

Modernization and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: A New Spring?

Svante E. Cornell
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Preface

In the past two years, a new wind of regionalism has swept across Central Asia. This encouraging development follows years in which Central Asia, in part due to the paucity of regionalism among the region's states, was viewed mainly as an arena of competition among great powers. Too often, outsiders, including Westerners, have had a tendency to talk about Central Asia with others rather than to promote the agency of the region itself.

That, however, is about to change. Central Asian leaders are coordinating policies more frequently, in more areas than ever, and are currently seeking ways to structure more developed forms of regional cooperation.

In the past year, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program released two volumes on regional affairs, published in the American Foreign Policy Council's series with Rowman & Littlefield, publishers. *Long Game on the Silk Road*, released in spring 2018, summed up the lessons of two decades of western policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus, and provided recommendations for more effective American and European policies. *Uzbekistan's New Face*, released in fall 2018, brought together a half-dozen experts to document the process of transformation under way in Uzbekistan. In a sense, this study should be seen as a complement to these two volumes.

In so doing, our purpose is twofold. First, we hope to support and inform the process of developing structures of regional cooperation, not least by our analysis of the lessons of past initiatives in the region, as well as the experience of cooperative structures in other world regions. Second, we hope to shed light on the new regionalism in Central Asia, and point out

that it includes Afghanistan in a way that has not been the case previously. As such, this process should be of considerable interest to Western states that have spent considerable blood and treasure in that country in the past two decades.

The emergence of regionalism in Central Asia has the potential to make the region a truly self-governing one where problems are resolved by Central Asians; where foreign powers can cooperate, but not engage in destructive rivalries. This process is worthy of support and encouragement, as well as whatever concrete assistance Central Asian states may seek as they go forward.

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S. Frederick Starr

Chairman, CACI & SRSP Joint Center

Executive Summary

Until recently, regional cooperation among Central Asian states has left much to be desired. While a number of initiatives have been launched over the past quarter-century, there is no functioning mechanism for coordination among the region's states, and by early 2018, a decade had passed since Central Asian leaders met without the presence of foreign powers. Little wonder, then, that despite the close cultural and historical connections linking Central Asians together, the very existence of a Central Asian region has come to be questioned.

In the past two years, there are important indications that this gloomy picture is rapidly changing. The pace of interaction among regional states has grown considerably. Controversies over border delimitation and water use have been largely resolved. In March 2018, leaders of five Central Asian states met in Astana at the invitation of the President of Kazakhstan, but at the initiative of the President of Uzbekistan. In June that year, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution, submitted by Central Asian states, that supported the strengthening of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Preparations are underway for a second summit of Central Asian leaders in March 2019. What are the prospects of such cooperation?

An overview of Central Asian regional cooperation to date shows that the roots of regional coordination lie in the late Soviet period. Central Asian leaders of the Brezhnev era worked together to coordinate their responses to Moscow's demands, and built a united front to maximize their freedom of maneuver. When independence was thrust upon the region, the leaders of the five republics took steps to continue this practice, and even to deepen it through common institutions. This, however, turned out to be premature

for two main reasons. First and foremost, the new states had enormous domestic challenges, and needed to focus their energies on the building of state institutions, often from scratch. This condition, common to post-colonial situations, preoccupied them for the better part of two decades. Today, however, Central Asian states are considerably more consolidated, meaning they are able and willing to look beyond their borders to seek regional solutions.

Second, there was, and remains, a rival to Central Asian cooperation: that of Eurasian integration, led by Moscow. Because of their economic and security dependence on Moscow, regional states sought simultaneously to deepen regional cooperation in Central Asia, while also engaging in Eurasia-wide integration structures. This appeared to work until geopolitical competition in Eurasia accelerated between 2001 and 2005. Central Asian states had set up an increasingly successful structure for regional cooperation; but this came to an end after Russia first joined the organization, and subsequently engineered its merger into Eurasia-wide integration structures in 2005.

What, then, is different today? Three main factors provide an impetus for the rebirth of regional cooperation in Central Asia. The first is that the prospect of continental trade linking Europe and Asia across the region is no longer an illusion, but rapidly becoming reality. To reap the full benefit of this process, Central Asian states must develop their coordination of policies in economic and customs matters, among other. The second is that while high commodity prices generated a certain level of complacency for a number of years, this changed with the drop in oil prices in late 2014. Beginning in 2015, a serious effort at political and economic reform began in Kazakhstan. In 2016, the power transition in Uzbekistan led to the rise to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who embarked on an ambitious program of reform of state institutions in every sector. These reform initiatives in

Central Asia's largest states weakened forces that benefited from the status quo, and required a greater level of regional cooperation to achieve economic modernization and development. Third, the role of Afghanistan is different today than in the 1990s. While it was only seen as a source of trouble at the time, Central Asians presently understand that Afghanistan is a Central Asian country that holds the key to their linkages to the south, and have increasingly engaged to help resolve Afghanistan's problems.

As Central Asians seek to design structures of cooperation that fit their needs, they should certainly build on the achievements of the late 1990s. But an overview of other global efforts at regional cooperation is also instructive. An overview of several such initiatives suggests that two in particular hold relevance for Central Asia: ASEAN and the Nordic Council. ASEAN emerged at a time of severe geopolitical tension in Southeast Asia, and succeeded in forming a consensus among regional states to prevent efforts of great powers to pit one regional state against another. From the early 1970s, ASEAN developed mechanisms that secured unity among regional states, and helped them approach foreign powers as a unit rather than separately. Moreover, ASEAN focused considerable energies on the economic front, and helped Southeast Asia develop into a growth engine in the global economy.

The Nordic Council has more limited ambitions than ASEAN, but is relevant because it shows that regional cooperation can succeed even in a situation where member states have divergent approaches to continent-wide integration structures. Much like Central Asia, the Nordic countries share close cultural and linguistic linkages, but have different patterns of membership in cooperative structures like the EU and NATO. That has put some limits on their regional cooperation, but it has not hindered them from entering into far-reaching agreements, such as the free movement of people and labor decades before the EU Schengen agreement.

A comparative examination of the structures for regional cooperation in the Nordic Council, ASEAN, Mercosur and the Visegrád Group leads to a very specific and highly significant conclusion, namely, that institutions matter. The relative weakness and ineffectiveness of Mercosur and the Visegrád group is a direct consequence of their weak institutional structures. ASEAN and the Nordic Council, by contrast, derive their effectiveness from the fact that over more than half a century they have focused serious attention on strengthening their institutional structures.

The coherence and rigor of Central Asia's future institutional structures will determine their effectiveness. This, rather than high-flown rhetoric about regional cooperation or highly publicized one-time meetings and conferences, will shape the future Central Asia. Similarly, one must also caution against too forceful and fast-paced efforts, advocating instead a gradual, step-by-step and flexible approach that will make sure all participants are fully content with the way their interests are protected and secured.

Introduction: Regionalism, Central Asia, and Why It Matters

Many observers both within the region and abroad have expressed surprise at the emergence of a renewed spirit of regionalism in Central Asia, manifested most overtly in a summit of Central Asian leaders in Astana in March 2018, and the passage of a United Nations General Assembly resolution on the Central Asian region in June of the same year. Only recently, it is observed, leaders of regional states had vociferously proclaimed their uniqueness and stressed all that differentiated them from their neighbors. Now suddenly everything seemed to change.

But did it? The burst of nationalism following the collapse of the USSR was the normal and healthy response of post-colonial states to independence. It was essential as the freshly established states struggled to embrace and preserve their new sovereignty. As they succeeded in this existential task they continued to value and preserve this new sense of identity. But at the same time, they began once more to reach out to neighbors with whom they had closely interacted over the centuries. The new regionalism was the natural product borne of the new countries' success, not frustration or failure. It should not have come as a surprise to anyone.

What is regionalism, what is the Central Asian region, and why does it matter? By its very nature, Central Asia is not neatly delimited by oceans. Where does it begin, and where does it end? In the past quarter-century, the answer would seem obvious: Most national bureaucracies and international organizations have accepted a definition of Central Asia as consisting of the five former Soviet republics ending in "stan." However, this definition

reflects merely the political realities of the late Czarist and Soviet periods. It ignores the geographic, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties that existed before Czarist Russia colonized parts of Central Asia. Accepting it risks the peril of perpetuating the new divisions that it created.

In fact, Central Asia could be both smaller and larger than this definition. The Soviet Union used the term *Srednaya Aziya*, Middle Asia, for its four southernmost republics: Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan was for practical purposes often treated jointly with these republics, but this region was also known in Soviet parlance as “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan.” Conversely, many pre-Soviet scholars who were asked about “Central Asia” would perhaps think first of Kashgar and the Taklamakan desert, both of which now fall within China’s Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region. That was the definition adopted by Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, who, by terming the Pamir mountains Central Asia’s western boundary excluded from the region almost all of what we presently term Central Asia. Aside from Xinjiang, Mongolia, too, has often been seen as a part of Central Asia. Most important, over many centuries Afghanistan was considered the very heart of the region.

The reasons for this are clear. Any definition that takes linguistic or ethnographic criteria into account will need to acknowledge the close ties between populations in what was once Soviet Central Asia with those in northern Afghanistan and western China. This is an ethnographic and cultural reality, not a political claim. Those who focus on economic potential will similarly observe that former Soviet Central Asia’s main trade partners were not territories north of it, but those to its east and *particularly* to their south.

The term “Central Asia” is relatively new: it gained currency only when the Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt published, in Paris in 1843, his

600-page opus *Asie Centrale*.¹ Previously, and subsequently as well, the region or parts of it had been known among other as “Inner Asia” or “High Asia.” The Greeks referred to it as “Transoxania,” while Arab invaders called it Mavarounnahr, meaning the land on the other side of the river. Persian speakers, following Firdousi, referred to it as “Turan,” while Russian colonizers had called much of it “Turkestan.” Tellingly, Russian scholars who used the term “Middle Asia” synonymously with Turkestan used “Central Asia” largely to refer to areas *outside* Russian control, including Afghanistan and “East Turkestan.” Humboldt defined Central Asia relatively narrowly, but Russian explorer Nikolay Khanykov, in 1862, proposed a hydrological criterion to define the region: the absence of the flow of water to the open sea. Part of eastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and what is now Turkmenistan had long been known to Persianate peoples as Khurasan. Following his hydrological definition, Khanykov included all Khurasan as part of the region. Other luminaries would propose their own definitions. The point here is to underscore the inadequacy of any definition of Central Asia that is limited to Soviet boundaries. It should be noted that as early as 1978 UNESCO brushed aside the Soviet definition of the region and instead defined Central Asia as the area covering “territories lying at present within the boundaries of Afghanistan, the western part of China, northern India, north-eastern Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan and the Central Asian Republics of the USSR”.²

It is inevitable that regionalism has an important political component. This is because the active pursuit of regionalism is above all the work of nation-states, though they by no means hold a monopoly on regional cooperation. Since this study’s primary purpose is to shed light on regional cooperation among Central Asian *states*, it need not resolve the debate on the exact

¹ Alexander von Humboldt, *Asie Centrale: Recherches sur les Chaînes de Montagnes et la Climatologie Comparée*, Paris: Gide, 1843.

