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# Leaders Matter: Regional Integration in Central Asia

*Aigul Kazhenova*[*]

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**Research Article**

**Abstract**

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian countries aimed at regional integration. Despite the states' declarations to enhance economic and political cooperation, the Central Asian integration institution was dissolved in 2005. This paper analyses the issue of regional integration in Central Asia with the application of intergovernmentalism by Stanley Hoffmann to explain hindrances that led to the dissolution of the Central Asian integration structure. Methodologically, the paper utilizes discourse analysis. The study shows that divergent views of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan significantly hindered the development of regional integration.

**Keywords:** regional integration; Central Asia; Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; leaders.

**JEL Classification:** F53; F55; F59.

[*] PhD candidate at Corvinus University of Budapest (Hungary). Email: ai.kazhenova@gmail.com.
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5583-1897

# Los líderes importan: la integración regional en Asia Central

**Resumen**

Tras la disolución de la Unión Soviética en 1991, los países de Asia Central se propusieron desarrollar la integración regional. A pesar de las declaraciones de los estados para mejorar la cooperación económica y política, la institución de integración de Asia Central se disolvió en 2005. En este artículo se analiza la integración regional de Asia Central mediante la aplicación del concepto de intergubernamentalismo de Stanley Hoffmann con el objetivo de explicar los obstáculos que llevaron a la disolución de la estructura de integración de Asia Central. Como metodología, el artículo utiliza el análisis del discurso. El estudio muestra que las opiniones divergentes de los presidentes de Kazajstán y Uzbekistán constituyeron un impedimento importante para el desarrollo de la integración regional.

**Palabras clave:** integración regional; Asia Central; Kazajstán; Uzbekistán; líderes.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian (CA) countries[1] aimed to establish a Central Asian organization. The Central Asian Union (CAU) was founded in 1994. The Union was later transformed into the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC), which, in turn, became the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). Despite declarations from the countries to enhance economic and political cooperation, the Central Asian Organization ceased to exist in 2005. Among all the CA countries, only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and later became full members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Regardless of various supra-regional structures like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) or the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) facilitating cooperation among the Central Asian states as well as with other countries, no overarching CA organization has existed anymore (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019).

At present, the issue of regional cooperation in Central Asia has become topical again. The interaction between the CA states has intensified since the new President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, came to power in 2016. The countries launched a new dialogue on the development of multilateral cooperation in the region after more than a 10-year break (Kazantsev & Kazhenova, 2019). In this regard, it is crucial to analyze why the previous attempts to build effective integration structures did not bring results. This understanding will provide valuable insights into the potential outcomes and challenges of the new tendencies of cooperation in the region.

Regional integration is essential for CA. Interstate cooperation is critical for maintaining peace and security in CA (Rakhimov, 2010). The intraregional integration is also vital for regional development, and it can bring about many benefits, especially in economic terms (Badykova, 2005; Geyikdagi, 2005; Green, 2001; Tolipov, 2010). One of the most crucial challenges in CA is water resource management, which has not been solved yet and requires joint decision-making. This issue appeared as a consequence of the transition from the centralized system of water and energy exchange between the CA republics during the Soviet period to a new dimension of relations between the newly independent states after the collapse of the USSR. There were attempts to establish a regional water regime, but it was ineffective (Boute, 2017; Dadabaev, 2015). In this context, CA has no option but to develop intraregional cooperation due to shared issues and threats (Bobokulov, 2006). Moreover, the CA

[1] Central Asia comprises five countries: Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

states can have a stronger bargaining position in the international arena. The lack of regional integration or non-cooperation in CA is considered a "pathology" (Spechler, 2001). Thus, the issue of regional integration has remained crucial for CA since the countries obtained their independence. Apart from its benefits to the countries, several shared challenges can be solved only by joint actions.

Much of the literature considers regional cooperation in Central Asia concerning competition between major powers, mainly Russia, China, and the United States. CA's position in the so-called Heartland (Mackinder, 1904) makes the region a geopolitically significant area. In this regard, CA is widely studied in terms of geopolitics and competition between external actors for influence (Blank, 2012; Brzezinski, 1997; Cooley, 2012; Grabowski & Stefanowski, 2019; Kazantsev, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Laumulin, 2007; Patnaik, 2016; Rakhimov, 2010). The rivalry between the powers named "the Second Great Game" exerts its influence on the CA regional integration (Bohr, 2004; Lewis, 2018; Tolipov, 2010; Zhengyuan, 2010), including security regionalism (Allison, 2004, 2008; Allison & Jonson, 2001).

Another bulk of the literature is focused on the economic and trade relations both among the CA countries and their neighbors in terms of the dynamics of regional integration (Linn & Pidufala, 2008; Pomfret, 2000, 2005; Wang, 2014). The trade relations are also analyzed in terms of the major powers' presence, in particular, the Russian or Chinese influence in the region (Libman & Vinokurov, 2011; Pomfret, 2009; Spechler, 2002; Tang, 2000; Vinokurov et al., 2010).

Other literature specializes in state-level factors (Bohr, 2004; Collins, 2003; Ilkhamov, 2007) that impact regional integration development. Authors also mention that nationalism, the CA countries' focus on their sovereignty, and the importance of building a new statehood had an impact on regional integration (Allison, 2004, 2008; Kubicek, 1997) and created the "national-regional" dualism" (Tolipov, 2010).

