

China-Central Asia Regionalization and Its Impact on the Central Asian Region and Beyond

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Abstract

Since gaining independence, Central Asian countries have maintained stable and friendly relationships with China. Through China-led bilateral, regional, and multilateral projects, China and Central Asia have significantly strengthened their strategic partnership and elevated the importance of their relationship in the region-building process. As a result of these interactions, Central Asia is emerging as an active regional actor. This article characterizes China and Central Asia's interactions as Warleigh-Lack's (2006) "regionalization" and examines the impact of this process on diffusing China's model of regionalism in Central Asia. Specifically, the article aims to answer the question: what are the implications of China and Central Asia's regionalization processes for shaping the region and for the presence of a third actor, Russia?

Employing Acharya's (2004) "norm localization" analytical framework, the article argues that the current Central Asian regional cooperation model can be described as an indirect (recipient-driven) influence of China and Central Asia's regionalization processes within the scope of the Shanghai Cooperation Agreement (SCO), bilateral strategic partnership agreements and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It posits that, of the various types of indirect diffusion of institutional and policy models of regionalism, the new Central Asian model of regional cooperation entails a "lesson-drawing" diffusion mechanism from the Chinese model of regionalism.

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1. China-Central Asia Relations

After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), China and the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan smoothly and carefully constructed their relations. The Central Asian states identified their position clearly: they would not allow any outbreak and expansion of separatist and Islamic fundamentalist movements in their territory and beyond. Additionally, Central Asian countries first stated that they recognize China as “one” and that “Taiwan is an inseparable part of Chinese territory” (Tokayev 2001). These claims fit China’s “core interests” well, which were stressed in the white paper as “state sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity and national reunification” (*China’s Peaceful Development* 2011). In turn, China constructed its image as part of the Global South—a developing country that is not hegemonic but pursuing the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence that advocate for multipolarity, non-interference, and different development models (Zhongping and Jing 2014).

China initiated the Shanghai Five—confidence-building talks with the post-Soviet countries sharing a border with China (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) in 1996. In 2001, with the membership of Uzbekistan, the Shanghai Five Forum became more institutionalized, which led to the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Despite not sharing any borders with China, other Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan became important members as they were the first to officially start following the Chinese model of development at the beginning of the 1990s (Kazantsev 2008; Syroezhkin 2010). The SCO has been a multilateral site where countries engaged in their deals bilaterally. In other words, the SCO is an institution for bilateral intergovernmental cooperation, which does not transfer any authority to an institution. Such an approach was important for China as it allowed for the continuation of its “hub and spoke” strategy; on the other hand, the Central Asian states liked a bilateral approach as it enabled them to feel like equal partners in the organization and not as ‘Russia’s little brothers.’ These factors enabled the Central Asian states to construct a more clear-cut vision of an organization that corresponds to their national interests.

Moreover, China favours a come as you are approach that avoids any conditionality, entailing the exportation of some external norms and values (Laruelle 2018; Russo 2018). In this regard, Kazakhstan’s former president Nursultan Nazarbayev (1997) stated that they welcome China’s anti-hegemonic policy of friendship with neighbouring countries. He went on to say, “China never dictates its own terms and does not say ‘live as we live’, as the West has always taught us” (Nazarbayev 2019). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan’s first president, Islam Karimov, declared that “China is the most reliable and trustworthy friend of Uzbekistan” (Syroezhkin 2010). While many countries criticized Karimov’s regime after the Andijan crisis,² China was the first not to question the internal affairs of Uzbekistan, which, in turn, improved economic ties by signing the Treaty on Friendly and Cooperative Partnership (Karrar 2010). Such gradually contracted political mutual trust was the first and key component of the China-Central Asia interactions.

The vast majority of the literature has looked at China and Central Asia relations from the perspectives of China’s geopolitical and geo-economic domination aspirations, as well as China’s strategies for dealing with its domestic economic and security needs³ and its impact on strengthening authoritarian regimes in Central Asia.⁴ Several studies have highlighted the agency of Central Asian countries and

² The Andijan crisis of 2005 was a violent crackdown on protesters in Andijan, eastern Uzbekistan, where security forces opened fire on demonstrators, leading to hundreds of deaths and international condemnation.

³ For more information, see Bohr 2004; Clarke 2017; Ercilasun and Ercilasun 2018; Gabuev 2016; Indeo 2018; Tekdal 2018; Reeves 2018; Sternberg et al. 2017; Swanström* 2005; Xuanli Liao 2021; Zhang et al. 2018.

⁴ For more information, see Allison 2008; Kembayev 2020; Peyrouse 2022; Peyrouse and Raballand 2015.

their hedging foreign policy approach in their relations with China (Bitabarova 2018; Dadabaev 2018; Sim and Aminjonov 2022; Zhang 2022); still, as Blanchard (2021) and De Lombaerde et al. (2022) argued, most literature related to China and Central Asia relations overlooks how such relations contribute to the diffusion of China's norms and experiences in the domestic and foreign policy-making of Central Asian countries. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining how China-Central Asia relations are influencing the domestic and regional integration efforts of Central Asian states and their relations with an external actor, Russia. The study aims to demonstrate the diffusion of China's regionalism ideas, rather than their implementation. Examining the implementation of these diffused ideas lies beyond the scope of this study. This study employs an interpretive and qualitative approach. Official documents retrieved from state presidents' official websites are examined to trace the processes of norm diffusion through content and discourse analyses. The research also incorporates speeches, interviews, press conferences, publications, and articles authored by heads of state as well as members of epistemic communities.

In order to understand the relationship between China and Central Asia and their regional and global impact, the article will briefly describe the theoretical framework explaining norm diffusion mechanisms, define key concepts, and conceptualize the China-Central Asia relationship as a regionalization process, where Central Asian countries draw lessons from China's model of regionalism. Afterwards, there will be an analysis of China's model of regionalism and how China and Central Asian countries have interacted within this framework. Next, the article will examine the impact of China-Central Asia regionalization on recent policymaking in Central Asia. Lastly, the article will look at how recent changes in region-building, resulting from China-Central Asia regionalization, have strengthened the position of member countries vis-à-vis Russia.

