

CHALLENGES TO CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION: THE CASE OF UZBEK-KAZAKH RELATIONS (1991–2016)*Musurman Khurramov**Senior lecturer, PhD, International Islamic Studies Academy of Uzbekistan,
Tashkent, Uzbekistan*

Abstract: This article examines the issues of regional integration within the framework of Uzbek-Kazakh relations during the years of independence. It analyzes the efforts made by both countries to promote regional cooperation, the challenges encountered, and the influence of external actors on the integration process. The study also explores the collapse of Central Asian integration initiatives and evaluates the roles played by the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in shaping the trajectory of regional cooperation. Particular attention is given to the differing approaches of the two countries toward regional integration.

Key words: Central Asia, integration, external forces, virtual regionalism, Organization of Central Asian Cooperation, International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, EurAsEC, Union of Central Asian States.

Introduction

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as the locomotive states of Central Asia, paid close attention to regional integration processes from the earliest years of independence. This focus was driven not only by geographical proximity, historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious commonalities, but also by the existence of shared economic and socio-environmental problems that could only be addressed through close cooperation (Karimov, 1995, p.39). However, regional cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan faced numerous objective challenges, and the dynamics of integration fluctuated over time.

It is worth noting that efforts at integration among Central Asian states began even before the republics formally gained independence. In the summer of 1990, the leaders of the Central Asian republics held their first regional meeting without Moscow's involvement in Almaty. During this meeting, they agreed to coordinate their activities across political, social, and economic spheres. The primary focus of this summit was to find collective solutions to emerging economic problems. Furthermore, proposals were made to establish regional councils addressing common issues in culture, education, and environmental protection.

As a continuation of the Almaty summit, a second meeting of regional leaders took place in Tashkent in August 1991, again without Moscow's consent. Here, the leaders agreed to collaborate in resolving economic problems within Central Asia. The subsequent summit occurred on December 12, 1991, in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan. Unlike the previous meetings, this one was shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its agenda focused on completely new tasks.

Despite the positive momentum, several obstacles arose that hindered integration efforts. The next meeting in Bishkek on April 23, 1992, was notably marked by Tajikistan's absence due to its escalating civil war, which adversely affected the regional integration process. Turkmenistan's declaration of "permanent neutrality" in December 1995 further complicated cooperation within the region.

Nonetheless, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, recognizing their significant potential, continued striving to deepen regional integration.

Early efforts at regional integration (1990–1994)

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as the leading states of Central Asia, devoted serious attention to regional integration processes during the early years of their independence. This was motivated not only by their geographical proximity, historical, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious commonalities but also by the abundance of shared economic and socio-ecological problems, which could only be addressed through mutual cooperation (Karimov, 1995, p. 39).

However, regional cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan did not proceed smoothly, due to various objective factors. The dynamics of integration were often unstable and fluctuating.

It is noteworthy that attempts at regional cooperation began even before the Central Asian republics formally achieved independence. In the summer of 1990, a historic summit was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where for the first time, without Moscow's involvement, regional leaders gathered to discuss cooperation. At this meeting, the leaders agreed to coordinate their activities across political, social, and economic sectors (Bobokulov, 2006). The central issue on the agenda was the search for joint solutions to emerging economic problems. Proposals were also made to establish regional councils to address shared challenges in the fields of culture, education, and environmental protection.

Following the logic of the Almaty summit, the second meeting of regional leaders took place in Tashkent in August 1991. Again, this meeting occurred independently of Moscow's approval. During the summit, the leaders of Central Asian states agreed to jointly tackle possible economic problems that might arise within the region. However, the third summit of regional leaders, held in Ashgabat on December 12, 1991, marked a turning point. By then, the Soviet Union had collapsed, and the agenda shifted to address entirely new challenges posed by the emerging post-Soviet reality.

The subsequent summit occurred on April 23, 1992, in Bishkek. This meeting differed from the previous ones as Tajikistan was unable to participate due to the deteriorating internal situation and the looming civil war. The absence of Tajikistan negatively impacted the fast-developing integration processes within Central Asia. Moreover, Turkmenistan's official declaration of "permanent neutrality" in December 1995 further strained regional cooperation efforts.

Despite these difficulties, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as the most economically and politically capable states in the region, made continued efforts to accelerate the processes of integration.

In July 1993, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on measures to deepen economic integration for the period 1994–2000. In January 1994, the two countries, later joined by Kyrgyzstan in April, signed a treaty to establish a Single Economic Space (Karimov, 1995, p. 40). An Executive Committee was established to coordinate their integration efforts, and a Central Asian Cooperation and Development Bank was created to finance joint projects. As a result of these efforts, the Council of Prime Ministers of the Republics signed decisions in Bishkek outlining priority investment projects and initiatives to economically bring the republics closer together by 2000.

