by two great powers i.e. Russia and China. Theoretical frameworks of regional integration prioritize economic cooperation for consolidation of regional integration rather than political or military arrangements. The only economic organization in which all countries of Central Asia are members is Economic Cooperation Organization which was co-founded by Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. Since this organization is an inter-regional organization and Central Asian countries enjoy nothing but membership, it seems to lack the required potential to integrate these countries.

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