2. Theoretical Framework and Conceptualization of China-Central Asia Relations

This article applies Acharya's norm localization theory, which explains how foreign ideas are adapted by local actors to align with local beliefs and practices. Acharya (2004, 245) defines this process, known as constitutive localization, as "the active construction (through discourse, framing, grafting, and cultural selection) of foreign ideas by local actors, which results in the former developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices." In simpler terms, localization involves integrating external concepts into one's existing cognitive priors. Acharya (2009, 21) defines cognitive priors as "an existing set of ideas, belief systems, and norms, which determine and condition an individual's or social group's receptivity to new norms." The beliefs of a nation's founding leaders or elite groups often serve as primary sources of these cognitive priors, particularly in shaping how recently independent states conduct themselves internationally (Acharya 2009).

States localize foreign norms through diffusion to create new, practical policy tools that enable them to achieve modern objectives without abandoning their established cognitive frameworks. When a foreign norm clashes with strong cognitive priors, diffusion through localization fails, however, it succeeds when the foreign norm replaces an existing local norm (Acharya 2004). Localization entails active participation rather than the passive adoption of new rules and institutional frameworks. It includes translating, interpreting, and integrating new norms and rules into existing institutions, while also resisting certain foreign norms (Acharya 2016; Risse 2016).

For the purposes of this article, diffusion is defined as "any process where prior adoption of a trait or practice in a population alters the probability of adoption for remaining non-adopters" (Strang 1991, 325). Risse (2016) gives two types of diffusion mechanisms: direct (sender-driven) and indirect (recipient-driven). According to her, the diffusion of regionalism, institutional structures, and regional governance is primarily shaped by indirect, recipient-driven processes of emulation rather than direct, sender-driven influence. Among the different types of indirect diffusion (competition, lesson-drawing,

normative emulation, and mimicry), this article uses the lesson-drawing mechanism to show norm diffusion. The lesson drawing mechanism is defined as a process where “actors look to others for policies and rules that effectively solved similar problems elsewhere and are transferable into their own context” (Risse 2016, 145). States are most likely to draw lessons from those facing similar political and economic challenges and have successfully overcome them. Through lesson drawing, states follow the logic of consequence, emulating foreign norms based on instrumental rationality and a problem-solving approach (Jetschke and Murray 2012; Risse 2016; Torney 2012).

Moreover, this article adopts Börzel and Risse’s (2016) definitions of regional cooperation, regional integration, and regionalism. Regional cooperation is defined as “intergovernmental relations that do not entail the transfer of authority to the respective regional organizations” (Börzel and Risse 2016, 7–8). Integration occurs when “states transfer at least some authority and sovereignty rights to the regional level” through pooling or delegation (Börzel and Risse 2016, 8). Regionalism is described as “a primarily state-led process of building and sustaining formal regional institutions [norms, rules, and procedures] and organizations [with a street address] among states (7).” Thus, regionalism goes beyond Eurocentric approaches and includes regional interactions in the non-European world (Acharya 2016). However, this article employs the definition of regionalization offered by Alex Warleigh-Lack. He defines regionalization as follows:

An explicit, but not necessarily formally institutionalized, the process of adopting participant state norms, policy-making processes, policy styles, policy content, political opportunity structures, economies and identity (potentially at both elite and popular levels) to both align with and shape a new collective set of priorities, norms, and interests at the regional level, which may itself then evolve, dissolve or reach stasis. (Warleigh-Lack 2006, 758)

Regional interaction between China and Central Asian states can fit within the scope of this definition of regionalization. China and Central Asia’s regionalization process has been tracked since the beginning of the 1990s. However, regionalization started strengthening in 2013 when China announced the BRI project. Particularly, the regionalization process has become increasingly evident, particularly following the regime change in Uzbekistan. China and Central Asian regionalization processes that have been occurring within the scope of the SCO, bilateral strategic partnership agreements (SPA) and the Belt Road Initiative BRI created a favourable environment for the Central Asian leaders to localize the foreign norms to solve domestic and regional issues. The new Central Asian regional cooperation model, which has been active since Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in 2017, can be described as the indirect (recipient-driven) influence of China and Central Asian regionalization processes through lesson drawing mechanism. The focus on Uzbekistan is due to the fact that it played a triggering role in the start of the new wave of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

3. China’s Model of Regionalism and Central Asia

A number of scholars have discussed the ambiguity of China’s model of regionalism (Clarke 2018; Dunford and Liu 2019), with some defining it as epochal regionalism (Chen 2021), open regionalism (Yi 2022), or virtual regionalism (Allison 2008). However, Xi Jinping’s 2013 speech, which framed the BRI as a regional project aimed at “[forging] closer economic ties, deepening cooperation, and expanding development space in the Eurasian region,” along with the publication of the report, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” offered a clearer conceptualization of China’s model of regionalism.⁵ This report outlined five key cooperation priorities: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial

⁵ Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. 2017. “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road.” April 17, 2017. Accessed March 15, 2025. <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2017/0410/c22-45.html>.

integration, and people-to-people bonds. These priorities are not new, as China and Central Asia have already been implementing them in their regionalization processes.

