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## **The Revival of Regionalism in Central Asia.**

**Roland Dannreuther, University of Westminster**

### *Abstract*

For a long time, the aspirations for Central Asian regional integration failed to materialise. However, there has recently been evidence of a revival in the prospects for Central Asian regionalism, with increasing intra-regional trade, resolution of border disputes, development of trans-regional infrastructure, and more regular and substantive meetings between the five Central Asian leaders. Understanding the sources of this revival of regionalism is the focus of this article. First, it argues that the external environment has become more benign for Central Asian regionalism with China's economic drive to connect West China with Europe facilitating connectivity in Central Asia. The Sino-Russian rapprochement over Central Asia also benefits regionalism compared to earlier periods of West-Russian competition. Second, the internal domestic conditions within the Central Asian states have favoured regionalism as a new generation of leader realise that economic autarchy is no longer a viable solution. This regionalism does not, though promote political liberalisation. It is a form of regionalism that seeks to preserve rather than supplant the authoritarian nation-state.

During the past 30 years of the independence of the post-Soviet Central Asian states, the dominant view is that the initial hopes for regional cooperation have failed to materialise, and that Central Asian regionalism is a lost cause. This pessimism reflects the failure to develop a series of Central Asian regional institutions during the first 15 years of independence. The Central Asian Union (CAU) established in 1994 was followed by the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) in 1998 which was then transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) in 2002. None of these regional institutions effectively promoted regional cooperation and did little to hinder the reality of political and economic regional disintegration. In 2005, these Central Asian regional initiatives were themselves undermined by the dissolution of CACO into the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2005 (Rosset & Svarin, 2014).

There has been much academic debate about the causes of this failure of Central Asian regionalism. These include the argument that the states of the region fundamentally distrust one another and even 'cannot be relied upon to trust themselves' (Olcott, 1994: 555); that there are negative perceptions to the threat of Uzbek hegemony and expansionism (Olcott, 1994; Rosset & Svarin, 2014); that the continued power and influence of Russia perpetuates traditional divide-and-rule policies (Kubicek, 1997); and that the neo-patrimonial and corrupted practices of the authoritarian regimes radically undermine any movement for regional integration as that would mean loss of their hold on power and the enrichment of the themselves and their patronage networks (Allison, 2004, 2008; Collins, 2009; Cooley, 2012; Spechler, 2001).

The focus of this article is to qualify this assumption of the insuperable constraints against Central Asian regionalism. Indeed, the argument is that, since the mid-2010s there has been a nascent revival in the prospects for regionalism in Central Asia. This revival culminated at the declaratory level at the 6<sup>th</sup> Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in August 2024 when the five states agreed to the concept for the development of regional cooperation 'Central Asia -

2040'. This agreement included trade and industrial cooperation, infrastructural development, and digital and green growth on a regional basis between the five states of Central Asia (Khitakhunov, 2025). This renewed enthusiasm for regional cooperation builds upon a gradual shift away from the disintegration of the 1990s and 2000s towards greater regional cooperation during the 2010s and 2020s. The claim is not that the long-standing obstacles to regional cooperation have disappeared but rather that there is a more realistic and more pragmatic resolve to seek to overcome these obstacles and that there is generally a more benign internal and external environment for such regional initiatives.

The main argument of the article is that this revival for the prospects for regionalism has both external and internal sources. The main external source is China's increased economic influence in Central Asia that has generally supported regional cooperation and has helped to reduce Russian-Western competition for power which had tended to fracture and divide the region. The internal sources for regional cooperation have been the growing convergence between the political regimes of the Central Asian region and their mutual recognition that the sustainability of the authoritarian regional model of rule comes from working more closely with each other rather than through seeking economic and political autarchy. As such, this is not regionalism pursued for liberal political ends. Rather the reverse, it is part of a more general project of 'authoritarian modernization' where regime stability is a paramount concern. In the context of European integration, the historian Alan Milward counter-intuitively argued that the logic of European integration was not to supplant but rather to 'rescue the nation-state' (Milward, 2000). In the Central Asian case, the logic of regional cooperation is not to supplant but rather to 'rescue the authoritarian nation-state'.

### **Interpreting the 'failure' of regionalism in Central Asia**

Before providing evidence for the emergent dynamic for regionalism in Central Asia, it is first important to define what is meant by regionalism. There are two significant distinctions to be made in this regard. The first is that between regionalisation and regionalism. Regionalisation refers to the bottom-up processes, involving multiple non-state actors such as companies and civil society, that result in

increased region-based activity and interaction. Regionalism, in contrast, is a top-down political project to promote regional cooperation which can be in multiple areas, not just economic but also social, political and security/military (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010: 619). The second distinction is between regionalism and regional integration. Regional integration refers to the complex social transformations driven by 'the intensification of relations between independent nation states' (de Lombaerde, 2006: 9). The overall goal of regional integration is to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, a 'process in which units move from a condition of total or partial isolation towards a complete or partial unification' (Langenhove, 2003: 5).

