

INTERNAL REGIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING GEOPOLITICAL PROCESSES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the mechanisms for strengthening mutual trust and the development of new political approaches in the Central Asian region. It explores the importance of regional cooperation in ensuring political stability, economic integration, and security. Particular attention is given to the “Central Asia-2040” Concept adopted by the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which aims to institutionalize multilateral cooperation and enhance dialogue among regional states. The study highlights the necessity of expanding economic ties, ensuring interethnic harmony, and deepening cooperation in education, culture, and information spheres as key factors for sustainable regional development. The paper concludes that building mutual trust, strengthening integration processes, and effectively using international mechanisms are vital for achieving stability and prosperity in Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional cooperation, mutual trust, political dialogue, integration, security, Central Asia-2040 Concept, interethnic harmony, economic partnership, stability.

Introduction

Central Asia is located in the heart of Eurasia, at the crossroads of various civilizations, cultures, and major trade routes. Today, the region is home to more than 80 million people, and its total area exceeds 3 million square kilometers.

Central Asia is a region with vast economic potential and situated in an important geostrategic location. Being at the intersection of major trade routes, this land was not only one of the world’s largest economic markets in the past, but also widely recognized as one of the centers of advanced scientific development. However, the discovery of sea routes in later centuries sharply reduced the importance of overland trade corridors. Consequently, this situation had a significant negative impact on the development of Central Asia.

It should be particularly emphasized that Central Asia represents a space of states that are closely interconnected geopolitically, geoeconomically, and culturally. Cooperation among the countries of this region plays a decisive role in ensuring regional stability and development. In recent years, the countries of the region have taken a number of important steps aimed at

achieving peace, stability, and economic growth. In particular, initiatives to intensify political dialogue, adopt joint approaches to transboundary issues, strengthen cultural ties, and institutionalize economic cooperation have become a solid foundation for the region's development and its future prospects.

Over the past 20–30 years, revolutionary changes and innovative solutions in the field of railway transport have once again turned land-based trade and transport corridors into one of the priorities of global trade development. The emergence of modern high-speed locomotives, as well as innovative engineering solutions in the construction of railway bridges and tunnels, have made it possible to significantly reduce travel time and transportation costs compared to sea routes.

It is worth noting that although container rail transport between China and European countries began only in 2011, the railway network has rapidly become an important link in trade and economic cooperation across Eurasia. During this period, container train routes between China–Europe and China–Central Asia have managed to connect over 100 cities in 11 Asian countries and 217 cities in 25 European countries through trade corridors.

In 2023 alone, more than 17,500 freight trains transported nearly 2 million containers along these routes. However, this volume currently accounts for only about 10–15% of the total potential cargo capacity that can be transported by land.

Modern trends in the field of railway transport are creating great opportunities for Central Asia to restore its historical strategic position and economic potential that once existed during the era of the Great Silk Road.

As the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan emphasized at the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States held in Dushanbe on September 14, 2023, Central Asia “is becoming one of the centers of economic growth and investment activity, and is once again assuming its historical mission of serving as a transport hub connecting the West with the East and the North with the South”.

However, there is only one way to achieve this goal — through joint action.

The countries of the region can reach this objective only by uniting their efforts and acting together in this direction. Ultimately, such cooperation will create new opportunities that bring significant benefits to all the peoples of the region.

In strengthening regional stability and fostering good-neighborly relations, the active use of cooperation mechanisms in border areas and the instruments of “people’s diplomacy” plays an important role. The consistent development of cross-border relations, the strengthening of mutual trust and solidarity through various visits and joint events between neighboring countries contribute to enriching regional relations both in content and quality.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has established constructive dialogue and effective cooperation with Central Asian countries on the rational and equitable use of transboundary water resources. Special commissions have been set up with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in the field of water management. Through these structures, important steps have been taken to resolve pressing issues related to transboundary water resources based on mutually beneficial approaches.

In particular, the countries of the region must address other unresolved issues in Central Asia — such as border delimitation, the use of water and other natural resources, and environmental challenges, especially mitigating the consequences of the Aral Sea disaster — solely through unity and joint action. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan has repeatedly emphasized these points in his speeches at the UN General Assembly.