Facilities Connectivity and Policy Coordination

For the most part, facilities connectivity and policy coordination are carried out through Chinese partnership agreements. These agreements and BRI are called “policy-led trade facilitation” through investment (Arase 2015). At these stages, investment is a key concept. China’s going out policy, which has been implemented since the end of the 1990s, played a crucial role in prioritizing investment policies over trade. The focus on investment is what makes China’s approach to regionalism different from the Western model, which places less emphasis on economic infrastructure (Arase 2015). Investment is essential for building infrastructure that supports seamless connectivity within and beyond national borders through collaborative development efforts. Investment is also the key to opening free trade zones to improve international trade. Many developing countries are reluctant to sign free trade agreements with China because of competitiveness. Therefore, before the formation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), countries’ practices involved establishing special economic zones (SEZ).⁶ In the long term, the spillover effect of free trade zones to free trade whole zones (FTA)⁷ is expected. The idea of establishing SEZ in the China-Kazakhstan border has existed since the beginning of the 1990s. The first cross-border SEZ was Zharkent in the Taldykorgan region. It is strategically positioned on the Kazakhstan-China border and serves as a major hub for trade, logistics, and industrial development.

Countries seek to enhance policy coordination to facilitate investment and trade. In some cases, they couple their national development strategies to achieve mutual benefits. At these stages, the primary focus is on removing barriers to the free movement of physical capital. One of the most notable examples of aligning development programs is Kazakhstan's 2016 agreement to integrate its new economic policy, *Nurly Zhol*, with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Harutyunyan 2022).⁸ During the Chinese leader’s visit to the SCO Summit held in Bishkek on June 13, 2019, the president of Kyrgyzstan at the time, Soornbay Jeenbekov, expressed Kyrgyzstan’s willingness to establish institutionalized mechanisms to align its 2018–2040 National Development Strategy with China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing their strategic compatibility (Xuequan 2019). Moreover, in the strategic partnership agreements between China and Turkmenistan, the members agreed to make all efforts to interface the “Chinese dream” strategy about the revival of the Chinese nation and Turkmenistan’s “Era of Power and Happiness” strategic development plan to achieve common growth based on the principle of win-win cooperation.

In 2022, during the SCO meeting in Beijing, Uzbekistan presented its Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 and expressed its intention to align it with China’s BRI (*Eurasia Diary* 2022b). Another interesting coupling happened with the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI through the signing of the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China. This event represented a partial realization of multiple unsuccessful attempts by Chinese authorities to integrate the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)⁹ through the establishment of a free trade area and a development bank (Kembayev 2020; Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2019). During

⁶ A special economic zone (SEZ) is a designated area within a country that has different economic regulations, such as tax incentives and trade benefits, to attract investment, boost exports, and promote economic growth.

⁷ Free trade whole zones FTA is a designated area where goods can be imported, stored, processed, and re-exported with minimal customs regulations and without paying duties or tariffs.

⁸ This strategic move aimed to integrate Kazakhstan’s infrastructure development plans with China’s massive global trade and connectivity project.

⁹ EurAsEc was the regional organization which existed between 2000 and 2014, which aspired towards economic integration within post-Soviet territories.

Uzbekistan's chairmanship at the SCO in 2022, a range of innovative ideas and documents were presented, including the Transport Connectivity Strategy, the Plan for Advancing Intra-Regional Trade, the Infrastructure Development Program, the Economic Forum, the SCO Industrial Innovation Week, the Forum of Regional Leaders, and the Forum of Industrial Cooperation (*Eurasia Diary* 2022a).

Unimpeded Trade

The unimpeded trade stage aims to establish a free trade system covering the entire national territory by signing free trade agreements. In other words, countries agree to eliminate any tariff and non-tariff barriers to trade in goods and services. Within the framework of the SCO, China has repeatedly attempted to negotiate free trade agreements with member states. However, Russia and the Central Asian countries have been reluctant to proceed, fearing market dominance by Chinese counterparts (Kassenova 2013; Syroezhkin 2010). The most recent attempt to establish a common economic space between China and the EAEU member states was once again unsuccessful, particularly from China's perspective. The 2018 Agreement on Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and the EAEU did not include any tariff preferences. Instead, it focused solely on eliminating non-tariff barriers for goods in transit.

People-to-People Bond

The people-to-people bond pillar is oriented to bring societies closer through “extensive cultural and academic exchanges, personal exchanges and cooperation, media cooperation, youth and women exchanges, and volunteer services” (Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2015). Through this pillar, China is aiming to expand its soft power. This pillar appears to be the least important in comparison with the other four pillars as China has been demonstrating itself as “we-doing” rather than “we-feeling” in the international arena (Kavalski 2013, 262). Therefore, China's position is often characterized as “warm politics, cold public,” meaning that it prioritizes strong relations with the political elites of partner countries over public sentiment (Dave 2018; Kerr 2010). China is engaging with the Central Asian youth mostly through the Confucius Institutes, Belt Road Initiatives research centers at universities, and Model SCO Youth Conferences. China and Central Asia have forged connections between 58 pairs of sibling cities, established 13 Confucius Institutes, and set up 22 Confucius Classrooms (Ge 2023). In the last five years, Model SCO Youth Conferences have been held 20 times.

The Characteristics of China's Model of Regionalism

China's model of regionalism is defined by a pragmatic and state-driven approach that prioritizes economic integration, flexible partnerships, and non-politicized cooperation. It emphasizes bilateral engagements within broader multilateral frameworks, strategic economic zones as stepping stones for integration, and a win-win narrative that aligns with South-South cooperation. The model is relational, emphasizing long-term diplomatic engagement, and avoids rigid structures or politically sensitive issues, instead focusing on mutual economic benefits and stability.

1. *Bilateral.* China prefers to build relations with other countries in a bilateral framework. Even in multilateral sites like the SCO, the ASEAN+3,¹⁰ and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the most important issues are targeted bilaterally. This bilateral framework enables China to establish a “hub-and-spoke” relationship with developing countries, positioning itself as the central hub while other Global South nations function as the peripheral spokes.

2. *Depoliticization.* China has eliminated all politically sensitive aspects from its economic cooperation and integration style. Many post-colonial states are reluctant to share their authority with the supranational

¹⁰ ASEAN+3 refers to the regional cooperation framework that includes the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—plus China, Japan, and South Korea.

institutions. Most Asian countries prefer a sovereignty-bound regime. China constructed an “anticolonial” foreign policy, which favoured top-down state-led intergovernmental cooperation. Moreover, developing countries consider the enormous Chinese labour force as a threat to their emerging labour market. Therefore, the Chinese model kept the free movement of goods and capital flow but eliminated the free movement of the labour force from their agenda. In addition, the Chinese model is silent about Western norms, such as human rights and democracy.

