



Feature Article
August 1, 2025

Layers of Cooperation: The Gradual Institutionalization of Central Asian Cooperation

Svante E. Cornell

The development of a spirit of regional cooperation has been the main political development in the Greater Central Asian region in recent years. This process is accelerating and taking place at different levels. Primary among the initiatives underway is the deepening of cooperation among the five states of Central Asia, where the consultative meetings of Heads of State are being institutionalized and expanded into cooperation on the ministerial and parliamentary level, governed by strategies of cooperation adopted by regional leaders. Beyond this, more intensive structures of cooperation have been set up between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the leading states of the region. Furthermore, trilateral mechanisms have emerged, including one centered on the Fergana Valley involving Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as a Trans-Caspian trilateral involving Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Taken together, these mechanisms of cooperation at different levels and involving different partners suggest a rapidly evolving cooperative spirit across the region, undergirded by an emerging common identity.

It would be no exaggeration to state that in the past decade, the rise of a spirit of regionalism has been the most visible political development in Central Asia. Yet while the region has seen a rise in regional cooperation, it continues to lack formal, institutionalized structures of cooperation that exist in virtually all other world regions. Still, under the surface, Central Asian regionalism is growing organically, in a multi-layered manner not dissimilar

to the emergence of European cooperation following the second world war.

Immediately following the collapse of the USSR, Central Asian leaders took concrete steps to take charge of how their region is defined and to set up regional institutions. Notably, they settled on the term “Central Asia” to distinguish from the Soviet era-term “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan.” Even more impressively, they created the “Central Asian Union,”

a largely overlooked effort to build regional institutions in the late 1990s. As Sanat Kushkumbayev notes in a recent analysis of this initiative, this was a serious effort to have regional institutions take root, but which was nevertheless weakened by several factors, ranging from divergence between the objectives of the member states to external geopolitical pressure. The Central Asian Union was eventually folded into the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Community.¹

In the past ten years, however, a new and more sustained effort to build regional cooperation has taken root. This effort benefits from several advantages compared to the attempt in the 1990s. For one, regional states have completed much of their individual state-building efforts, which were only beginning in the 1990s. More secure in their own sovereignties, Central Asian states appear much more prepared to embrace the next step – building their region together. Furthermore, while the geopolitical tensions undermined regional cooperation fifteen years ago, today they are doing the opposite. Previously, regional states were not strong enough to withstand the centrifugal effects of geopolitical competition; yet today, this turbulence serves as a factor accelerating their resolve to take charge of their region together, rather than to have outsiders do so.

At the same time, it is often observed that regional states have different levels of ambition regarding the building of regional institutions, with some remaining skeptical. While this is true, the same can be said for the most advanced examples of regional cooperation, such as Europe, where concentric circles of cooperation have emerged regarding sensitive issues such as the Schengen border zone and a common currency. All EU member states are not part of these cooperative mechanisms; that has not been allowed to impede the continuous development and deepening of European cooperation. Quite to the contrary, it enables the states most dedicated to deepening cooperation to do so and pave the way, while allowing room for those European states that do not do so to remain valued parts of the EU.

Similarly in Central Asia, regional cooperation has to be understood to exist in more shapes than one. Clearly, there is a recognition that a group of five former Soviet Central Asian states constitutes the core of Central Asian cooperation. However, there is often an excessive emphasis on the Soviet-era definition of Central Asia, which ignores the commonalities between these five states and neighboring states. As such, there is also emerging a broader constellation that can be termed Greater Central Asia, with neighboring states including Afghanistan, Azerbaijan and Mongolia, that at

¹ Sanat Kushkumbayev, *Gone but Not Forgotten: The Central Asian Union, 1990-2005*, Washington, DC:

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Silk Road Paper, June 2025.

different times and for different purposes are integral parts of cooperative initiatives in the region. Conversely, there are important bilateral and trilateral relationships among states of Greater Central Asia, which have advanced cooperative ventures that have been key to the development of the region. One can speak of an inner core consisting of the relationship between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the most constructive analogy to which is the French-German axis in Europe. Trilateral groupings that have emerged include, for example, that between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan regarding border delimitation in the Fergana valley, and the intensifying cooperation in energy affairs among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Taking stock of the evolution of regional cooperation in Central Asia thus requires a broader analysis of these disparate initiatives, and whether, put together, they indicate the development of institutional ties across the region.

A Central Asian Regional Identity?

It is often taken for granted that there should be regional cooperation in Central Asia, just as there is in other world regions. But what is the basis for regional cooperation? And why should Central Asian states cooperate on the basis of this region, so defined? After all, there are alternative possibilities on the basis of which cooperation can be developed.

For example, it could be advocated that because the vast majority of Central Asians are Muslims, this common religious identity should be the basis for cooperation, suggesting an integration of the region with states to its south, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran and beyond to the Persian Gulf. Yet this has never been a serious option for either Central Asian leaders or most of their population, as there is very little sense of either common identity or common interests with other states simply because of religious identity. Furthermore, Central Asian states would find it against their secular statehood to base regional cooperation solely on the religious factor.