One of the problems in the study of regionalism is that there is the tendency to use regional integration as the yardstick for determining the success or failure of regionalism. Yet regional integration, involving some form of supranational authority to oversee the dynamic of unification, is relatively rare on a global level and is most evident in the context of the European integration process. The European case has also its exceptional context in that it emerged after the continent had been almost destroyed itself through two World Wars and where integration was conceived as a vital peace project. There is also a long-standing theoretical debate about whether European integration came about primarily from the bottom-up dynamics of regionalisation, as captured in the theory of neo-functionalism. Or whether the process was, as neo-intergovernmental theory argues, driven by the interests of nation-states who saw regional integration as the only way to protect European interests in a world dominated by the two superpowers of the United States and the Soviet Union (Hooghe & Marks, 2019). Despite these exceptional conditions, the European model of integration has been strongly promoted as an effective means to building regional cooperation that brings both peace and prosperity. The problem, however, of this European style and model of integration is its relative rarity and how it sets high bars for regionalism in other parts of the world.

This use of European-style regional integration as a yardstick for identifying the success or failure of regionalism in Central Asia explains, to some extent, the disappointment at the ineffectiveness of the Central Asian regional institutions and initiatives of the 1990s. The five states of Central Asia undoubtedly represent a

distinctive region, given their historical, cultural, ethnic and religious ties, along with their shared Soviet experience (Collins, 2009). Indeed, the conscious decision in 1993 by the leaders of the five states to rename their region 'Central Asia' (Tsentral'naia Azia) in place of the Soviet category of 'Middle Asia and Kazakhstan' (Srednaia Azia i Kazakhstan) was a clear statement of decolonial intent, reinstating a regional identity that had been obscured during the Soviet period (Olcott, 1994). However, this sense of 'region-ness' has generally been seen to have failed to be translated into concrete trans-regional social, economic and political practices and institutions (Hettne & Soderbaum, 2006), though there are some significant dissenting voices (Buranelli, 2021, 2025; Lewis, 2018).

One factor in explaining the high expectations and the subsequent disappointment at the failure of Central Asian regional integration is rooted in anxieties over the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the West, while the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 was viewed as an unqualified gain since it represented the ideological defeat of communism, the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union was seen more ambivalently. This ambivalence was most notoriously expressed by President George H. W. Bush in August 1991 in his so-called 'chicken Kiev' speech when he cautioned against Ukrainian independence as it could lead to the replacement of a 'far off tyranny with local despotism' (Bush, 1991; Fink, 1997). Bush was reflecting the post-Cold War fears that the break-up of large multinational states, such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, would inevitably lead to ethnic violence, nationalist extremism, and civil war (Huntington, 1993). In this context, Central Asia was judged to be particularly vulnerable to, particularly after the ethnic violence in the Ferghana Valley in 1989 and 1990 and the descent of Tajikistan into civil war in 1992. The resultant Western policy prescription was for the newly independent states of the region to engage in regional integration since, as Kubicek argued, 'alone, each of these states has an uncertain future and is ripe for exploitation by rapacious neighbours. Together, either in more formal union or through multilateral cooperation, they could solve many of their common problems and create a more stable and secure environment' (Kubicek, 1997: 637).

The subsequent failure to promote Central Asian regional integration did not result in the more alarmist projections for instability in the region. The civil war in

Tajikistan proved to be the exception to the general rule of the reasonably peaceful trajectory of development in the other states of Central Asia, apart from simmering border disputes. In addition, the prediction that Central Asia would be captured by 'rapacious' external powers, engaged in a new Great Game, failed to materialise. Instead, as Cooley argues, the Central Asian states developed their own 'local rules' to dissipate the manipulations of external powers (Cooley, 2012). On a more practical level, it was always unrealistic to expect regional integration to emerge in the context of new fragile independent states whose primary initial goal was to assert their sovereignty and consolidate their liberation from an oppressive multinational empire. There is a striking contrast here with Europe's initial conditions for integration where the problem was to tame and overcome, rather than to create and celebrate, discrete national sovereignties.

A more appropriate analogy for understanding the dynamics of Central Asian regionalism is the record of non-European regionalism among other post-colonial regions in the Global South. In these post-colonial regions, the general experience of regionalism has been as mixed and problematic as in Central Asia. If you compare the experience of the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa and the South-East Asia you also find much variation. In the Middle East, the initial hopes and expectations of pan-Arab unity through the establishment of the Arab League failed to materialise as divisions between Arab states led to inter-Arab conflicts and the external environment was hostile to integration due to the constant competitive intervention of external powers. Apart from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Middle Eastern regional initiatives have never gained momentum (Gause, 2010). The case of Africa has similarities to the Middle East in that the hopes for pan-African integration, institutionalised in African Union, also failed to materialise (Asante, 1997). However, there has been a modest revival of regionalism in the post-Cold War period with the increased roles played by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC). However, their distinctive contributions have been less in promoting economic integration and more in practical support for peacekeeping activities and election monitoring (Fawcett & Gandois, 2010: 621).

In South-East Asia, the experience of regionalism has been more positive with ASEAN as the most successful exemplar of an Asian regionalism. However, the ASEAN model is distinctively different from the European one. Within ASEAN, the emphasis has been to resist political integration and not to require member states to commit to liberal and democratic norms, but rather the focus has been on enhancing informal economic connections in relation to trade, foreign direct investment and migration (Rangsimaporn, 2022). While ASEAN rejected any idea of pooling of sovereignty, it nevertheless sought positively to support consensus-building with countries of varying political systems (Acharya, 2010; Goh, 2000). Instead of the complexity of institution and norm-building required for European-style integration, Asian-style regionalism has been pragmatic and issue-based and focused more on completing specific projects rather than developing legal norms and rules that promote an ever-closer economic and political union (Libman & Vinokurov, 2021). As such, the pragmatism in the Asian-style approach accords priority towards infrastructure development as a key catalyst for integration. However, in one area, there is a similarity between ASEAN and European integration – they both required external powers, the US in relation to the EU and the US and China in relation to ASEAN, to provide a supportive environment for institutionalised regional cooperation (Lundestad, 1986; Yates, 2017)