Thus, a wide range of literature on CA investigates different aspects of cooperation among the region's states. However, there is still a lack of research explaining the issue of regional integration in Central Asia from the point of view of theories of regional integration. Some works analyze the issue of regional integration in CA by applying different theoretical approaches. For example, Kubicek (1997) analyzes integration in Central Asia by referring to theories of power distribution, interdependence theories, constructivism, and domestic-level explanations. Certain scholars maintain that the European integration theories are not useful in analyzing

integration processes in CA due to the specific regimes of these states (Collins, 2009) or because European theories do not account for different economic structures (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019). While neo-functionalism provides valuable insights into the development of European integration, Sadri (1997) states that it is irrelevant to the CA case as, for instance, no politically viable and organized stakeholders would push for integration. Tolipov (2017a, 2017b) believes that neither realism nor liberalism nor constructivism can provide the best framework for explaining the CA case. All in all, experts agree that there is a lack of rigorous theoretical and conceptual elaborations in CA studies that could fully explain either the process of disintegration or integration in CA.

## METHODOLOGY

The paper utilizes intergovernmentalism by Stanley Hoffman as a state-focused European theory of regional integration to explain the CA case. The top-down way of making politics characterizes cooperation among the CA countries, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift to a market economy. So far, no research has been done on the CA case with the application of intergovernmentalism by Stanley Hoffmann, which focuses on political leaders' views. The given study applies the intergovernmentalist approach as it explains the European regional integration at the very outset of its development. Since the paper aims to investigate why the CA regional integration structure was dissolved, the primary focus is on the conditions necessary for successful integration and the obstacles that hinder it. The main statement important for the analysis is that political leaders' views about the common future are crucial. Thus, differences in leaders' outlooks can become a severe obstacle to developing efficient regional integration.

For the analysis of the CA case, two countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, were chosen for this study. The dynamics of the regional integration in Central Asia have been largely influenced by the two states. It was the tandem of Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan that launched the first CA integration project, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joining it later. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) highlighted the crucial importance of the two countries for the region. Kazakhstan is the biggest CA country in terms of geography. Uzbekistan is the most populous country located in the center of the region, sharing borders with all five CA republics. Both countries, abundant in resources, possess the greatest economic potential in the area. Kazakhstan boasts

substantial oil and mineral reserves, whereas Uzbekistan is rich in natural gas, gold, and cotton. Moreover, the two countries have the potential to become regional leaders.

Thus, the research analyzes the role of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the CA regional integration from an intergovernmentalism theory perspective. Methodologically, the paper utilizes discourse analysis. It investigates how the leaders' views of the two CA states influenced the regional integration dynamics. By exploring the leadership perspectives and foreign policy strategies of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the study aims to shed light on the obstacles that had an impact on regional integration. The primary sources used for the discourse analysis are speeches, addresses, articles, and books by the presidents of both states, where attitudes and positions of the political leaders toward regional integration are reflected. Apart from this, the text of laws and foreign policy concepts are used in the research. The analysis covers the timeframe from 1994, when the CAU was established, till 2005, when the only CA regional structure—the CACO—was dissolved.

## HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK: THE REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

The development of regional integration processes in Central Asia started when Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed the Treaty on creating a common economic space on January 10, 1994, with the Kyrgyz Republic joining it a week later. Initially, the countries aimed to develop regional integration according to the model of the European Union (Pomfret, 2009). The states had quite ambitious plans for economic integration in the region. They agreed on undertaking joint efforts in economic reforms, developing a market economy, and establishing mutually beneficial economic relations (see Table 1). This included creating necessary conditions for advancing economic integration, forming a common economic space with free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor, and jointly coordinating fiscal, tax, customs, and monetary policies (Kazhenova, 2021). These initiatives marked the beginning of integration processes in Central Asia, eventually leading to the establishment of the CAU (see Table 2). Within the CAU, the Interstate Council was established at the level of Heads of State, the Council of Prime Ministers, the Council of Foreign Ministers, and the Council of Defence Ministers (Kembayev, 2006).

In general, numerous agreements on cooperation, mainly in the economic spheres, were signed within the framework of the CAU. However, most of the

commitments made by the states were not fulfilled, and further integration development stalled. After four years of operation, the CAU was transformed into the CAEC.

In 1998, Tajikistan joined this CA integration organization.[2] The main focus of the CAEC was primarily economic; thus, it was a less ambitious project than the CAU. The countries intended to establish customs, payments, and monetary unions, ultimately forming a single market for goods, services, and capital. However, the CAEC had limited progress and did not produce significant practical outcomes (Pomfret, 2009). The CA countries signed many agreements; however, intraregional trade did not increase, and commitments were not fulfilled (Kembayev, 2006).

*Table 1.*

*Economic Indicators of the Central Asian Countries in GDP Per Capita (Current US$)*

| | Kazakhstan | Kyrgyzstan | Uzbekistan | Tajikistan |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1994 | 1,316.2 | 372.3 | 576.4 | - |
| 1998 | 1,468.7 | 345.1 | 623.2 | 214.4 |
| 2002 | 1,658 | 321.7 | 383.3 | 186.7 |
| 2005 | 3,771.3 | 476.6 | 546.8 | 333.7 |

Source: The World Bank (2020).