² A. H. Dani, *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, p. 480.

boundaries of Central Asia. It will note, however, that the quarter-century since the collapse of the Soviet Union – a very short period in historical terms – has already seen the start of a process by which those parts of Central Asia that were part of the Soviet Union seek reconnections with those that were not. On that basis we are justified to identify the five post-Soviet states of Central Asia as the main drivers of regional cooperation in Central Asia. At the same time, we must also note that Afghanistan considers itself an essential part of the region, and that this view is now increasingly shared by governments of the five former Soviet states. Let us also note the close relatedness of western China, which through the millennia has been linked by language, culture, and religion with the other centers of Central Asian culture and life. However, given that the region which China calls “Xinjiang”, or “the new territory,” lacks political sovereignty, the extent to which it will partake in Central Asian regional cooperation will depend on decisions taken in Beijing.

Why does regionalism in Central Asia matter? To Central Asians, the answer is simple: the degree of regionalism will have an important impact on their lives. Central Asians are citizens of countries with small or middling populations encircled by some of the world’s largest powers. The fate of their nations, and particularly of their security and economic prospects, will either be determined by themselves or by outsiders. And as Afghanistan’s tragic experience in the past thirty years suggests (not to mention the Czarist and Soviet experiences), outsiders are likely to fail in any effort to impose security from without. If Central Asians do not themselves determine the fate of their region, the region will almost by definition be a zone of competition among foreign powers, including not just Russia and China but also India, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Europe and America. If, however, Central Asians succeed in establishing a common understanding on their region’s interests and best directions for development, they will have a better chance of ensuring that theirs is a region where foreign powers can engage in

cooperative ventures but will have neither the urge nor the ability to divide and rule.

Precisely for this reason, the future of Central Asian regionalism should matter also to the United States and Europe. If Central Asia is internally divided, with outside powers clamoring for influence, then stability and development will continue to elude it. That would be detrimental not least to Afghanistan, where western states have sacrificed thousands of lives and trillions of financial resources in the past two decades – but also to the evolution of the former Soviet Central Asian states. It would also vastly complicate the advancement of those goals that western states have set for their interaction with the region: advancing human rights, developing market economies, spreading participatory government, and turning the region into a hub for continental trade linking Europe with Asia. If, by contrast, regionalism takes deeper root, it would boost the economic development while also improving security across the region. Neighboring Russia and China would both benefit from this development, since both currently identify the reduction of instability arising from drug trafficking and religious extremism as their major strategic concern in Central Asia. If the Central Asian states take the lead in building security there, these and other outside powers will finally have reason to abandon the use of “divide and rule” strategies with respect to Central Asia. A more secure and economically developed Central Asia would also be more likely to apply principles of open governance and the rule of law championed by western governments. Going further, a successful trajectory for Central Asia – the world’s largest concentration of secular states in Muslim societies – would also play an important role on a global level, as it would offer a fruitful example of governance for other parts of the Muslim world today.

Origins of Central Asian Regionalism

The prospects of regionalism in Central Asia raises the question of how the peoples of the region have traditionally related to one another – before and during Soviet rule, as well as after independence. Are there living historical roots for closer relationships among the diverse peoples of the region? Were their interactions over the centuries conflictual or were they conducive to the kinds of cooperation and interaction that is emerging today among the states of Central Asia?

Before Soviet Rule

Two different forms of divisions have existed in the region since time immemorial: settled versus nomad, and Persianate versus Turkic. A third potential source of division – religious differences – has been muted, since the overwhelming majority of the regional populace is comprised of Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of law. However, one must acknowledge that the fate of “Twelver” Shiites in Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, and of Ismaili Shiites in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, has not always been easy. However, the fact that the former comprise only 15 percent of the Afghan population and the latter only 3 percent of the Tajik populace minimizes the impact of their sometimes difficult fate on the region as a whole. Finally, we should note the continuing influence of nomad faiths, generally referred to as Tengrianism. However, for a millennium the interaction of Tengrianism and Islam has been pacific and often resulted in mutually enriching influences.

The mutual relationship of settled, urbanized peoples and nomads is easily misunderstood. Thus, it is true that the former (primarily Uzbeks and

Tajiks) favor vertical forms of organization on account of the need over the millennia to maintain highly complex irrigation systems, while the latter (Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen) favor more horizontal structures that correspond to their geographically more fluid nomadic life style. It is true, too, that beginning two millennia ago Turkic forces overran many urban settlements and established themselves as nominal overlords. But the duties they imposed were not excessive and the two peoples avoided overt conflict. Indeed, the basic relationship between nomadic and settled folk was one of mutual dependence, in which each required goods and services produced by the other in order to survive. Moreover, Turkic control of the countryside meant that it was they who kept open the caravan routes that enriched the cities, which in turn provided essential goods to the nomads and markets for their products. Thus, the deeper urban-nomad relationship was for the most part reciprocal and amicable.

This said, periods of conflict must be acknowledged. Tensions rose each time a new nomadic group moved into the region. Some, like the Karakhanids and Uzbeks, initially fought but then settled into an urban life based on reciprocal relations with surrounding nomads. The rise of khanates in urban Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand also gave rise to conflicts with nomads, especially in the case of urban Bukharans and Khivans versus nomadic Turkmen and, later, of urbanized Kokand versus nomadic Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. But these conflicts always coexisted with the mutual dependence that was essential to the survival of both groups.

Some historians have stressed cultural tensions over the centuries between Persianate and Turkic peoples. The Germano-Russian scholar Vasilii Bartold saw these as the juxtaposition of a sophisticated high culture (Tajiks) to simple folk cultures (Uzbeks, Kazakhs, etc.). Other, including the Frenchman Rene Grousset, stressed instead the subtle skills, especially in governance, of the nomadic peoples. Either way, these analysts have

stressed differences rather than commonalities. Where they failed was to ignore the important instances of newly arrived Turkic invaders assimilating the urbanized culture of the Persianate folk they had just conquered. An early example of this were the Karakhanids, who conquered most of the cities between Bukhara and the Chinese border and then settled down in those centers, while the heirs of Timur (Tamerlane) did much the same in Samarkand and Herat.

Finally, lest we exaggerate the differences of ethnicity within Central Asia, it is important to note over the centuries some of the sharpest confrontations occurred between peoples of the same general Turkic ethnicity as, for instance, Bukharan Uzbeks and Turkmen, or Kokand and Kyrgyz. In every case these were due to the same passion for control that motivated the various groups in early modern Europe who lived near one another.

Commonalities among the peoples of Central Asia tended to disappear from sight when outside powers began playing them off against one another. The Arab conquerors in the seventh and eight centuries were masters at this, as was the Turkic strongman Mahmud of Ghazni. Later, when Russia aspired to bring the region under its colonial rule, it played urban versus nomad, Turkic versus Persian, and various Turkic peoples against each other.

The paradox is that this approach often generated strong feelings of solidarity among the victims. Thus, when early Russian colonial rulers claimed land from one local group, neighboring groups would join in the protest. This led to the massive revolt of 1916, in which Turkic and Persianate folks, urban dwellers and nomads, all joined forces to oppose the military conscription imposed by the tsarist government.

Soviet Rule

No subject is more sensitive to Central Asians than the process by which their early Soviet rulers divided the vast region into five nominally national

republics of the USSR. While the five states that resulted seem natural today, this was not the case in 1924. The Soviet nationality policy called for the creation of nation-states within the USSR defined on the basis of ethnicity. This flew in the face of the criteria that traditionally defined both statehood and identity in Central Asia: states had never been defined on the basis of their subjects' identity, and these identities were in any case not primarily ethnic. Instead, depending on whether they were nomadic or settled, Central Asians defined themselves by the tribe, sub-tribe, oasis, or city they belonged to. Furthermore, in the settled agricultural areas, the distinction between Turkic Uzbeks and Persianate Tajiks was fluid indeed. Intermarriage was common, bilingualism was the norm. Indeed, there were examples of Persian-speakers defining themselves as Uzbeks, as well as Turkic-speakers calling themselves Tajik.³

In such a context, the delineation of republics on the basis of nationality became an artificial and even capricious endeavor. The boundaries that resulted from the heavily top-down process reflected both detailed study and utter caprice, high-minded ethnographic research and the most cynical manipulation of whole peoples who had no say in the matter. Thus, for example, Soviet leaders rewarded the Uzbeks, with the result that Uzbekistan dominated the major historical political and economic centers of the region. By contrast, the process punished the Tajiks, who initially received only a subordinate status, that of an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan. Only when it appeared possible that Tajiks might be attracted to a booming Iran after World War I did Moscow "pay them off" with their own republic. Then, having defined republics mainly on the basis of ethnicity, Soviet rulers proceeded to weaken the resulting republics by assuring that nearly all of them contained substantial numbers of alien and unassimilated peoples. Through all these complex maneuvers, the Soviet

³ Paul Bergne, *The Birth of Tajikistan*, London: IB Tauris, 2007, pp. 30-38.

rulers' main concern was to play everyone against their neighbors in such a way as to prevent any regional feelings from arising among the peoples of Soviet Central Asia.

To some extent, this succeeded. Dictionaries, histories, and other publications extolled the separate identities of the region's five Soviet republics. Ethnographic research was conducted mainly on the basis of the nationalities imposed by Moscow. Afghanistan, which had for three thousand years been considered an essential part of Central Asia, lay beyond the Soviet border and was therefore treated as a hopelessly backward land of hollow traditions and ignorance. Under the late Soviet campaign to bring about the "merging of nations" (*sliianie narodov*) every effort was made to merge all Central Asians into a single USSR-wide nationality and to suppress all lesser regional or blood-based identities. Enforced through the educational system and mass media, this initiative brought many superficial successes. Yet these transformations proved to be only skin deep.

To cite just one instance of opposition, adroit Central Asian leaders proved more capable in many respects than the Communist Party officials in Moscow to whom they reported. Each republic was under the control of the First Secretary of its Communist Party, who in turn reported to the USSR-wide Party leaders in Moscow. As the Soviet economy began to falter in the 1960s, the Soviet rulers placed ever heavier demands on the fifteen republics, including the Central Asians. From the latter they demanded cotton, vegetables, uranium, meat, small airplanes, and electronic equipment. Under pressure from the higher Party bosses, the Central Asian First Secretaries began to consult with one other on how best to respond to these incessant claims on their resources.

Sharaf Rashidov, Uzbekistan' long serving First Secretary, coordinated these consultations, which soon became a confidential forum for discussing

region-wide issues pertaining to Central Asia as a whole. After the collapse of the USSR, Turdakun Usubaliev, Rashidov's counterpart in Kyrgyzstan, spoke and wrote of these discussions. Through such consultations, the First Secretaries decided to provide Moscow with what was demanded of them, but to resist further claims. Furthermore, they made it a condition of their cooperation with the imperial center that officials in the Soviet capital would otherwise stay out of their hair. In short, they made the reciprocal demand that Moscow Party leaders and bureaucrats would leave local leaders to run their republics and the region as a whole as they wished. Indeed, as Mr. Usubaliev later told one of the authors of this study, "Moscow had no choice in the matter."