It is important to note that within the framework of the Commonwealth of Central Asian States, established in 1994, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan played a particularly crucial role. The success of this organization largely depended on how relations between these two countries evolved. As the two largest and most capable states in the region, Uzbekistan and

Kazakhstan needed to coordinate their efforts in several critical areas, including ensuring social protection during the transition to a market economy, addressing environmental challenges, pursuing a coordinated economic and financial policy, and developing unified customs and tax regulations. Additionally, issues such as establishing a unified information and defense space also emerged on the agenda. Overall, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan sought to play leading roles in developing integration ties within Central Asia.

External challenges and the disruption of integration (1994–2000)

The rapid development of warm relations among Central Asian states was not welcomed by all external actors. Certain powers, viewing the potential reunification of Turkic peoples as contrary to their own interests, sought to sow discord and mistrust among the newly independent Central Asian countries. When no substantial pretexts could be found, various false narratives and misinformation were circulated.

For example, an article by V. Yurtaev and A. Shestakov, published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on May 13, 1993, alleged that the creation of the Commonwealth of Central Asian States was merely a tactic to pressure Russia into providing greater economic assistance. The same article falsely claimed that Uzbekistan was preparing to intervene militarily in Kyrgyzstan under the pretext of protecting the interests of 800,000 ethnic Uzbeks residing there (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1993).

In response to such disinformation, President Islam Karimov, speaking at ceremonies commemorating the memory of the three great Kazakh biys (tribal judges), urged vigilance:

“We must not fall for the false promises of subversive forces and allow our friendship to be undermined” (Karimov, 1995, p. 40).

It must be emphasized that the emerging processes of Central Asian integration conflicted with Russia’s interests for several reasons. First, the Central Asian market, which had developed during the Soviet era, was gradually being filled with products from newly industrialized countries, thus reducing Russia’s economic dominance.

Second, Central Asian leaders increasingly sought to resolve regional conflicts without external intervention, thereby diminishing Russia’s traditional military influence.

Third, Uzbekistan’s initiative, in cooperation with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine, to create an alternative transportation corridor bypassing Russia (TRACECA project) undermined Moscow’s ability to exert direct economic pressure on Central Asian states.

Consequently, Russia actively sought to disrupt Central Asian integration through various means. Russian dissatisfaction became increasingly open, and negative commentary toward Central Asian states intensified in the Russian media. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* played a particularly leading role in this regard. For example, in its March 26, 1997 issue, it argued:

“The existence of any bloc in the Central Asian republics, regardless of its orientation, does not serve Russia’s national interests. The 1994 formation of the Central Asian Union poses a potential threat to Russia and must be countered by using all available means to disrupt the emerging bloc and intensify regional competition” (Zatulín & Migranyan, 1997).

Clearly, from Moscow’s perspective, it was undesirable for Central Asian countries to pursue an independent policy contrary to Russian interests.

Achievements of regional integration despite challenges (1993–1998)

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, Central Asian states managed to achieve several important milestones in regional integration, which are worth highlighting.

First, the establishment of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) in 1993 marked a major achievement. This fund, created by the leaders of five Central Asian

countries, aimed to attract resources for projects related to the Aral Sea and to promote rational use, protection, and monitoring of transboundary water resources. It represented the first significant regional institution to emerge in the post-Soviet era in Central Asia (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012).

Second, in December 1997, at a summit in Akmola (now Nur-Sultan), the heads of state agreed to establish an international consortium focused on cooperation in energy, food security, and mineral resources.

Third, in 1996, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed a Treaty on Eternal Friendship, which Kyrgyzstan later joined in 1998. This treaty reflected the political will to strengthen regional ties and mutual support among the three states.

Fourth, under the auspices of the United Nations, a Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion was established in December 1995. This initiative aimed to enhance regional security and demonstrated the ability of Central Asian states to coordinate on defense matters without external domination.

Fifth, the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia was signed by all five regional states on September 8, 2006, in Semipalatinsk. This initiative, originally proposed by President Islam Karimov at the 48th session of the UN General Assembly on September 28, 1993, created an unprecedented level of political trust among the Central Asian states concerning security and non-proliferation efforts (Khalq Sozi, 2006).

Finally, in March 1998, Tajikistan officially joined the Central Asian Union, which indicated a recovery of sorts for regional cooperation following the end of Tajikistan's civil war.

