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**Consultative Meetings of the Heads of States of Central Asia: Analyzing the Prospects of  
Regionalism and Cooperation in Central Asia**

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## **Abstract**

The high level of disintegration in Central Asia has become the focus of copious amounts of scholarly works on the region. However, the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Leaders held from 2018 to 2023 became an occasion to reconsider the discourse around the future of regionalism in Central Asia. Due to the recentness of the informal meetings of the heads of the five Central Asian countries, this topic has not yet received a sufficient level of attention from the scientific community, which is why the value, influence and implications for the long-term future of the area of these meetings remain undisclosed. This study analyzed the content of the speeches of each of the Presidents of the countries who spoke at the fourth and fifth consultative meetings using qualitative methods, namely Critical Discourse Analysis techniques to gather information, considering linguistic constructions and the emotional narrative of the leaders concerning cooperation in the region to answer the main question and understand whether the discourse of cooperation or a deep-level integration prevails among the visions of Central Asian leaders concerning the future direction for the area. Moreover, for a deeper analysis of regionalism in Central Asia, the literary review will examine the previous works of such scholars on Central Asia as Ikboljon Qorabojev, Filippo Costa Buranelli, Nargis Kasenova and others to delve into the current discourse on regionalism in CA. This study has a huge significance and relevance because the intentions of the Presidents of the region and, accordingly, its future remain unclear and vague for the scholarly community and interested parties, thereby there is a need to fill the gap concerning the role of recent meetings of leaders for affairs' dynamics in the region. During the study, it was concluded that the vast majority of speeches by the Presidents of the Central Asian countries indicate a desire to maintain cooperation without a straightforward initiative to increase

the level of integration, however, some projects proposed at the summit still suggest the idea of a possible rapprochement of countries in the political, economic and cultural levels.

## **Introduction**

Central Asia is often perceived and presented as a "Failed Region", unable to effectively cooperate or integrate despite the benefits that their possible cooperation could bring to the 5 countries. (Allison, 2008) This is confirmed by such failures of countries as de jure signed economic agreements, which de facto have no real importance. For example, the CIS Agreement on the Establishment of a Free Trade Area was signed in 1994 but was never implemented (Laruelle et al., 2012). 1999, a list of common exemptions from the free trade regime was agreed upon but never put into effect (Laruelle et al., 2012). In addition, there is no unified legal system in Central Asia, as well as the lack of a common bureaucratic system in emergencies and many other factors emphasize the disunity of the region (Laruelle et al., 2012). All this runs counter to the fact that after the collapse of the USSR, Central Asia was expected to be successfully united due to geographical proximity, transboundary natural resources, a common post-Soviet traumatic past and similar material and spiritual values. (Bohr 2004)

Some scientists often explain this by saying that the most important actors in Central Asia are too strongly influenced by the battle for natural resources from great powers such as Russia and China in order to successfully deepen interconnection in the region (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019). Others suggest that the main reason lies in security-oriented regionalism, wariness and

distrust of countries towards each other hidden behind the desire to maintain an authoritarian regime with its key features and reluctance to liberalize the economy. (Collins, 2009). However, the trend of disunity in Central Asia began to change rapidly, but not in the form in which it was expected. In 2017, after Shavkat Merziyoev became President and his initiative to increase cooperation in the area, the first trends of cooperation appeared (Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018). The number and frequency of cooperation between country leaders, regional thought tanks, and government-level discussions about a free visa between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have increased (Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018). Moreover, since 2018, consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders began to be held, at which further prospects for cooperation, and joint solutions to environmental and socio-economic problems were discussed, and proposals and initiatives were put forward that awakened a discourse on deepening cooperation and further integration of Central Asia into a full-scale international organization (Moldashev & Qoraboyev, 2018).

The very first consultative meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia was in 2018 and marked a new step towards the success and development of regionalism and cooperation in the region. This meeting was of great importance for both the presidents of the countries, since such a meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia was held for the first time in almost 10 years, and also took place without the participation of the President of the Russian Federation (Altynbayev, 2019). But this is not the only thing that makes this event unique and distinguishes it from previous summits, although it is not officially held. All five Central Asian states were invited to the first consultative meeting, not just the “traditional” four (Tolipov, 2018). At the same time, the author, for example, also points out that such meetings opened the way to solving many problems that remained unresolved for a long time, such as water resources, visas, and territorial

issues. This all indicates that changes and transformations are taking place in the region in the sphere of politics and economics and that these consultative meetings can be called some levers and catalysts for such changes. Despite the fact that consultative meetings and their decisions play a huge role in the development of cooperation between the states of Central Asia, there are still significant gaps in understanding, for example, how exactly such meetings can influence the promotion of regionalism in the region, and in what direction and patterns it will move, as well as gaps in understanding the effectiveness of these meetings. There is also a lack of imperial studies that focus on consultative meetings and the decisions and agreements made at these meetings. Previous research works were aimed more at studying the history and political decisions of individual state leaders. However, they did not address or study the last two consultative meetings, which may be an important aspect in determining the prospects for cooperation. The work aimed at studying and analysing existing prospects for regionalism and cooperation in general, based on the analysis and focusing on the last two consultative meetings. The area of research included the dynamics and development of these very consultative meetings since they are a crucial part and foundation for the dialogue between heads of state, at which issues related to cooperation in such areas as trade and security are discussed. It is also worth emphasizing the importance of the region as a transit point for trade routes passing through it and the region acts as a kind of “bridge connecting the East with the West” (Dar, 2014). Analysis of these meetings provided an opportunity to deepen knowledge regarding the geopolitical situation in the region, as well as the dynamics of cooperation and relations between the countries of Central Asia. For people not interested in politics, such work has a different meaning. For example, for industry, this work can help with risk assessment and investment issues. From an academic point of view, this work can be significant in the study and in-depth understanding of