Those who dismiss the new regionalism arising in Central Asia today as an upstart with no historical roots would do well to study closely the interactions coordinated by Rashidov and described by Usubaliev. They indicate that Central Asian self-government (at least in domestic matters) advanced so far under Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko, as to constitute a kind of quasi-independence at the regional level. In short, the present drive towards regionalism has roots deep in the Soviet era.

Independence

If Central Asia's pre-Soviet and late Soviet past both made it ripe for regionalism, why then has the record in the first quarter century of independence been so poor? Of the many factors contributing to this, three stand out: first, the focus on national consolidation; second, the turbulent regional environment; and, third, the prominent role of external powers.

The rise of new sovereignties after 1991 shifted the focus of regional attention to the nation states. Central Asian republics had enjoyed a degree of self-rule in the Soviet era, but they lacked many institutions of statehood, while their economies remained deeply entangled in the Soviet command

economy, in which they were mainly suppliers of raw material. In this sense, in December 1991, they resembled post-colonial countries elsewhere in the world, which are compelled at independence to focus on building their own institutions. Central Asian states had no sovereign laws or institutions of self-government; they lacked military forces of their own; many of their mutual boundaries were not demarcated; they were landlocked and had little infrastructure connecting them to the rest of the world; they had no national currencies or banks; nor had they had the chance to prepare for being thrust onto the international scene.⁴

Leaders in all five states well understood the precariousness both of their own positions and that of the republics they headed. They could not take for granted either the internal or external legitimacy of their new statehood. National identities had been slowly advanced during the Soviet period, but were far from consolidated. Would they withstand the challenges of alternative identities, particularly the Islamic extremist ideologies that were on display in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world? And would the world, especially larger powers, respect their sovereignty and independence?

These fears proved to be more than mere speculation. Soon after independence, Tajikistan descended into a vicious civil war, with the parties defined both by regional and ideological divisions. The Uzbek sector of the Ferghana valley saw the rise of extremists committed to the violent promotion of an Islamic state, while smaller groups of like-minded people appeared elsewhere.

In response, Central Asian governments prioritized building their own institutions and their own nations. Governments conjured up national cults dedicated to local heroes such as Manas in Kyrgyzstan, Timur (Tamerlane)

⁴ S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *Long Game on the Silk Road*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 15-38.

in Uzbekistan, and Ismail Somoni in Tajikistan. National constitutions were drafted, national institutions established, national languages began to revive, and national customs were reclaimed. This massive effort temporarily pushed more regional concerns into the background.

Independence accentuated the differing realities faced by Central Asian states. Kazakhstan, which had the most advantageous economic situation, faced serious demographic issues: at independence, ethnic Kazakhs – up to 40 percent of whom had perished in the politically induced famines of the 1920s – constituted a mere 39 percent of the republic's population, and were outnumbered by Slavic speakers. This, and a 4,000-mile border with Russia, made the management of the country's relationship with Moscow the leadership's top priority. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were the smallest and poorest of Central Asia's new states, having long depended on subsidies from Moscow for roughly a quarter of their GDP. They also faced deep internal challenges: both had serious divides between northern and southern provinces, and Tajikistan in addition faced the challenge of a long and porous border with war-torn Afghanistan. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had perhaps the best conditions for independent statehood. Uzbekistan had a relatively varied economy that included a substantial industrial sector, a considerable internal market, and a strong sense of its identity. But it also faced a serious threat from extremists. While Tajikistan's civil war ended in 1997, exiled Uzbek Islamists joined Al Qaeda and the Taliban the next year, and soon began mounting incursions into Central Asia that took advantage of the weak border controls and state institutions in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ This in turn caused Uzbekistan to react defensively by erecting hard borders with its two poorer neighbors. Turkmenistan had been largely neglected in the Soviet period, and was less

⁵ Svante E. Cornell, "Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia: the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 17 no. 4, 2005, pp. 619-639.

developed institutionally than its neighbors. Its potential advantage was that it possessed huge natural gas resources. For the time being, though, it was entirely dependent on Russia for the export of its gas abroad, and Russia exercised its monopoly by drastically underpaying Ashgabat for gas that it then re-exported to Europe at world prices, pocketing the difference. Fragile but potentially rich, Turkmenistan adopted a policy of neutrality and self-isolation.

The focus on state-building did not mean that the new governments lost sight of the regional dimension. Shortly after independence, the new presidents met in Tashkent and declared that the region, with Kazakhstan as an integral part of it, should henceforth be known not as “Middle Asia” (*Srednaia Aziia*) but as “Central Asia.”⁶ At first it was unclear to what it was central to. But shortly after independence both the European Union, through its TRACECA project, and China, through what a generation later became its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), indicated that they wanted to open new transport routes across the newly independent states. If actually constructed, such roads and railroads, following the shortest route between Europe and China, would make the region truly “Central.”⁷

In the spirit of the earlier weekly consultations among First Secretaries, the new presidents also called for the creation of a regional organization consisting of the five former Soviet republics.

Already at this stage, it was clear that the relationship between Central Asia’s two largest states – Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – was key to any

⁶ Martha Brill Olcott, “The Myth of ‘Tsentral’naia Aziia’” *Orbis*, Vol. 38 no. 4, Autumn 1994, Pp. 549-565.

⁷ S. Frederick Starr, Svante E. Cornell and Nicklas Norling, *The EU, Central Asia, and the Development of Continental Transport and Trade*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, December 2015. (<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/2015-starr-cornell-norling-eu-central-asia-continental-transport-and-trade.pdf>)

regional cooperation. The impetus for the creation of a regional structure came when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in 1994, signed a treaty creating a single economic space between the two countries.⁸ Kyrgyzstan immediately expressed its interest in joining, leading to the creation of the Central Asian Union that same year. Tajikistan also sought to join, and was admitted in 1998. Turkmenistan declined outright, citing its self-declared neutrality. This cooperative entity was to adopt several different names. It was renamed the Central Asian Economic Union in 1998, and in 2001 turned into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), a name it kept until it was closed down in 2005. But it constituted a single and increasingly region-wide platform.

This Central Asia Union (CAU) was an immediate success, fostering mutual engagement in many areas including security. A joint Council of Defense Ministers was created in 1995 to coordinate security issues. An important achievement in the military sphere was the creation of a joint peacekeeping battalion, Centrasbat, within the context of NATO's Partnership for Peace. This engagement played an important role in fostering modern-type military reforms and the discussion of common equipment beyond what had been inherited from the Soviet Union. While it provided a basis for joint exercises with NATO forces,⁹ it also fostered interaction among the region's nascent militaries.

The CAU leaders were optimistic from the start: by late 1995, they expressed their recognition of an "objective" need to cooperate to foster "growth,

⁸ Mirzohid Rahimov, "Internal and External Dynamics of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 1 no 1, 2010, p. 96; Damian Rosset and David Svarin, "The Constraints of the Past and the Failure of Central Asian Regionalism," *Regional Studies of Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, vol. 3, 2014, pp. 245-266.

⁹ Gareth Winrow, "Turkey and Central Asia," in Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, eds., *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, London/Washington, 2001, p. 216.

security and political stability.”¹⁰ They also announced that membership would be open to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, as well as to Azerbaijan. After the U.S.-led coalition’s removal of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001, CACO invited Afghanistan to join as an observer.¹¹ This provided an early indication of Central Asians’ recognition of that country as an integral part of their region.

Why did this promising Central Asian cooperative structure not endure and thrive? In retrospect it is clear that it fell victim to the growing geopolitical competition in the larger region and to the competing efforts by neighboring great powers to draw the entire region into their own orbits. In fact, from the outset a key issue concerning regional cooperation was to define the region. Kazakhstan from the outset supported *both* Central Asian and Eurasian cooperation, the latter involving cooperation among the successor states of the Soviet Union under Russia’s leadership.¹² While Kazakhstan was an enthusiastic supporter of the CAU, President Nursultan Nazarbayev also proposed the idea of a Eurasian Union in 1994. This idea was not yet popular in Moscow, where Russia’s leaders were still focusing their energies on the re-integration of wayward republics *within* the Russian Federation itself. Because of this, the idea of reintegrating the former Soviet space under Russia’s leadership did not yet command a consensus in Moscow. But re-integrationist impulses were soon to become dominant, particularly after Vladimir Putin gained power in late 1999 and after the United States became a player in Central Asia after September 11, 2001. Uzbekistan, in sharp contrast to Kazakhstan, was skeptical about all talk of “pan-Eurasian”

¹⁰ Paul Kubicek, “Regionalism, Nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 49 no. 4, 1997, p. 642.

¹¹ Roy Allison, “Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia,” *International Affairs*, vol. 80 no. 3, 2004, p. 474.

¹² Eg. Rosset and Svarin, p. 256.

cooperation, which it saw as a mask behind which Moscow sought to reassert its former authority.¹³

Meanwhile, the year 1999 saw the beginnings of security troubles within Central Asia itself. Following an attempt on the life of President Karimov in Tashkent, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) staged armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan's sector of the Ferghana valley that summer and repeated them a year later, adding an incursion into Uzbekistan as well. All three attacks had Tashkent as their objective. These armed attacks caught the security structures of the region unprepared, particularly in the case of Kyrgyzstan. That in turn led to a hardening of borders between all the Central Asian republics. It also brought into the open disagreements over how to react to security threats posed by extremist groups that were deeply connected to the narcotics industry emanating from Afghanistan. Having failed to elicit serious interest from the West, Uzbekistan instead joined the Shanghai five, a grouping of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that proposed to address regional security issues. This entity soon evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington by Salafi-Jihadi extremists, mainly Saudi Arabian nationals, fundamentally affected the geopolitics of Central Asia, as NATO and the United States rapidly, but briefly, took a lead in regional security efforts through bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. This triggered a vigorous response by Moscow to assert its interests in the region. It did so by expanding both its bilateral security relations with Central Asian states and its multilateral initiatives, and by Putin himself warning Central Asian leaders not to enter into agreements with Washington without first consulting him, Putin. In 2002 Moscow

¹³ Svante E. Cornell, "The Center of Central Asia: Uzbekistan in Regional and International Politics," in See S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Uzbekistan's New Face*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 5-17.

transformed the lagging multilateral Collective Security Treaty into a multilateral organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and in the following year it created a military base of its own in Kyrgyzstan. This growth of geopolitical competition in the region posed a significant challenge to the idea of cooperation within Central Asia. Uzbekistan elected not to renew its adherence to the CST in 1999. But by playing regional governments off against Tashkent, Moscow succeeded in 2002 in enlisting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as founding members of the CSTO. Tashkent's resistance to Putin's aspiration weakened temporarily following the U.S. support for "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003-05. Meanwhile, Moscow developed its Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, to which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had already adhered in the late 1990s. In 2000, Moscow institutionalized this as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurasEC). At the time, Uzbekistan abstained from joining. Except for the absence of Uzbekistan, membership of these new economic and security organizations included members of the Central Asian Union. But there was one very significant difference: in both cases Moscow not only founded the new entity but participated in it as the dominant voice. By these steps and others Russia effectively neutralized the impetus within Central Asia for regional institutions that would be exclusive and truly self-governing.