The post-colonial experience of regionalism in the Middle East, Africa and Asia provide insights both into the failure of earlier ambitious Central Asian regional institutions and the more pragmatic promotion of regionalism in the more recent period. As with these other regions, the overriding post-independence imperative was to forge secure nation-states in conditions of internal fragility and multiple external threats. And in common with these post-colonial societies, authoritarian and neo-patrimonial regimes emerged that perceived themselves to be besieged by multiple internal and external threats (Halliday, 1994). These conditions, which included at their extreme the almost paranoid inward-focused development of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, was far from conducive for regional cooperation. The more recent revival of regionalism follows much more closely the Asian rather than the European model adopting a regionalism that is more pragmatic and issue-based and accords priority towards infrastructure development over social, economic and political integration.

## Reviving regionalism in Central Asia

Richard Pomfret, a leading economist on Central Asia, noted that the peak period of post-Soviet Central Asian disintegration was in the mid to late 2000s (Pomfret, 2019: 206). The dynamic then shifted to one that was more supportive of integration. A critical turning point was the agreement reached in mid-2000s for the development of Central Asian natural gas pipeline, linking Turkmenistan to China via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which was then opened in 2009. At the time, most of the commentary was about how this agreement meant that the Central Asian states were bypassing Russia and why Russia appeared to be so complacent about losing a dependent supplicant in Turkmenistan (Harding, 2009). But a more significant longer-term implications of the agreement was the willingness of China to support and finance a pipeline critical to its energy security despite it needing to cross two transit states. Transit states are notoriously treated with suspicion by both the resource producer and the end-consumer as transit states gain considerable leverage as there are no clearly defined international norms about how such transit states should be compensated (Stevens, 2009). There is also the additional vulnerability that, at some point, bilateral relations between the transit state and either the exporting or importing states could lead to the pipeline being shut down. The Middle East, for example, is littered with transregional pipelines that have been shut down due to regional conflicts (Stevens, 2000). The fact that China was not constrained by these potential security risks is *de facto* a recognition that these three concerned Central Asian states had sufficiently stable and trusting relations that made it economically and politically viable to support the development of the pipeline. As such, the construction of this pipeline was a symbolic marker of a new dynamic for Central Asian regionalism.

Another key turning point was the accession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the Presidency in Uzbekistan, who succeeded the long-term post-Soviet leader, Islam Karimov, in 2016. Karimov had been suspicious and dismissive of Central Asian regionalism, reflecting his own Soviet-inherited preferences for more domestically driven development and eschewing the Western pressure to engage in economic liberalisation and the privatisation of national assets (Lang, 2016). In contrast to

Karimov, Mirziyoyev has been much more upbeat about the region, describing Central Asia as a 'single organism' during a visit to Kazakhstan in 2017 (Gazeta.uz, 2017). He also accorded priority to the Central Asian region in terms of foreign policy and has sought trade liberalization and improvements in relations with neighbouring states. In January 2023, this resulted in the finalization of a comprehensive border agreement between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, ending a series of disputes that had plagued bilateral relations for over 30 years (Putz, 2022; Rickleton, 2023a). As recently as 2016, the Uzbek military had occupied parts of the disputed border area and an armed conflict was only narrowly avoided (Orozobekova, 2016). In the early 2000s the border area was extensively mined by Uzbekistan in response to the perceived threat of the infiltration of Islamists (Megoran, 2004). These greatly improved border arrangements have also increased mobility to and from Uzbekistan and its neighbouring states. For example, the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan state border has seen a significant number of people crossing it daily, from 200-300 in 2019 to more than 30,000 in 2024. An agreement with Tajikistan similarly opened 17 border crossings with the traffic crossing the border growing to 20,000 (Ozod, 2023).

Mirziyoyev's overtures have also been favourably received in other neighbouring countries' political leaders. This includes the most significant neighbour, Kazakhstan, where Kassym-Jomart Tokayev succeeded Nursultan Nazarbayev as President in 2019 and who has been equally keen to enhance bilateral relations which had often tended in the past to be more competitive than cooperative (Nuriddinov, 2022; Podrobno.uz, 2021). Over the period from 2019-2024, the two leaders of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have had over 15 meetings. In December 2021, the two leaders elevated their relations to that of an alliance and established a Supreme Interstate Council and a Council for Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation between the two countries. In August 2024, there was the first formal meeting of the Supreme Interstate Council of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A practical example of their more collaborative approach is that both countries agreed to support the construction of a new dam in Kyrgyzstan at an estimated cost of \$3bn (Rickleton, 2023b). This was after the Kyrgyz government's agreed to break its commitment to Russia to develop the dam in an alternative location that had long been opposed by Tashkent. The dominant approach remains forging bilateral

agreements between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and between the other states of the region has a multilateral effect of a web of bilateral agreements (Ozod, 2023).