the Central Asian region. For students of international relations and related specialties, such research work helps in understanding the region and the geopolitical landscape, knowledge of which will be useful for further work in this area, which is the main purpose for us to conduct this study. The worldview for this research will be social constructivism.

### **Literature review**

Regionalism in Central Asia is a topic of many discussions in the scientific community, however, it still remains understudied due to the bias of interest of the scientific community in other regions. Speaking about regionalism in Central Asia, Kubicek (1997) wrote that the fate of regionalism and integration in particular depends on 4 different factors. These factors are: the internal politics of Russia, the relations that are being built between Russia and the states of the region, the relations between the states themselves included in the Central Asian region, as well as the internal relations of states affecting rival elites. The author writes that the states of Central Asia are quite vulnerable and dependent on their neighbour, which is a major power. However, not only this generally affects regionalism and its development in the region. As the author wrote, “Uzbek hegemony” also poses a huge threat to the countries of Central Asia. He called these themes dominant in the development of regionalism in Central Asia (Kubicek, 1997). Khasanov (2021) also touched upon these same factors in his work. He also emphasized that the main player influencing the development of regionalism is Russia and that the countries of Central Asia prefer



cooperation not only among themselves but also with their northern neighbour. The author also based his work on Uzbekistan and examined the development of regionalism from the prism of Uzbekistan, citing most examples confirming the “new regionalism” on the part of this state (Khasanov, 2021). Just like previous authors, Allison (2004) also viewed Russia as a state with regional hegemony and influencing regionalism, in particular the security sphere of regionalism in Central Asia. In general, the author writes that the focus of states on bilateral relations, conditioned by the provision of security assistance, is precisely what the author views as something that displaces regionalism. Tashay and Buranelli (2022) also write about Russian influence. However, they do touch on the theme of balancing. The authors point out that the countries of the Central Asian region have to balance between containing “Russian revisionism” that spreads to the post-Soviet state and maintaining diplomatic ties with this state. Russian revisionism is driven by Russia's desire to achieve a multipolar world and replace the current order, which is based on the liberal Western model. This model of order that Russia is striving for is also due to the historical desire of this state to dominate Eurasia and to hegemony in the region (Parfinenko, 2023). To solve and contain revisionism, Central Asian countries use “balancing regionalism” by creating multilateral relations with players to protect themselves from the politics of great powers and the dominance (Tashay & Buranelli, 2022). Like Kubicek (1997), Moylan (2013) addresses several issues that may affect regionalism and its development in the region. In his study, he also touches on the topic of domestic politics, which creates difficulties for the success of regionalism. The author mentions that countries have so far achieved regionalization only in the security sphere, but they are still far from regionalization in the economic and trade spheres. The author identified “the corrupt and patriarchal nature of their leadership” as one of the main factors influencing the failure to achieve this economic regionalization (Moylan, 2013).

However, in recent years there has been a lot of foreshadowing of the development of regionalism, which has been widely discussed among news publications. Komilov and Tanbev (2023) also wrote about the growing dynamics; such impulses also influenced discussions aimed at regional identity. Buranelli (2023) also spoke in this light after the 5th consultation meeting in Dushanbe. In general, the author writes that regionalism is developing, albeit mostly along “statistical and presidential lines” (Buranelli, 2023). However, the article also assumed the important Treaty on Eternal Friendship, which is quite important in connection with regionalism, which was not signed by Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. One of the important documents signed by the countries of Central Asia related to regionalism, as it was written before, is the Treaty on Eternal Friendship, which laid the foundation for “long-term relations between the countries of Central Asia” and provided the opportunity for cooperation between states (UNITED NATIONS, 1997). It was first signed in 1997 between 3 countries: the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Uzbekistan (UNITED NATIONS, 1997). The document marked long-term cooperation based on mutual respect and trust. This can also be seen as steps towards the successful development of cooperation and integration in such areas as culture and trade. However, in 2022, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan did not sign it again, citing internal procedures that do not allow signing this agreement again, which could jeopardize all efforts aimed at regional cooperation and integration within the region (Najibullah and Asankojoeva, 2022) There are many projects in Central Asia aimed at regionalism and indicating its development. One of the main projects that was aimed at improving and increasing cooperation between the countries of Central Asia is the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Program, which in turn should encourage and increase cooperation. Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2023), which owns this program, stated in its report that they are guided by the principle of “Good neighbours,

good partners and good prospects” (Asian Development Bank, 2023). They support initiatives and regional projects aimed at sustainable development and prosperity in the region. However, these works do not contain one of the most important factors contributing to the development of regionalism-consultative meetings. Also, the above-mentioned authors did not touch on the topic of the direction and model of development of regionalism, whether it will take the form of cooperation or integration. The small amount of work on the topic of consultative meetings may be due to the fact that these meetings were held recently and there is still no precise and clear understanding of their importance for the development of the region.