Thus, Moscow subsumed regional cooperation in Central Asia under new institutions that it both founded and controlled. Meanwhile, Russia had applied to join the Central Asia Cooperation Organization as an observer. The Central Asians, faced with a seemingly innocent request from their former overlord, had no choice but to accept. Then, in May 2004, Putin asked the group to admit Russia as a full member. Again, the Central Asians were in no position to say no. Then, finally, in September 2005, Putin proposed to merge CACO with EurasEC. With this final stroke Putin terminated the

last remaining Central Asian regional organization that did not include a powerful external power as a member and dominant participant.¹⁴

While President Nazarbayev continued to support Eurasian integration, i.e., a large entity that would include Russia, he grew increasingly concerned with the manner in which Moscow was advancing it. In a significant step, he reacted to the growing Russian influence over the Central Asian region by proposing that the Central Asian Union be reinvigorated. Speaking in 2005, he emphasized that Central Asian states

share economic interests, cultural heritage ...face common external threats ...we should direct our efforts towards closer economic integration, a common market, and a single currency.¹⁵

Conditions within the region in 2005 prevented this expansive program from being realized. But the notion of Central Asian unity remained very much alive. Thwarted in their desire to form a purely regional union without outsiders, Central Asian leaders did not give up. Back in 1992, Mongolia had declared itself a nuclear-weapons free zone. The next year President Karimov of Uzbekistan proposed to the United Nations that all Central Asia become a nuclear weapon free zone (NWFZ). Then, after years of steady negotiations, following adoption of the Almaty Declaration on the creation of a NWFZ in 1997, the five former Soviet states of Central Asia agreed on a text for a treaty, which they signed in 2006 (the Semipalatinsk Treaty). In that same year the United Nations and International Atomic Energy Agency endorsed the concept that all Central Asia should become a nuclear weapons free zone.

The significance of this initiative can scarcely be overstated. The NWFZ was initiated and drafted solely by the regional states. Neither the U.S. nor any

¹⁴ Farkhad Tolipov, "CACO Merges with EEC: The Third Strike on Central Asia's Independence," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 19, 2005.

(<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/10376>)

¹⁵ Nursultan Nazarbayev, "Address to the People of Kazakhstan", February 18, 2015.

of the nearby nuclear powers by which Central Asia was nearly surrounded—Russia, China, India, and Pakistan—played a part in it. Indeed, the Semipalatinsk Treaty excluded these same powers from using any Central Asian state for activities relating to nuclear weapons. And it closed the door to any outside power that wished to use the nuclear sphere to play the Central Asian countries off against one another. For the first time Central Asian countries stood together on the international stage.

In the period in which the NWFZ was being signed and ratified, external powers did play a role in fostering regionalism in Central Asia. In 2004, four of the five former Soviet states of Central Asia joined Japan in establishing an annual regional dialogue, “Central Asia Plus Japan.” Turkmenistan, citing its status as a non-aligned state, participated too, but only as an observer. A year later, one of this study’s authors published an article in *Foreign Affairs* proposing, first, that the United States should follow Japan in establishing a regional high-level dialogue with the Central Asian countries and, second, that Afghanistan should henceforth be considered a part of Central Asia or, more accurately, “Greater Central Asia.”¹⁶ Abdulaziz Komilov, Uzbek ambassador to Washington and later Uzbekistan’s foreign minister, worked to establish such a dialogue under a “Trade and Investment Framework Agreement” (TIFA) but the Obama administration took no interest in the issue. However, in 2014 the European Union set up a “High Level Political and Security Dialogue” with Central Asia, followed by a “EU-Central Asia Energy Commission” (including Azerbaijan) in 2017,

¹⁶ S. Frederick Starr, “Partnership for Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, July-August, 2005. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2005-07-01/partnership-central-asia>; “A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Paper, 2005. (https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2005_starr_a-greater-central-asia-partnership.pdf); also Starr, “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” Policy Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, September 2008. (https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_09_PP_Starr_Greater-Central-Asia.pdf)

and then a dialogue between Central Asia and Central Europe (2018). During 2018, it prepared a new European strategy for Central Asia that was region-wide in scope. The U.S. belatedly established an analogous mechanism as the C5+1 in 2015.

Throughout the Soviet period official Central Asians, following Moscow's lead, viewed Afghanistan as a desperately backward zone with little or nothing in common with their enlightened world. The events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally changed this. The collapse of the USSR and now the possibility of a new and better order in Afghanistan, caused Central Asian leaders to view their neighbor in a different light. Instead of viewing it as just a dangerous neighbor, they came increasingly to see it as a land of possibility, not only for their own investors but also as a potential transport corridor to the Indian sub-continent and Southeast Asia. Turkmenistan, for instance, had for a decade been promoting a gas pipeline to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan. As a result of this changed thinking and after reexamining their own history, the former Soviet states came to embrace Afghanistan as an integral part of Central Asia and its most populous country, and not merely as an inconvenient neighbor. This fundamental shift was not translated into policy until 2017, but it had been in the making for more than a decade.

A New Wave of Reform and the Rebirth of Regionalism

The stagnation of Central Asian regionalism after 2005 coincided with a certain level of stagnation in domestic political and economic development. For several years, Uzbekistan was reeling from its confrontation with the West following the May 2005 violence in Andijan, and adopted an increasingly defensive position both at home and abroad. Kazakhstan, which had engaged in substantial market reforms in the 1990s, now benefited from high global commodity prices, particularly for oil. As is well-documented from world experience, high oil prices are not a stimulant for reforms, quite the contrary: while it can contribute to an ability to fund important infrastructural projects, it provides a strong disincentive for difficult reform processes, and tends to entrench vested interests that oppose reforms.¹⁷ This appears, to some extent, to have been the case in Kazakhstan as well. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan experienced two extra-legal power transitions, in 2005 and 2010, the latter accompanied by significant violence and followed by ethnic clashes in the country's south. While the country recuperated by opting for a parliamentary form of government that has, on balance, served it well, Central Asia's trajectory left much to be desired.

Reform in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

From 2015 onward, however, the sense of complacency and stagnation that prevailed has been transformed into considerable dynamism. In retrospect,

¹⁷ Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.

the sharp decline in the oil price from late 2014 – which led to considerable short-term turmoil – may have been a boon, as it made it clear to leaders across the region that serious reform of both an economic and political nature would be needed for the region to maintain its development and stability. The significant steps toward reform have since then been centered in the two most significant countries of the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.¹⁸

Kazakhstan had already in 2008 announced a state program for reform entitled “the Path to Europe.” But reform efforts accelerated from 2015 on. That year, President Nazarbayev announced a 100-step reform program focusing on introducing greater transparency and an increase in institutional effectiveness. The Program aimed at five institutional reforms: first, the creation of a modern and professional civil service. Second, ensuring the rule of law. Third, industrialization and economic growth. Fourth, a unified nation for the future. Fifth, transparency and accountability of the state. The one hundred specific steps included in the program are too numerous to list, but would fit well with the recommendations of international organizations for institutional reform. The major challenge of this initiative obviously lays in the implementation, in particular the will and ability to overcome strong vested interests with stakes in preserving the status quo. But if even half of these ambitious steps

¹⁸ On these reforms, see S. Frederick Starr, Johan Engvall, and Svante E. Cornell, *Kazakhstan 2041: The Next Twenty-Five Years*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, October 2016 (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13228>); See Svante E. Cornell and Johan Engvall, *Kazakhstan in Europe: Why Not?* Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, October 2017 (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13254>); and S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Uzbekistan's New Face*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

are implemented, they would improve the quality of public administration and bring citizens closer to their government.

In the beginning of 2017, President Nazarbayev announced the presentation of a comprehensive constitutional reform package at the central level. The constitutional amendments, which were signed into law in March 2017 and received approval of the Council of Europe's Venice Commission, delegate a number of presidential functions to the parliament and the government.¹⁹ Presidential decrees will no longer have the force of law, and the role of the president will be restricted to focusing on steering the political course with regards to national security, foreign policy and long-term strategic planning.

It is worth noting that the constitutional reform course set out in Kazakhstan goes in the opposite direction to the global trend toward greater concentration of power in the executive and particularly in the hands of a single leader. Kazakhstan has set ambitious goals for its future development, announcing initiatives that amount to setting its sights on joining the world's most developed countries, including acceding to the OSCE, in the process holding itself to an entirely new set of benchmarks.

Following the holding of EXPO 2017 in Astana, the site of the Exposition is in the process of being transformed into the Astana Financial Center, providing international investors with access to adjudication under British common law, as in Dubai, Singapore or Hong Kong. The initiative is led by Kairat Kelimbetov, a highly competent chief executive and former central bank governor, assisted by a strong and qualified team. If successful, this ambitious initiative would remedy the lack of a credible platform for international financial dealings in the region.

¹⁹ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), *Kazakhstan: Opinion on the Amendments to the Constitution*, March 10-11, 2017.

([http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDLAD\(2017\)010-e.](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDLAD(2017)010-e.))

Until 2016, at least on the surface, Kazakhstan's process stood in strong contrast to Uzbekistan. But even before the death of President Islam Karimov in August 2016, the basis for a gradual process of reform had been built within Uzbek government institutions. But the country's currency was still not convertible, its judicial sector rife with problems, and foreign investment limited. The economy's lack of international exposure had helped it weather a variety of global crises well, but was in dire need of reform to bring the country to a higher level of development. Most of all, the country's Ministry of National Security operated like a state within a state, stifling dissent and efforts to produce political or economic change. It was therefore a great surprise to many when former Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, after being appointed Acting President, unleashed a thrust of reform already in his campaign for the presidency. He boldly announced that he would make the *som* fully convertible and that he would free Uzbek businessmen to enter into partnerships abroad and welcome international investors. He declared at the outset that "It is time to end the period when people worked for the government. Instead, the government must start working for the people!" He opened up a "virtual office" accessible to all citizens and demanded that all central and local senior officials do the same.

In February, 2017, Parliament promptly adopted Mirziyoyev's *2017-2021 National Development Strategy*, which identified key areas affecting the economy, including privatization and general liberalization, lightening the bureaucracy's hand in the economy, and greater competition to spur the modernization of Uzbek agriculture and industry. A significant shakeup took place at the Ministry of Finance, and measures were introduced to make the judiciary independent, increase the authority of the courts, and improve the judicial system on the basis of the best international practices, including a thorough restructuring of legal education. In January 2018, Mirziyoyev retired the long-serving Minister of National Security after publicly denouncing the agency's excesses, sending a shock wave

throughout the society. He followed up by removing the similarly long-serving General Prosecutor, and instituted changes at the Procuracy, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Police Academy. Uzbekistan has also reaffirmed the secular model of governance in Uzbekistan, but focused less on defensive and more on positive steps. This has included liberalizing state policies toward religion, and launching a national idea of “Enlightened Islam,” based on a fulsome embrace of the great Age of Enlightenment that flowered in Central Asia under Muslim rule between the eighth and twelfth centuries.