3. *From micro to macro.* The formation of the FTA (free trade area extended to the whole area) is a medium or long-term project. The step toward the FTA starts with opening free trade zones (cross border, within the region, etc.). China’s external opening up in the 1970s started with the building of special economic zones (SEZ). China established four SEZs to attract foreign direct investment in 1979. The positive results of these SEZ led to the launch of 15 new Economic and Technological Developmental Zones between 1984 and 1988 (Zeng 2015). SEZ were an attractive policy for the Chinese government as they permitted liberalization of only some parts of the territory. This approach enabled economic experimentation without exposing the entire national economy to uncertainty. However, there needs to be a positive spillover effect if the SEZ project is to succeed. This was the case for China when the successful Pearl River Delta SEZ quickly extended to the Guangdong and Fujian provinces of China. The Southern China Growth Triangle even became the first and most successful project in East Asia. Today, there are around 5400 SEZ worldwide, with more than 2500 SEZ being located in China (552 state-level zones and 1991 provincial zones) (UNCTAD 2019). The importance of the SEZ strategy in contemporary Chinese policies has been evident from the thirteenth five-year plan (2016–2020), where the concepts of Free Trade Zones and Free Trade Areas are repeated more than 11 times (Pacory 2019). SEZ are attractive for those countries which are in transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy, seeking external capital flow that incentivizes economic activities (Thant et al. 1995).

4. *Flexible.* The Chinese model is not based on a rigid or already defined framework, in other words, “China has not taken a cookie-cutter, one size fits all” approach (Webster 2007). Instead, China implements the all-weather approach, which means that states, based on their mutual interests, decide how to conclude their agreements. For instance, China’s free trade agreements (FTAs) are diverse in terms of form, coverage, and brevity (Antkiewicz and Whalley 2005). While China’s FTAs with ASEAN, Australia, and New Zealand are found to be more undefined, superficial, and gradual process-oriented, China’s FTAs with Hong Kong or Chile adopted a more concrete, comprehensive, and Western-like formal structure (Antkiewicz and Whalley 2005; Webster 2007).

5. *South-South cooperation.* China has tended to position itself as part of the Global South or as a developing country that “gives economic aid to meet China’s own development needs while also serving the development needs of recipients” (Arase 2015). In other words, China offers a win-win formula for co-development purposes. Unlike traditional North-South cooperation, which often involves aid from developed to developing countries, China’s approach emphasizes equal partnerships, mutual benefits, and co-development rather than donor-recipient dynamics. Through soft loans, infrastructure development, and technology transfers, China provides economic support that not only facilitates the growth of recipient countries but also serves its own long-term strategic interests—such as securing resources, expanding markets for Chinese goods, and strengthening political alliances.

6. *Relational:* Chinese relationality logic entails the maintenance of dynamic processes through diplomacy, and relation-building is paramount to the Chinese model of cooperation rather than immediate tangible results (Qin 2011; Sally 2013). This involves institutionalizing official visits and regular summit meetings of top government representatives as well as discourses through conferences, forums, and think-tank dialogues like Global Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 16+1 Forum, Belt and Road Innovation, the Entrepreneurship Forum, China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum, China-Kazakhstan Think Tank Dialogue, and Model SCO Youth Conference (Goldstein 2005).

7. *Comfort zone.* Leaving aside conflictual issues, the “comfort zone” understanding takes its roots from Deng Xiaoping’s famous concept, “setting aside dispute and pursuing joint development” for a peaceful settlement of border and transboundary water issues as proclaimed in 1978. The main elements of this approach are that states put aside their conflictual issues for the time being and develop joint solutions for less politically sensitive problems to improve mutual understanding through constructive dialogue (Embassy of the PRC in the Republic of Estonia 2004).

China's Versus Asean's Model of Regionalism

All these criteria mentioned above are not only exclusive for China's model of regionalism but can be also found in other Asian regionalism¹¹ frameworks like ASEAN. However, there are two things that make China's regional model different from that of ASEAN's: first, an unclear identification as to who is the self and other and second is the fact that China's regional model is not regional enough.

China has been constructing its foreign policy-making in a very careful manner so as not create new foes. Even though there were some tensions between China and the US, China restrained its use of harsh discourse, instead, requesting that "outside countries [e.g., US], on their part, should respect the diversity of [China's] region and do their part to facilitate its development and stability" (Xi 2014). When Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, a leader of an ASEAN member nation, proposed the East Asian Economic Group as an exclusive regionalist alternative to Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), aimed at countering the US, it was China that vetoed the proposal (He 2017). Another example, when President Xi first announced his Silk Road and Belt initiative in Astana, he stated "[w]e [China] stand ready to enhance communication and coordination with Russia and all Central Asian countries to strive to build a region of harmony" (Xi 2013). China expressed its acknowledgment and respected Russia's role and interest presented in the Central Asian region and by doing so effectively avoided any misunderstandings with Russia.

In the case of ASEAN, numerous instances illustrate how exclusive regionalism has been employed to balance the influence of major powers while strengthening regional identity and autonomy. ASEAN member states have actively shaped regional cooperation through norm-driven mechanisms, effectively constraining the influence of external powers by prioritizing consensus-based decision-making, non-interference, and informal diplomacy—an approach commonly referred to as the ASEAN Way.

The ASEAN Way, developed through decades of region-making, is characterized by sovereignty preservation, mutual respect, non-intervention, and consensus-building. This informal and non-binding approach has allowed smaller ASEAN states to prevent domination by major external actors, including China and the United States, while maintaining regional stability and fostering cooperation. By adhering to this model, ASEAN has successfully managed to neutralize great-power competition within its framework, ensuring that no single external power dictates regional affairs. ASEAN was called as the most successfully developed normative regionalism that effectively identified who is the self and who is other (Acharya 2006; Ganesan 2010; Severino 2008; Solingen 2008;).