Another possibility is to look north instead of south, and embrace the concept of a Eurasian identity and pursue Eurasian integration. This has been a more serious proposition, not least because it has been advocated by the leadership of Russia for two decades. In the region itself, key leaders, such as Kazakhstan's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev, emphasized the value of Eurasian cooperation, not least given the strong economic connections between states of the Soviet Union, tying Central Asia's economies to those of Russia and other European republics of the Soviet Union. Yet the Central Asian understanding of Eurasian cooperation differed markedly from the Russian one. Where Russia sought political integration under Russian leadership, Central Asians aspired to economic cooperation on the basis of mutual respect for sovereign statehood. The

tension between these diverging perspectives has only grown over time, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine and frequent threats toward other states hardly inspired confidence in the primacy of Eurasian formats of cooperation.

Another possibility is for regional cooperation to be based on linguistic identity. This has also been developed over time, particularly under the banner of Turkic cooperation. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have been leading advocates in the region for such cooperation, and more recently Turkey itself has embraced this notion, resulting in the creation of an Organization of Turkic States. But an excessive focus on the linguistic aspect is itself potentially divisive – it excludes Tajikistan, and disregards the significant non-Turkic populations of a region that, historically, was characterized by the coexistence and cross-pollination of Turkic and Persianate identities and languages. This is also compounded by the fact that the region's Turkic languages are different enough not to be easily mutually intelligible. Unlike in the case of Scandinavia – where Danes, Norwegians and Swedes can interact with relative ease – Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbeks cannot do so as easily. As such, linguistic commonality cannot realistically be the foundation for regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Is there, then, a common regional Central Asian identity? There is much to suggest that such an identity is slowly emerging. Central Asians are slowly rediscovering their common history, a process that requires unlearning the historiography preferred by the Soviets, who sought to portray Central Asians as backward, with Russia being the provider of culture and civilization. In the third decade of independent statehood, Central Asians are instead rediscovering the luminaries of their past – a period a thousand years ago dubbed as the “Lost Enlightenment,” when Central Asia was truly the intellectual center of the world.² Yet it would be mildly preposterous for any *individual* Central Asian state to lay claim to historical figures like Biruni or Avicenna, who lived a millennium before the boundaries of these states were drawn, and who moved around the vast geography of Central Asia and beyond.

That did not stop several states during the process of nation-building to distinguish themselves from each other and lay such claims.³ More recently, however, regional leaders have instead tended to acknowledge the common ancestry that ties together the region rather than separates regional states from each other. Thus, Uzbekistan's former President Islam Karimov in 2014 convened a conference in Samarkand on the great thinkers of the past, stating

² S. Frederick Starr, *The Lost Enlightenment*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

³ Erica Marat, “Branding the New Nations of Central Asia and South Caucasus,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 14, 2007.

in his remarks that these thinkers “were in fact the product of the region as a whole, and of their deep and rich common culture and values.... in spite of differences of ethnicity, language, and the contrast between pastoral and urbanized peoples.”⁴ Similarly, in a 2024 article titled “The Renaissance of Central Asia,” Kazakhstan’s President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev argued that Central Asians “share a unique Central Asian mentality, which has given rise to a distinctive culture and traditions. The pillars of Central Asian identity are respect for our common historical roots, intercultural dialogue, and interfaith harmony.”⁵

It thus seems clear the leaders of Central Asia have begun to promote a regional identity. To what extent is this reflected in the populations of the region? That remains to be seen, not least given that the national consciousness of Central Asian populations is itself a relatively recent phenomenon, amplified by the building of statehood in the past three decades. But anecdotally, indications are there that a regional kinship or solidarity is emerging. During the 2024 Olympic games, for example, there was

what one regional analyst termed an “extraordinary sense of solidarity to support each other” among fans and athletes from Central Asia – best illustrated when an Uzbek coach stepped in to coach a Kyrgyz boxer when his own coach was unable to obtain a visa.⁶ Similar experiences can be viewed among Central Asians abroad, or in the emergence of networks of young professionals from across the region like the CAMCA network.⁷

There is, thus, increasingly a regional Central Asian identity emerging. This is in itself a significant fact, not least given the difficult hand states were dealt at independence. Complex networks of energy interdependence, unclear borders, and the existence of exclaves were among the factors that worked to undermine cooperation among them. And while the Soviet-educated generations had a certain commonality derived from Soviet education and the Russian language, it would not have been surprising if post-Soviet generations developed in a nationalist direction, giving birth to growing tensions between Central Asian states. Some elements of this did indeed happen, as border tensions between Kyrgyzstan

⁴ S. Frederick Starr, “Uzbekistan and the Institutionalization of Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 3, 2025. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13856>.)

⁵ Assel Satubaldina, “President Tokayev: Regional Cooperation in Central Asia is Vital Necessity,” *Astana Times*, August 8, 2024, (<https://astanatimes.com/2024/08/president-tokayev->

[regional-cooperation-in-central-asia-is-vital-necessity/](https://astanatimes.com/2024/08/president-tokayev-regional-cooperation-in-central-asia-is-vital-necessity/))

⁶ Jenny Jenish Kyzy on Instagram, at https://www.instagram.com/p/C-hVy_wIVzA/. See also Anton Chipegin, “Uzbek Coach Honored for Supporting Kyrgyz Olympic Boxer,” *Times of Central Asia*, August 9, 2024. (<https://timesca.com/uzbek-coach-honoured-for-supporting-kyrgyz-olympic-boxer/>)

⁷ See www.camcanetwork.org.

and Tajikistan have indicated. But overall, a common regional identity may indeed be forming – not least as a result of the inclusive concepts of national identity based on citizenship that the region’s states have adopted, as well as the spirit of regionalism that their leaders have embraced.