This wave of reform accorded high priority to foreign relations, and particularly to Uzbekistan’s Central Asian neighbors. The new leadership moved to rapidly resolve disputes over water and border delimitation, and adopted an entirely more positive attitude to efforts at regional cooperation. This included hosting a large-scale international conference on security and development in Samarkand in November 2017, and a March 2018 Tashkent conference designed to support the peace process in Afghanistan. Most importantly, the close dialogue between Presidents Nazarbayev and Mirziyoyev led to the hosting in March 2018 by Kazakhstan, at Uzbekistan’s initiative, a summit of Central Asian leaders. In June 2018, this was followed by the passage at the United Nations of a resolution on “Strengthening regional and international cooperation to ensure peace, stability and sustainable development in the Central Asian Region.”²⁰

Prospects for Regionalism in Central Asia’s Smaller States

While there is no question that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan form the dynamic duo that has been the driver behind recent moves toward regional cooperation, it is equally important to observe that this initiative has been

²⁰ Batir Tursunov, “UNGA Adopts Resolution on Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 5, 2018. (<http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13532>)

met with the full support of the other states of Central Asia. These states, however, have not yet embarked on significant reforms as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have.

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan suffer from problems of governance, albeit for opposite reasons. Kyrgyzstan's effort at parliamentary rule has partially stalled under the burden of outside pressures and corruption. One-man rule continues to hamper Tajikistan which, like Kyrgyzstan, is buffeted by geopolitical pressures from Russia, China, and Afghanistan. Both countries are subject to pressures from foreign-sponsored Islamic extremists. Lacking energy resources, the economies of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are stagnant. However, both countries are rich in potential hydroelectric power. A major new World Bank-funded project (CASA 1000) will transmit electricity from both countries to Afghanistan and thence to Pakistan, while regional and international investors are attracted to new power-generation projects in both countries, thanks to the more open economic environment created by the changes in Uzbekistan. Further, transport projects funded in great part by China promise to open inaccessible regions of both countries to market-based international trade and to link them to continental corridors. In short, both countries face difficulties but are on the lip of changes that have the potential both to lift their economies and subject them more to market-based discipline.

Low world prices on gas, along with profligate expenditure on social projects, has hurt the economy of Turkmenistan. Its government has responded by strengthening controls over the economy, which remains solidly in the hands of the state, and severely limiting the rights and freedoms of its citizens. Under severe and coordinated pressure from both Russia and Iran, Turkmenistan justifies these measures in terms of the preservation of sovereignty. At the same time, Turkmenistan has used its own resources to build major new roads and railroads linking Afghanistan

and the Caspian. Its modern new Caspian port at Turkmenbashi is starting to function, linking Central Asia to Turkey and the West. The new corridor to the East and the real possibility of exporting its gas to Europe have the potential to open Turkmenistan to market-based development and lift the prevailing state of national emergency. Turkmenistan has worked with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to advance the long-stalled TAPI gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. This ambitious project could become a major source of stability within Afghanistan and an avenue of cooperation between India and Pakistan. Suffice it to say that both President Ghani and the Taliban support it, as do Pakistan and India.

Afghanistan's Turn Toward Central Asia

Afghanistan might at first appear to be an anomaly amidst the other five Central Asian states. Yet on closer inspection it has amply earned a place in the emerging region. While the process of reform in the post-Soviet states began in 1991, it did not begin in Afghanistan until 2002, a full decade later. Nonetheless, under both of its two presidents since then, the country has established a functioning elective parliament; reformed its courts and laws along secular lines based on Roman law; vastly expanded access to schools, especially for girls; and established nationwide print and electronic media that are privately owned and independent. Whereas in 2001 the country lacked a nationwide telephone system, today cell phone usage in Afghanistan is far higher than in the other states of Central Asia. Moreover, a young entrepreneurial class in such cities as Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat is rapidly expanding and consolidating an independent private sector.

One must note, of course, that bloody fighting continues in some parts of the country (above all in the thinly populated South). Yet the fact that these and other reforms and achievements in the sphere of development have

taken place even as the country wages war against foreign and domestic extremists on its territory, makes these and many other achievements all the more significant. Meanwhile, as in the rest of Central Asia, a rising generation of young men and women are transforming life in countless ways. Whether foreign educated or prepared in domestic universities (including a new American University of Afghanistan), members of this new generation are fully as competent as their counterparts in other countries of Central Asia. Indeed, the absence of what may be termed a "Soviet mentality" among the parents' generation eases and speeds their sons and daughters' transition to modern life in a free society.

For these and other reasons, Afghanistan is fast making up for generations of backwardness. The fact that the country boasts what has been established as at least \$1 trillion worth of natural resources, and enjoys a physical location that is ideally suited to continental trade, brightens its longer-term prospects. Thus, while fully acknowledging Afghanistan's existing difficulties, one must take note of the fact that many elements that will be essential for its longer-term success are already present in Afghanistan, and that the country's trajectory gives reason to think that that success will eventually be achieved. Further grounds for optimism lie in the fact that there is a clear consensus within the government and among the diverse peoples of Afghanistan that their future (like their deeper past) will not be as an isolated state in a difficult region but as a core component of the emerging Central Asian region.

Reform and Regionalism

The current wave of regionalism is intimately connected to this reform agenda in Central Asia. Indeed, the realization that serious reforms were needed inevitably put the spotlight on the opportunity cost that the absence of serious regional cooperation entailed. Central Asian leaders now appear

united in their ambition to restore some form of institutionalized Central Asian regional cooperation.

As Central Asians seek to deepen and structure their interactions, it is more than likely that they will find it necessary to once again design some form of structure for their cooperation. They will certainly look back to identify the positive experiences of their efforts to develop regional institutions in the first decade after independence, after which the process of institutionalized Central Asian regionalism was subsumed under Russia's project for Eurasian integration. But regional cooperation is a global phenomenon, which has developed in several waves in recent decades. What lessons and experience do other world regions offer that are of relevance to Central Asia?

Models of Regionalism

The experiences of countries as diverse as the Nordic countries, South America, and Southeast Asia may all be relevant to Central Asia. After all, these and other world regions offer a rich history of efforts to develop regional cooperation. They have achieved successes, endured failures, and grappled with challenges that are not dissimilar from those faced by Central Asian leaders today.

These questions range from the technical to the political: How should the freedom of movement of people, labor issues, or trade facilitation be handled? How is regional cooperation affected by the fact that regional countries do not share the same patterns of membership in international organizations? How deeply institutionalized should regional structures be? How do they relate to outside powers, particularly large ones and potential hegemony? These questions are the focus of the following sections. They deal with several significant regional organizations, though not with the two that might seem to be the most obvious ones: the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. Both are continent-wide manifestations of regional integration, which therefore gives them geographical as well as institutional ambitions that differ fundamentally from what the Central Asians seek in their mutual cooperation. The fact that two regional states – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – are members of the Eurasian Economic Union does not change this. For its part, the European Union is the most advanced form of regional integration yet devised – so much so that it has, in fact, become a *supranational* institution. Because Central Asians show no interest in losing their identities in some new supranational structure, the experience of the EU is not a subject for this analysis. Similarly, the Eurasian Economic

Union embodies strong element of a highly political supranationalism, which Kazakhstan has explicitly sought to resist. The Russian-led project for Eurasian economic integration differs fundamentally from Central Asian cooperation in that it is centered around a dominant country, whose population, economy, and military might dwarfs that of the other participants combined. This is not the case among the states of Central Asia. Instead, the purpose here is to study regional cooperation efforts that share some similarities with, and relevance for, Central Asia. These are the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN); Nordic Cooperation; The Višegrad Group; and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR). It will be shown that the first two of these have the highest relevance for Central Asia, while the others provide additional insights that could usefully inform Central Asian regional cooperation.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

In 1967, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand joined forces to create ASEAN. This move took place against the background of the Cold War, and specifically the growing military confrontation in Indochina. Following the end of the Cold War, ASEAN expanded to include Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. The key principles underlying ASEAN are non-interference in each other's affairs, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and cooperation to further economic and social development. ASEAN developed considerably over the years, establishing a secretariat in 1976. However, its major step in this direction occurred in 2008, when it significantly deepened its international legal personality by adopting the ASEAN Charter.

In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community was established, with a view to "transform ASEAN into a region with free movement of goods, services,

investment, skilled labor, and freer flow of capital.”²¹ While the aim was eventually to develop ASEAN along lines similar to the EU, with full freedom of movement, ASEAN’s member states have taken a more incremental approach to the implementation of these provisions.

As noted, ASEAN maintains a secretariat based in Jakarta. The organization’s Secretary-General is appointed by an ASEAN summit for a non-renewable five-year term. The members rotate terms based on alphabetical order.²² ASEAN summits are held twice a year, attended by the heads of state of all member countries. Periodic summits act as ASEAN’s policy-making body. These meetings are convened by the member state currently chairing the organization, or can be held at any time by the special request of a member country and the concurrence of the other members.²³ ASEAN also has a Coordinating Council, made up of the Foreign Ministers of each member state, which meets at least twice a year. This council prepares the agenda for summit meetings and helps coordinate the implementation of ASEAN agreements.²⁴ Under ASEAN there exist three Community Councils: Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural. Each of these councils meets at least twice a year.²⁵

Citizens of ASEAN can visit other ASEAN countries without a visa, but their stay is limited to 14 or 30 days. Longer stays are regulated by the laws of individual states.²⁶ As part of ASEAN’s plan for the future, known as ASEAN Connectivity 2025, member states are looking to ease visa

²¹ ASEAN Economic Blueprint, 2007.

²² ASEAN, “Secretary-General of ASEAN”. (<https://asean.org/asean/asean-secretariat/secretary-general-of-asean/>).

²³ ASEAN, “Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.” (https://www.aseankorea.org/files/upload/pdf/asean_charter10.pdf.)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ASEAN, “ASEAN Framework Agreement on Visa Exemption.” (<http://agreement.asean.org/media/download/20160831072909.pdf>.)

regulations for travel among them, simplifying access to information regarding ASEAN, establishing training programs to enable citizens of ASEAN countries to meet common qualifications, and supporting higher education exchanges among ASEAN members.²⁷ An important aspect of the 2025 Master Plan involves the mobility of labor. Individuals will be permitted to work in other member states in six sectors: engineering, nursing, architecture, medicine, dentistry, and tourism. It is likely that surveying and accountancy will shortly be added to the list.²⁸ Mutual Recognition Agreements (MARs) among member states allow for workers in these sectors to become part of a specific ASEAN-wide professional group. For example, qualified engineers can become part of the ASEAN Chartered Professional Engineers. These provisions are all designed to increase mobility within the region and to reduce barriers to licensing among ASEAN members.²⁹ The MARs are not identical, but are tailored to the needs of each sector.³⁰

Concerning the facilitation of trade, the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) is the main economic agreement in ASEAN. This allows for the common tariff applied to the vast majority of products sold between the member states to be reduced to between 5 percent and zero.³¹ In this and other ways the ASEAN 2025 Master Plan focuses on facilitating future trade among members. Members plan to establish a rolling priority list of ASEAN

²⁷ ASEAN, "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025". (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Master-Plan-on-ASEAN-Connectivity-20251.pdf>.)