*Table 2.*

*Regional Organizations in Central Asia*

| Organization | Years | Member States | Total Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Central Asian Union (CAU) | 1994–1998 | Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan | 43 million |
| The Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) | 1998–2002 | Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan | 50 million |
| The Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) | 2002–2005 | Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia (since 2004) | 52 million (196 million with Russia) |

Source: Authors' elaboration using the World Bank's (2020) data.

In 2001, the CA countries transformed the CAEC into the CACO. This development was connected to the increasing influence of radical Islamism in the region,

[2] Turkmenistan, adhering to its UN-recognized status of perpetual neutrality, did not join any regional integration projects.

which made regional security a growing concern. The states abandoned the only "economic" focus by transforming the organization. The new organization's goals implied diversification of political dialogue, deepening mutual understanding on forming a single security zone, improving the forms and mechanisms of economic integration, and devising a joint strategy to maintain peace and stability in the region. However, the new regional structure did not lead to the intensification of regional cooperation. Moreover, in 2004, Russia became a member of the CACO.[3] A turning point was when Uzbekistan joined the EurAsEC and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). As a result, CA was characterized by a completely overlapping membership, and the CACO merged with the EurAsEC (Kazhenova, 2021).

Thus, three integration projects, the CAU, the CAEC, and the CACO, were created consecutively. However, in parallel with the implementation of new CA integration initiatives, the degree of integration was steadily decreasing. CA integration has always remained relevant; however, new proposals have not found much support in the region. In 2005, the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, proposed the idea of creating a new integration organization (The Union of the Central Asian States) without the participation of external states. Still, this initiative was not supported by all the CA states (Marat, 2008).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INTERGOVERNMENTALISM BY STANLEY HOFFMANN

The intergovernmentalist approach by Stanley Hoffmann is characterized by state-centrism and privileges the role of states that are considered basic units in world politics. In order to follow the relationship between the nation-state and the international system, it is necessary to consider the notion of national situation designated by Hoffmann (1966, p. 867). The national situation is an aggregate of "objective factors (inside: social structure and political system; outside: geography, formal commitments) and subjective factors (inside: values, prejudices, opinions, reflexes; outside: one's own traditions and assessments of others, and the other's attitudes and approaches toward oneself)" (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 868). The national situation may significantly impact a state's foreign affairs by promoting or restraining integration processes.

[3] According to the Treaty on the Establishment of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, the CACO had a status of an open organization.

According to Hoffmann (1966), national interests depend on how political leaders define them, considering the domestic and external conditions of the national situation. Therefore, national interests are determined as follows: "N.I. = National situation × outlook of the foreign policy-makers" (p. 869).

The similarity of national situations in reproaching states is an important aspect at the very outset of integration and its further development. However,

> what matters is not that the units be in "objectively" similar situations at the time when integration begins and while it proceeds. What matters is "subjective" similarity – a similarity that is not the scholar's assertion, but the policy-maker's conviction. (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 905)

Thus, similar national situations of countries can lead to various policies depending on the views and decisions of public officials. Even if certain objective favorable conditions exist for integration, political leaders' visions and outlooks about a shared future must coincide. Even if states have similar origins and history, a decisive moment is how politicians interpret these circumstances and see if that unit can ally with a common goal, namely if they can make "a common choice of a common future" (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 906). They should have shared views on the past, the present, and the future of reproaching states, meaning that states should have a) "similar origins," b) "similar itineraries," and c) "similar destinations" (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 906).

Thus, according to Hoffmann (1966), an important obstacle to extensive cooperation is differences in the views of statesmen when national interests are divergent and there is no common outlook about the future. These conditions and obstacles are essential for the research on CA regional integration, which will be discussed in the next section.

## THE ISSUE OF REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA: THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN

The issue of regional integration in CA was characterized by the fact that the dynamics of integration processes in the region heavily depended on the two states: Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan is the largest country in CA regarding its geographic size, while Uzbekistan is the most populous country in the region. In his book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), Zbigniew Brzezinski underscores the

paramount importance of these states in CA. Kazakhstan serves as a so-called land bridge between Europe and Asia due to its vast territory extending from the Caspian Sea to China. At the same time, Uzbekistan is centrally located in the region and borders all other CA republics. For example, Kubicek (1997) states that Uzbekistan could become the anchor state due to its strategic location in the region. Both nations, being resource-rich countries, had the biggest economic potential in the region. Kazakhstan has significant oil and mineral reserves, while Uzbekistan is rich in natural gas, gold, and cotton. All these could provide a basis for regional leadership. Scholars believe that regional cooperation among CA states depends on the Kazakh-Uzbek relationship (Allison, 2008). Moreover, the tandem of Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan launched the CA integration, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joining later. The focus of this analysis is the evaluation of the role of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan from the intergovernmentalist perspective, specifically examining how the views of the leaders of these states on regional integration impeded the progression of what were initially promising regional integration endeavors. By examining the leadership perspectives of the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and their foreign policy strategies, this section aims to provide an understanding of the obstacles to integration within Central Asia.

