



POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INTEGRATION PROCESSES IN CENTRAL ASIAN STATES: ACHIEVEMENTS AND OBSTACLES

Xudoyberdiyev Otabek Zafar o'g'li
International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

Annotation: This article explores the political and economic integration efforts among Central Asian countries since their independence in the early 1990s. It analyzes the progress made toward regional cooperation in trade, infrastructure, energy, and security, with particular emphasis on multilateral platforms such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program and the recent regional summits initiated by Uzbekistan. The paper also discusses the internal and external challenges that hinder deeper integration, including political differences, border disputes, competition for resources, and the influence of global powers. Ultimately, the article evaluates whether sustainable regional integration in Central Asia is achievable and what steps are necessary to overcome the existing barriers.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional integration, political cooperation, economic cooperation, multilateralism, CAREC, obstacles, regionalism, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan.

The idea of regional integration in Central Asia has been a recurring theme in the post-Soviet period, driven by shared history, geographic proximity, and common developmental challenges. Following the collapse of the USSR, the five Central Asian republics — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan — faced the urgent task of establishing independent political systems and national economies. Over time, the necessity for cooperation in areas such as trade, transportation, water resource management, and regional security has become increasingly evident.

Despite cultural and historical ties, the region has faced significant difficulties in advancing integration. Political mistrust, inconsistent leadership priorities, and external competition from larger powers such as Russia, China, and the United States have contributed to fragmented regional dynamics. Nonetheless, recent years have seen renewed efforts, particularly following Uzbekistan's foreign policy shift since 2016, which has prioritized regional cooperation.

This article aims to assess the main achievements in Central Asia's political and economic integration, as well as the persistent obstacles that hinder its progress. Through the examination of regional initiatives, agreements, and diplomatic





interactions, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of where the region stands and what the future may hold for a more connected and cooperative Central Asia.

Since the early 1990s, the five Central Asian republics — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan — have demonstrated varying levels of commitment to regional integration. While cultural, linguistic, and historical ties make cooperation a natural choice, political, economic, and geopolitical realities have often created barriers to deeper integration.

One of the most notable achievements in regional economic cooperation is the establishment and development of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program. Initiated by the Asian Development Bank, CAREC has facilitated numerous cross-border infrastructure projects, particularly in transport and energy. Roads, railways, and transmission lines connecting Central Asian states have been improved significantly, enhancing intra-regional trade and movement of goods and people.

Recent years have seen a growing political will for regional unity. This shift became especially visible after 2016, when Uzbekistan — the region's most populous country — adopted a foreign policy based on openness and good-neighborly relations under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The country initiated several regional summits and forums aimed at improving dialogue and building trust among the Central Asian leaders. These efforts have helped ease tensions over border demarcation, water sharing, and trade barriers.

In addition to infrastructure and diplomacy, economic integration has seen progress through the formation of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), though primarily driven by Russia, has attracted interest from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which are full members. Uzbekistan has engaged with the EAEU as an observer, indicating cautious interest while maintaining economic independence.

However, integration efforts face numerous obstacles. One major challenge is the lack of institutionalized and binding regional organizations exclusive to Central Asia. While regional summits and initiatives occur, they often lack legal or enforcement mechanisms, making long-term cooperation vulnerable to leadership changes and shifting national interests.

Political competition and differing governance models also impede integration. Turkmenistan maintains a policy of neutrality and minimal participation in regional structures. At times, historical grievances and nationalistic sentiments have





overshadowed the common regional agenda, particularly in disputes over natural resources such as water and gas. The uneven development of national economies further complicates harmonization of policies and shared goals.

External actors play a dual role. While investments from China (through the Belt and Road Initiative) and strategic partnerships with Russia, the EU, and the United States bring economic benefits, they also create competition for influence. This can weaken intra-regional coordination as countries prioritize bilateral deals with major powers over regional solidarity.

Nevertheless, the momentum for regionalism is growing. Youth exchanges, cultural collaborations, and increasing people-to-people ties have begun to lay the foundation for stronger integration. Additionally, global challenges such as climate change, food security, and water scarcity require collective responses that no single state can manage alone.

In summary, while Central Asia has made progress in terms of infrastructure, diplomatic rapprochement, and economic cooperation, the road to full political and economic integration remains complex. A shared vision, stronger regional institutions, and consistent political will are necessary to overcome the remaining barriers and unlock the region's full potential.

The integration processes in Central Asia reflect both significant progress and persistent challenges. Since independence, the region has taken important steps toward economic and political cooperation, especially in infrastructure development, regional diplomacy, and trade facilitation. Initiatives such as CAREC, the renewed role of Uzbekistan as a regional connector, and increased political dialogue among the Central Asian states have demonstrated the growing desire for unity and shared prosperity.

However, integration remains partial and uneven. Deep-rooted political differences, limited institutional frameworks, unresolved border and resource disputes, and external geopolitical interests continue to hinder the realization of full regional cohesion. Additionally, the absence of a binding and inclusive Central Asian integration organization weakens the long-term sustainability of current efforts.

Moving forward, Central Asia must build stronger regional institutions, foster trust through continuous diplomatic engagement, and align national strategies with regional priorities. Sustainable integration will require not only political will but also public support, inclusive economic policies, and collective responses to regional and global challenges. If these goals are pursued strategically and cooperatively, Central Asia has the potential to become a more unified and influential region on the global stage.

References





1. Asian Development Bank. (2021). *CAREC 2030 Strategy: Connecting the Region for Shared and Sustainable Development*.
2. Bohr, A. (2019). "Regionalism in Central Asia: New Politics and Old Challenges." *Chatham House Research Papers*.
3. Laruelle, M. (2018). *The Central Asia–Russia Relationship and Regional Integration*. George Washington University, Central Asia Program.
4. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan. (2022). *Statements and Regional Cooperation Initiatives*. Retrieved from www.mfa.uz
5. Satpayev, D. (2020). "Central Asia's Integration Dilemma: Domestic Politics vs Regional Goals." *Open Democracy Central Asia*.
6. Pannier, B. (2021). "Uzbekistan's Regional Foreign Policy Shift: Trust Building and Cooperation." *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*.
7. CAREC Institute. (2022). *CAREC Regional Progress Report*. Retrieved from www.carecinstitute.org