These pressing challenges also require the countries of Central Asia to further strengthen their cooperation. However, until 2016, Uzbekistan’s borders were largely closed to neighboring states, and relations among the Central Asian countries were far from ideal. This situation can be explained by several factors, including:

- There were disagreements over the delimitation and demarcation of borders, and due to the complex geographical conditions of the Fergana Valley, various conflicts arose.
- Trade and economic relations were limited, and the existence of customs barriers and the lack of visa-free travel opportunities had a negative impact on economic cooperation.
- There were contradictions in the use of water and energy resources, which in some cases led to conflicts.
- Since Uzbekistan’s foreign policy was primarily aimed at protecting national interests and ensuring internal stability, issues of regional cooperation were addressed only to a limited extent.
- Mutual distrust and political contradictions among Central Asian states also complicated the process of cooperation.

Due to these factors, relations between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries remained complicated for many years. It should be noted that in 2012, the “Concept of Foreign Policy Activity”¹ of the Republic of Uzbekistan was adopted, according to which one of the most important priorities of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy was defined as strengthening good-neighborly relations with the Central Asian states.

However, until 2016, due to the above-mentioned reasons, close and friendly relations between Uzbekistan and the countries of the region were not fully established. After the change of government in Uzbekistan in 2016, pragmatic changes began to take place in the country’s foreign policy. In particular, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev declared the development of relations with Central Asia and neighboring countries as a top priority of Uzbekistan’s foreign policy, which laid the foundation for creating an entirely new atmosphere in the region.

A truly new era of cooperation among the countries of the region began, and relations between Uzbekistan and the Central Asian states rose to a qualitatively new level.

Today, the role and importance of Central Asia in the international community are steadily increasing. This process is clearly reflected in the formation of multilateral formats within the framework of regional and international cooperation. The Central Asian countries, both politically and economically, have gained new opportunities and are becoming a central point of cooperation among global powers.

In particular, Uzbekistan’s political initiatives aimed at further developing and strengthening cooperation with neighboring countries are opening new doors of opportunity for the region.

¹ Since this document is classified, it is not possible to provide a citation.

The country's leadership is paying special attention to implementing joint projects through regional solidarity, expanding trade and economic relations, and promoting infrastructural development.

Moreover, the strengthening of cooperation in cultural and humanitarian spheres plays an important role in further consolidating mutual trust among the countries of the region. Various cultural events, joint educational projects, and youth exchange programs not only deepen regional ties but also contribute to enhancing the role of Central Asia in the international community.

In strengthening regional stability and good-neighborly relations, the active use of cross-border cooperation and public diplomacy mechanisms plays a crucial role. The consistent development of interactions in the border areas of neighboring countries, as well as the strengthening of trust and solidarity through visits and joint events at various levels, serve to enrich the substance of regional relations.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has established constructive dialogue and effective cooperation with Central Asian countries on the rational and fair use of transboundary water resources. Special commissions have been created with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in the field of water management, through which significant steps are being taken to resolve pressing issues related to transboundary water resources on the basis of mutually beneficial approaches.

In short, the formation of a stable and renewed environment of cooperation among the countries of the region demonstrates that it serves as a solid foundation for creating positive changes not only in political and economic spheres but also in all areas of society. This process is considered one of the key factors ensuring sustainable development not only at the regional but also at the international level.

The geopolitical situation in Central Asia is closely linked not only to external influences but also to the internal political, economic, and social processes of the regional states. Each country's internal stability, policy on resource utilization, approach to security, and level of cooperation with neighboring states influence the region's geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, integration processes in Central Asia, ethnic and social issues, and the efficient use of natural resources also shape the overall geopolitical landscape. From this perspective, the main internal regional factors influencing geopolitical processes in Central Asia include the following:

1. Border issues and territorial disputes. Certain countries still face problems related to the delimitation and demarcation of borders, which from time to time have led to tensions. The processes of delimiting and demarcating borders in Central Asia are historically, ethnically, and geographically complex, and some disputed territories remain unresolved to this day. The main issues have been observed between the following states:

Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border disputes. In particular, conflicts have arisen over enclaves and exclaves located in the Fergana Valley (such as Sokh, Shohimardon, and Yangiqo'rg'on belonging to Uzbekistan, and Barak and Chongara belonging to Kyrgyzstan). Restrictions on

access to Uzbek enclaves within Kyrgyz territory and tensions with local populations have also contributed to periodic disputes. Disagreements have occurred over the use of water resources and the passage of livestock routes.