²⁸ "Labor Mobility in ASEAN: Current Commitments and Future Limitations," *ASEAN Briefing*, May 13, 2015. (<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/2016/05/13/asean-labor-mobility.html>)

²⁹ ASEAN, "ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Engineering Services," ([http://investasean.asean.org/files/upload/MRA%20Engineering%20\(2005\)%20recon.pdf](http://investasean.asean.org/files/upload/MRA%20Engineering%20(2005)%20recon.pdf)).

³⁰ "ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreements," *Invest in ASEAN*, (<http://investasean.asean.org/index.php/page/view/asean-free-trade-area-agreements/view/757/newsid/868/mutual-recognition-arrangements.html>)

³¹ ASEAN, "The ASEAN Free Trade Area," (<https://asean.org/asean-economic-community/asean-free-trade-area-afta-council/>).

infrastructure projects, set up a platform to measure and improve productivity, generate and coordinate strategies for dealing with urbanization, develop a digital network for financial inclusion, build an open data network, enhance the efficiency of trade routes and supply chains, harmonize standards and technical regulations, and reduce non-tariff measures that distort trade.

ASEAN is chiefly an economic organization, but has from the outset also addressed security issues. ASEAN aspires to create a Political-Security Community, the goal of which is to promote peace and stability within the region through political development, the advancement of democratic values, and the protection of human rights. In 1971, ASEAN adopted a "Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality Agreement."³² Five years later, members built on this agreement by signing a "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation" to promote peace building throughout the region.³³ Importantly, in 1997 the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free-Zone entered into force, which banned the use, manufacture, transport, storage, testing, or disposal of nuclear weapons in ASEAN states.³⁴

The 1971 agreement declared ASEAN, and the region of Southeast Asia, to be "free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers" and "that Southeast Asian countries should make concerted efforts to broaden the areas of cooperation which would contribute to their strength, solidarity and closer relationship".³⁵ The agreement, strongly pushed by Jakarta,

³² ASEAN, "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration," (<http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Transnational/zone.pdf>).

³³ ASEAN, "Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia Indonesia, 24 February 1976." (<https://asean.org/treaty-amity-cooperation-southeast-asia-indonesia-24-february-1976/>).

³⁴ ASEAN, "Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone." (https://asean.org/?static_post=treaty-on-the-southeast-asia-nuclear-weapon-free-zone)

³⁵ ASEAN, "1971 Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration," November 27, 1971. (<http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Transnational/zone.pdf>)

protected the region against being dragged into Cold War confrontations.³⁶ It detailed specific language on internal and external security to Southeast Asia that does not appear in the original Bangkok Declaration, which only generally touches on promoting regional peace and collaboration on economic, social, and cultural fields.³⁷ Thus, it created regional objectives that could be obtained in the future, such as internal procedures for maintaining peace and cooperation or a process of establishing a nuclear free zone.

The Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) followed from this agreement. Although the TAC corresponds more with regional cooperation and maintaining order and peace within member countries, the SEANWFZ proved to be a successful international deterrent against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It was the first nuclear weapons free zone to include continental shelves and exclusive economic zones, and shows the importance of thinking of Southeast Asia as a whole, not simply separate member states and their territories.³⁸ Moreover, it prevented the proliferation problems of Northeast Asia (North Korea, China, and Japan) and South Asia (Pakistan and India) from reaching the region. The 1971 agreement was the building block of ASEAN security. By giving a blueprint on how the region wishes to proceed in the future and what challenges the

³⁶ M. C. Abad, Jr. "The Role of ASEAN in Security Multilateralism ZOPFAN, TAC, and SEANWFZ," *ASEAN Regional Forum*, April 23, 2000. (<http://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/files/Archive/7th/ARF-Professional-Development-Programme/Doc-10.pdf>).

³⁷ ASEAN, "Bangkok Declaration," August 8, 1967. (<https://asean.org/the-asean-declaration-bangkok-declaration-bangkok-8-august-1967/>)

³⁸ Wilfred Wan. *Regional Pathways to Nonproliferation*. Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 2018, pp. 78-94. 2018.

region may face, ASEAN was able to build more specific documents such as the TAC, SEANWFZ, and ASEAN Political-Security Community.

ASEAN is actively promoting peace and stability in the South China Sea and continues to work toward the adoption of a regional code of conduct for members.³⁹ It also promotes cooperation and confidence building measures in the maritime sphere. Among the latter are the exchange of observers for military exercises, the advancement of bilateral defense cooperation, the development of joint projects of defense research, and the promotion of transparency in defense policies.⁴⁰ Since 2006, the Defense Ministers Meeting has convened annually to advance cooperation in the sphere of defense.⁴¹ ASEAN states have also agreed on an “ASEAN 2025 Political-Security Community Blueprint,” which seeks to promote stability throughout the region and to deepen cooperation with external parties.⁴²

ASEAN has also been involved in a comprehensive partnership with the United Nations which has led to cooperation in such areas as, peace and security, human rights, connectivity and integration, food and energy security, human development, and disaster management, among others.⁴³

An important feature of ASEAN’s relationship with foreign powers has been to engage them in dialogues as a single unit rather than individually. This effectively prevents outside powers from playing one ASEAN state off against another. Such dialogues have taken place with the United States,

³⁹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Political-Security Blueprint.” (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/archive/5187-18.pdf>).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ ASEAN, “ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM).” (<https://asean.org/asean-political-security-community/asean-defence-ministers-meeting-admm/>).

⁴² ASEAN, “ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint 2025.” (<https://www.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ASEAN-APSC-Blueprint-2025.pdf>).

⁴³ ASEAN, “An Overview of ASEAN-United Nations Cooperation.” (https://asean.org/?static_post=background-overview-united-nations).

India, Germany, Turkey, and Russia, among other countries. ASEAN has also collectively negotiated Free Trade Agreements with China, Japan, and South Korea. From this has grown the ASEAN Plus Three concept, which includes China, Japan, and South Korea, and aims to expand ASEAN relations with all of East Asia.⁴⁴

ASEAN's experience is of definite relevance to Central Asia. A prominent ASEAN diplomat observed that, "Even today, ASEAN states have much less in common than do Central Asian states."⁴⁵ This is indeed true. ASEAN countries diverge fundamentally in languages, ethnicity, and religious traditions. They also developed their cooperation in an intense geopolitical context that was dominated by the superpower confrontation during the Cold War and in recent years by the rising Asian behemoth, China. ASEAN countries also differ considerably in their economic development, with advanced economies like Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand coexisting with less developed ones like Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. ASEAN countries, with their combined population of 600 million people, are of a different scale than Central Asia. Indonesia is by far the largest ASEAN country, with over 250 million people, but this is still less than half of ASEAN's total population. And Indonesia's GDP is approximately a third of ASEAN's combined GDP. Indonesia's size is only partially balanced by the smaller but more advanced economies of Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia and by populous but mid-income countries like the Philippines and Vietnam.

Nordic Cooperation

The present form of Nordic cooperation is, in a sense, the product of a failure. During the Second World War, Denmark and Norway were occupied by Nazi Germany, while Sweden stayed neutral and Finland

⁴⁴ ASEAN, "Overview of ASEAN Plus Three Cooperation." (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Overview-of-APT-Cooperation-Jul-2018.pdf>).

⁴⁵ Bilahari Kausikan, speaking at 2018 CAMCA Forum, June 2018, Baku, Azerbaijan.

fought a separate war against the Soviet Union. To shore up the security of the Nordic region, it was proposed to develop a Nordic Defense Union, based significantly on Sweden's military power. However, Nordic countries disagreed over the question of the proposed Union's relationship to NATO. In the end, Norway, Iceland and Denmark opted for NATO membership, while Sweden and Finland remained neutral. Further failures would follow. None of the Nordic countries were initial members of the European Economic Community, which would later become the EU, so the Nordic states in the 1960s agreed to set up among themselves an Organization of Nordic Economic Cooperation, a far-reaching effort at economic integration similar in many ways to the Rome treaty that created the EEC. This project fell apart when Finland, under pressure from the USSR, pulled out of the agreement. Denmark then joined the EEC in 1973, and Sweden and Finland followed in 1995. Norway twice negotiated membership in the EEC, but the Norwegian people twice (in 1972 and 1994) voted against joining.

Thus, efforts to develop deeper economic and security cooperation have failed. However, the Nordic countries have nonetheless developed deep functional cooperation in a variety of concrete policy areas. The Nordic Council was created in 1952, and it moved immediately to abolish the need for passports for travel among member countries. This innovation was later formalized by the Nordic Passport Union. In 1954, the states created a Nordic Labor Market, which enables Nordic citizens to live and work freely across all Nordic Council member states. This was followed the next year by a Nordic Convention on Social Security.

The main elements of Nordic Cooperation are a Nordic Council and a Nordic Council of Ministers. In the Nordic Council, each member state is represented by a national delegation elected by that state's parliament. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden each have twenty members on the Nordic Council Parliament, with Denmark including two from the Faroe

Islands and Greenland, and Finland including two from the Åland Islands. Iceland has seven members.⁴⁶ Within the Nordic Council Parliament there is considerable cooperation among political parties sharing similar ideologies; these take the form of Nordic party groups, which came into being during the 1980s. These groups include social-democratic parties, conservatives, socialist-greens, center parties, and the Nordic freedom group.⁴⁷ The Nordic Council meets twice a year, with a main session in the fall and a special thematic session in the spring, designed to further cooperation in a particular area.

The Nordic Council of Ministers was founded in 1971, and governs inter-governmental cooperation among member countries. It consists of eleven different councils, one is a general ministerial council for Nordic cooperation while the other ten are policy specific. The presidency is rotated amongst members and elected at the Ordinary Session, typically held in fall.⁴⁸ Nordic Prime Ministers hold annual meetings, and frequently also meet to coordinate policy ahead of EU summits, something that allows Norway and Iceland to stay informed of EU developments.

While Nordic cooperation may appear modest from a geopolitical perspective, it should be noted that it anticipated many of the key initiatives of the European Union. The Nordic countries abolished internal borders forty years before the EU Schengen Treaty entered into force, and similarly allowed for full movement of labor long before the EU did so – and ASEAN still does not.

⁴⁶ Nordic Council, "The Nordic Council." (<https://www.norden.org/en/information/nordic-council>)

⁴⁷ Nordic Council, "About the Party Groups." (<https://www.norden.org/en/information/about-party-groups>).

⁴⁸ Nordic Council, "About the Sessions of the Nordic Council." (<https://www.norden.org/en/information/about-sessions-nordic-council>).