Although this nascent revival of Central Asian regionalism has not led to the establishment of a formal regional institution, the establishment in 2017 of the Consultative Forum for Central Asian Leaders has provided a practical context for developing stronger regional cooperation. As the title suggests, this is a purposefully modest and low-key arrangement, pre-empting any over-ambitious expectations of regional institution-building. But the meetings have grown in scope and confidence, and, in 2023, there was a marked increase in institutionalising regional cooperation and it was agreed, for example, that a coordinating body would be established to manage trans-regional transport and other infrastructure projects (Buranelli, 2023). As noted above, in 2024 this was extended further to outline a clear pathway towards enhanced regional cooperation through the 'Central Asia – 2040' concept of regional development. At the Summit in Astana, Mirziyoyev provided a clear statement of the ambitious nature of these regional commitments. He stated that the five countries, 'plan to launch mechanisms and institutions for regional cooperation, including meetings of national coordinators, sectoral ministries, and agencies. Regarding practical measures, Central Asian republics are set to eliminate tariff and non-tariff barriers, mutually recognize certificates of conformity, harmonize regulations, digitize customs operations and phytosanitary procedures, and consider mutual access to public procurement' (Aslanov & Akromov, 2024).

It is important to stress that these ambitions remain promises for the future and will require considerable strong political will to realise. The current reality for enhanced Central Asian regionalism is more modest and represent the 'petit pas' or 'small steps' of the early European integration process. However, there are encouraging signs of inter- regional trade increasingly significantly since 2017 (see figure 1). This increase includes a more modest increase of the overall share of trade, with the relative share of intra-regional trade compared to trade with the rest of the world growing from 6% in 2014 to just under 8% in 2024 (see figure 2). However, it remains the case that overall intra-regional trade remains relatively small and a greater proportion of the trade of all the countries in the region is with extra-regional partners, most notably the EU, Russia and China.

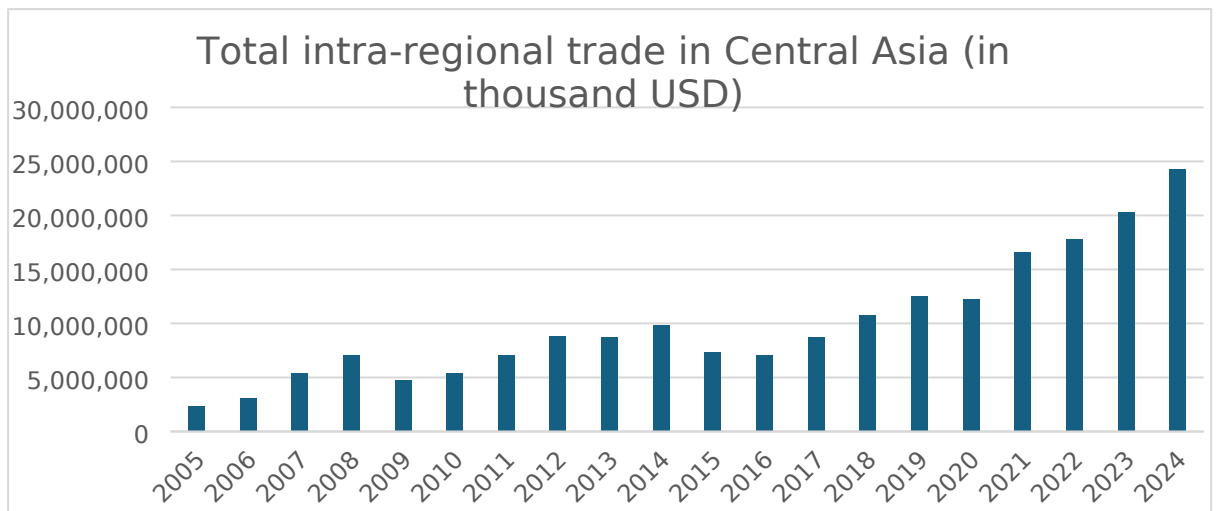


Figure 1: Trade between 5 Central Asian states in \$ - 2005-2024 (source: Trade Map)

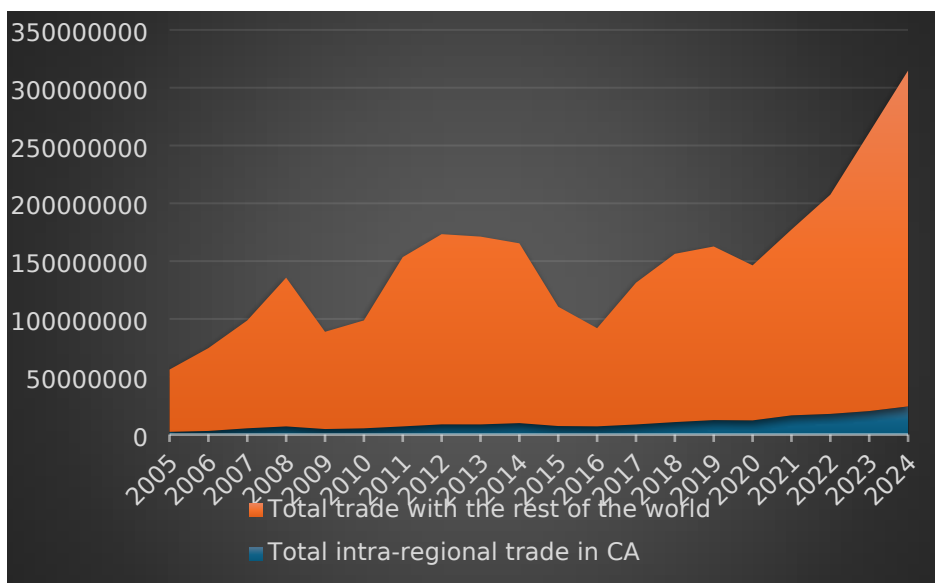


Figure 2: Relative share of trade (intra-regional vs rest of the world) (Source: Trade Map)