In light of the increased tendency of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to participate in various summits as a single actor, especially in the consultative summits from 2018 to 2023, this paper seeks to examine the already existing discourse on Central Asian integration comparing this phenomenon with the experience of organizations like the EU and ASEAN, as well as prospects for cooperation and collaboration as an alternative to full integration. This work seeks to fill the scientific gap and reveal the meaning and context of the Central Asian Leaders' Consultative Meetings in order to understand whether Central Asian leaders are seeking to deepen their relationships by seeking to integrate or cooperate. In this literary review, authors who have written about integration and cooperation in Central Asia will be considered.

## **Integration of Central Asia**

The integration of Central Asia is an often discussed issue in scientific discourse. Often, the integration of this region is understood as a semblance of the reconstruction of the Soviet Union, which included all 5 countries of the area, usually led by Russia, or Euro-Atlantic integration, that is, a movement in the direction of such organizations as European Union and NATO.(Pourchot & Stivachtis, 2014)

However, this work focuses on the integration of five Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Hadley Bull defined integration or the creation of an international system as “when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another’s decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole.” (Bull, 1977) Central Asia is one of the few regions in the world that does not have a regional integration organization. Pourchot notes that countries in the region have repeatedly tried to create an analogue of the international system, citing as examples the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Collective Security Treaty Organization the Free Trade Area (CISFTA) (Pourchot & Stivachtis, 2014).

Many support prospects for regional integration, an example of this is the work of Bobokulov (2006), who argues that multi-facilitated cooperation, which will later become integration, is the single most effective path that will lead to political and economic stability. Moreover, the author suggests that if this need is ignored, Central Asia will become an insignificant player and will be vulnerable to other, more influential actors. Also, Necla V. Geyikdagi (2008) suggests that the Central Asian countries need to integrate as this will stabilize

their economies, because individually they are vulnerable, but by uniting they can achieve a certain level of stability, which will make the area more attractive to international investors. Alexander Libman (2008) also suggests that integration in the region will benefit Central Asia since, after the Collapse of the Soviet Union, countries in the region were faced with similar economic problems and could unite to further solve them and develop jointly economically. However, Liebman also emphasizes that actions towards integration in the region are so vague that they remain “ink on paper” and there is no evidence of intergovernmental cooperation (Libman, 2008)

However, there is an opinion that integration in the region, despite attempts at unification through organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has already failed (Sebastian Krapohl & Alexandra Vasileva-Dienes 2019) because the two hegemon, Russia and China, oppose strengthening international relations between the Central Asian countries. The authors argue that the lack of regional organization in the area is rather surprising, due to the fact that there is more than sufficient basis for the desire to cooperate between the 5 countries. In the region, the most widespread religion is Islam, they all share a past associated with being part of the USSR under the leadership of Russia, and the ways of conducting politics and economics of these countries are also similar because they are controlled by semi-autocrats.(Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019) It is useless to blame internal factors for the lack of unity. The author suggests that Russia, by participating in the EAEU, is trying to lure Kazakhstan into cooperation, offering economic advantages for fear of the spread of the influence of the Chinese competitor, thereby alienating Kazakhstan from other Central Asian countries (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019). Moreover, realists suggest that successful regionalism requires a hegemon who will control other actors

(Lake, 2009), in which case the failure of integration can be explained by the fact that in this region Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are fighting for leadership, which is not conducive to more deep cooperation (Krapohl & Vasileva-Dienes, 2019). Constructivists suggest that social identity plays a significant role in integration (Acharya 2005). Identity seems weak in Central Asia, so this may also explain the lack of cooperation. Finally, liberalism relies on domestic interests in the region to explain prospects for cooperation (Moravcsik 1998). In this case, there are also reasons for weak integration in Central Asia, because the authoritarian leaders of the Central Asian countries are very reluctant to open up to their neighbours, not wanting to establish the interdependence necessary for institutionalization and risk losing political control.

Overall, there is a fair amount of work examining integration in Central Asia and comparing the process with regional organizations such as the European Union and ASEAN, nevertheless, most of them focus on the influence of external actors such as China and Russia rather than on domestic and foreign actors and internal actions.

### **Cooperation in Central Asia**

The topic of cooperation between the Central Asian countries remains quite controversial in scientific circles. If some, such as Olcott (2009), write about the practical impossibility of achieving this kind of cooperation, or at least this process will be difficult, since such relations and collaborations imply a commitment to "European values", then as a Central Asian state, they are not quite ready to adhere to them. The author clarifies that although the organizations to which the countries belong and adhere to these values, such as the OSCE, the probability that the

countries themselves will include them in their policies is extremely low. However, another part of the researchers holds the opposite opinion.