While defense and security issues were not part of Nordic Cooperation during the Cold War, they have increasingly turned into a key arena for cooperation. The end of the Cold War released Finland from its “special relationship” with the Soviet Union and enabled it to join the EU. Sweden and Finland gradually moved away from their policies of neutrality and have developed defense cooperation bilaterally with the United States, NATO, and countries of the Nordic region. During the 1990s European defense structures de-emphasized territorial defense and geared their capabilities increasingly to out-of-area operations. Accordingly, cooperative ventures were initially set up in the areas of armament supply and the coordination of peacekeeping operations. But as the security situation in northern Europe deteriorated in the 2000s, Nordic defense cooperation changed fundamentally. In 2009 the Nordic countries formally created NORDEFCO, a structure involving regular coordination meetings of defense ministers and chiefs of general staffs. Areas of cooperation have included joint military exercises in the high north, and initiatives in defense procurement and cyber-defense.⁴⁹ The efforts to establish joint procurement programs have failed down to the present.

After the conflict in Ukraine, Nordic defense cooperation entered a new phase. In a joint 2015 op-ed, five Nordic defense ministers noted that they faced a more dangerous security situation as a result of Russian behavior both in Ukraine and in the Baltic region itself, and that they would meet this challenge by “deepening solidarity” and developing a capability to “act together in a crisis.”⁵⁰ The most concrete result has been the development of secure communication channels between Nordic military and defense officials, as well as an increase in military exercises, which have often

⁴⁹ Tuomas Forsberg, “The Rise of Nordic Defense Cooperation: A Return to Regionalism?”, *International Affairs*, vol. 89 no. 5, 2013, 1161-81.

⁵⁰ Peter Hultqvist, Nicolai Wammen, Carl Haglund, Ine Eriksen Søreide, and Gunnar Bragi Sveinsson, “Vi fördjupar det nordiska försvarssamarbetet” *Dagens Nyheter*, April 10, 2015.

involved NATO countries including the United States. Importantly, Nordic defense cooperation is not viewed as an *alternative* to NATO, the EU, or to stronger bilateral defense ties to the United States – but as a supplement. This, of course, has altered the formerly neutral role of Finland and Sweden: as two Norwegian experts put it, “Nordic cooperation can no longer be construed as neutralist, and it serves *de facto* as another vehicle for tying the militarily non-aligned countries closer to the U.S. and NATO.”⁵¹

What, then, is the Nordic Council’s relevance for Central Asia? In fact, the Nordic region shares many similarities with Central Asia, and is in many ways more similar to it than is Southeast Asia and the ASEAN countries. The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden – share a close cultural, religious and historical relationship. Scandinavian languages, like Turkic languages in Central Asia, are closely related. Finnish, like Tajik, is of a different origin. No country has a dominant position in Nordic Cooperation: while Sweden is almost twice as large as Denmark in terms of population, it constitutes only a little more than a third of the population and GDP of the Nordic region as a whole. Finally, the Nordic countries display considerable differences in their membership in international organizations. Denmark is the only Nordic country to be a member of both the EU and NATO. Norway is a member of NATO but not of the EU; Sweden and Finland are EU members but do not belong to NATO. This is similar to Central Asian states’ divergent patterns of membership in Eurasian cooperation organizations. What the Nordic model indicates is that such divergent attitudes to continent-wide cooperation need not be a hindrance to closer regional cooperation among a set of like-minded countries that share common interests and characteristics.

⁵¹ Håkon Lunde Saxi and Karsten Friis, “After Crimea: The Future of Nordic Defence Cooperation,” *NUPI Policy Brief*, October 8, 2018.

Visegrád Group

The Visegrád group dates to a summit held in 1991 between the leaders of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland at the site of the 1335 meeting between the rulers of Bohemia, Poland and Hungary. The group traces its formation to members forming “part of a single civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots,” in order to “work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration.”⁵² Unlike ASEAN or Nordic cooperation, the Visegrád group is not institutionalized, consisting only of periodic meetings at various levels. Annual summits are held, which also feature the transfer of the presidency of the group, with each holder being responsible for its one-year action plan. As in Nordic cooperation, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers frequently meet before international events to coordinate policy. Similarly, there is frequent consultation among the group’s Permanent Representations to the EU and NATO, as well as other relevant organizations.

The Visegrád group stands out as its members are all members of both the EU and NATO. This undoubtedly limits the nature of its cooperation, as the more institutionalized nature of those organizations subsume many of the functions of regional cooperation in central Europe. That said, member states have developed closer cooperation a number of issues, including in the defense and security realm. Thus, Visegrád countries provide an EU Battlegroup for the region since 2016. They have sought to increase and harmonize NATO exercises, in part through the Visegrád Group Military Educational Program (VIGMILEP) which provides a framework for increased cooperation of defense education. Similar to Nordic defense cooperation, Visegrád states also seek to develop joint training and exercises as well as joint procurement and defense industry.

⁵² “About the Visegrad Group,” (<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/about-the-visegrad-group>)

Regional cooperation in trade is mainly focused on supplementing EU trade policies. The Visegrád Fund promotes regional cooperation through grants, scholarships, and artist residences funded equally by the Visegrád countries.

From a Central Asian perspective, the Visegrád model has certain specific attractions. Following the 2018 Astana Summit of Central Asian leaders, President Nursultan Nazarbayev referred to the Visegrád model in underlining the informal character of the summits of Central Asian leaders.⁵³ And in a sense, given the fact that a new summit of Central Asian leaders is planned for March 2019, in Tashkent, Central Asian cooperation is already moving in the direction of a format similar to Visegrád: informal and close coordination with yearly meetings of heads of states. But it is important to reflect on the reason why Visegrád cooperation is not more institutionalized than it is: mainly, because any further institutionalization would be redundant within the framework of the EU and NATO membership of all its four-member states. If the Visegrád-four had not been part of these larger organizations, one suspects their own cooperation format would have compelled them to consider handling questions ranging from the movement of people and labor to common approaches to foreign powers. In this sense, the Visegrád model could be termed a minimum for Central Asia: it would be an improvement over the weakness of regional cooperation since the abolition of CACO in 2005, but may not allow Central Asians to meet the challenges which now prompt them to seek to expand regional cooperation. In fact, in some ways, Central Asia is already reaching beyond the Visegrád Group's format. Recent reports suggest that Central Asian states are seeking to develop a Schengen-like "Silk Road" visa,

⁵³ Slavomír Horak, "Central Asia after Astana: From Integration to Cooperation," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 30, 2018. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13509>)

enabling holders of a visa to any Central Asian state to also visit the other countries.⁵⁴ Given that they are not part of a larger entity that manages freedom of movement or labor mobility, Central Asian states will have to devise their own mechanisms to resolve such matters – requiring a level of cooperation that will likely surpass that of the Visegrád Group.

The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR)

The Southern Common Market or MERCOSUR was born in 1991, following a number of unsuccessful attempts to develop regional cooperation in South America. Formed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, MERCOSUR first and foremost reflects efforts to improve the formerly very fraught relations between Brazil and Argentina. These two countries dominate MERCOSUR, accounting for over 90 percent of the bloc's population and GDP. Brazil alone accounts for nearly three quarters of both indicators. In other words, MERCOSUR is very much dependent on the position of Brazil, and on the character of Brazilian-Argentine relations. The 1991 Treaty of Asunción aimed to create a common market with four concrete goals: the free circulation of goods, services and means of production; common tariff and trade policies; coordination of macroeconomic policy; and the harmonization of domestic legislation. Notably, the treaty ignored political institutions, focusing instead entirely on economic matters. Three years later the four states signed the Protocol of Ouro Preto, which provided MERCOSUR with an institutional structure and international legal personality, including a secretariat in Montevideo.⁵⁵ MERCOSUR subsequently opened up the possibility of associate member status, which provided for reduced tariffs on trade with members. In 1996,

⁵⁴ "A Single Central Asian Visa is an Analogue to the Schengen Visa," *Kazakh TV*, October 11, 2018. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KIJCxBi0Qg>)

⁵⁵ Andrés Malamud, "MERCOSUR Turns 15: Between Rising Rhetoric and Declining Achievement," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 18 no. 3, 2005, 422-436.

Bolivia and Chile were the first to associate themselves in this manner. Peru followed in 2003, Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela in 2004, and Guyana and Suriname in 2013. Venezuela gained full membership in 2012, but its life as a member was to be short: its membership was formally suspended in 2016, with the four original members citing the country's failure to adopt MERCOSUR criteria on trade and human rights.⁵⁶ Bolivia is currently seeking full membership and is awaiting ratification by MERCOSUR members.

MERCOSUR is comprised of three main bodies. The first is the Common Market Council (CMC), which manages the process of political integration. It is comprised of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Ministers of Economy of member states. This council meets at least twice yearly with the Presidents of member states.⁵⁷ The second is the Common Market Group, (GMC) which oversees the day-to-day operations of the organization.⁵⁸ Finally, there is the Trade Commission (CCM), which is responsible for the administration of common policy instruments.⁵⁹ MERCOSUR also created an inter-parliamentary body in 2006. Originally set at 18 Members per country, the number of MPs has changed to reflect proportionality to a greater extent. Brazil now has 75 members, Argentina 43, Paraguay and Uruguay 18. Venezuela, prior to its suspension, had 33.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ "Mercosur Suspends Venezuela over Trade and Human Rights," BBC World, December 2, 2016. (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-38181198>)

⁵⁷ MERCOSUR, "Organs Derived from Foundational Texts." (<http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/v/3878/11/innova.front/organos-derivados-de-textos-fundacionales>).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ MERCOSUR, "Map of Parliamentarians."

(https://www.parlamentomercosur.org/parlasur/2016/mapa_interactivo/mapa.jsp?site=1&channel=parlasur&contentid=13138)

MERCOSUR allows visa-free travel among its members. Moreover, citizens can obtain legal residence in any of the other countries for a term of two years. Citizens do not need to show proof other than national identification cards and a clean criminal record. Permanent residence may be granted if accepted by the host country prior to ninety days expiration of the temporary residency.⁶¹ By its thirty-third anniversary in 2021, MERCOSUR aims to create a “MERCOSUR citizenship” statute.