C5+ Mechanisms: Building Recognition of Regional Identity

While a Central Asian regional identity is taking root among populations of the region, it has also gained recognition on the world stage through Central Asian states’ joint interaction with world powers. This is equally important, as one of the main impetus for Central Asian regional cooperation is to ensure the sovereignty of regional states and avoid being the objects of great power competition.

Indeed, great powers with an interest in Central Asia have tended to adopt a bilateral approach to the region. This is true both for regional great powers and for Western powers. For Russian leaders, with a stated intention to maintain a “sphere of privileged interests” in the region, it is obvious that this can be more readily achieved by managing relations with each regional state separately, as it enables

Moscow to maintain the upper hand in any bilateral relationship given the immense disparity of size and power between Russia and Central Asian states. A bilateral approach also is what the Soviet Union’s leadership had to Central Asian republics. In fact, Russia saw the emergence of Central Asian regional cooperation in the late 1990s as a threat to its ambitions of dominance, and made sure to join this effort only to force it to be subsumed under Eurasian Cooperation mechanisms, as discussed in detail in previous studies published by this Institute.⁸

China differs somewhat from Russia in this regard. While Beijing also has shown tendencies to follow a bilateral path where that has suited its purposes, it saw the benefit of working with Central Asian states jointly early on, not least because that simplified its engagement with the region. China’s first major initiative in the region was indeed multilateral: the so-called “Shanghai Five” mechanism designed to delineate the boundary between China and Central Asian states. This was, of course, not a purely Central Asian initiative: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were not included, having no border with China. Moreover, as a result of Chinese eagerness not to antagonize Moscow, Russia

⁸ Kushkumbayev, *Gone but Not Forgotten: The Central Asian Union, 1990-2005*; Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, *Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia*, Washington & Stockholm: Silk

Road Paper, 2018. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13320>)

was a member of the group from the start. Uzbekistan later joined, turning the informal grouping into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which subsequently expanded its membership far beyond Central Asia. Importantly, however, unlike Moscow, Beijing has never exhibited any tendency to actively undermine Central Asian regional cooperation.

Western countries now portray themselves as supporters of Central Asian regionalism. Yet wittingly or unwittingly, the United States long maintained an approach that was itself divisive. This was the case not least in terms of U.S. policies in the field of democracy promotion, where Washington long tended toward dividing countries of the region into “good students” and “bad students,” distributing praise and criticism according to its perception of countries’ receptivity to U.S. priorities in this area. Of course, this was also true for U.S. policy in security and counter-terrorist affairs, where the Pentagon dealt bilaterally with each state to obtain basing and overflight rights. It is a welcome development that the U.S., like the EU, has come to endorse Central Asian regional cooperation in its published strategies and policy pronouncements.

That said, neither Russia, China nor the United States were the first to develop a policy that treated Central Asian states as an entity. That role fell to Japan, which created the Central Asia plus Japan format at a summit in Astana

in 2004. This was followed three years later by the European Union, which began to implement a similar format. Notably, long before the formal start of highest-level consultation among Central Asian presidents in 2018, this format of dialogue gained traction in two ways. First, the number of such dialogues increased rapidly. The creation of the C5+1 mechanism with the United States took place in 2015, and presently Central Asians have a dozen such mechanisms with partners ranging from the Gulf Cooperation Council, South Korea and India to European states like Germany and Italy – as well as Russia and China, who joined this format rather late, in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

Furthermore, the level of these interactions has consistently increased. Early iterations of the Central Asian dialogues with Japan and the EU or United States consistently took place at the level of Ministers or Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs. More recently, the level has risen to that of heads of state or government, as seen in recent summits with Russia, China, the GCC, Japan, as well as the United States and EU. President Biden’s meeting with the Central Asian leaders in New York in 2023 was the first time a U.S. President engaged directly with the region, and in 2025 the EU and Central Asia held their first highest-level summit.

One can marvel at the intensity of these diplomatic interactions. But the efforts of Central Asian states to constantly expand the format is

indicative of the importance Central Asian leaders accord to C5+ formats: they have successfully pushed the great powers to accept that relations with Central Asia will not be solely at the bilateral level, or through wider organizations like the Commonwealth of Independent States or Shanghai Cooperation Organization. To do this, the Central Asian states worked jointly in the United Nations General Assembly to obtain support for the recognition of Central Asia as a distinct world region.

Getting first the U.S. and subsequently Russia and China to acquiesce to C5+ mechanisms essentially forces these great powers toward acknowledging that Central Asia is an emerging and cohesive world region where divide-and-rule tactics will no longer work. In turn, the necessity of dealing with Central Asian states as a group makes the relationships more equal. While either of the superpowers obviously outweigh the Central Asian states put together, there is security in numbers, and Central Asian solidarity makes it harder for external powers to put pressure on Central Asian states.

Yet the C5+ mechanisms are not simply a defensive tactic to bond together against the threats of outside powers: they form part of a strategy to elevate the role of Central Asia in world politics. By engaging, at present, all major powers at the highest level, these dialogue

mechanisms truly put Central Asia on the world map, and serve to turn the region into what President Tokayev termed “a separate regional actor in international relations, capable of becoming a new center of global gravity.”⁹

Central Asian Cooperation: A Slow Process toward Institutionalization

It is a paradox that by 2017, Central Asian leaders had met frequently in mechanisms involving other powers. But for almost a decade, they did not have a regular format in which they met *only* as Central Asians, without foreign powers involved. That said, they had met jointly for specific purposes, most notably the Treaty creating a Nuclear Free Zone for Central Asia, signed at Semey, Kazakhstan, in 2006. Furthermore, they created joint institutions as early as 1993, when the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea was founded.