Speaking of cooperation Patnaik (2019) mentioned that cooperation between the Central Asian countries is possible precisely because of the common culture and linguistic and religious characteristics. As a result, the author mentions that even in the post-Soviet countries, several conditions were being undertaken to create an institutional mechanism for cooperation in the region. As one example of the focus on cooperation between countries, the author shows a meeting held in Astana on March 15, 2018, after Mirzayev took over the presidency in 2016. He mentions that since that time there have been tremendous changes in the policy not only of Uzbekistan itself but also of other countries about cooperation. He shows the first meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia as a significant step towards cooperation. Mentioning that it was cooperation that made it possible for countries to resolve long-standing unresolved issues in some way. The author calls regional cooperation something that should solve the problems of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Mentioning cooperation, the author also touches on 2 meetings, which were also a confirmation of the desire of the Central Asian countries for cooperation. He calls one of them the meeting in 2017 in Samarkand, where the President of Uzbekistan outlined his views and views on the sustainable development of cooperation, where he mentioned the transit and logistics potential of the region. Patnaik further cites the example of a conference organized in 2019 by the Ministry of Uzbekistan "Interconnectedness of Central Asia: Challenges and new opportunities", where one of the main topics was the dominance of cooperation in the region and saving from geopolitical competition. Paradorn Rangsimaporn, as well as Ajay Patnaik, mentions that the desire to expand Central Asian cooperation also appeared after the collapse of the USSR, which in turn could lead to "central Asian regionalism without

the participation of external actors". The author also mentions ASEAN, which in turn could serve as a good model for countries in the region, since they have common principles and norms, such as "non-interference in internal affairs, consensus, pragmatism, and flexibility." The author also mentions the attractiveness of the organization due to its role in «containing regionalism». The organization also uses internal cooperation as a tool and as a moderating mechanism, which in turn manages and regulates relations with major powers and prevents excessive dependence on them. In general, according to the author, Central Asian countries are increasingly interested in regional cooperation and are increasingly striving for it and can consider ASEAN as one of the potential models for achieving the set goals. In turn, Rakhimov (2010) in his work cites the challenges faced by the countries of Central Asia in terms of integration and cooperation. He writes that since the post-Soviet period, Central Asia has shown interest in the formation of various organizations such as CIS and SCO. However, their effectiveness differs due to problems related to the predominance of national interests over regional ones, which shows that countries are not ready for integration and that cooperation in this regard has a better chance. Economic development and the rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for leadership and concerns about subnational structures are also called barriers. The author also mentions ASEAN as one of the possible examples that Central Asia could use as a model. In conclusion, the author emphasizes that the stage of cooperation between countries is still in its infancy, with weak institutional frameworks. Horák (2018), as well as previous authors, writes that the creation of an integration organization and cooperation has been in the field of interests of Central Asian countries since post-Soviet times. However, several of the attempts to create integration organizations in the region failed due to excessively high expectations, as well as due to the "unwillingness of local leaders to follow formally agreed rules" (Horák, 2018). Like previous



authors, Horák (2018) writes about the rivalry between the leaders of the Central Asian countries, as well as the intervention of other powers such as Russia and China and their integration projects, including the CSTO, SCO, and others, as important factors that destroyed the remnants of the integration potential of Central Asia. Like Ajay Patnaik, he writes about the first meeting of the heads of state and suggests that cooperation is more suitable for the countries of Central Asia. As the author mentions, it is the personal relations of the heads of state that influence regional cooperation, so the warm welcome and friendly atmosphere at the Astana summit in 2018 show optimistic prospects for cooperation.

Unlike previous authors, Akiner (2007) holds an opinion about cooperation, which is due to strong scepticism related to the effectiveness of regional organizations, as well as the problems associated with achieving meaningful cooperation. The author mentions that the history of the creation of regional cooperation in Central Asia shows the scale of misunderstanding and difficulties associated with this task. Such challenges in creating cooperation lead to the fact that aspirations exceed opportunities. Shirin Akiner believes that the rivalry between major players also has a huge impact on the development of cooperation. Russia, in turn, directs all its attention precisely to economic integration, while China seeks to challenge Western influence. Speaking about obstacles, the author mentions two sides of obstacles. The first is that there is an internal obstacle, including distrust and insecurity. The second is external and includes pressure from major powers, which in turn seek to advance their interests in the region. Bohr (2003), as well as Akiner (2007), touches on the general impossibility of cooperation and integration between the states of Central Asia. In his work, the author describes the fact that for the region, as well as for the countries within the region, the greatest threat and tension comes precisely from within the region itself, and not from other powers that are located outside the region. As an example of the

impossibility of cooperation, he describes and cites the fact that weaker countries feared not Russia as a great power that could be a threat, but the domination of Uzbekistan, a neighbouring state. To begin his argument, Pomfret (2008) also mentioned the example of the period after the collapse of the USSR, when the regional trading arrangements (RTA) occurred, the reason for which could be the fact that at the end of the 20th century, there was a surge in “bilateral and plurilateral free trade agreements” (Pomfret, 2008). He called this leap not a developing trend “towards regionalism, but only a reaction to regional disintegration” (Pomfret, 2008). He emphasizes that in Central Asia there were no institutions that could become the foundation for regional cooperation between states.