Thus, despite considerable external pressures and internal political difficulties, the Central Asian states demonstrated that regional integration was not only possible but could achieve tangible results in critical areas such as environmental protection, security, and economic collaboration.

The emergence of fragmentation and decline of integration (1998–2005)

In an effort to further strengthen regional cooperation, the heads of state of the Central Asian countries agreed in 1998, during a summit in Cholpon-Ata (Kyrgyzstan), to rename the Central Asian Union as the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC). Russia, Georgia, and Turkey were granted observer status within the organization. However, ironically, from this very period onward, regional integration began to falter.

A major blow came in 1998, when Kyrgyzstan became the first Central Asian state to join the World Trade Organization (WTO). As a result, the other three members of the CAEC—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan—were compelled to adjust their trade, taxation, and customs policies toward Kyrgyzstan. In particular, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were forced to adopt protective measures to safeguard their domestic industries from the influx of re-exported goods through Kyrgyzstan (Islamov, 2001, p. 176).

Moreover, a second major disruption occurred on February 26, 1999, when Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed a treaty with Russia and Belarus to join a Customs Union, seeking closer economic ties with Moscow. This initiative further complicated regional economic cohesion.

Shortly thereafter, on October 10, 2000, these same states signed an agreement to establish the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), which officially entered into force on May 30, 2001. As a result, regional integration efforts among Central Asian states were significantly weakened, and fragmentation deepened.

Taking into account growing security threats and aiming to expand the scope of regional cooperation, President Islam Karimov proposed in December 2001 that the Central Asian Economic Community be renamed the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC). He also suggested organizing a conference of Central Asian entrepreneurs in Tashkent to stimulate economic collaboration (Pravda Vostoka, 2001).

In line with these proposals, in 2002, four countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (excluding Turkmenistan)—signed an agreement in Almaty to establish the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation.

The Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC) and its collapse (2002–2005)

Following its rebranding, the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC) initially generated cautious optimism among scholars and policymakers. Two notable developments in 2002–2004 particularly stimulated regional collaboration.

First, parliamentary cooperation was initiated. On November 18, 2002, the first meeting of parliamentarians from the OCAC member states was held in Tashkent. During the meeting, participants approved a memorandum emphasizing the importance of developing common legislative principles and decided to establish a Parliamentary Conference as a permanent cooperation platform (Narodnoe Slovo, 2002).

Second, business cooperation was actively promoted. Several business forums were held in Tashkent (November 28–29, 2002) and Osh (May 6, 2003). During these forums, regional business representatives stressed the need to develop joint projects, harmonize legislation, liberalize trade regulations, and strengthen direct contacts between enterprises across Central Asia.

However, despite these initiatives, very limited tangible progress was achieved between 2002 and 2004 in creating a common market for Central Asia. Efforts to harmonize customs procedures, deepen cooperation in water, energy, transport, and communications sectors largely remained declarative and symbolic, giving rise to what scholars termed "virtual regionalism" (Bobokulov, 2006, p. 85).

In October 2004, during a summit of the OCAC Heads of State Council held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, Russia officially joined the organization. President Islam Karimov at that time viewed Russia's accession as an "objective and natural process" (Pravda Vostoka, 2004). Russia was perceived as a potential guarantor of stability in the event of conflicts among Central Asian states.

However, the outcome diverged from expectations. Rather than promoting regional cohesion, Russia increasingly became a source of division, manipulating differences among Central Asian countries for its own strategic advantage. Given the region's critical strategic importance, Russia's involvement in the OCAC foreshadowed the organization's demise.

Shortly thereafter, in October 2005, during a summit of the OCAC Heads of State Council in St. Petersburg, a historic decision was made to merge OCAC into the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC). This merger effectively marked the end of independent Central Asian integration initiatives. From that point onward, the dream of building a self-sustained regional bloc in Central Asia faded into history.

Nazarbayev's proposal for a new union and the final collapse of Central Asian integration

In February 2005, President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the idea of creating a new regional bloc called the Union of Central Asian States during his address to the people of

Kazakhstan. He suggested that the 1997 Treaty on Eternal Friendship, signed between Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek, could serve as a solid foundation for this new union (Official Website of the President of Kazakhstan, 2005).

The President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, expressed support for Nazarbayev's initiative. However, in 2008, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov firmly rejected the proposal. Thus, efforts to revive regional integration through the creation of a new Central Asian union came to an end.