Central Asian regional cooperation got kick-started in 2017, when Kazakhstan’s then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev, responding to a suggestion by Uzbekistan’s new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, convened a meeting of Central Asian Presidents. When this consultative meeting took place in 2018, it was the first time in almost a decade that Central Asian presidents had met without outsiders present.

⁹ Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, “The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity,” *Astana Times*, August 8, 2024.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2024/08/the-renaissance-of-central-asia-towardssustainable-development-and-prosperity/>)

Since then, meetings between the presidents have taken place on a yearly basis.

The emphasis on presidential meetings is a reflection of the political realities of Central Asia. With political systems that are largely organized top-down, it is only natural that regional cooperation will be structured in a top-down manner, in the form of consultative meetings of the presidents. But for regional cooperation to be successful, it cannot only or even primarily be focused on presidential meetings. Quite to the contrary, regional cooperation will be successful when government agencies, trade councils, and civil society groups across the region cooperate in a structured manner with each other, through formal mechanisms or institutions.

Such a vision was indeed launched at the fourth meeting of Presidents in Cholpon-Ata in 2022, when presidents approved a broad range of initiatives covering mutual relations in more than two dozen spheres ranging from law, trade, sports, investment, visas, and education, to security. Similarly, the 2024 sixth meeting led to the adoption of a roadmap for the development of regional cooperation for 2025-2027 and an action plan for industrial cooperation among Central Asian states for the same time

period. Still, because the texts of these documents are not publicly available and because there is no central institution tasked with coordinating regional cooperation, it is difficult to follow the implementation of these agreements.

Steps have nevertheless been taken toward the building of institutions. Most importantly, the Presidents resolved at the 2023 Dushanbe Summit to establish a Council of National Coordinators of the presidential consultative meetings.¹⁰ Designed to “enhance the day-to-day effectiveness of interstate engagement and provide coherence to ongoing initiatives,” this body might in fact form the embryo of institutionalized Central Asian regional cooperation.¹¹

Further moves toward the institutionalization of regional cooperation came at the 2024 summit in Astana, where the five presidents approved a strategic vision proposed by Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev entitled “Central Asia 2040”, subtitled a “Concept for the Development of Regional Cooperation.” This strategic vision in turn builds on President Tokayev’s concept of “Central Asian Renaissance,” outlined in a policy article published ahead of the 2024 summit.¹² In this article, the

¹⁰ “5th Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Tajikistan – Outcomes,” *News Central Asia*, September 15, 2023. (<https://www.newscentralasia.net/2023/09/15/5th-consultative-meeting-of-the-heads-of-state-of-central-asia-in-tajikistan-outcomes/>)

¹¹ Javlon Vakhobov, “A New Central Asia Emerging: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 10, 2025. (LINK)

¹² Tokayev, “The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity”.

Kazakh leader outlines a vision of a more integrated region that also serves as an interlocutor on the world stage with great powers and international organizations. As he points out, this is already beginning to take place as a result of deeper Central Asian coordination in multilateral bodies like the United Nations, as well as in organizations like the SCO in which Central Asian states are represented.

The “Central Asia 2040” document spelled out a vision to deepen integration in concrete areas like trade, energy, transport, environment, digital connectivity, but also specifically included the task of strengthening a joint Central Asian cultural identity. But beyond that, it mentions, for the first time, the institutionalization of meetings of heads of state into a formal regional structure. Accepting that the consultative meetings of Heads of State constitutes “the cornerstone of political coordination,” it declares that this format is being institutionalized as a “permanent regional structure” and declares that it is being broadened beyond the Heads of State. Emphasizing the importance of “multi-level dialogue,” it expands the formats of cooperation to include parliaments, ministries, civil society, businesses, and think tanks.” It should be noted that minister-level dialogues are already underway: ahead of the 2024 con-

sultative summit, there was a meeting of Central Asian transport ministers, as well as a meeting of energy ministers.

A movement to develop parliamentary cooperation among the five Central Asian states has already been initiated. A first Central Asia Inter-Parliamentary Forum was held in Turkestan, Kazakhstan, in February 2023, and was followed by a second convocation in Khiva, Uzbekistan, in September 2024. Key matters discussed included cooperation on oversight over high-level agreements and the harmonization of legislation across Central Asia, as well as the development of a legal framework for a common economic space, and for fostering cooperation in industry and transport.¹³

In addition to these formal steps, it is clear that informal contacts among government officials across Central Asia have increased exponentially over the past decade. Far from being isolated from each other as in the past or interacting only through formal means, representatives of Central Asian government agencies are now comparing notes and learning from each other in ways that were not imaginable a decade ago.

The development of Central Asia-wide regional institutions is thus under way but is a process that will take time. Major decisions are

¹³ Dana Omirgazy, “Central Asian States Committed to Deepen Inter-Parliamentary Ties,” *Astana Times*, September 19, 2024.