In general, the authors' views differ on cooperation in Central Asia. However, they all point to obstacles that must be resolved regardless of whether the model of cooperation between States is cooperation or integration. Despite the extensive research work carried out by the authors, this topic is still not fully understood. Having studied the last 2 consultative meetings of the leaders of the Central Asian countries, we will fill in this gap, which will allow us to study this topic in more depth and understand which model of cooperation the countries are striving for.

### **External influence**

To understand the main trends of regionalism among the countries of Central Asia, it is necessary to study and analyze the interests and effects of external actors influencing relationship dynamics between Central Asian Countries. For this purpose, we selected parties that interact with Central Asia most actively and have empirical power in the region. The parties selected for

analysis were divided into two groups: countries that interact with Central Asia most actively, such as Russia, China and Turkey, as well as international organizations which include the OSCE, CSTO and SCO.

### *Countries*

#### The influence of Russia on regionalism in Central Asia

The first country whose interests and commitments in relation to cooperation in Central Asia will be considered in this work is Russia. When discussing any of the political and economic aspects of regionalism in Central Asia, it is not rational to ignore the influence of Moscow, since Russia has significant influence over the region and each country as a whole due to economic dependence, the Soviet unified past and the prevalence of the Russian language in Central Asia, which in fact is lingua franca in the region when other third-party languages like Chinese and English could not come close to the level of prevalence in Central Asia (Kavalski, 2010). Experts suggest that Russia is not interested in, or at least not making any significant efforts to strengthen ties between the Central Asian countries and proposes a role of "defensive integration", which implies unity and cooperation with a common goal to suppress possible international and domestic opposition actions against countries with similar political and governmental systems. (Allison, 2008) In other words, this model does not imply deep integration and encouragement of connectedness between actors, in this case, the countries of Central Asia by Russia, since each country preserves and prioritizes its own interests and national security. Buzan and Waever (2003) also reinforce this idea by describing the region as a weak Central Asian complex in which competition prevails over cooperation, fueled by demarcation problems, problems with ethnic communities and diasporas, and competition for natural resources.

However, despite the scepticism of scholars regarding Russia's commitment to strengthening connectivity in Central Asia, at the Central Asia-Russia 2022 summit, Vladimir Putin, although restrained, positively characterized the format of the Central Asian consultative summits: "I am confident that the new format of our communication will be useful and bring us an additional benefit." (Kremlin, 2022)

Based on all of the above, this part of the study came to the conclusion that Russia does not contribute to deepening cooperation and integration in Central Asia without it, since it does not see any interest or possible benefit in this, since the current status quo and approach to the region as a tool and protection from attacks from the international community is sufficient for Moscow at the moment. The countries of Central Asia are bandwagoning to Russia, but this does not contribute to increasing integration in the region.

#### The influence of China on regionalism in Central Asia

Another significant actor capable of cooperation in Central Asia is undoubtedly China. China plays an important role both in the economy of each Central Asian country individually and in the development of the region as a whole.

China's trade with Central Asia is growing at a rapid pace, as evidenced by the increase in trade turnover since the collapse of the Soviet Union US\$463 million in 1992 to US\$782 million in 1995 and US\$872 million in 1997 (Tang, 2000). This is also evidenced by the fact that trade between China and Kazakhstan, the largest economy in Central Asia, in 1994 exceeded Turkey's

turnover with all Central Asian countries combined (Tang, 2000). Moreover, China's trade with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is also increasing, going from US\$85 million in 1992 to US\$281 million in 1996 (Tang, 2000). Economic interaction with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan has also continued to develop since the collapse of the USSR (Tang, 2000). Moreover, the common borders and residence of the Uyghur diaspora in the countries of Central Asia only strengthen China's role in Central Asia. Central Asia also needs support from China because Beijing provides Central Asia with access to the economy of East Asia. It is in the territory of China that two strategic corridors were built the Uzbeki-stan-Kyrgyzstan-Xinjiang (Kashgar) Highway and the second Trans-Eurasia Railway for these purposes (Tang, 2000).

China has an interest in unifying the countries of Central Asia, and at least in increasing the level of cooperation between them for several reasons. (Tang, 2000) First, economic integration in Central Asia could lead to economic growth and progress, which would make partnerships with Central Asia even more beneficial for China. Secondly, the unification of the countries of Central Asia could potentially relieve the population of the 5 countries from fears and, accordingly, discontent in relation to the dominance or control of China, increasing the independence of the region. Also, increased cooperation between the 5 countries of Central Asia would help minimize the discourse about hostility between Russia and China on the right and influence on Central Asia, since the region would become more independent and would no longer perceive itself as inferior and vulnerable to the influence of Moscow and Beijing (Tang, 2000). Thus, the growth of cooperation and/or integration of Central Asia is in the interests of China. This is reinforced by the holding of The first China-Central Asia Summit in 2023 (The First China-Central Asia Summit, 2023), demonstrating Beijing's interest in relations with Central Asia.