## The Central Asian Regional Integration and Kazakhstan under Nursultan Nazarbayev

The First President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Head of the State from 1991 to 2019, played a pivotal role in forming Kazakhstan's foreign policy after its independence. President Nazarbayev has been known in the post-Soviet space as an integrator and author of ideas for creating various integration structures. Nazarbayev's leadership was marked by a commitment to an open foreign policy with a strong accent on promoting integration initiatives (Dashzeveg, 2011). He supported and promoted CA integration, and he was an initiator of the dialogue that resulted in the signing of the Cholpon-Ata Agreement in 1994, which later resulted in the creation of the CAU. Beyond Central Asia, Nazarbayev actively pursued a range of regional integration projects, advocating for close cooperation with former Soviet states and other international actors (Karabayeva, 2019; Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019).

The foreign policy of Kazakhstan was formed amidst new geopolitical realities within which the country needed to operate. Nazarbayev considered integration a very important condition for preserving and strengthening Kazakhstan's

independence (Nazarbayev, 2011, p. 75). Taking into account the geopolitical location of CA, President Nazarbayev, in his statements, reiterated that the Central Asian states should not become a subject of the *divide et impera* game ("divide and rule") as it was during the Czarist Empire and Stalin's ethnic policy (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005; Nazarbayev, 2011, p. 75). His speeches highlighted a primary concern that CA could become a battleground for major power disputes. Such a scenario could entangle the nation in a whirlwind of unpredictable military, political, economic, and religious conflicts (Ambrosio & Lange, 2014). Nazarbayev believed that CA leaders should understand that the formation of purely national interests without taking into consideration common regional interests would harm the strategic balance in CA (Nazarbayev, 1999, pp. 257–270). Therefore, according to him, the CA republics should strive for unity to secure their independence, preserve stability, and ensure regional progress.

The Kazakh President also believed that integration was the only way to solve many issues, such as environmental challenges, which were left after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "If we do have a political will for the creation of a system for coordination of national interests, then conflicts will appear between the national interests of our states," he stated in his speech (Nazarbayev, 2011, p. 75). Apart from that, Nazarbayev made an accent on shared cultural heritage, language, and religion. According to him, "The founding fathers of the European Union could only wish they had so much in common" (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005).

President Nazarbayev was also convinced that integration could give CA countries more regional weight and help advance their interests. He considered that only the CA countries could restore the region's economic importance, promoting the creation of a common market and a single currency.

> We have a choice between remaining the supplier of raw materials to the global markets and waiting patiently for the emergence of the next imperial master or to pursue genuine economic integration of the Central Asian region. I choose the latter. (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005)

According to Nazarbayev's policy, the main focus was economic growth based on an open market economy with a high level of foreign investments (Nazarbayev, 2013). Being rich in hydrocarbon resources, Kazakhstan sought opportunities to attract multiple partners to exploit its oil and gas resources and develop different routes to

access the global market. The country's energy industry competed with Russia's oil and gas sector, and in the early 1990s, Kazakhstan depended on Russian oil pipelines (Hanks, 2009). In this regard, Kazakhstan put many efforts to hold reforms "toward an independent, open and free market economy" (Nazarbayev, 1998). Since the beginning of the 1990s, the country has implemented a policy that created favorable conditions for its integration into the world markets, emphasizing the implementation of respective domestic reforms (Gleason, 2001a). In fact, Nazarbayev was "one of the early champions of post-communism reform" (Gleason, 2001b, p. 1082). Kazakhstan quickly adopted a tradable currency, started privatizing leading sectors of the economy, and liberalized prices; it adopted a modern banking system and a securities exchange system and established a new system of government fiscal management. This liberalization strategy brought good results, leading to significant inflows of foreign direct investments from the West, particularly into the oil sector (Gleason, 2001b).

Nazarbayev saw that regional integration among the CA states should benefit all economically. In order to develop the transit trade for oil and gas exports, the CA states needed to have a united foreign economic policy and security system (Nazarbayev, 1999). Though the level of economic cooperation among the CA countries was low, he was still optimistic and encouraged the countries to develop it (Nazarbayev, 2011).

The Kazakh President adhered to a united CA and did not change his views during that time. In 2005, when the CACO was dissolved, Nazarbayev still called upon the creation of a union of the CA states with the Treaty of Eternal Friendship between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan serving as a foundation for such a union with a possibility for other countries to join it (Official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2005). Thus, Nazarbayev had a firm position and repeatedly called for a greater integration of the CA states, promoting the idea of a CA Union.

In his speeches, the Kazakh President regularly emphasized the geographical conditions that defined the country's foreign policy choices (Ambrosio & Lange, 2014). Such geopolitical factors as Kazakhstan's location at the crossroads of Eurasia, a long border with the two regional powers, Russia and China, and a convergence of interests of Russia, China, and the USA in Central Asia influenced its foreign policy formation. The country has been conducting a rational, balanced foreign policy, which implies "developing friendly and predictable relations with all countries that play a significant role in world affairs and are of practical interest to Kazakhstan" (Kazakhstan 2050

Strategy, 2012). Nazarbayev saw Kazakhstan as a bridge between geopolitical interests (Ambrosio & Lange, 2014). Therefore, the strategic vision of the Kazakh leader was to participate in different integration structures with different regional powers to secure its sovereignty. Thus, apart from the integration in CA, Nazarbayev was actively promoting and supporting other integration projects related to the country's concept of multivectorism (Hanks, 2009).