(<https://astanatimes.com/2024/09/central-asian-states-committed-to-deepen-inter-parliamentary-ties/>)

taken at the yearly meetings of presidents, and to a certain extent continue to be determined by the lowest common denominator. This raises the issue of varying enthusiasm for regional cooperation, a question that has been marring Central Asian regionalism from the start. It should be noted that contrary to the situation twenty years ago, Turkmenistan is now a full participant in the regional cooperation mechanisms, including the presidential-level and parliamentary formats. This is in no small part due to the patient efforts by Astana and Tashkent to build trust with Ashgabat concerning the plans for regional cooperation and an urge to make sure that Turkmenistan is included, even if this means proceeding more slowly than would otherwise have been the case.

Still, however, Turkmenistan remains somewhat cautious not to allow regional cooperation to intensify too rapidly. When Kazakhstan's suggestion for a friendship treaty among Central Asian states was raised at the 2022 Cholpon-Ata summit, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan both refrained from signing, citing unnamed internal procedures. In the case of Tajikistan, the reticence could be more readily explained by the border conflict with Kyrgyzstan, which has since been resolved, as discussed below. Yet in the three years since, neither state has made moves to sign this treaty, indicating a continued skepticism to contribute to the rapid institutionalization of regional cooperation. Indeed, there is a clear sense that Astana and Tashkent are the driving forces in Central

Asian cooperation, that Bishkek is a willing participant, but that Ashgabat and Dushanbe would prefer to proceed more cautiously.

Yet for Central Asian regional cooperation to be successful, it cannot long avoid speeding up the process of institutionalization. There is a limit to the momentum that can be achieved by pronouncements at the presidential level, even if it is followed up by *ad hoc* meetings at the ministerial level or between parliamentary representatives. Already, the implementation of the agreements reached at Consultative Summits is unclear; and as the "low-hanging" fruit of easily achieved steps is picked off, achieving tangible results without regional structures will be increasingly difficult. For regional cooperation to be felt at the societal level, and to become irreversible, structures of cooperation will be needed, first because these can ensure that the pronouncements made by presidents are actually implemented at the national level; and second, because such regional structures can themselves identify and prioritize the main issues facing deeper regional cooperation in Central Asia.

The Core: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

Much like the relationship between France and Germany constituted the core without which the European Union would never have seen the light of day, the relationship between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is crucial to the development of regional cooperation in Central Asia. They are by far the two largest states of

the region, and are also complementary: where Kazakhstan has the larger territory and economy and links China with the Caspian Sea, Uzbekistan has the largest population and the most central location in the region, bordering all other Central Asian states including Afghanistan. When the countries have not seen eye to eye, Central Asian cooperation has faltered, as was sometimes the case in the 2000s. When their views align, as they have since the early 2010s, there has been an upswing in Central Asian regionalism.

In this context, it should be noted that this upswing actually began before Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Islam Karimov and President of Uzbekistan. Indeed, Karimov had accepted Kazakhstan's suggestion that the two countries form a Strategic Partnership, something that was realized during Nazarbayev's visit to Tashkent in June 2013.¹⁴ Karimov, known for his skeptical and sometimes derisive view of Uzbekistan's neighbors, visibly altered his approach to Kazakhstan in a positive direction in his latter years.¹⁵ Once Mirziyoyev took charge in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's policy toward all its neighbors shifted dramatically and positively. The relationship then developed quickly – particularly after the shift in

power in Kazakhstan that saw President Tokayev take over the reins of power. Indeed, Tokayev made one of his first visits as President to Tashkent in April 2019. By late 2021, the two states concluded a Treaty on Allied Relations. This act was perhaps mainly symbolic, as no defense treaty yet exists between the two states. Still, the treaty spells out provisions for strengthening defense and security ties between the two states and to coordinate foreign policies. More than anything, it suggests the intention of Central Asia's two leading powers to take charge of their common region, and work to strengthen the region's autonomy from the great powers surrounding it and establish its own voice in world affairs.

The 2021 Treaty also foresaw the institution of a Supreme Interstate Council of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. This Council met for the first time in August 2024 in Astana. Alongside this main event were other meetings of government agencies, business groups, think tanks and cultural events, and the Council meeting resulted in the launch of a Strategic Partnership and Alliance Program for 2024-2034. While a main focus of this Program is for the development of joint business ventures and industrial cooperation, with an aim to increase bilateral trade to

¹⁴ Danna Bupezhanova, "With Warm Embrace, Nazarbayev and Karimov Call for Stronger Ties between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan," *Astana Times*, November 20, 2014. (<https://astanatimes.com/2014/11/warm-embrace-nazarbayev-karimov-call-stronger-ties-kazakhstan-uzbekistan/>)

¹⁵ Farkhod Tolipov, "Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan: Competitors, Strategic Partners or Eternal Friends?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 7, 2013. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12786>)

\$10 billion, considerable attention was also granted to the coordination of positions between Astana and Tashkent in international affairs, not least in multilateral bodies including the United Nation and the SCO. The importance accorded to foreign policy coordination is also visible in the creation of a Council of Foreign Ministers between the two countries.¹⁶

Importantly, these institutions being set up on a bilateral basis between Central Asia's two leading states should not be seen as something replacing broader regional institutions. Quite to the contrary, they are complementary and may be seen as a blueprint for region-wide institutions. For example, the establishment of a Council of Foreign Ministers appears a blueprint for a similar region-wide institution.

It should be noted that the framework of a Supreme Interstate Council is one that has been adopted by Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, as well as by Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, indicating the complementarity of this format.