These increases in regional trade have been facilitated by the improvement in transportation links and these are set to improve significantly in the future. In 2022, an agreement was reached to build the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway that had long been discussed and which will, if realised, have a major impact on enhancing trade across Central Asia and building links between the region and

China and Europe (Sharifli, 2022). However, it should also be noted that enhanced connectivity does not itself drive regional cooperation unless supported by strong political will. Central Asia is also not a region that is completely pacified, with a longstanding border dispute between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan resulting in a major armed conflict in 2022. Although there has been some minimal opening, Turkmenistan remains committed to its posture of 'positive neutrality' which means that it engages with caution in any multilateral arrangements (Najibullah, 2023). Central Asian regionalism also co-exists and competes with other more prominent integrative processes, most notably Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Yet, with all these qualifications, there has nevertheless been a significant change in the region in the recognition of the need for greater cooperation between the five Central Asian states. There has, as a result, re-emerged a nascent political project of Central Asian regionalism. The rest of this article sets out why pessimism about Central Asian regionalism is no longer justified and identifies the key factors behind the revival of regionalism.

### **The External Sources for the Revival of Central Asian Regionalism**

As argued above, the decision to develop the Central Asian gas pipeline was a symbolic marker for the revival of the dynamic of increased regionalism. But it also highlights the importance of external actors in supporting regional cooperation. In the west European context, Geir Lundestad argued against the conventional view that integration emerged from within Europe and that such integration was only possible through the support of the United States in what he called 'empire by integration' (Lundestad, 1986, 1998). In his analysis, the US supported the integration of Western Europe because it reflected the federal values of the American Republic and because it was deemed necessary to counter the emergent Soviet threat. Crucially, the US committed itself to providing an external security guarantee, through the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1947, which provided a benign security environment in which European integration could then be pursued (Gillingham & Heller, 1992). A similar process of ensuring security

integration before economic and political integration was also evident after the end of the Cold War when the states of East Central Europe joined NATO before moving towards accession to the European Union (Dannreuther, 1997).

For the states of Central Asia, the need for a supportive external environment is arguably even greater than in Europe. Central Asia is like the Middle East in being a 'penetrated region' where multiple external powers compete for influence in the region (Brown, 1992). Located as it is in the crossroads between East and West and North and South, this excites the interests not only of the Great Powers, such as Russia, the US, China and the EU but also multiple regional powers, such as Iran and Turkey. When this penetration of external powers takes a competitive form, as has generally been the case in the Middle East, then the conditions for autonomous regional development and cooperation are limited (Lustick, 1997). The Central Asian region, therefore, needs to have a relatively benign external environment as an essential pre-condition for the possibility of regional integration. As in Europe, the role of a strong external actor supporting regionalist ambitions is also a critical factor.

As suggested with the Central Asian natural gas pipeline, China has been particularly influential in indirectly supporting Central Asian regionalism. China's interest in Central Asia is a relatively recent phenomenon and has two inter-connected aspects to it. The first of these is the increasing importance of the energy resources of the Central Asian region for the Chinese economy. In the mid-1990s, China shifted from being an energy-exporting to being an energy-importing country. In the following two decades, China's needs for imports of oil and gas increased dramatically as the country enjoyed fast energy-intensive economic growth (Andrews-Speed, Liao, & Dannreuther, 2002). A landmark in this energy dependence was when China overtook the United States as the largest importer of oil in 2017 (EIA, 2017). As with other oil importers, the oil and gas provided by the countries with the most abundant reserves, most notably in the Persian Gulf region, are critical to meet China's energy needs (Andrews-Speed & Dannreuther, 2011). However, unlike many other importers, this dependence comes with a significant degree of vulnerability as the main Sea Lines of Communication from the Gulf region to the Chinese mainland are controlled by the US navy and the supplies are potentially vulnerable to a US embargo (Lanteigne, 2008).

In this context, the main strategic advantage of obtaining oil and gas from Eurasia, from both Russia and Central Asia, is that the supply of these resources is free from the threat of direct US interdiction. There is, therefore, a strong energy security dimension to China's engagement with Russia and Central Asia that helps to explain its geopolitical as well as geoeconomic commitment to securing supplies of oil and gas from these regions. In Central Asia, this was first done through the main Chinese oil company, CNPC, gaining concessions from 1997 onwards for oil and gas supplies from Kazakhstan and in building the necessary pipelines from Kazakhstan to China (Liao, 2006; O'Neill, 2014). As noted above, the project that has been most significant in terms of promoting more substantive intra-Central Asian regional cooperation is the Central Asian natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China that transits through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that was built from 2006-9. The security vulnerabilities of this pipeline that cross several transit states is outweighed by the security benefits for China to diversify its supplies from the Persian Gulf region. This strategic calculation can also be seen in Beijing's commitment to build a fourth pipeline (Line D) from Turkmenistan that will also transit Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Aizhu & Gurt, 2023).

The success of China in helping to construct an energy infrastructure that connects Central Asian states can be compared to the relative failure of the US and EU to promote such integration in the 1990s and 2000s. Both the US and the EU had a strategic ambition to build East-West oil and gas pipelines that would free the energy-exporting Central Asian states from their dependence on Russia. In this endeavour, they were partially successful in that Kazakhstan was able to export its oil from the Tengiz field via the Caspian Petroleum Pipeline (CPC) and Azerbaijan was similarly able to export its oil through the South Caucasus pipeline (SCP) that went via Georgia to Turkey (Chow & Hendrix, 2010). However, Russian pressure meant that the CPC transited Russian territory with the export terminal being in Novorossisk; and a mix of Russian and Iranian pressure undermined the plans for a trans-Caspian pipeline that would have connected the SCP with Turkmenistan's energy resources. The result was that neither of these projects contributed in a significant way to enhancing connectivity between the five Central Asian states. This is in contrast with the energy infrastructure developed by China.