Following its multi-vector strategy, Kazakhstan's cooperation with Russia was a European integration vector. In contrast, the CA integration project, together with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, later Tajikistan, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with the participation of China, was the Asian vector of economic cooperation. In terms of political and security cooperation, the European orientation was the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, and the CSTO. At the same time, the SCO and the Conference for Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (Kazakhstan was the initiator of this project) were the Asian vector (Karabayeva, 2019).

Nazarbayev's active position in initiating integration projects was a means to promote himself as a regional leader. One of his big ambitions was the Eurasian integration project, which he actively promoted during his presidency starting in the 1990s. The Kazakh leadership has always positioned itself as an Eurasian state, and Eurasianism has become one of the major ideologies of Kazakhstan (Odnostalko, 2015). Nazarbayev's idea of Eurasian regionalism implied a more profound integration among the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (Nazarbayev, 1997). This project was necessary to transform the rules of interaction within the CIS, the organization that originally implied a peaceful disintegration among the former Soviet republics (Karabayeva, 2019). Nazarbayev asserted that in the CIS, "the big ones want to see themselves big, the small ones feel small" (Nazarbayev, 1997, p. 170), thus emphasizing that the CIS could not provide equality among its member states. Nazarbayev's idea of the Eurasian integration project was based on the experience and model of the European Union.

To a certain extent, the Eurasian idea demonstrates Nazarbayev's dual identification: Central Asian and Eurasian. This duality somewhat complicated the development of CA integration due to perspectives of choosing an integration model (Kushkumbayev et al., 2015). The Eurasian regionalism had different reactions among the CA states: if Kyrgyzstan supported this initiative, Uzbekistan

did not share the same view. Uzbek President Islam Karimov was highly critical of Eurasian integration (though it entered the Eurasian Economic Community in 2005, its membership was short as the state withdrew from the community in 2008). Karimov believed the project was a hasty decision (Karabayeva, 2019), and he was convinced it would give Russia more opportunities to assert its regional influence (Rosset & Svarin, 2014).

## The Central Asian Regional Integration and Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov

As a new independent state, Uzbekistan also faced the issue of identifying its position in the international arena and a foreign policy doctrine that would adequately take into account the region's geopolitical factors. The first President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, who was the head of the state from 1991 to 2016, played a decisive role in the formation of the country's foreign policy. In his approach, President Karimov aimed to maintain the freedom to maneuver with a strong accent on the country's independence. The central concept of the Uzbek policy was the idea of self-reliance (*mustaqillik*) which meant not to be politically, economically, and culturally dependent on any other state "to pursue autonomy" and "international equality status" (Fazendeiro, 2017, p. 417). Though the country was a member of different multilateral organizations, the foreign policy approach of Islam Karimov, including his vision on various regional integration projects, could be later characterized as cautious isolationism. Tashkent maintained this approach in its relations with key global players and CA neighbors.

Islam Karimov initially supported close cooperation among the CA states (Dadabaev, 2019), referring to a common culture, language, and spiritual values as well as the necessity for joint use of energy and water resources (Karimov, 1997). Being a proponent of regional integration in CA, President Karimov proposed the concept of "Turkistan–our common home" in 1994 to stimulate regional integration of the CA republics (Karimov, 1995). The Uzbek leader also introduced such concepts as "Towards globalism through regionalism" and "Uzbeks and Tajiks are one people speaking two languages"; however, most of these ideas were left only on paper (Tolipov, 2014). Karimov actively participated in the formation of the first CAU, which was later transformed into the CAEC in 1998 and the CACO in 2001.

Being involved in the development of the CA integration, Karimov had an ambition to become the leading regional power in the region. According to Annette Bohr (1998, p. 51), "most initiatives for Central Asian integration [in the 1990s] have come from Uzbekistan leadership and have been accompanied by the underlying message that the region should unify around the Tashkent metropolis." Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) also considered Uzbekistan as the leading candidate for the role of regional leader in CA. During the Soviet period, Uzbekistan was central to CA (Spechler & Spechler, 2009). Having the biggest population among the CA countries, being centrally located in the region, and being the only state sharing borders with all other four CA countries, the President considered Uzbekistan as "the natural leader" (Spechler & Spechler, 2009, p. 354) in the region. Uzbekistan is the heir and custodian of thousand-year-old Islamic traditions and owns historically significant cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand. The country promoted the opening of the International Institute of Central Asian Research in Samarkand City under UNESCO (Doroshko, 2013). In addition, the country was historically inhabited by farmers with a preserved culture and traditions of statehood. Moreover, large communities of ethnic Uzbeks live in all neighboring states (Kushkumbayev et al., 2015). At the same time, Karimov's ambitions were of some concern among the leaders of Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and even Kazakhstan, fearing that the aspirations for leadership could develop into dominance. It was one of the reasons which hindered regional integration (Brzezinski, 1997).