The Ferghana Trilateral

Since the 1990s, the Ferghana valley has been identified as the most likely "powder keg" in

Central Asia. A quick look at the boundaries drawn in Soviet times between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan would suggest why: they appear to have little in common with any settlement patterns or geographic and topographic realities, making the sharing of key resources, particularly water, potentially very problematic. And indeed, the valley has seen its share of conflict, most recently the border dispute between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Yet on March 31, 2025, the presidents of the three states signed the "Khujand Declaration" on eternal friendship, completing the process of delimitation of boundaries between them.

This symbol of the new cooperative dynamic in Central Asia contrasted sharply with the difficulties of the past. Suffice it to note that security threats in the late 1990s led to the closure and even mining of sections of the border between the countries. The Afghanistan-based and Al Qaeda-allied Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which emerged in the Ferghana Valley in the late 1980s, staged two attempts to break into Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, and in both cases sought to do so by infiltrating from Afghanistan across Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan's Batken province. This led President Karimov in Uzbekistan to see the two smaller states as security risks on account of their inability to stop

¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, "The Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan held the first meeting of the Supreme Interstate

Council," August 8, 2024. (<https://www.uzbekembassy.in/the-presidents-of-uzbekistan-and-kazakhstan-held-the-first-meeting-of-the-supreme-interstate-council/>)

the insurgents, leading to unilateral steps to safeguard Uzbek territory. The resulting closure of the border interrupted the frequent human and economic interactions across the boundaries in this highly interconnected valley.

A decade later, following the 2010 overthrow of the government in Bishkek, ethnic rioting broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan, disproportionately targeting ethnic Uzbeks in the area. Yet President Karimov firmly resisted any intervention on behalf of co-ethnics in Kyrgyzstan, and furthermore actively worked to prevent the deployment of Russian forces in southern Kyrgyzstan. Another decade later, in 2021-22 escalating tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan led to several rounds of armed fighting between both civilians and military units of the two states.

The road from this gloomy situation to the 2025 accord began, not surprisingly, with the shift in Tashkent's position on its smaller neighbors. President Mirziyoyev's charm offensive, which he embarked on immediately after acceding power, led to the surprisingly rapid resolution of border problems with Kyrgyzstan and Tajik-

istan. Already by 2018, almost all of the disputed sections of the Uzbek-Tajik border had been resolved, and the two countries agreed on reinstating visa-free travel between their countries.¹⁷ By 2020, the demarcation process was well under way.¹⁸ Similarly, the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border was completely delineated by late 2021.¹⁹ The conclusion of these agreements required land swaps as well as creative solutions to sharing control over disputed territories that were both symbolically important as well as crucial for downstream irrigation purposes. The multiple exclaves in the region – islands of territory belonging to one country but surrounded by another – had often been points of contention generating localized conflict and violence. Yet the easing of obstacles to crossing boundaries gradually also eased the situation for inhabitants of these exclaves.

This set the stage for the resolution also of the most infected boundary dispute, that between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In April 2023, presidents Sadyr Japarov of Kyrgyzstan and Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan reached an agreement that demarcated 90 percent of their shared border. Unlike earlier fragmented efforts, this agreement addressed a substantial

¹⁷ "Uzbekistan ratifies agreement on state border signed with Tajikistan," Asia-Plus, July 5, 2018. (<https://www.asiaplustj.info/en/news/tajikistan/politics/20180705/uzbekistan-ratifies-agreement-on-state-border-signed-with-tajikistan>)

¹⁸ "Uzbekistan, Tajikistan sign border demarcation protocol," Azernews, January 8, 2020. (<https://www.azernews.az/region/160433.html>)

¹⁹ "Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan sign deal to end border disputes," *Eurasianet*, March 26, 2021. (<https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-sign-deal-to-end-border-disputes>)

majority of the disputed territory, indicating a newfound willingness from both governments to engage in constructive dialogue rather than resorting to military confrontations. With the 2023 agreement, the two countries agreed to exchange certain parcels of land and establish joint management in some areas over roads and water resources. In July and December 2024, the two countries agreed on the remaining areas of the border.²⁰ This in turn made possible the beginning (at least publicly) of the trilateral process involving also Uzbekistan, with a January meeting of the Prime Ministers of the three countries at the junction of the borders of the three states.²¹ Finally, in March 2025, Presidents Rahmon and Japarov signed a border treaty as well as fifteen other cooperation agreements, signifying the resolution of all boundary issues in the Ferghana valley. That agreement in turn made possible the March 31 summit of three presidents and the Khujand Declaration.

At the local level, differences will certainly remain, and local conflict may certainly continue to arise against the background of the tensions and recriminations that have been reported over the past years. Still, the resolution at the political level of boundary disputes among the three states sharing the Ferghana Valley is a

key landmark in the modern history of Central Asia, which will have a significant impact on the further development of regional cooperation.

While this development is not formally connected to the consultative meetings of Central Asian Presidents, it is simply unthinkable that the contentious relationship between Bishkek and Dushanbe could so rapidly have been transformed into a positive process leading to the resolution of the dispute in the absence of the Central Asia-wide process of regional integration led by Astana and Tashkent. Indeed, it is likely that these powers played a much more significant role in the process of reconciliation between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than has been publicly reported. In other words, Central Asian regional cooperation played a strongly centripetal role in pushing the two states toward cooperation and away from conflict, and ensured that the dispute could be resolved without the intervention of outside powers.