This development raised an important question: Why did Central Asian integration collapse? Why were the states unable to unite? The answer lies in several key factors:

Firstly, an alternative integration project was being simultaneously promoted by Kazakhstan — the idea of establishing a Eurasian Union. This concept was first introduced by Nursultan Nazarbayev during his speech at Moscow State University on March 29, 1994 (Nazarbayev, 1997, p. 32). The Eurasian Union, however, was envisioned primarily as a political association and was not capable of solving the deep economic crises across the post-Soviet space. In an interview with *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* in 1994, Islam Karimov criticized this idea, stating:

“Those advocating this concept are primarily aiming to boost their domestic ratings in Kazakhstan and trying to resolve post-Soviet crises through political means. I am categorically against resolving such matters through political tools; I advocate gradual and evolutionary solutions instead” (Karimov, 1994).

Karimov's remarks clearly revealed that the Eurasian Union project aimed at elevating Kazakhstan as the core state in regional integration, while in previous Central Asian cooperation initiatives, Uzbekistan's geographic position naturally placed it at the center. Such differences in strategic vision contributed significantly to tensions.

Secondly, by the early 2000s, Kazakhstan's foreign policy increasingly moved away from a purely Central Asian orientation toward a "Eurasian" trajectory. Proponents of this course argued that:

“Kazakhstan borders Central Asia geographically but is not a Central Asian country. We are a Eurasian nation influenced strongly by European and Western values. Our historical models are not Saudi Arabia, but rather Norway, South Korea, and Singapore” (Tolipov, 2006, p. 22).

This shift in identity and foreign policy priorities diminished Kazakhstan's commitment to Central Asian integration.

Thirdly, Kazakhstan gradually leaned more heavily toward Russia in its foreign policy. This was largely due to the immense length of their shared border (7,591 km) and the fact that by the late 1990s, nearly half of Kazakhstan's population was ethnically Russian (Official Website of the President of Kazakhstan, 2022). Speaking at a press conference on December 4, 1997, Nazarbayev stated:

“We are neighbors with Russia by divine will, sharing a 7,000 km border. Any politician in my place would take this fact into account. Cooperation with Russia is crucial for us economically, as it provides a huge market for our goods” (Foreign Ministry Archives, Dossier No. 083).

Thus, the "Russian vector" gradually gained dominance in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, weakening the country's interest in developing an independent Central Asian integration framework.

Broader causes of failure: structural, political, and geopolitical factors

Although Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were considered the driving forces behind Central Asian integration, both states fell short of fully fulfilling their leadership roles. The level of mutual trust between the Central Asian countries remained extremely low. Often, treaties signed at summits were not implemented, and agreements were left declarative rather than practical. This chronic gap between rhetoric and action seriously undermined the prospects for deep regional cooperation.

Professor Roy Allison of the School of Global and Area Studies at Oxford University analyzed the systemic weaknesses in Central Asian regionalism. He outlined four major factors explaining why efforts at regional integration consistently faltered (Allison, 2020):

1. **State Capacity Gaps:** Variations in administrative, economic, and technical capabilities among Central Asian countries made it difficult to implement collective, region-wide projects. The gap in state capacities was significant and persistent.
2. **Ideological Divergences:** National self-assertion and sovereignty-building efforts in the 1990s led Central Asian states to prioritize their own independence over regional solidarity. Consequently, political leaders often focused more on emphasizing differences rather than searching for common ground and shared regional interests.
3. **Economic Competition:** Instead of complementing each other, the economies of Central Asian states often competed. Furthermore, the transport infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union made economic integration difficult, reinforcing patterns of competition rather than cooperation.
4. **External Pressures:** Competition among major external powers — Russia, the United States, and China — weakened regionalism. Rather than pursuing a unified Central Asian policy, the states increasingly sought bilateral relations with powerful external actors.

Similarly, researcher Chori Kocharov highlighted the macro-economic incompatibilities among Central Asian states as a major obstacle. The national economic development strategies and programs of each state differed significantly, creating structural imbalances that complicated any attempt at joint development (Kocharov, 2008, p. 19).

Another major hindrance was the low level of trust and transparency among Central Asian leaders. Instead of prioritizing collective regional interests, personal ambitions often took precedence.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev later aptly observed:

"Openness and trust are not always qualities found among many leaders. However, when leaders set aside ambition and prioritize the interests of their peoples, reason prevails, and goals can be achieved" (Mirziyoyev, 2017).

Indeed, the development of regional cooperation depended heavily on the nature of interpersonal relations between the heads of state. Frequent summits between presidents served as clear indicators of the state of bilateral and multilateral relations at any given time.