Uzbekistan's position, represented by President Karimov, influenced its relations with Kazakhstan, as it, due to its fast economic development, also started to position itself as a regional leader. As a result, the two states tended to view one another more as competitors than allies. Later, their relations were described exaggeratedly as a struggle for leadership in the region (Rakhimov, 2010, p. 97). President Karimov, initially committed to the idea of a united CA, became disappointed due to differences in views with the leader of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The Uzbek President criticized Nazarbayev for being open to many integration projects (Marat, 2008). It was Karimov's ambition for Uzbekistan to become a regional leader, and he could not accept that another CA state, Kazakhstan, would play the role of a real leader in the region.

After the CACO ceased in 2005, Nazarbayev proposed establishing the CAU again. However, Karimov did not support the proposal.

> Each country determines its attitude to this initiative based on the extent to which this initiative meets the interests of a particular country in this region. I immediately want to state that this initiative is unacceptable to Uzbekistan or us. I want to state this once and for all so there is no speculation. Therefore, if Kyrgyzstan wants to establish this union with Kazakhstan, I think that only the two countries should solve this issue. (Akkuly, 2010)

Even though Uzbekistan was a member of the CA integration structures, Karimov needed to maintain independence and freedom of action. He was convinced that political independence was applied to economic independence. In contrast to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan had an "anti-reformist attitude" and denied "the liberal paradigm of economic interdependency," instead prioritizing "economic self-sufficiency" (Karabayeva, 2019, p. 6). Karimov emphasized that the government's primary task was "to radically restructure the economy and introduce a structure capable of securing Uzbekistan's economic and political independence" (Karimov, 1992, p. 51). The "Uzbek path" of economy implied a gradual and step-by-step approach to transit to a market economy (Karimov, 1994), but, in fact, the economy was mainly controlled by the state. The government launched state-sponsored welfare programs and rejected large-scale privatization while refusing assistance from economic experts and international organizations to liberalize prices and immediately adopt a tradable currency (Fazendeiro, 2017; Gleason, 2001a). Thus, this policy was the opposite of its neighbor's: Kazakhstan had a greater degree of openness and quickly adopted international standards (Gleason, 2001a). Furthermore, Uzbekistan maintained strict control of its currency and exchange rate system to reinforce self-sufficiency.[4] This currency system hindered international companies' investment in the state's economy (Fazendeiro, 2017). The country implemented a protectionist policy as it prioritized the development of the state's producers, and its economy became more closed at the end of the 1990s, which harmed integration processes in the region (Yusupov, 2017). Without adopting a standard economic policy, it was impossible to develop integration.

In contrast to Nazarbayev, whose main priority was the establishment of stable and predictable relations with the global and regional powers, the Uzbek leader was changing the foreign policy strategy, which included either a pro-American or

[4] In comparison with its CA partners' currency, Uzbekistani som was a not convertible currency for a long time, and even after the introduction of currency conversion, the government strictly controlled it.

pro-Russian orientation (Tolipov, 2020). The Uzbek foreign policy changed over time, demonstrating support for different regional institutions at different times. This approach was explicitly designated in the Law "On the Main Principles of the Foreign Policy," which was in effect from 1996 till 2012. It stated that based on the interests of the state and the people, Uzbekistan could enter into alliances, join commonwealths and other intergovernmental organizations, and withdraw from them, thus emphasizing the freedom of the country to join and leave unions. Article 6 declared Uzbekistan's non-alignment with military-political alliances, and it reserved the right to withdraw from any intergovernmental organization in case of its transformation into a military-political alliance (Zakon RU "Ob osnovnyh printsipah vneshnepoliticheskoi deyatel'nosti" [Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On the Main Principles of the Foreign Policy"], 1996).

In the early years of independence, Uzbekistan pursued a foreign policy to reduce its dependence on Russia (Anceschi, 2010; Fumagalli, 2007). Initially, for Uzbekistan, establishing the CA integration institution and placing itself in the center of the union was a kind of protection against Russian domination (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). Though Uzbekistan was a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States Organization, which was established after the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a platform for dialogue for former Soviet states, President Karimov aimed to limit the importance of this organization (Rosset & Svarin, 2014; Spechler & Spechler, 2009). Uzbekistan was also among the signers of the Collective Security Treaty (the Tashkent Treaty) in 1992, but it left the Russian-led CST in 1999 when it was planned to renew the treaty. The Uzbek leadership was suspicious of the possible threat from its association with Russia (Spechler & Spechler, 2009). It was also connected with the fact that in the late 1990s, Uzbekistan had closer relations with the United States, and it considered that the USA could replace Moscow as a security partner.

The state joined the pro-Western GUAM (which became GUUAM after Uzbekistan became its member), officially the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development, the union created in 1997 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, which aimed to restrain the Russian clout among the former Soviet republics (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). It included weakening the member-states' economic and particularly energy dependence on Russia by developing alternative energy routes bypassing the Russian territory through the Caspian Sea, Caucasus, and Europe. The member-states also intended to join the European and Trans-Atlantic

cooperation structures. However, in 2002, Uzbekistan announced its intention to leave the GUUAM and officially withdrew in 2005 (Yaz'kova, 2005). This motivation was connected with the beginning of color revolutions in the member-states of the GUUAM, in particular, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the appeal of the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to color revolutions throughout the post-Soviet space (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). Uzbekistan was very concerned about the external influence on the country's domestic policy.