The Middle Powers Trilateral

Shifting our gaze to the West, another form of trilateral cooperation has arisen among the states that could be called the “Middle Powers” of Greater Central Asia. Whereas Kazakhstan

²⁰ Catherine Putz, “After 33 Years, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan Announce Border Agreement,” *Diplomat*, December 4, 2024. (<https://thediplomat.com/2024/12/after-33-years-kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistan-announce-border-agreement/>)

²¹ “Prime Ministers of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan held a meeting on the border issue,” *Gazeta.uz*, January 8, 2025. (<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2025/01/08/borders/>)

in particular has been recognized as a middle power, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan also are emerging as states that have displayed an ability, not least in working together, to shape the region around them rather than allowing it to be shaped solely by external actors.²²

As discussed above, the bilateral mechanisms of cooperation among the three states display considerable similarities. Relations have first been anchored, on a bilateral basis, through the signing of agreements on Strategic Partnership. These have then been expanded to treaties on allied relations, while intergovernmental councils have been set up to formalize the government-wide cooperation between two states. Relations between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, developed early on – the former relationship is discussed in detail above, while Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan were joined in the common focus on Trans-Caspian transportation, in order to expand the opportunities for Kazakhstan to export its energy resources through Azerbaijan, while also creating the western portion of the east-west corridor linking Europe to China through the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The relationship between Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan developed somewhat later, but at lightning speed, and very much modeled on each state's relations with Kazakhstan.²³

That in turn set the stage for the development of trilateral consultations between the three states. Most concretely, in June 2024 the three states signed, at the ministerial level, an agreement to integrate the energy grids of the three countries and develop solar and wind energy for export to Europe. On the sidelines of the 2024 COP29 meeting in Baku in November, the three Presidents signed the "Intergovernmental Agreement on Strategic Partnership for Green Energy Development and Transmission between Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan." This agreement aims to establish a "green energy corridor," integrated electricity markets in the region, and export of renewable energy to other regions.²⁴

This is in itself a remarkable achievement, even though there remains much to be done before such a linking of the energy systems is completed, let alone enough electricity is generated to make the export of energy possible.²⁵ Still, it

²² Svante E. Cornell, "Kazakhstan and the Rise of Middle Powers in Central Asia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 31, 2024. (https://www.cacianalyst.org/resources/pdf/240731_FT_Kaz.pdf)

²³ See i.e. "Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan Cooperation: Bridging the Caspian," Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, November 2, 2023. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/fellowship/item/13498>)

²⁴ Saniya Sakenova, "Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan Sign Agreement on Energy System Integration," *Astana Times*, November 13, 2024. <https://astanatimes.com/2024/11/kazakhstan-azerbaijan-and-uzbekistan-sign-agreement-on-energy-system-integration/>

²⁵ Svante E. Cornell and Brenda Shaffer, "Central Asia in the Energy Transition," *Central Asia-Caucasus*

signifies the understanding of the leaders of these three states that by working together, they can take a leading role in the broader Greater Central Asia region, thus strengthening the autonomy of the region as a whole from outside powers.

Challenges Ahead

Looking forward, there is no shortage of challenges for Central Asian States to work on that require region-wide cooperative action. Three areas can be highlighted among many: security threats, environmental threats, and media.

Security threats to Central Asia remain manifold, ranging from great power competition to violent extremism and narcotics trafficking. Thus far, Central Asian states have avoided getting embroiled in the competition among great powers. But without the greater coordination among regional states, localized instance of violence, such as the Kyrgyz-Tajik border conflict several years ago, could lead to the intervention of external powers. Similarly, Central Asia continues to face the interrelated threats of violent extremism and narcotics trafficking, which are often connected to the situation in Afghanistan. It should be noted that Central Asian states have proven remarkably resilient to these threats, and that they have

chosen to proactively engage with Afghanistan, rather to repeat the approach of the 1990s, when they largely sought simply to isolate Afghanistan. And it is positive news that the opium production in Afghanistan has fallen dramatically since 2022. Still, the country continues to harbor extremist movements like Islamic State Khorasan, which has also seen setbacks in recent times, but remains a force to be reckoned with.²⁶

Given the growing instability in Eurasia as a whole, Central Asian states are forced to divert resources to the strengthening of defense structures and defense industry. As they do so, they would certainly benefit from greater coordination between their respective defense bodies, to avoid duplication of efforts and achieve interoperability and burden-sharing. Similarly, the need for continued counter-radicalization efforts remains, and is an area where the regional states could benefit greatly from comparing best practices. Indeed, the region is in the midst of a shift from a reactive and defensive approach centered on security services to a more “proactive” approach to countering radicalization particularly among youth.

In his 2024 concept for the “Renaissance of Central Asia,” Kazakhstan’s President Tokayev identified the need for greater coordination in

Analyst, December 4, 2024. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/feature-articles/item/13832>)

²⁶ Abdul Basit, *Is the Islamic State of Khorasan Province Losing Momentum?* *Diplomat*, June 26, 2025.