Let us consider each case separately:

Sokh. The Sokh district, which is part of the Fergana region, existed within the Uzbek SSR from 1942 to 1959, after which it was incorporated into the Rishtan district. On February 27, 1990, Sokh district was re-established, with its administrative center located in the town of Ravon. The district is surrounded by the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan (between the Batken and Kadamjay districts). Sokh is one of the world's largest exclave territories in terms of both area and population. Its area is 352 square kilometers, and it is home to nearly 80,000 people. The population is 99% Tajik, 0.7% Kyrgyz, and 0.1% Uzbek and other ethnic groups.

The **Shohimardon exclave** is also part of the Fergana region and administratively belongs to the Fergana district. It is surrounded by the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan. The territory was transferred to Uzbekistan in 1930. According to various sources, its population ranges from 5,000 to 10,000 people, and its area is 90 square kilometers. It is located about 17 kilometers away from the "mainland" territory of Uzbekistan.

Shohimardon is divided into **southern and northern parts**. The population consists mainly of Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. The Kyrgyz government proposed returning the exclave to Kyrgyzstan in exchange for a certain financial compensation. Uzbekistan, however, responded that this issue could be revisited and discussed in more detail in the future. At one point, the borders of the exclave were even mined.

The problems of the exclave's residents have been exacerbated by several factors, including rapid population decline in the valley, the presence of multiple border checkpoints, acute poverty, corruption, and interethnic tensions.

The **latest agreements (2007)** between the two countries resolved some disputes and granted citizens of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan visa-free access to the exclave. As part of efforts to promote tourism, residents were allowed visa-free travel for up to two months to visit nearby attractions, including Lake Qurbonkul in Kyrgyzstan.

Chongara village was incorporated into the Sokh district from the Rishtan district in 2018. It is located on the right bank of the Sokh River. As of 2018, the village had a population of around 1,300 and an area of 261 hectares. The inhabitants are mainly of Uzbek and Kyrgyz origin.

Jangail is another exclave located within Kyrgyzstan's Batken region but administratively belongs to the Fergana district of Uzbekistan. The exclave covers an area of less than 1 square kilometer. According to some reports, almost no one permanently resides there.

In addition, there are enclaves belonging to other states that are surrounded by Uzbek territory:

Barak village – part of Kyrgyzstan, is located within the Qorqontepa district of the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. The area covers 230 hectares. According to 2009 data, its population slightly exceeded 600 people, but in recent years the number has been declining. By 2014, only about 20 families remained. The residents are mainly of Kyrgyz and Uzbek nationalities.

The village of Barak administratively belongs to the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. It is located 1.5 kilometers away from the main territory of Kyrgyzstan.

Sarvak — an enclave belonging to the Sughd region of Tajikistan — is surrounded by the territory of the Pop district of Namangan region, Uzbekistan. The area of the exclave is 8.4 square kilometers, stretching 14 kilometers in length and 600 meters in width along the Sarvak River. The nearest distance to Tajikistan is about 1.2 kilometers. The population mainly consists of Uzbeks, and according to data from 2005, around 150 people resided there.

These issues were primarily related to border disputes among the Central Asian states. However, the countries of the region have reached certain agreements on these matters. Between 2017 and 2022, 1,378 km of the border was officially demarcated. In 2022, an agreement was reached on the Kampyrabad Reservoir. Furthermore, in June 2024, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan signed a tripartite agreement on the construction of the Kambarata HPP-1². On March 31, 2025, the Presidents of Uzbekistan (Shavkat Mirziyoyev), Tajikistan (Emomali Rahmon), and Kyrgyzstan (Sadyr Japarov) jointly inaugurated the “Dostlik (Friendship) stele” at the point where the borders of the three countries meet³.