The second aspect of China's interest in Central Asia involves a broader set of economic and political considerations. In 2000, Beijing unveiled the Western Development Strategy, popularly known as the 'Go West' strategy, which aimed to accelerate the economic development of its western regions which had fallen economically behind the more dynamic Eastern coastal regions (Lin & Chen, 2007). European and other foreign companies were encouraged to set up factories and industries in key cities in the region such as Chongqing and Chengdu. This westward focus also sought to provide economic development and infrastructure integration with China's restive and potentially secessionist regions, most notably Tibet and Xinjiang (Szadziwski, 2009). The 'Go West' strategy had a significant impact on Central Asian regional politics. Central Asia was now a region where goods developed in Western China could be transported overland to their European destinations, significantly cutting short the journey time compared to the maritime route via China's pacific ports. For China, the economic links between Xinjiang and Central Asia also had a political value in reducing support for Uighur separatism amongst its co-religionists in Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation that was established in 2001 as a joint Chinese and Russian initiative, and that brought together the five Central Asian states, was designed with this explicit purpose in mind (Bailes et al, 2007).

This process of economic and infrastructural integration of China with Central Asia was given official status with the inauguration of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by Xi Jinping in 2013. The BRI (or One Belt and One Road) involved a strategic ambition to revive the ancient Silk Road from China to the West through substantial funding and financing of economic and infrastructure projects (Dunford & Liu, 2019; Huang, 2016). This gave Central Asia the opportunity to move from being 'landlocked to a land bridge', in Richard Pomfret's words (Pomfret, 2019: 267). Three main East-West overland corridors have been developed – the northern corridor via Russia; the southern corridor via Central Asia, Iran and Turkey; and the middle corridor through the Central Asian states to the South Caucasus. With the sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the northern corridor became no longer viable. Similarly, the international isolation of Iran has made the southern corridor problematic. Consequently, the middle corridor has gained in

strategic significance (Sattarov, 2021). This provides the context for the decision by Beijing, after much prevarication, to commit to build the China- Kyrgyzstan- Uzbekistan railway in 2022 as a key building block in the development of the middle corridor, though there remain challenges to finance this project.

China has provided, therefore, a strong economic and political rationale for greater connectivity and integration in the Central Asian region. But this role has been aided by the fact that the level of Russian-US competition in the region, which had been a significant factor dividing the region in the 1990s and 2000s, has decreased with the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. At the height of the US intervention in Afghanistan, the internal cohesion of the Central Asia region was weakened by the individual states deciding to balance either with the US (as with Uzbekistan in the early 2000s) or with Russia (as with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). The decline of an essentially competitive US-Russian engagement has also been replaced by a significantly more cooperative Sino-Russian relationship. This greater strategic cooperation is driven by a convergence in norms and values between Moscow and Beijing, with a joint ambition to undermine Western hegemony, which has facilitated the avoidance of confrontation in Central Asia. China also does not have the ambition for geopolitical hegemony in Central Asia so long as the Central Asian states do not challenge China's core interests, such as over Taiwan or Xinjiang (Soboleva & Krivokhizh, 2021). This differs from Russia which still tries to subordinate Central Asia to its interests, such as through the Eurasian Economic Union (Defraigne, 2021). But Russia, due to its own growing dependence on China, particularly with the Ukraine War, acquiesces to the reality of China's increasing economic power and influence in the region.

In addition, the ending of the Afghan civil war in 2021, albeit with the victory of the Taliban, has also brought a greater stability to the broader region and has reduced, if not eradicated, the perceived threat of extremist Islamist interventions. Uzbekistan has taken a highly proactive role in seeking to include Afghanistan as part of the broader plans for regional connectivity which contrasts with its earlier estrangement with the country (Umarov & Murtazashvili, 2022).

An additional external factor that arguably indirectly supports Central Asian regionalism is the increased regularity of C5+1 summits of Central Asian leaders with the major external powers. This started in 2018 with the Central Asian-US C5+1 forum to facilitate dialogue between the US Secretary of State and the Central Asian foreign ministers (US Department of State, 2023). In September 2023, this was upgraded to a leadership level with US President, Joe Biden, meeting with the Central Asian leaders in New York (Wood, 2023). This was preceded in May by a highly publicised summit between the five leaders and the Chinese leader, Xi Jinping, in Xi'an. In 2022, there was the first Russia-Central Asian Summit with the five leaders and President Putin along with the first EU-Central Asian summit in Astana with the President of the European Council, Charles Michel. There is clearly a pattern here where the preferred format for major external actors to engage with the Central Asian region is through meeting the Central Asian leaders collectively and in a multilateral format. This clearly does not replace bilateral diplomacy, and individual Central Asian states undoubtedly prefer bilateral settings for key decisions and the multilateral setting for more rhetorical and performative acts. However, this externally enforced multilateralism inevitably supports a dynamic of Central Asian regionalism as it requires, at the very least, the Central Asian leaders to engage in some level of diplomatic coordination.