China's regional policies are not committed to regionalism per se (He 2017). Indeed, the driving force for all of China's regional efforts is national developmental strategies and internal social stability factors. For Chinese officials, an instrumental approach that prioritizes national interests more than building the region or that of a regional sense of community is more important. There is almost no discourse about the instances where regionalism is constructing the Chinese nation-state, whereas in the case of ASEAN, regionalism was more functionalist and liberalist in nature (Eurasia Review 2020).

4. China-Central Asia Regionalization: Impact on Central Asian Region-Building

New Uzbekistan: As Region Builder in Central Asia

Changes in international politics of the region that have been happening since early 2017 were directly related to Uzbekistan's new president Shavkat Mirziyoyev and his innovative domestic and foreign policies. By analyzing speeches and the most important documents adopted by the new leader, one can

¹¹ Prominent ideas in Asian regionalism include the principles of absolute sovereignty and non-interference, a preference for informal processes, relatively weak and centralized institutions, agreements with nonbinding outcomes, and consensus-based decisions (Acharya 2016; Kahler and MacIntyre 2013).

learn more about turning points from the previous policy direction to the current situation.¹² In all the official documents and statements, the key message has been “economy first,” implying that development takes place through the economic sector. Such rhetoric was also famous during the previous president Karimov’s regime, but his economy first concept propagated together with other political and geopolitical concerns, such as “independence, independence and once again independence” (BBC 1993). Indeed, the “cognitive priors” established by Karimov in Uzbekistan—non-interference, a self-reliant identity, and autonomy-seeking cooperation—rejected the diffusion of European ideas of regionalism¹³ in Central Asia (Karabayeva 2021). Therefore, several attempts to create a Central Asian Union by emulating the EU model, as well as Russia and Kazakhstan’s efforts to expand the EAEU—an integration project modeled after the EU’s institutional design—were resisted by Uzbekistan.

However, Mirziyoyev’s idea seems genuinely focused on economic matters through export. The current regime’s internal and external policies are aimed at decreasing imports from abroad and increasing exports to foreign partners (Dadabaev 2019). Such developmental strategies of the state have also influenced the structure and missions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Uzbekistan. Now, the first and foremost goal of Uzbekistan’s embassies or representative offices abroad is to bring as much foreign direct investment as possible. This question was cemented by the “must” point. This directive has been reinforced as an absolute mandate, reflecting the country’s strategic focus on economic modernization, industrial development, and global market integration. In addition, Mirziyoyev empowered the status of regional governors, particularly the *hakims*¹⁴ of those regions that share borders with neighbouring countries.

Even if one considers the names given to years since 2017, it is not difficult to notice what sectors and issues Uzbekistan has been concentrating on. The year 2017 was declared as “the Year of Dialogue with People and Human Interests”; 2018: “the Year of Support of Active Entrepreneurship, Innovative Ideas, and Technologies”; 2019: “the Year of Active Investment and Social Development”; and 2020: “the Year of the Development of Science, Education and the Digital Economy.” With such declarations, Uzbekistan has been initiating and supporting programs such as “Every Family is Entrepreneur” and “Youth is Our Future” as well as projects aimed at training a million software programmers (Agency for Strategic Reforms 2022).

Mirziyoyev stated Uzbekistan should emulate and learn from those states “[i]n their foreign policies, prioritize facilitating exports of their products in foreign markets” (Dadabaev 2019). In this respect, it can be more evident now why Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy has been making challenges in determining who is the self and who is the other. One cannot clearly define what the direction Uzbekistan is leaning toward; who is the closest partner of Uzbekistan: is it Russia, China, or the West? In this respect, Dadabaev (2019) claimed that Uzbekistan has short-term goals that might give off the impression that Uzbekistan has been taking a particular foreign policy direction. Still, one should not confuse and take it as Uzbekistan’s official stance. Further, Dadabaev (2019) stated that such short-term goals have been taking place to accomplish the real long-term perspective becoming an export-

¹² For example, the early key documents, including Uzbekistan’s National Development strategy (2017–2021); the Decree of the President “On additional measure to ensure the accelerated development of the entrepreneurial activity, comprehensive protection of private property and substantial improvement of business climate”; President Mirziyoyev’s speeches, including his foreign policy speech from 2016, his speech “Central Asia is a region of huge unrealized potential” at the international conference held in Samarkand, November 14, 2017, and the President’s addresses to the *Oliy Majlis* (Uzbek Parliament) in 2018, 2019 and 2020 and his address to Uzbekistan’s ambassadors abroad in 2017.

¹³ The main principles of European regionalism include a preference for sovereignty-constraining structures through the formation of some degree of supranationalism, highly institutionalized legal frameworks, and majority decision-making structures with binding outcomes (Acharya 2016).

¹⁴ In Uzbekistan and some other Central Asian countries, a *hakim* is a regional or city governor appointed to oversee local governance, economic policies, and administrative matters.

oriented economy; this implies that every country is equally important for Uzbekistan. Moreover, such an equal relationship is also related to the Central Asian countries. The head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kamilov, noted that Uzbekistan does not prioritize any country (e.g. Kazakhstan) in Central Asia; instead, it works mutually with all of them (Berdiev 2017). A good example from practice can be the case when Mirziyoyev had his first official foreign trip as a president to Turkmenistan, instead of the influential countries outside of the Central Asia (e.g. Russia, China, the US, or Japan) or even a larger country within the region like Kazakhstan. Most importantly, the elements of China's developmental and problem-solving approach are present in Uzbekistan's current domestic and foreign policy-making.