2. Problems along the Uzbekistan–Tajikistan border.

These mainly include territories not clearly defined during the Soviet period, as well as disputes over land and water resources near the border. It should be noted that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are working together to coordinate the operation of the Rogun Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) and have agreed to construct several small new hydropower plants. Moreover, they are cooperating within large regional projects such as CASA-1000. In particular, Uzbekistan’s “Surkhan–Pul-e Khumri” power transmission line project in Afghanistan may become a part of this transboundary energy network⁴. Based on the 2018 agreement, 1,200 km of the border was delineated, and the opening of border posts enabled freer cross-border movement for citizens.

3. Problems along the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border.

Out of the 970 km border, about 300 km remain undemarcated, particularly in the Batken region, where the Vorukh enclave is located. Disputes over water and land resources, as well as armed clashes (especially in 2021 and 2022), have been frequent in the border zones.

The Vorukh enclave, in particular, is bordered by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the north, Tajikistan to the south and west, and the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan to the east and partially to the south.

Since 2002, over 100 meetings on border issues have been held, and during 19 years, 520 kilometers of the border were agreed upon. President Emomali Rahmon stated during his visit

² https://uza.uz/uz/posts/qirgiziston-prezidentining-ozbekistonga-tashrifi-ikki-tomonlama-hamkorlikka-kuchli-turtki-beradi_617439

³ <https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/8002>

⁴ <https://www.uzanalytics.com/siyosat/9513/>

to Vorukh (April 9, 2021, in Isfara) that “there have been no negotiations and there can be no negotiations about exchanging Vorukh for another territory”.

In contrast, Kamchybek Tashiev, Chairman of the Kyrgyz State Committee for National Security and head of the government delegation on border issues, proposed at a press conference that Kyrgyzstan was ready to exchange the Vorukh enclave for an analogous area of 12,000 hectares within the Batken region.

It is known that following the clashes that took place on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border between September 14–17, 2022, the President of Kyrgyzstan addressed his people, stating: “At present, only the border areas with the Republic of Tajikistan remain undemarcated and continue to cause problems. We will continue to strive to resolve the disagreements along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border exclusively by peaceful means”⁵.

In 2023, negotiations between the two countries continued, but a final agreement was not reached.

4. Issues along the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan borders.

It should be noted that the main issues have now been resolved, and only technical demarcation work is ongoing. In conclusion, it can be said that in recent years, the Central Asian states have been seeking to resolve border problems through diplomatic negotiations. Most importantly, the leaders of the region’s countries are committed to resolving these disputes peacefully.

The internal regional factors influencing geopolitical processes in Central Asia may, in some cases, hinder cooperation among the regional states or even lead to tensions. Such problems include border disputes, use of water and natural resources, slow pace of economic integration, security issues, and interethnic relations.

Effectively addressing these challenges is essential for ensuring the stability and sustainable development of the region.

To address the internal regional factors affecting geopolitical processes in Central Asia, the following mechanisms may be proposed:

1. Mechanisms for resolving border disputes

Interstate negotiations – Signing bilateral and multilateral agreements among regional countries to settle disputed territories inherited from the Soviet period.

Acceleration of demarcation and delimitation work – Establishing joint working groups to finalize unresolved border issues.

Use of international mediation and legal instruments – Engaging international organizations such as the UN and the OSCE to provide legal and technical assistance.

2. Mechanisms for the joint use of water and natural resources

Regional water cooperation platform – Establishing an interstate body for managing the resources of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers.

Technological modernization and efficient resource use – Introducing water-saving technologies and strengthening land reclamation activities.

Cooperation in addressing environmental issues – implementing joint projects to mitigate the Aral Sea crisis.

⁵ <http://www.president.kg/ru/news/all/37917>

3. Mechanisms for strengthening regional economic cooperation

Joint trade and transport corridors – developing regional logistics centers and transport corridors. Free trade zones and customs privileges – promoting trade among Central Asian states.

Cooperation in the energy sector – strengthening mutually beneficial relations through power lines and gas pipelines.

4. Mechanisms for ensuring security and political stability

Joint fight against terrorism and extremism – sharing information and conducting joint military exercises. Strengthening regional security organizations – enhancing cooperation within the frameworks of the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), and CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization). Enhancing border security – improving cooperation mechanisms with neighboring states in protecting borders.