Another example of the country's active cooperation with the United States was the decision of the Karimov government to grant the Karshi-Khanabad airbase located in the South-Eastern part of the country to the US government for assistance in its military operations in Afghanistan (Anceschi, 2010). A year later, Uzbekistan and the United States signed the Strategic Declaration of Mutual Partnership, formally establishing an alliance between the two countries (Pikalov, 2014). Several factors led the Uzbek leadership under Islam Karimov to the need to develop cooperation with the US, and one of them was the proximity of Afghanistan, with its drug trafficking and arms trade. Until 2005, the military-political vector of the country remained pro-American. However, in May 2005, the Uzbek authorities demanded the withdrawal of the American troops after Washington sharply condemned the suppression of protests in Andijan (Deutsche Welle, 2005).

On May 13, 2005, riots broke out in the Uzbek city of Andijan, followed by the seizure of administrative buildings by armed extremists, and the government opened fire. One hundred eighty-seven people died, and more than 1500 refugees moved to the neighboring country, Kyrgyzstan (Garbuzarova, 2016). President Karimov stated that there was an attempt to raise an Islamist uprising and argued that no one had given the order to shoot. The United States criticized the Uzbek authorities for a violation of the democratic rights of the population and imposed sanctions, including a ban on selling weapons to the state (Garbuzarova, 2016). The Western initiatives started to be perceived as a potential threat to the state's sovereignty (Dadabaev, 2019). In 2012, Uzbekistan adopted a new Concept of Foreign Policy, which added a ban on the placement of foreign military bases on the territory of the country and the unacceptability of integration imposed from outside, which infringed on the freedom, independence, and integrity of the country (Saipov, 2012).

Islam Karimov changed its foreign policy toward rapprochement with Russia and China. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five, which was transformed

into the SCO, the multilateral organization where Russia and China were its founding members. The country considered that China's membership in the SCO was a balance against the Russian clout (Rosset & Svarin, 2014). Moreover, Tashkent rejoined the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2006. However, Tashkent did not ratify any agreements adopted by the organization, abstained from participating in joint exercises, and kept from engaging actively in other non-military areas of cooperation (Tolipov, 2013). The country left the CSTO entirely in 2012 as the organization, according to Tashkent, was developing in the direction of a military bloc (Tolipov, 2020).

Rapprochement with Russia was also demonstrated by Uzbekistan's becoming a EurAsEC member in 2006. The EurAsEC aimed to promote economic integration among the post-Soviet states: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. However, the membership in this organization was also not permanent, as Karimov decided to leave it in 2008 due to doubts about the efficiency of the Community. In his letter to the EurAsEC Integration Committee, the Uzbek leader stated that the main objectives and issues discussed within the EurAsEC were duplicating the agenda of the CSTO and CIS. Another reason was that Uzbekistan disagreed with the principles of accession of the EurAsEC states to the Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. "It is envisaged that the remaining member countries of EurAsEC will accede to the documents of the Customs Union without any reservations or comments, that is, without discussing and taking into account the vital interests of each state," the President of Uzbekistan declared. His letter stated that

> even when joining the World Trade Organization, a long process is envisaged during which the newly acceding states have the right to defend and legally establish fundamental issues that ensure the protection of their national interests, and in the version of the EurAsEC Customs Union such a right is not provided. (RIA Novosti, 2008)

Thus, Uzbekistan has been involved in multilateral institutions (see Table 3) using what has been termed an "elastic foreign policy" (Pikalov, 2014, p. 298). This approach aims to maximize the country's benefit from a particular alliance until another, more advantageous, partnership appears. Membership in different multilateral organizations followed the famous formula that Uzbekistan had no permanent friends; it had only permanent interests (Zhumaly, 2006).

*Table 3.*

*Membership of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the Regional Organizations*

| Organization | Kazakhstan | Uzbekistan |
|---|---|---|
| Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) | + | + |
| Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) | + | 1992–1999<br>2006–2012 |
| Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) | + | + |
| GUUAM (Organization for Democracy and Economic Development) | - | 1997–2005 |
| Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) | + | 2006–2008 |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Thus, Uzbekistan has been changing its relations with the great powers since 1991 to maintain freedom from external influence (Spechler & Spechler, 2009). The foreign policy of Uzbekistan was highly dependent on the decisions made by Karimov at different periods. Though the state remained a member of such integration structures as the CIS and SCO, Karimov later considered them as a good platform for developing bilateral relations. The growing threat of global terrorism and the war in Afghanistan led to the shift of the country's foreign policy from a more complex multilateral engagement to bilateralism. In Karimov's understanding, multilateralism meant compromising and partly pooling sovereignty; on the contrary, bilateralism was a better choice for advancing self-reliance and solving international and regional issues (Fazendeiro, 2017). Uzbekistan also became skeptical about CA integration, as with any other multilateral organization (Marat, 2008).