Strategic Partnership Agreements

Kazakhstan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) with Kyrgyzstan in May 2012 and with Uzbekistan in June 2013. However, after the leadership change in Uzbekistan from Islam Karimov to Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan pushed strategic partnership agreements with other Central Asian countries. As a result, all Central Asian countries had signed SPAs with each other by 2018, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan due to longstanding tensions between the two countries (see Table 1). Almost all Central Asian Strategic Partnership Agreements prioritized the economic sector among others¹⁵ by focusing on trade, investment, and infrastructure aspects, except the SPA between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan¹⁶ where the security aspect and energy sector were found to be at the core of the agreements. Such flexible character of the Central Asian countries' Strategic Partnership Agreements (CASPs) emulates Chinese partnership models rather than rigid American or Russian security-based SPAs or European partnership types aimed at the expansion of democratic, human rights, and governance values. Like Chinese SPAs, the CASPs have not emphasized common values or identity.

The CASPs followed the comfort zone logic by leaving aside contentious issues. Instead, the rhetoric of "we have not left any issues unresolved" became an integral part of the agreements. Countries are showing their willingness to find mutual understandings on more economic issues, rather than politically sensitive disputes. Thus, Uzbek and Tajik leaders decided not to remember about official statements made at the end of the 2000s about territorial claims for Samarkand and Bukhara and the construction of the Rogun Dam.¹⁷ The Uzbekistan-Tajikistan SPA bypassed the Rogun Dam disputes and instead agreed to mutually benefit from jointly constructing two other hydro-electric power stations in Zarafshan River (Tolipov 2018). Additionally, these two countries jointly settled the status of the Farkhad hydropower station located in the Spitamen district in Sughd Province, which is part of a disputed border territory between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.¹⁸ These types of natural resource-based development initiatives were also found in the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan SPAs. The national energy companies of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, *Uzbekneftgaz* and *Turkmennebit*, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the joint exploration and development of Turkmen energy deposits in the Caspian Sea (Sattarov 2018). Additionally, *Uzbekgidroenergo* and the Kyrgyz National Energy Holding Company signed a memorandum on the

¹⁵ All Central Asian Strategic Partnership Agreements include economic, security and cultural-humanitarian cooperation features.

¹⁶ The Kyrgyzstan-Turkmenistan SPA specifically mentioned the importance of the realization of the gas pipeline between Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and China.

¹⁷ Relations between former Uzbek president Islam Karimov and the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon worsened in 2009. This aggravation of relations led leaders to make official statements where Rahmon stated that Tajikistan will take back Samarkand and Bukhara; on the other side, Karimov threatened war if Tajikistan kept constructing the Rogun Dam.

¹⁸ Working group delegations on delamination and demarcation from both countries agreed that the territory where Farkhad hydropower station located belongs to Tajikistan, whereas the hydropower station itself is under the ownership of Uzbekistan. All maintenance of the hydropower station will be under the responsibility of Uzbekistan, and security will be guaranteed by Tajikistan.

joint construction of the Kambaratinsky hydroelectric power station-1. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan further agreed on the joint use of Orto-Tokoy reservoir in the Jalal-Abad region of Kyrgyzstan (*Sputnik Uzbekistan* 2017). More importantly, all five Central Asian leaders participated in the third consultative meeting despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were in the midst of a border conflict. Kassenova claimed that Central Asian states seem to have learned from Chinese diplomatic conventions to treat its regional partners with respect, despite having limited experience on the international stage (Sorbello 2024).

Table 1: Central Asian Strategic Partnership Agreements

	KAZ	KGZ	TJ	TM	UZ
KAZ	N/A	May 2012	September 2018	April 2017	June 2013
KGZ	May 2012	N/A	No SPA	August 2018	October 2017
TJ	September 2015	No SPA	N/A	November 2017	August 2018
TM	April 2017	August 2018	November 2017	N/A	March 2017
UZ	June 2013	October 2017	August 2018	March 2017	N/A

Source: Author

Special Economic Zones

All seven attempts to create Central Asian economic integration since the post-independence period have failed. Indeed, such failures were mostly reasoned due to the low level of intra-regional trade accounting for less than 10 percent of their total trade, different levels of economic and social development, as well as the incompatibility of the countries' rules regulating trade and investment.¹⁹ However, these obstacles are not the case for sub-regional economic zones (Thant et al. 1995). Unlike trading blocs, special economic zones (SEZs) do not discriminate against non-members by offering them mutual beneficial deals, including market access and foreign capital flow. Special economic zones that guided China's opening up to the world economy seem to play a significant role in Uzbekistan's new leader's domestic and foreign economic policy making.²⁰ The number of SEZs doubled from 27 in 2015 to 55 in 2022, thanks to Uzbekistan. By 2015, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan had ten, seven, five, three, and two SEZs, respectively (ICTSD 2015). However, by 2022, the numbers of SEZs skyrocketed in Uzbekistan reaching 22, and there was a gradual increase in other Central Asian countries, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan (5): 13 in Kazakhstan, 10 in Turkmenistan, 5 in Tajikistan (Adrianople Group 2023).

Strategic partnerships in Central Asia, particularly those ones where Uzbekistan is a partner, made a very significant step for the regional cooperation through the signing of bilateral agreements between governments on intraregional cooperation. President Mirziyoyev's initiative, intraregional cooperation, refers to sub-regional interactions, in other words, interactions between administrative-territorial units of corresponding states, particularly focusing on trade investment relations. For this

¹⁹ Economic integration or trading blocs precondition the existence of the following criteria: 1) large volumes of international trade; 2) similar laws and regulations governing trade and investment flows; 3) per capita income should be similar; 4) geographical proximity is significant; 5) high level of political commitment and policy coordination (Thant et al. 1995).

²⁰ Scholars put forward four of the most common driving forces of building different types of SEZs, including "(i) attracting foreign direct investment and promoting exports and industrialization; (ii) serving as pressure valves to alleviate large-scale unemployment; (iii) supporting a wider economic reform strategy; and (iv) acting as experimental laboratories for the application of new policies and approaches" (Zeng 2015).

aim, he proposed to set up “an association of regional governors” of Central Asian countries.