### **Internal factors supporting Central Asian regionalism**

The argument so far is that, given the relative weakness of the Central Asian states compared to the major extra-regional actors, a favourable external environment is critical for a substantive dynamic of regional cooperation and integration. However, this does not mean that the interests of the individual states of Central Asia can be discounted. The states of Central Asia have agency, and their domestic preferences are essential factors in ensuring that this more benign external environment is acted upon and greater regional cooperation takes place.

One of the assumptions of the earlier scholarship on Central Asian regionalism was that regional integration was only possible if the regimes in the region were willing to liberalise politically as well as economically (Collins, 2009; Cooley, 2012; Spechler, 2001). The consensus was that regionalism failed to

develop as the regimes feared falling into the so-called 'modernization trap', whereby any genuine liberalisation of economy and society would inevitably lead to undermining the foundations of authoritarian rule (Foa, 2018; Snyder, 2017). With the regimes giving primacy to their own self-preservation, it was then thought inevitable that regional integration would lead to regime destabilization and thus be perceived to be intrinsically undesirable. Regionalism was only performatively promoted through multilateral bodies with Russia, China or the US providing security assurances for the existing authoritarian structures. Such externally directed regional institutions, such as the Eurasian Union, the CSTO or the SCO, substituted for and undermined autonomous regional cooperation and integration (Allison, 2004).

However, as argued above, there has been a revival of the conditions for regionalism in Central Asia without a significant process of political liberalisation or democratisation. But this persistence of authoritarianism does not exclude the nature and form of authoritarian rule changing in ways that encourages cross-border economic liberalisation and regional cooperation. One way of conceptualising this dynamic of 'authoritarian regionalism' is how key regional states have moved from populist or personality-based to a bureaucratic and performance-based authoritarianism. This transition involves a form of 'authoritarian modernization', a concept first developed in the post-Soviet space by Vladimir Gel'man and Andrey Starodutsev in relation to Russia (Gel'man & Starodutsev, 2016) and then applied specifically to Uzbekistan by Luca Anceschi (Anceschi, 2019). However, the concept has a longer lineage and has been earlier applied in the Middle East in the context of authoritarian regimes undergoing succession from their dominant post-colonial leaderships (Heydemann, 2004, 2007; Hinnebusch, 2006; King, 2009). As Hinnebusch noted after the death of Hafiz al-Asad in Syria in 2000, his son Bashar al-Asad faced several challenges to his personal rule as well as the broader legitimacy of the regime. The son lacked the charisma of his father; the economy could no longer deliver strong performances due to its inward-looking quasi-autarchic nature; and there was significant disquiet from both the capitalist-oriented middle classes and the broader masses whose economic security was being eroded (Hinnebusch, 2012: 98-9).

Shavkat Mirziyoyev faced a very similar set of challenges when Islam Karimov passed away in 2016. Although he was a regime insider, being Prime Minister for over a decade, he lacked the charisma associated with the founder President of the new post-Soviet Uzbekistan. The economy of Uzbekistan was also suffering from its autarchic and statist nature. Karimov had rejected western-style economic liberalisation and promoted inward-oriented industrialization with domestic investment being directed towards capital intensive industries and economic self-sufficiency in areas such as agriculture (Pomfret, 2019: 115-6). Although this economic model arguably avoided the catastrophic economic crises experienced in the other more liberal-oriented post-Soviet states (Ruziev, 2021), the longer-term costs were economic stagnation, international isolation, and the failure to develop human capital, resulting in large-scale economic emigration (Spechler, 2007). For Mirziyoyev, the political challenge facing him on his accession to the Presidency was that continuation of this economic course would lead to both elite and popular dissatisfaction. The solution was, therefore, to direct the government to the overriding objective of economic modernization through making Uzbekistan attractive for foreign international investment and opening the economy to trade both within and beyond the Central Asian region (Anceschi, 2019; Blackmon, 2021; Starr & Connell, 2018). Mirziyoyev's strong advocacy of Central Asian regionalism was, therefore, an integral element in this wider strategic objective of economic modernization which involved liberalization of trade, finance and capital exchange. But, as has become increasingly clear as Mirziyoyev has extended his rule almost indefinitely through constitutional reforms, the aim has been a form of authoritarian modernization and only limited social and political liberalization (Williamson, 2023).

This shift to performance-based bureaucratic authoritarianism in Uzbekistan is undoubtedly the most significant internal regional factor supporting Central Asian regionalism. This is due to several factors. Uzbekistan is at the heart of Central Asia, double-landlocked and bordering all the other four Central Asian states and with the largest population. It is the historic centre of Central Asia with Tashkent being the Soviet capital of the region and with a more capable infrastructure of public administration. But, perhaps most importantly, Uzbekistan is not so rent-dependent as the other Central Asian states whose economies are either heavily resource-based (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) or remittance-based (Tajikistan and

Kyrgyzstan). Certainly, the Uzbek economy is also heavily reliant on both resources (gold, gas, cotton) and on remittances, but the degree of dependence is more limited than for the other Central Asian states (Gleason, 2003; Spechler, 2007). As a result, there is a stronger economic rationale to diversify the economy and to seek to export added-value products, such as textile goods, to regional and extra-regional markets. Without such trade integration, the prospects for Uzbekistan's economic development is significantly constrained.