## The influence of Turkey on regionalism in Central Asia

Turkey is another country that has its influence on the region and cooperation between the countries of Central Asia. Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey has shown interest in Central Asia. For example, it created an agency that was responsible for the country's cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, and then in 2009 was created the Turkic Council (Donnellon-May, 2022). As the author mentioned, Turkey's interest in Central Asia is due to several factors. First of all, this is expanding its influence and searching for alternative routes for economic purposes since relations between the West and Turkey remain tense. The second factor is the purchase of weapons. The countries of Central Asia are actively purchasing all kinds of drones and weapons from Turkey, thereby becoming ever closer partners. The third reason is Turkey's energy needs. As Russia, which was considered the hegemony in the region, now enters the war and loses its position, Turkey is expanding its influence and strengthening its global ambitions, positioning itself as the "key link" between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Donnellon-May, 2022). For the countries of Central Asia, according to the author, this is also a good opportunity, since Turkey as a "Eurasian power" can provide access to world markets. Just like the previous author, Osipova (2023) believes that Turkey is also strengthening its position in Central Asia. Starting with the change of name from the Turkic Council to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), thereby conveying the meaning that the organization can now be considered nothing more than a "Turkic-speaking EU", which in turn emphasizes the "pan-Turkic identity" and pursuing common goals. The author considers this as an example of Turkey's soft power. Kahveci and Bonnenfant (2023) also write about this, calling Turkey a "regional player" that uses soft power tools such as cultural and educational institutions and programs for its ambitions. They

also write that Turkey's interest, as well as political steps aimed at Central Asia, began with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

### *International Organizations*

#### The influence of The European Union, EU on regionalism in Central Asia

One of the most important international actors seeking to foster and promote the rapprochement of Central Asian countries is the European Union. For a long time, the European Union was not interested or motivated to pay attention to this region, but this changed due to the expansion of the European Union's borders which was followed by the EU's adoption of a new partnership strategy for Central Asia in 2007 (Hoffmann, 2010). The strategy itself was adopted under the pretext of dividing and implementing effective methods of public administration and government, in other words, sharing positive practices and experiences of the European Union for the countries of Central Asia (Hoffmann, 2010). Central Asia is interested in integrating into international treaties and increasing the level of partnership with the EU, however, 5 countries are not so positive about the conditions and principles of democracy promoted by the European Union due to their commitment to an authoritarian regime (Hoffmann, 2010).

The European Union strives to unite the countries of Central Asia, however, due to too many differences between the Central Asian countries that are fundamental to the European Union, such as democracy, openness and the absence of conflict situations, the influence is unequal. This is supported by evidence that from 1999 to 2001, 419 million euros were allocated by the EU for Central Asia (Hoffmann, 2010), and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan received most of these funds because they were the most cooperative when both Turkmenistan and Tajikistan only got around to 50 and 8 million accordingly (Hoffmann, 2010). However, in general, the European

Union is interested in the integration of Central Asia since it is important for the EU to unify the region's energy resources for their more productive and safe use (Boonstra, 2011).

#### The influence of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, **SCO** on regionalism in Central Asia

The Shanghai Organization can also be called someone who has influence on Central Asia. According to Stonis (2023), the organization not only performs the function of an open platform for regional cooperation but also multiplies the already considerable influence of countries such as Russia and China. In addition to the designated functions, the author also writes that the organization brings a new model for cooperation, which he calls the "Shanghai Spirit". Such a model is aimed at ensuring mutual trust, bringing benefits and signifies equality and respect for its members. As Kolpakova and Kuchinskaya (2015) wrote, the organization embodies the "new regionalism of China", also giving an understanding that the organization supports and strengthens China's influence. The authors also call the Central Asian region a "training ground" where new "diplomatic techniques" are tested and applied, which have not been used or used anywhere else before. Stonis (2023) also speaks on this topic and writes that China, in turn, uses the organization as a platform for strengthening bilateral relations with members of organizations. The author, in turn, also emphasizes that despite the fact that the main goals of the SCO are to strengthen cooperation aimed at solving tasks and goals in the fields of security and stability, nevertheless, the SCO also creates "rules" of cooperation, in other words, it gives an understanding of exactly how cooperation should be built and on what to base both within the organization, so it is outside of it. However, such actions and an "unconventional approach",



including “non-interference in the internal affairs of States”, call into question not only the effectiveness of the organization but also cause a negative reaction from both Central Asian countries and non-member countries of the organization. At the same time, the organization, according to Stonis (2023), despite the fact that the organization makes a great contribution to the energy sector and its infrastructure, at the same time it also has a huge impact on the security of the region. The author also makes a comparison between the SCO and the EU and mentions the differences between these two organizations. Unlike the SCO, which strengthens the geo-political role of its members who already have influence on the region, such as China and Russia, thereby dominating the region, as well as in making decisions in the region, the EU puts "connectivity" at the forefront. According to the author, the EU concept is more aimed at building mutual assistance between the region and its non-governmental actors.