Today it is necessary to give priority to regional cooperation. In this regard, I propose founding an association of heads of, that is to say, governors of regions and business communities of Central Asian countries. When we conduct dialogue directly with the regions, their leadership, and business communities, the results will, as they say, be evident. There will be more results when we help them and do not prevent them [from doing so]. (BBC 2017).

This initiative was the first step toward Central Asian bottom-up or zonal economic cooperation. Kazakhstan supported the new Uzbek leader’s idea and proposed to build a cross-border cooperation zone on the border of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. After a year, the two countries signed a memorandum on the creation of an international center for trade and economic cooperation—Central Asia and Turkestan. These cross-border zones aim to become a cross-border trade, logistics, and tourist hub, opening up economic opportunities with Europe and China (*Kazakh TV* 2019).

The realization of the special economic zone between Central Asia and Turkestan is certainly important for the accomplishment and further development of the International Central Asian North-South Transport Corridor (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2019). With the support and technical assistance of the Asian Development Bank, the core project of the North-South Corridor—the Turkestan-Shymkent-Tashkent-Khujand Economic Corridor—has already been initiated. This initiative connects three densely populated regions (*oblasts*), which have popular touristic centers in Central Asia—Turkestan (Kazakhstan), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), and Sughd (Tajikistan). Such a project is not new for the Asian Development Bank, as it has already been technically supporting another Central Asian interregional economic project—the Almaty-Bishkek Economic Corridor under the framework of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program since 2017. The Almaty-Bishkek Economic Corridor involves the Almaty and Zhambyl regions of Kazakhstan and the Chuy and Issyk Kul regions of Kyrgyzstan. Both economic corridors are meant to intensify economic activities in sub-sectors, including agriculture, health services, information and communications technology (ICT), transport, and tourism (Asian Development Bank 2018). In 2022, at the Tashkent Investment Forum, Kazakhstan proposed to build another intraregional “Turan special economic zone” (*Astana Times* 2022). Intraregional cooperation is also growing between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, particularly between Surxondaryo and Khatlon regions and the Samarkand, Tashkent, and Sogdy regions.

Annual Consultative Meeting of Leaders

The annual Consultative Meeting, originally suggested by Uzbekistan in 2017, has evolved into a crucial collaboration platform exclusively designed for Central Asian nations. Over time, this meeting has grown into a significant event, with different Central Asian countries taking turns to host it. Kazakhstan hosted the first event in 2018, followed by Uzbekistan in 2019, Turkmenistan in 2021, Kyrgyzstan in 2022, and Tajikistan in 2023. The key topics that the heads of state have discussed and agreed upon so far include the creation of local free trade zones, fostering Central Asian industry, connecting to key economic routes, supporting business communication with a Business Council, addressing regional security, collaborating on energy and the environment, sharing news via a regional TV channel, expanding higher education through branch universities, and forming a youth policy agreement.

An interesting observation was the more active participation of Turkmenistan’s leader. Turkmenistan has always tried to isolate itself from regional initiatives, yet, during this meeting, Turkmenistan took a different path. The Turkmen leader, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, advocated for the

CA5+n formula²¹ of cooperation. He called for cooperation among states, especially major powers. He also proposed a five-party business council as “a think tank for the formation of a joint strategy of [their]states on priority areas of economic partnership” (Kadyrova 2019). Such five-party initiatives, especially from the side of Turkmenistan, were unexpected and introduced a new level of improved regional relationships. It is evident that when discussing regional cooperation, the leaders of the Central Asian countries intentionally refrain from making grandiose statements and instead provide carefully considered and politically neutral evaluations. The advisory meeting, as a collaborative format, currently aligns with the preferences of all Central Asian leaders.

5. China-Central Asian Regionalization: Impact on Russia’s Position in Central Asia

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), formed under Russian leadership alongside Kazakhstan and Belarus, was largely modeled after the EU’s institutional framework. The EAEU is a regional closed bloc, which is concentrated only on the post-Soviet countries. Like the EU, the EAEU is a top-down, institutionalized organization with supra-national bodies. The Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), a predecessor to the EAEU, once included all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan as members. In both the EurAsEC and EAEU, Central Asian countries sought similar economic benefits, including unrestricted access to the Russian market, a steady influx of Russian capital, and infrastructure development, in return for their political alignment with Russia (President of the Russian Federation 2004). However, in his interview with the author of the article, Olzhas Khudaibergenov, a Kazakh economist, stated that Russia failed to fulfill the role of a “center” leading to the loss of trust from the Central Asian countries.²² Moreover, Moscow’s role as a *primus inter pares* within the framework of the EAEU prompted the states of Central Asia to seek more direct engagement with China (Gabuev 2016, 63). The need for economic benefits has been effectively met by China since the establishment of partnership agreements with Central Asian countries. Some scholars have observed that Russia’s EAEU and China’s BRI represent competing and rival regional frameworks (Indeo 2020). It’s worth noting that not all Central Asian countries are members of the EAEU, every Central Asian country participates in the BRI.

It appears that Central Asian states are increasingly favouring Chinese-led economic initiatives over Russian-led ones. Temur Umarov, a fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, pointed out that, “before the war, Uzbekistan was one step closer to joining the Eurasian Economic Union...I think that now Uzbekistan will try to distance itself from Moscow” (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2022). On the other hand, Uzbekistan in 2017 and Tajikistan in 2020 formally expressed their interest in joining the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA), a customs cooperation initiative originally signed in 1995 by China, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. This agreement aims to streamline customs procedures among the participant countries. China and the Central Asian nations consistently refer to the QTTA as a foundational element for expanding connectivity projects within the BRI, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the upcoming China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan project (Nelson and Sutherland 2023).