The other Central Asian states lack the same degree of economic incentive for economic and regional integration. The markets for their principal exports, whether these being primarily commodities or labour, are located beyond the Central Asian region. But there remain many pressures to follow the pattern of regionalism-supporting authoritarian modernization as developed in Uzbekistan. In Turkmenistan, the commitment to a form of extreme economic autarchy has produced an economic crisis with severe social and economic strains for the larger part of the population (Human Rights Watch, 2020). In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev, like Mirziyoyev, lacks the charisma of his predecessor, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and faces the challenge of quelling popular dissatisfaction at the extreme inequalities of the distribution of the resource wealth of the country (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022). For Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, there is severe economic deterioration and the evident need to benefit from the reduction of the cost of trade across the region. In general, the model of economic autarchy and self-sufficiency is viewed widely as an economic failure and there is a general recognition that the resilience and persistence of authoritarianism requires improved economic performance.

An additional factor behind the internal logic favouring regionalism is the way that the various authoritarian regimes in the five Central Asian countries have become more similar in the nature and operationalisation of authoritarian rule. During the 1990s and 2000s, there were significant differences in regime types in Central Asia. Edward Schatz distinguished between 'harder' and 'softer' forms of authoritarian rule (Schatz, 2006, 2008). In the 'hard' camp were the regimes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that were both economically and political illiberal with harsh internal repression and with a highly defensive and suspicious attitude to both

their neighbours and the wider world. In the 'soft' camp were Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan where there was a commitment to economic liberalisation and openness to external partners and, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, a more liberal and open society (Schatz, 2009). Tajikistan was always somewhat an outlier with its descent into civil war in the 1990s but the resolution of that internal conflict had led to a degree of power-sharing between the neo-communist regime and the Islamist opposition. Overall, the regional consequences of these serious divergences in the internal constitution of the different regimes were that it generated a high degree of mutual suspicion and distrust that was a major obstacle to regional cooperation.

By the early 2020s, these divergences had been significantly reduced. Again, the shift within Uzbekistan to greater economic openness and various initiatives to develop trust-building relations with neighbouring states and the wider international community was a major catalyst for broader regime convergence. It brought Uzbekistan much closer to the softer form of authoritarian modernization of Kazakhstan instituted by Nazarbayev in the early 2000s and that has been maintained by his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The quasi-democratic outlier of Kyrgyzstan has also changed with the elevation of Sadyr Japarov to the Presidency in 2021 through an internal coup. Although the stability of the country remains in question, Japarov has instituted various measures to repress internal opposition, to undermine civil society, and to build an authoritarian state that is more like the regimes in the other Central Asian states (Zehrunig, 2023). There has been less movement in the other two Central Asian states, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, though there are glacial signs of Turkmenistan breaking free from its most extreme form of self-isolation (Muhamedov, 2021). Tajikistan, for its part, has become increasingly authoritarian since 2017 when the opposition Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was banned and designated a terrorist organisation and Pamiri demands for autonomy have been relentlessly opposed.

The implications of Central Asian regionalism of this growing convergence of authoritarian rule are that now the five Presidents of Central Asia have a broadly similar view of the nature of political rule and of the wider world. While various bilateral tensions continue to mark their relations, there is nevertheless a greater degree of ideological affinity and a less marked sense of mutual distrust. The

problems that they face have several similarities: how to deal with a revisionist Russia, how to manage restive regions, how to build elite loyalty through patronage, and how to ensure regime stability, particularly during periods of leadership succession. There is what might be called an authoritarian imitative culture or 'learning environment' where they learn from the successes and mistakes of their peers (Hall & Ambrosio, 2017). Overall, this creates a more trusting regional culture, even if based on a fundamental commitment to authoritarianism, that permits the type of regionalism that promotes greater infrastructural connectivity and increased regional trade.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to stress that all these factors that combine to make the prospects for Central Asian regionalism more favourable and more dynamic compared to the earlier post-Soviet period should not be over-stated. The nature of the current regionalist trends are still incipient early steps and there is no guarantee that they will necessarily lead to more substantive regional integration. The internal and external constraints inhibiting regionalism remain powerful forces. The economies of the five Central Asian states remain more competitive than complimentary with a dependence on resource extraction for which the markets are primarily international rather than regional. The external environment remains one of great power competition, if subdued compared to the earlier period, but could always be reinvigorated. And the states of Central Asia still have multiple sources of bilateral tensions, as the armed conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan demonstrates, and there is always the prospect for other ethnic, regional or religious-based conflicts to escalate if conditions deteriorate. This sense of regional fragility informs the strategic outlook of the authoritarian regimes in each of the Central Asian states which means that, when regime survival appears to be at stake, the logic of security will tend to have a higher priority than the benefits of cross-national economic development.

Nevertheless, this article has sought to demonstrate that the dominant pessimism of the prospects for Central Asian regionalism fails to capture the reality in the ground. Part of this pessimism was due to the earlier promotion of a

European-style integration process that was simply not applicable in the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the need for the Central Asian states to define and consolidate their own national independence. As with other post-colonial regions, the necessities of nation- and state-building took priority over regional integration. However, as these states have become more consolidated, and as they have been able to manage the external environment more confidently, the economic and political rationale to revive regionalism has become more urgent, most notably in support of increased economic trade and greater regional infrastructural connectivity. This does not mean a loss but rather a potential gain for national sovereignty. In relation to European integration, Alan Milward counter-intuitively argued that the process of European integration was not driven to supplant but rather to 'rescue the nation-state' (Milward, 2000). One can also argue that, in relation to Central Asia, the logic of regional integration is not to supplant but rather to 'rescue the authoritarian nation-state'.

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