5. Mechanisms for resolving social and ethnic issues

Strengthening interethnic harmony – implementing policies that protect the interests of ethnic groups in each country. Developing educational and cultural cooperation – launching joint educational programs and cultural initiatives in the region. Managing migration processes – improving legal mechanisms for protecting the rights of labor migrants in the region.

The Central Asian states must strengthen mutual trust-based cooperation, enhance regional integration processes, and effectively utilize international mechanisms to resolve geopolitical challenges. In this process, it is essential to consolidate political dialogue among the states, achieve agreements that serve common interests, and improve cooperation mechanisms.

The role of regional organizations should also be strengthened — particularly in expanding cooperation among Central Asian countries in the areas of economy, transport, energy, and security.

It is crucial to intensify efforts within the frameworks of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), and UN specialized programs.

Furthermore, to reinforce economic solidarity, it is necessary to liberalize trade, improve the investment climate, expand industrial cooperation, and develop transport infrastructure. Establishing free trade zones and pursuing a unified customs policy among the Central Asian countries could also accelerate regional economic integration.

Furthermore, in order to strengthen economic solidarity, it is necessary to liberalize trade, improve the mutual investment environment, expand industrial cooperation, and develop transport infrastructure. The establishment of free trade zones and the implementation of a unified customs policy among the Central Asian countries could also accelerate regional economic integration.

Ensuring security is one of the key pillars of regional stability. It is essential to further develop cooperation among the states in combating terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and transboundary organized crime. In this regard, it is advisable for states to strengthen information exchange among law enforcement agencies, special services, and defense institutions, and to conduct joint security operations.

Likewise, ensuring interethnic harmony and social stability in Central Asia is among the most important issues, since the region is ethnically diverse. There are several reasons for this. Historically, the Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Kazakh peoples have lived side by side in the region, maintaining good-neighborly relations. They have long been united by common values, a shared culture, mutually intelligible languages (including the Persian–Tajik language), common challenges, and, above all, a common religion.

However, as a result of the incorporation of the region into the Russian Empire and later into the Soviet Union, the number of ethnic groups and nationalities living in the region increased significantly.

Today, more than 130 ethnic groups inhabit Central Asia. This, in turn, has created certain challenges — in such a setting, the region cannot be fully immune from ethnic conflicts unless the leading states consistently implement policies of interethnic harmony and tolerance.

Such conflicts have been observed in countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Among these are the disputes between the Meskhetian Turks (who were resettled to Uzbekistan in the 1940s) and the local population in the early 1990s, as well as the interethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz⁶.

Under these circumstances, it is important to expand cooperation in the fields of education, culture, and information, to establish youth exchange programs, and to support integration processes through mass media.

In August 2024, the leaders of the Central Asian states adopted the “Central Asia-2040” Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation in Astana. The Concept reflects the approaches of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan toward further strengthening multifaceted cooperation. It emphasizes that political dialogue and inter-state rapprochement processes in Central Asia are open and constructive in nature.

According to the Concept, the five-party summit mechanism has elevated the political cooperation of the region’s countries to a new level. The Consultative Meetings of the Central Asian heads of state are intended to develop various formats of intra-regional dialogue platforms.

Furthermore, the Concept notes that particular attention is being paid to mechanisms of cooperation among parliaments, relevant state institutions, public organizations, analytical centers, and business communities.

In order to strengthen international subjectivity, the issue of institutionalizing the format of the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian leaders is becoming increasingly relevant. Transforming this cooperation platform into a fully-fledged regional structure is expected to enhance its effectiveness.

Thus, Central Asian states need to further develop cooperation based on mutual trust and shared interests in addressing geopolitical challenges, while strengthening integration processes to

⁶ In 1944, Stalin deported 155,000 Meskhetian Turks from 200 villages to the Central Asian republics. As a result of this event, a large number of them were relocated to Uzbekistan, where they eventually settled and built their lives. According to some sources, their total number exceeds 600,000 people.

ensure stability and economic growth. At the same time, effective use of international mechanisms, expansion of regional organizations' capacities, and reinforcement of security will contribute to achieving common progress.