The war in Ukraine, coupled with the resulting sanctions, has disrupted trade in Central Asia. Russia, in particular, experienced a substantial trade contraction, with estimates suggesting a possible 60 percent decline in 2022 (Darvas et al. 2023). In contrast, China has remarkably increased its trade with the region more than 100-fold over the past three decades (State Council of the PRC 2022). During a

²¹ CA5+N cooperation refers to the engagement between the five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) and external partners (denoted as “N”), which may include major global and regional powers like the US, EU, China, Russia, Japan, India, South Korea, or the Gulf states.

²² Author’s unpublished interview with the economist Olzhas Khudaibergenov, August 7, 2018.

summit in January 2022, Chinese leader Xi Jinping unveiled plans to open up China's market to imports from Central Asia, with the goal of boosting total trade turnover between China and the region to 70 billion US dollars (USD) by 2030 (Nelson and Sutherland 2023).

China assisted Central Asian states in reducing their dependence on the Northern corridor²³ and was able to successfully open up the Kazakh-China joint terminal in Lianyungang port as well as launch Central Asia's connectivity to the Middle Corridor, which extends from China to Turkey. Central Asian goods now can reach Europe without passing through Russian territory, although a dependency on the Northern corridor still exists. Nevertheless, Astana, for instance, claimed that Moscow's leverage to exert pressure has been limited (Hess 2023).

The collaborative efforts of China and the Central Asian states have improved both the infrastructure and interconnections within the Central Asia region (Bohr 2019). Out of the six economic corridors within the BRI, two traverse Central Asia: the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor. Kazakhstan is involved in five of the six routes within the New Eurasian Land Bridge Corridor, facilitating connections for Central Asian countries to the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean (Harutyunyan 2022). Cargo arrives at the Kuryk Port in Aktau, Kazakhstan and, via the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan, reaches Europe. The Kuryk Port was successfully connected to Turkmenistan and Iran to reach the Middle East. Such road and sea connectivity improvements are not only important for Chinese and Kazakh goods, but there is also a big potential for export capacities of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. To achieve this objective, the reconstruction of the Beineu-Akzhigit-Border of Uzbekistan and Zehtibai-Zhanaozen-Kendirli-Border of Turkmenistan is underway to enhance connectivity between this automobile corridor and Kuryk Port. These projects, along with other ongoing upgrades to the transport and logistics network in Central Asia, contribute to regional infrastructure development and connectivity enhancement (*Kazakh TV* 2018). Under the BRI, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are also working together with China to build a railway, which will connect Asia to Europe and the Far East. China was able to successfully convince Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to jointly construct a gas pipeline to export energy to China. This was another opportunity for Turkmenistan to break Russia's monopoly over its energy export.

Furthermore, Russia's conflict with Ukraine has also brought Central Asian states closer to China in the security sphere (Nelson and Sutherland 2023). Scholars claim that Russia's war undermined its role to serve as a mediator in intraregional conflict (Doolotkeldieva and Marat 2022) or a source of stability (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2022) in Central Asia. China has conditioned its support for the reconstruction of the Dushanbe-Uzbekistan border road on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan improving bilateral relations, particularly through the resolution of border disputes and other conflicts (Indeo, 2018). Furthermore, at the Third China and Central Asia (C+C5) Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Kazakhstan, the participating states signed four outcome documents; among these, one document conveyed Central Asia's endorsement for a localized iteration of China's Data Security Cooperation Initiative, with the aim of enhancing coordination for cross-border data exchanges (Kadyrova 2022).

Central Asian countries have already started constructing their political and economic course oriented toward China's strategic policies. For example, the former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, has not hidden the fact that it was the 2050 China strategy that influenced Kazakhstan to choose the long-term "Strategy Kazakhstan-2050" program (Nazarbayev 2012). The alignment of the timeframe for the "Made in Kazakhstan-2025" program—which seeks to promote technological modernization and the development of a non-resource-based economy—with China's "Made in China-2025" strategy, aimed at advancing the production of higher-value goods and services, is unlikely to be coincidental.

²³ Seventy percent of all routes from Central Asia are directed toward the Northern corridors, which passes through Russia.

6. Conclusion

After the collapse of the USSR, the newly independent Central Asian states carefully crafted their foreign policies concerning China. Both China and the Central Asian states had a shared interest in prioritizing stability above all else. The key to this cooperation was their mutual commitment to respecting each other's sovereignty and the absence of political pressure in their relations. This allowed China and the Central Asian countries to establish a trustworthy environment in the region.

The Shanghai Forum and its successor, the SCO, played significant roles in constructively resolving serious disputes, such as border issues, through bilateral dialogue and consultations. Under China's leadership, Central Asian countries experienced a new form of soft, peaceful, and incremental-based regionalism. This innovative Central Asian regional cooperation model was initiated by Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev in 2017 and received strong support from other Central Asian countries. It appears that Central Asian nations took cues from China's regionalism model by engaging in China and Central Asia regionalization processes, which involved the SCO, bilateral partnership agreements, and the BRI.

China's successful transition from a planned to a market economy, coupled with the role of SEZs in achieving high economic growth and attracting foreign capital, motivated Central Asian countries to adopt a similar model of regionalism. Uzbekistan's open foreign policy stance was a driving force behind Central Asia's shift toward regional cooperation characterized by inclusiveness, openness, progressiveness, and a conflict-free nature.

This growing intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia exhibited many common characteristics with China-led regionalism rather than Russia-led initiatives like the EAEU. This alignment may be attributed to the perception, as stated by Nargis Kassenova, Director of the Program on Central Asia at Harvard University's Davis Center, that Central Asians "see China as an agent of modernization—not Russia" (Davis Center 2019). Kassenova also remarked that "[t]he Chinese leadership has been really effective in making smaller powers feel more like important actors in the global stage. There are certain aspects of diplomatic culture that Kazakhstan is taking from the Chinese [rulebook]. It's a very subtle difference from the Russia-dominated Soviet past, but it's a noticeable change in narrative, rhetoric, and ceremonies" (Sorbello 2024).

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