### *The influence of The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) on regionalism in Central Asia*

Another organization with influence on Central Asia can be called CSTO. According to Javaid (2017), the creation of such an organization makes it possible for Russia to remain involved in the affairs of the region while the CSTO remains the region's main security partner, and also increases the country's interest in Central Asia. Such an organization, according to the author, has the goal of containing the influence of the West, and in particular, as the author points out, NATO and the United States, and contributes to expanding the perception of Russia as a “means of ensuring security” in the region. Whereas NATO's actions are seen as a threat. By remaining in the

CSTO, Russia seeks to govern the region and dominate in solving tasks and setting goals in the field of security, thereby remaining hegemony in the region.

### **Research methods**

The purpose of this study was to identify the model of regionalism of Central Asia according to the discourse of 2 consultative meetings among 5 leaders of Central Asia. The study analyzed the prospects for regionalism and cooperation, as well as the direction of this very cooperation in Central Asia through discourse analysis. This follow-up is aimed at deepening the understanding of key issues, as well as existing opportunities and mechanisms for cooperation.

### **Research question and hypothesis**

Main research question focuses on which vision of regionalism (Integration or cooperation) prevails in the last two consultative meetings of the heads of state of Central Asia?

Hypothesis 1:

The model of cooperation prevails in the speeches of 5 of the heads of state of Central Asia in the last two consultative meetings.

Hypothesis 2:

Given that Central Asian leaders are increasingly moving toward a cooperative model of regional development, future initiatives, as well as future policies, will increasingly take into account and reflect elements of joint efforts.

### **How your research question and/or hypothesis is original/different from existing literature?**

Our research question stands out for two primary reasons. Firstly, regional summits among the countries of Central Asia have recently taken place from 2018 to 2023, the last meeting within the framework of the summit was held on September 14-15 in the capital of Tajikistan, Dushanbe. Considering this, scholars and experts had less than a year from the end of the leaders' meetings to conduct a comprehensive analysis and study of what was happening between countries and their leaders. Because of this, the number of works covering the summits is limited, including journal articles by such scholars as Filippo Costa Buranelli in publications such as "The Diplomat" (Buranelli, 2023) and local Central Asian publications such as "The Astana Times" (Ualikhanova, 2023), as well as announcements and press releases on the website of the ministries of foreign affairs of the participating countries ("Fifth Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia | Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan," 2023). Secondly, the Central Asian region is often neglected by the scientific community and, despite the fact that several articles have been written on cooperation and integration in Central Asia, such as the works of Rakhimov, Buranelli and Pourchot & Stivachtis, etc., There is not a single study that focuses on the importance, significance and prospects of the Consultative Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia or at least in any way provides these events with scientific analysis. Our scientific work seeks to contribute to the coverage of this topic and fill the scientific gap around such an important shifting factor in the countries of Central Asia.

## Research design

For a more in-depth study of this topic and to answer the research question we posed, we choose an interpretive approach, focused on interpretation and understanding, analysis of the social context, meaning and perception of personalities, events and international actors. (Lamont, 2015).

The theoretical approach that most accurately described the research methods used during the study in this case is constructivism. This paradigm implies that international actors interact in the world of social constructs and their relationships depend not only on material factors but also on intangible factors such as identity, ideas and perceptions of the actors (Wendt, 1992). Within the framework of constructivism, it is most appropriate to consider the importance and significance of consultative meetings of the leaders of the countries of Central Asia within the framework of strengthening the rapprochement of countries and local regionalism in the context of today's situation in the international arena.

This work is a qualitative study because it is an analysis of non-numeric data with an emphasis on the analysis of social constructs, concepts and events within a general context, and does not seek to identify a direct cause-and-effect relationship between variables, as occurs in a quantitative approach. (Lamont, 2015).

The most suitable and relevant research design for this work was a case study research design, since, by definition, the case study design is about considering and generating knowledge around a specific event that occurred in a strictly defined period and took place at a designated location (Lamont, 2015). As discussed above, consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders took place

in the period from 2018 to 2023 in the countries of Central Asia, the analysis of the event is fully consistent with the chosen research design.

For data collection and analysis, as already mentioned, quantitative methods will be used. To collect information, Internet-based research of primary data such as speeches of the Presidents of participating countries and declarations made at summits, as well as an analysis of secondary data such as articles and press releases on the websites of regional publishers and ministries of foreign affairs covering consultative meetings will be conducted.

To analyze the collected findings, discourse analysis will be used, specializing in interpretation understanding, and analysis of linguistic forms of communication. (Lamont, 2015). Discourse analysis contributed to the study of linguistic constructions, the choice of emotionally charged words and epithets used by the leaders of the Central Asian countries to calculate the attitude of the Presidents of the participating countries toward regional cooperation and integration, as well as to identify what is more preferred by each country.

If there were no difficulties with the choice of methodology and theoretical approach, then the problem with searching and accessing information was inevitable in this case, since not all the presidents' speeches are available on the Internet, including "YouTube" video hosting, and there were some difficulties in finding all 25 speeches, although some of them are in public access. Moreover, due to the recent origin of the summit, as mentioned above, there was no scientific review of informal cooperation in the form of consultative meetings, and there was not a single scientific work that fully focused on this topic, as a result of which we are faced with a shortage of necessary information. Moreover, it is important to remember that some resources, including press releases from foreign ministries, are sometimes written in languages that the researchers do

not speak, such as Uzbek, Kyrgyz, etc. However, these difficulties were overcome by paying more attention to primary resources and the competent use of translators.