In terms of trade, MERCOSUR has focused on the free circulation of goods, with agreements already in place on the elimination of customs duties and non-tariff restrictions.⁶² The Fund for the Structural Convergence of MERCOSUR (FOCEM) contributes to finance projects that seek to promote competitiveness, social cohesion, and symmetry among members. This body also aims to strengthen institutional structures within member states.⁶³ MERCOSUR has adopted a common external tariff as well as a common commercial policy towards outside states.⁶⁴ MERCOSUR has also been an important force on the international scene, negotiating with other trading blocs. Significantly, it is currently in negotiations with the EU for a bi-regional free trade agreement. While these talks have been taking place on and off for more than a decade, a new round was inaugurated in 2018.⁶⁵ Aside from the EU, MERCOSUR has been focused on achieving trade deals with a variety of organizations and countries that it believes will strengthen

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶² MERCOSUR, “Objectives of MERCOSUR.” (<http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/v/6304/1/innova.front/objetivos-del-mercursosur>)

⁶³ MERCOSUR, “What is FOCEM?” (<https://focem.mercosur.int/es/que-es-focem/>)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ European Commission, “Mercosur.” (<http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/mercursosur/>).

its original objective of establishing a free circulation of goods.⁶⁶ These deals have included North and South American countries, as well as talks with South Korea and Singapore.⁶⁷

MERCOSUR was initially a success story, achieving a tenfold increase in trade among its members. However, the pace of integration slowed at the end of the decade, when its chief economies—Argentina and Brazil—both faced economic hardships. These problems led to Brazil’s devaluation of its currency in 1999 and the economic collapse of Argentina two years later.⁶⁸ These developments contributed to the politicization of MERCOSUR, with efforts by left-wing politicians to transform it into a bloc that would oppose American-led neoliberal economic policies. As one analyst observed as MERCOSUR turned fifteen, “thus, an integration project that was initially about trade, customs and market has unexpectedly become a symbol for leftist political activism and national liberation ideologies.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, Argentina and Brazil developed a practice of negotiating exceptions to commonly agreed norms when that suited their national interest, thus weakening the rule-based nature of the organization.⁷⁰ Given the dominant role of these two states, political oscillations in either one of them have affected MERCOSUR as well. For example, the Worker’s Party government in Brazil was keen to bring socialist Venezuela into MERCOSUR during the

⁶⁶ MERCOSUR, “Objectives and Principles of International Cooperation of MERCOSUR”. (<http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/v/8618/11/innova.front/objetivos-y-principios-de-la-cooperacion-internacional-en-el-mercotur>).

⁶⁷ “Mercosur”. *Bilaterals*. (<https://www.bilaterals.org/?-Mercosur->)

⁶⁸ Claire Felter and Danielle Renwick, “Mercosur: South America’s Fractious Trade Bloc,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, September 10, 2018. (<https://www.cfr.org/backgroundunder/mercotur-south-americas-fractious-trade-bloc>)

⁶⁹ Malamud, “Mercosur turns 15,” p. 425.

⁷⁰ Roberto Bouzas Pedro Da Motta Veiga Ramon Torrent, *In-Depth Analysis of Mercotur Integration, Its Prospectives and the Effects Thereof on the Market Access of EE Goods, Services and Investment*, Observatory of Globalization, Barcelona, November 2002; “Mercotur RIP?”, *Economist*, July 14, 2012. (<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2012/07/14/mercotur-rip>)

early 2010s, which Paraguay opposed. Since Paraguay's opposition was the only factor preventing Venezuelan accession, Paraguay was suspended from membership in MERCOSUR following a contested presidential election, and Venezuela was admitted immediately thereafter. Conversely, a shift to center-right control of Brazil in 2015 and the election of an outright conservative government in Argentina in 2016 precipitated the suspension of Venezuela. In other words, decision regarding membership in MERCOSUR became so thoroughly politicized that doubt was cast on the validity and utility of MERCOSUR itself.

For Central Asia, MERCOSUR's experience appears of limited relevance. Nonetheless, several important lessons can be drawn from its history. The lack of a strong institutional basis governing the organization's membership and norms hampered the long-term development of MERCOSUR. Meanwhile, the coexistence of two key powers in the organization and the central role of the management of their relationship has certain obvious lessons for Central Asia. Beyond that, MERCOSUR's early successes are an indication that regional cooperation has the power to greatly increase trade among countries that initially were not notably interdependent. At the same time, it appears that a focus solely on economic matters, as in the case of MERCOSUR, does not provide a sufficient foundation upon which to build a solid regional identity and valid regional structures.

Steps Forward for Central Asian Regionalism

The above review of some of the principal regional entities worldwide suggests a number of significant implications for the countries of Central Asia.

First, Central Asian regional cooperation has a record much more positive than what is generally acknowledged. Serious progress was made during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Achievements from that time include the Central Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone and the setting up of cooperative structures that were so successful that Moscow sought first to join them and then to subsume them under its own leadership. Geopolitical pressures in the 2000s led to a temporary pause in the development of regionalism in Central Asia, but the substantial base of understandings and expectations remained, and formed the foundation of current initiatives.

Second, the present time offers an auspicious moment for a serious effort to develop and institutionalize regional cooperation in Central Asia. Central Asia's states have all consolidated their statehood and have built the metaphorical ground floor that is required for a serious regional effort to succeed. Moreover, during the past decade the public's understanding of the region's nature and history has grown deeper and more sophisticated, enabling people everywhere to look beyond the Soviet boundaries to a broader definition of Central Asia.

Third, it is clear both from historical experience and from present-day politics that any successful regionalism in Central Asia must be founded on a positive and constructive relationship between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two cornerstones of Central Asian cooperation. A joint

commitment of the two states will inspire confidence throughout the region and beyond, and will demonstrate to all the seriousness of Central Asians' intentions with respect to regional cooperation. Equally important will be the successful management of the relationship between these two relatively more powerful states and the three smaller ones, e.g. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. It is crucial that these three states be given a full voice in the process, and that their concerns are taken seriously. In particular, the attitude of Turkmenistan toward regional cooperation will be important, as it has historically remained aloof from regional initiatives on the basis of its non-aligned status. This likely means that for Central Asian cooperation to be successful and include all five post-Soviet regional states, it will have to be gradual, flexible and be a form of coordination that cannot be mistaken for a "bloc" of any kind.

Fourth, the role of Afghanistan must be clear from the moment that regional cooperation is launched. The inclusion of Afghanistan in region-wide deliberations will positively alter the nature of a regional dialogue across all Central Asia. Not only will it be symbolically important in moving beyond assumptions formed during the Soviet era, but it will help support the development of that country and thus enhance prospects of peace and stability in the wider region. No less important, Afghanistan offers significant economic opportunities for investors from its Central Asian neighbors, and is also the key country for reopening ancient commercial ties with the Indian sub-continent that were largely suspended during the Soviet era. Anchoring Afghanistan in Central Asia's emerging cooperative structures will also be in the interest of Western powers, which have invested lives and treasure in that country in the hope of its further development.

Fifth, Central Asian regional cooperation must be built by and for the regional countries. Membership in the process and even observer status

should not be open to external powers, whether immediate neighbors or those situated a continent away. There already exist numerous structures where Central Asian states meet with major powers: they regularly sit down with Russia in the CIS and other Eurasian structures; with Russia and China in the SCO; with Turkey and Iran in ECO; with Turkey in the Turkic Council; with Western powers in the OSCE; and so forth. Central Asian cooperation must remain a vehicle for coordination among the countries of Central Asia itself.

That said, some possible relationship with Azerbaijan, Georgia and Mongolia might at some point be considered, for their economies are increasingly linked with those of Central Asia, thanks to the growing importance of East-West transport corridors. The earliest post-Soviet efforts at Central Asian regionalism left the door open to Azerbaijan, and this should remain the case, if nothing more than to enable it to be an observer or associate member. Not only does Azerbaijan share cultural and linguistic traits with Central Asia, it also is the region's link westward and plays a key role in the transit of hydrocarbons from Central Asia to international markets. For this reason, Georgia, too, should be offered some form of interaction with the eventual structures of regional cooperation. Finally, Mongolia is in most senses a Central Asian country, being separated from Kazakhstan by only twenty-three miles. Many ethnic Kazakhs live in Mongolia, and the nomadic peoples of Central Asia share important cultural traits with the Mongols. Some form of outreach to Mongolia should therefore be considered.

Sixth, moving to the experiences of regional cooperation worldwide, the Visegrád group offers an important confirmation of the lesson Central Asia learned in 2005, when CACO was closed down in favor of Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Even in the benign context of membership in the EU and NATO, being part of a larger institutional context imposed clear

limits on the ability of Visegrád countries to develop and institutionalize their regional cooperation. In effect, membership in a larger integrative institution reduced the Visegrád countries to the status of a sub-group within the larger European structures – something that they judged to be worthwhile, given the benefits of EU and NATO membership. For Central Asia, however, there is no similarly beneficial form of pan-regional cooperation. The lesson is that Central Asian cooperation must remain Central Asian in order to avoid again losing its purpose.

Seventh, ASEAN's experience provides useful guidance in this regard. One of ASEAN's distinctive features has been the organization's practice of conducting dialogues *as a unit* with foreign powers. Just as ASEAN has developed dialogues *as a unit* with powers like China, Russia, South Korea, and Germany, so Central Asians can advocate that the institutional structures that they have individually developed with Japan, Korea, Europe and the United States be recast as region-wide consultations.

Eighth, Central Asia can benefit from ASEAN's experience in the development of a core of solidarity among regional members in order to prevent foreign powers from playing ASEAN members against each other. This served the organization well during the Cold War, and has continued to be of great value as Southeast Asia reckons with the rise of China. ASEAN offers no panacea for managing assertive great powers, but it has sent a strong signal to such powers that regional states have a primary loyalty to each other, following which they can jointly develop fruitful relations with great powers. Cooperation among ASEAN members benefits the member states themselves and is not directed against anyone. As President Nazarbayev stated following a 2018 meeting with President Mirziyoyev, Central Asians are capable of managing the challenges in Central Asia without the interference of outsiders.

Ninth, the Nordic Council also offers a key lesson for Central Asia: that divergent patterns of membership in various pan-regional organizations is no hindrance for regional cooperation among similarly sized, like-minded states with deep and close historical and cultural linkages. Just as Nordic states had divergent attitudes to EU and NATO cooperation, Central Asian states may diverge on their attitudes to Eurasian integration. The Nordic experience shows not only that it is possible to develop meaningful regional cooperation under such conditions, but that it strongly complements it: Nordic cooperation has enabled Norway to stay informed about EU matters, and Sweden and Finland about NATO. Similarly, Central Asian cooperation can assist states that have chosen not to be deeply integrated into Eurasian organizations to develop a more nuanced understanding of the realities of regional geopolitics.

Tenth, and finally, from our examination of the structures for regional cooperation in the Nordic Council, ASEAN, the Visegrád Group and Mercosur, one can draw a very specific and highly significant conclusion, namely, *that institutions matter*. Indeed, the relative weakness and ineffectiveness of Mercosur and the Visegrád group is a direct consequence of their weak institutional structures. ASEAN and the Nordic Council, by contrast, derive their effectiveness from the fact that over more than half a century they have focused serious attention on strengthening their institutional structures. The coherence and rigor of Central Asia's future institutional structures will determine their effectiveness. This, rather than high-flown rhetoric about regional cooperation or highly publicized one-time meetings and conferences, will shape the future Central Asia. It will be critical to pursue a pragmatic, flexible approach, emphasizing mutual interests and the principle of feasibility. It goes without saying that sustained and respectful dialogue at the top levels of national leadership will be of crucial importance to the future of regional cooperation in Central Asia. However, without effective and permanent institutional structures, it

will not be possible to bridge the gap between good intentions and practical actions.

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