## Obstacles to the Central Asian Integration

Several factors negatively influenced the dynamics of integration in Central Asia. The Presidents of the two potential leading countries of the CA integration, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, had radically divergent foreign policy strategies and even different philosophies in the region. Kazakhstan, represented by President Nazarbayev, was a strong proponent of integration projects in the region and the formation of efficient regional institutions. According to Kazantsev, this can be described as a "specific local version of liberal integrationism" (Kazantsev, 2018). Though initially supporting CA regionalism, Uzbekistan, under President Karimov,

later changed its priority toward developing bilateral relations. The Uzbek leader was skeptical about the regional integration and establishment of regional institutions as he saw a threat to the country's sovereignty in such unions. This can be described as a "local version of realism" (Kazantsev, 2018). Karimov's attitude toward the CA project greatly influenced it, which became one of the main constraints on integration.

The tandem of Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan could become the driving force of the regional integration in CA, which reminds the European tandem of Germany and France (Kazantsev & Kazhenova, 2019). However, it did not happen. Initially, the Uzbek and Kazakh Presidents recognized the potential benefits of regional cooperation in CA, including economic development and security. However, their visions for the region's future and their roles within it did not coincide. The important factor that hindered the CA integration was President Karimov's and President Nazarbayev's ambitions to become a regional leader. This led to the situation when the two heads of state considered each other not as allies but as competitors. According to the intergovernmentalist theory, the leaders did not make "a common choice of a common future" (Hoffmann, 1966, p. 906) about the united CA.

Another important factor was that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan pursued significantly different approaches to economic reforms. If Kazakhstan had chosen the way of immediate liberalization and an open economy, Karimov would have adhered to the so-called Uzbek path, which assumed a gradual and step-by-step approach toward liberalization. It resulted in the state's control of its economy and even protectionism. The Uzbek approach could not provide favorable conditions for supporting trade ties among the CA republics, thus making economic integration impossible.

The newly CA independent states shared the same issue of maintaining their sovereignty and not becoming too dependent on one of the powers. Due to its geopolitical location among the regional powers such as Russia and China and the interest of the US, the EU, and other regional powers in the region (also connected with the availability of rich energy resources), CA is considered in the context of the New Great Game (Rakhimov, 2010). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had divergent approaches to their external relations. With its concept of multivectorism, Kazakhstan has developed stable and balanced relations and was an active member of multilateral organizations with the participation of the great powers. The Kazakh President has constantly supported integration with Russia within the

Eurasian alliance. It was connected with the national situation of Kazakhstan: it shares the longest continuous international border with Russia in the world. This policy of Nazarbayev was criticized by Karimov as, according to him, the Kazakh President was too open to different integration projects. Moreover, Nazarbayev's idea of Eurasianism created a dualism in his integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space. Uzbekistan, in turn, had a particular foreign policy changing its priorities toward the West or Russia at different periods. Later, the state chose to preserve its independence by distancing itself from other states. Uzbekistan (not having common borders with Russia) distanced itself from Moscow. While the Uzbek President was critical to different regional organizations (whether or not Uzbekistan was a member), Kazakhstan has worked toward positioning itself as "the central pole of attraction" (Akiner, 2001, p. 201).

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of the issue of regional integration in Central Asia through the prism of the intergovernmentalism by Stanley Hoffmann has demonstrated that divergent views of the leaders of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were an obstacle to regional integration development. In fact, the different views of Nursultan Nazarbayev as the President of Kazakhstan and Islam Karimov as the President of Uzbekistan had a decisive impact on the CA regional integration. The presidents of the two potential leading countries also had divergent foreign policy strategies and even different philosophies in the region. Kazakhstan represented a strong proponent of integration projects in the region and the formation of efficient regional institutions. At the same time, Uzbekistan was skeptical about establishing regional institutions as a threat to the country's sovereignty.

The partnership between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had the potential to drive regional integration in CA, similar to the European partnership between Germany and France. However, the visions of the Kazakh and Uzbek Presidents for the region's future and their roles within it did not align. The two presidents viewed each other more as competitors rather than allies. It was a significant obstacle to the CA integration as President Karimov and President Nazarbayev aimed to become regional leaders. Moreover, the two countries had divergent approaches to their external relations with regional powers, which also strongly influenced regional integration.

Thus, proceeding from intergovernmentalist statements, leaders matter. This was the case in CA. Even if there are certain objective favorable conditions for integration, which the CA countries initially had, a lot will depend on political leaders' visions about a shared future of integration, which CA did not have then. The theory of intergovernmentalism is helpful in explaining the issue of regional integration in CA, particularly the importance of the leaders' views for the advancement of integration. A new stage of cooperation between the CA countries was initiated when the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, came to power in 2016, proves this statement. From the beginning of his presidency, Mirziyoyev announced that cooperation with the CA countries would be a priority. This led to new dynamics in CA, intensifying cooperation between the CA states in the form of consultative meetings (Kazhenova, 2021; Kazantsev & Kazhenova, 2019). At the same time, it is important to note that the theory has its limits as it disregards geopolitics; in particular, it does not include the factors of analyzing how the external powers influenced the CA regional integration. This is especially important for such a complex region as CA, which is situated at the crossroads of interests of different powers.

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Aigul Kazhenova

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