(<https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/is-the-islamic-state-of-khorasan-province-losing-momentum/>)

the identification of security threats to the region, and called for “collaboration in the realm of defense policy and security,” and in particular the need “to establish a regional security architecture.”²⁷ As Uzbekistan’s President Mirziyoyev has noted, countering violent extremism “can be ensured when we act together.”²⁸

An equally serious concern for the region is the environmental challenge, related in particular to the utilization of water resources. As noted, one of the first joint efforts by Central Asian states was the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea. Yet disagreements between states on the usage of water was long pronounced, pitting upstream states with abundant water resources against downstream states that are also fossil fuel producers. It took many years to overcome these differences, which were long most acute between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Yet recently, a consensus appears to have grown that the region’s water and energy resources must be seen as a whole. As such, Uzbekistan has lifted its opposition to Tajikistan’s

Rogun hydroelectric power plant and committed to purchase electricity from it.²⁹ Meanwhile, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have both joined Kyrgyzstan’s Kambarata Hydropower Plant Project.³⁰

While these developments are positive, the continued issue of managing the waters of the region’s largest rivers, Amu Darya and Syr Darya, remain decisive to the region’s future. The Aral Sea disaster, caused largely by highly inefficient Soviet irrigation practices and the overcultivation of water-intensive crops like cotton, led to the desertification of an area comparable to mid-size European countries.³¹ Concerns over reduced water flows were further exacerbated by the Taliban authorities’ plan to build the Qosh Tepa canal, which would reduce the flow of Amu Darya water to downstream states by an estimated 15 percent.³² Given the continued reduction rainfall, the melting of Central Asian glaciers, and growing water usage in conjunction with population growth and economic development, the water

²⁷ Tokayev, “The Renaissance of Central Asia: Towards Sustainable Development and Prosperity”.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, “President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev: Central Asia is a region of huge unrealized potential,” November 14, 2017. (<https://www.uzbekembassy.in/president-of-uzbekistn-shavkat-mirziyoyev-central-asia-is-a-region-of-huge-unrealized-potential/>)

²⁹ “Tajikistan to Supply Rogun Hydropower to Uzbekistan at 3.4 Cents per kWh,” *Times of Central Asia*, July 17, 2025. (<https://timesca.com/tajikistan-to-supply-rogun-hydropower-to-uzbekistan-at-3-4-cents-per-kwh/>)

³⁰ “Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan agree on key principles, stages of Kambarata HPP-1 project,” *Interfax*, January 2, 2025. (<https://interfax.com/news-room/top-stories/109441/>)

³¹ “Kazakhstan leads regional cooperation to save the Aral Sea,” *NE Global News Service*, March 13, 2024. (<https://www.neglobal.eu/kazakhstan-leads-regional-cooperation-to-save-the-aral-sea/>)

³² Ali Mahaqi, “Water Tensions Under the Taliban,” *The Interpreter*, January 8, 2025. (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/water-tensions-under-taliban>)

issue will be a key definer of Central Asia in the twenty-first century. And while it is a welcome development that the regional cooperative spirit has extended to this previously contentious area, the task of implementing meaningful change to the region's water management, especially agricultural practices, will require cooperative initiatives that can only realistically be implemented by cooperative institutions at the regional level that do not yet exist in the region.

One concrete such initiative is the upcoming Regional Environmental Summit (RES2026), to be hosted by Kazakhstan in Aktau in 2026. This initiative, led by the UN Economic Commission for Europe, will serve to support Central Asian countries in advancing environmental sustainability, resilience, and cross-border cooperation. A preparatory meeting is being held in Aktau in August 2025, and preparatory work for this summit will be undertaken, with a view to address environmental challenges in Central Asia, such as rising temperatures, land degradation, water stress, and air pollution.

Conclusions

As this analysis has shown, the development of Central Asian cooperation is proceeding rapidly, on multiple fronts. The five-state Central Asian cooperative mechanism, focused on yearly summits at the presidential level, is slowly being institutionalized, as well as expanding to the regularized meetings at the

ministerial level. Meanwhile, inter-parliamentary cooperation is expanding as well – a crucial element to ensure the harmonization of laws across the region. Separately from the five-state cooperation mechanism, however, other formats are developing that are complementary to the region-wide cooperation. At the core lies the intensifying alliance between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which is being complemented by a trilateral relationship involving Azerbaijan. In parallel, another trilateral relationship focused on the Ferghana valley is emerging among Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Looking toward the future, much remains to be done for this vision of a cooperative Central Asia to be realized. Thus far, the regional states have largely built their regional cooperation alone, without much support from international institutions, with the exception of the United Nations. Given the geopolitical realities of the region, this may be a good thing. Yet in the future, supporters of Central Asian regional cooperation will find many opportunities to respond to Central Asian requests for assistance in specific, technical issues where they seek to strengthen their cooperation, be it in matters relating to common visa regimes or the facilitation of trade, the integration of energy grids, or the management of water resources.

As Central Asian cooperative initiatives intensify and become rooted through the building of institutions, the impact on the broader region is

highly significant. Indeed, in many respects Central Asia is going against the grain. A survey of global events would indicate that centrifugal trends are dominant – with controversies, conflicts and wars dominating the headlines – the states of Greater Central Asia are going in the opposite direction. Rather than allowing themselves to succumb to the prevailing global trends, they have taken charge of their region, working toward a more collaborative future rooted in a developing sense of a common Central Asian identity.

Yet the need for the formation of concrete structures of regional cooperation is pressing. Crucially, the unrest involving many of the

great powers surrounding Central Asia provides the region with an opportunity to act now to develop institutions of regional cooperation that will lay the groundwork for security and stability in the region, as well as pave the way for sustainable development in Central Asia and the management of the region's environmental challenges. Central Asia has come a long way, but for the region's leaders, this is the time to take the next step and accelerate the building of regional institutions.

Svante E. Cornell is Research Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center.