Conclusion

The case of Uzbek-Kazakh relations between 1991 and 2016 offers crucial insights into the complex and ultimately unsuccessful attempts at regional integration in Central Asia. Although the initial momentum for cooperation was strong — driven by shared historical, cultural, economic, and geographic ties — the region's path toward integration was obstructed by a combination of internal weaknesses and external pressures.

Internally, the absence of mutual trust, disparities in national capacities, ideological divergence over sovereignty, economic competition, and competing leadership ambitions

significantly undermined the feasibility of deeper integration. While Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan held the greatest potential to serve as joint drivers of regional cooperation, their conflicting strategic visions — particularly Kazakhstan's pivot toward a Eurasian foreign policy orientation — created a lasting structural imbalance.

Externally, persistent interference by major powers, especially Russia, further complicated integration. Rather than supporting Central Asian unity, Russia viewed independent regional consolidation as a threat to its influence and actively worked to fragment emerging initiatives. Other global powers, such as the United States and China, also encouraged bilateral relations over regional multilateralism, further weakening intra-regional ties.

Despite the significant achievements such as the establishment of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, the Treaty on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, and the temporary progress under the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation, these efforts proved unsustainable. The ultimate dissolution of the OCAC into the Eurasian Economic Community in 2005 symbolized the end of a distinct Central Asian regional integration project.

Today, the experience of Central Asia serves as a cautionary tale about the difficulties of building effective regionalism without genuine political commitment, economic complementarity, and protection from external geopolitical rivalry. Nevertheless, the lessons drawn from this period continue to inform new efforts toward regional cooperation in a more complex and multipolar world.

References:

1. Allison, Roy. 2020. "Challenges and Prospects for Central Asian Regionalism." Uzbekistan in the Context of Regional Security and Global Change, UWED GCRF COMPASS Conference Proceedings, February 2020.
2. Bobokulov, I. 2006. "Central Asia: Is There an Alternative to Regional Integration?" Central Asian Survey (March-June): 75–91.
3. Foreign Ministry Archives of Uzbekistan. Dossier No. 083.
4. Islamov, Bakhtior A. 2001. *The Central Asian States Ten Years After: How to Overcome Traps of Development, Transformation and Globalization*. Tokyo: Maruzen Co. Ltd.
5. Karimov, Islam. 1995. *Turkiston – Umumiy Uyimiz. Do'stligimiz Quyoshi Ming Yilliklar Qa'ridan Nur Sochadi*. Tashkent: Uzbekistan.
6. Khalq So'zi. 2006. "Uzbekistan's Initiative on a Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone in Central Asia Gains International Recognition." Khalq Sozi, accessed [link].
7. Kocharov, Chori. 2008. *Problems of the Central Asian Regional Integration Process*. PhD diss., Tashkent.
8. Laruelle, Marlene, and Sebastien Peyrouse. 2012. "Regional Organizations in Central Asia: Patterns of Interaction, Dilemmas of Efficiency." UCA IPPA Working Paper No. 10.
9. Mirziyoyev, Shavkat. 2017. "Leaders Come and Go, but Nations Remain." *Gazeta.uz*, October 6. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2017/10/06/talks/>.
10. Nazarbayev, Nursultan. 1997. *Eurasian Union: Ideas, Practice, Prospects 1994–1997*. Moscow: Foundation for the Promotion of Social and Political Sciences.
11. Narodnoe Slovo. 2002. "Meeting of Parliamentarians from CAS Member States," Narodnoe Slovo, June 23.



12. Nezavisimaya Gazeta. 1993. Yurtaev, V., and A. Shestakov. "Asia's Gas Will Go to Europe." Nezavisimaya Gazeta, May 13.
13. Nezavisimaya Gazeta. 1997. Zatulin, K.F., and A.M. Migranyan. "CIS: Beginning or End of History." Nezavisimaya Gazeta, March 26. <https://zatulin.ru/sng-nachalo-ili-konec-istorii-k-smene-vex/>.
14. Official Website of the President of Kazakhstan. 2005. "Kazakhstan on the Path of Accelerated Economic, Social, and Political Modernization: Address by President Nazarbayev." Accessed [link].
15. Official Website of the President of Kazakhstan. 2022. "Republic of Kazakhstan." https://www.akorda.kz/ru/republic_of_kazakhstan/kazakhstan.
16. Pravda Vostoka. 2001. "Central Asia: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow." Pravda Vostoka, December 29.
17. Pravda Vostoka. 2004. "On the Path to Peace, Stability and Progress." Pravda Vostoka, October 19.
18. Tolipov, Farkhod. 2006. "Central Asia is Five 'Stans': A Polemic with Kazakhstani Eurasianists." *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 2(44): 18–29.