## **Limitations**

1. The discursive analysis is based on the last two consultative meetings and does not affect the speeches and statements that were used for the previous three meetings of the heads of State of Central Asia. The last two consultative meetings were chosen as the material for discursive analysis, as they generally show the direction of the development of regionalism and its model. They were among the last to take place and can give a recent perspective on the trajectory of the development of regionalism. Such an analysis provides an understanding of the most pressing tasks and topics pursued by the main states and reflects the latest dynamics in these issues. Also, only the full speeches of all five heads of state at the last two meetings were freely available, whereas the rest of the speeches were not available.

2. Consideration of other meetings attended by the Heads of State of Central Asia for a deeper understanding of the development of regionalism and its model when viewed in a broader geopolitical trend.

## **Discourse analysis**

### **Integration of Central Asia in the speeches of Central Asian Leaders on the summits 2022-2023**

Despite the fact that most often the topic and center of the discourse of speeches at all consultative meetings of the leaders of Central Asia, including the last two, is cooperation, subtle subtext and assumptions of the possibility of integration can be traced, mainly when mentioning and proposing initiatives that involve closer cooperation.

#### *The President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Zhaparov about integration of CA*

For example, On behalf of Kyrgyzstan, at the 4th Consultative meeting, the President proposed and highlighted ideas such as “Construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway”, “joint organization of specialized tourist routes”, “create a common Central Asian” (Nca, 2022), which leads to the idea that Japarov supports partial integration in the region. However, throughout the speech, greater emphasis is placed on cooperation, which is mentioned in the speech much more often than integration. It is also worth mentioning that in his speech Zhaparov very often uses appeals such as: “Dear Heads of State,” and “Dear colleagues,” (NCA, 2022) thereby drawing the attention of participants to important issues. During his speech at the next consultative meeting among Central Asian leaders The President, as in his speech at the previous summit, often mentions the importance of integration in the region. For example, Sadyr Japarov calls for cooperation between countries and their leaders in particular: “The Kyrgyz side considers it important to further expand the forms and directions of cooperation in the field of ensuring

security in the region” (Nca, 2023). The President encouraged the country to cooperate urgently and straightforwardly: “The current crisis conditions of world politics dictate the need for our countries to cooperate even more closely” (NCA, 2023), thereby supporting the discourse of cooperation.

Integration is not mentioned directly, however, the proposal to “create a Regional centre in Bishkek” (NCA, 2023) to create more energy-sustainable and productive production could be perceived as integrating energy production activities.

Despite the proposed initiative, during his speech the President of Kyrgyzstan hesitates much more actively and mentions cooperation in the areas of security, environmental friendliness and economic cooperation rather than integration.

#### *The President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov about integration of CA*

Another representative case of the willingness of Central Asian leaders includes the fact that the integration of Central Asia was also promoted in Berdimuhamedov’s speech at the 4th consultative meeting. For example, the sentence about “integration of transport systems in Central Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the Asia-Pacific region” (Nca, 2022) and “development of the Central Asia–Caspian–Black Sea and Central Asia–Persian Gulf transport routes” (Nca, 2022) implies a certain level of interaction on a deeper level. Moreover, for the successful use of natural resources, the President suggested that “integration corridors” are an urgent topic. In addition, the integration of Central Asia is also affected by the words about the need to “create a single cultural space in the region”; the word “single” in this context means the unification of the flow of cultural information, which is an important identifier of the desire to



integrate Central Asia. Despite this, in conclusion, President Berdimuhamedov concludes that “Turkmenistan is ready for the closest cooperation to achieve these goals,” (NCA, 2022) thereby leaving, on the one hand, apparently expressing his position that cooperation in the region is what Turkmenistan strives for. Although, the phrase “closest cooperation” suggests a certain level of integration. (Admin, 2022)

*The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon about integration of CA*

The statement of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon(2022) contains elements of both integration and cooperation. For instance, by mentioning security and issues related to its strengthening, the president touches on joint actions, which can be considered as an element of integration. Such actions, in turn, assume that countries will respond with joint efforts and will conduct joint coordination. Another example of integration and ideas of integration in speech can be the construction of a transport corridor, which in turn, passing through the entire region, will connect the countries of Central Asia. This type of project involves deeper cooperation and can be considered as integration. Also, as another example of integration, statements related to "joint" can serve, for example, such as joint response, joint activities, and joint promotion (NCA, 2022). Such statements may be of the nature of ordinary cooperation, however, a large number of the use of such words can be considered as a "call" for something bigger and deeper, which brings about unification and joint actions and decisions. In his speech on the fifth consultative meeting, Rahmon also hints at possibilities of integration in the region. In the text, there are also references to projects, for example, “development of individual cooperation programs” and “large transport and infrastructure projects” (Rakhmon,2023). Although in the first he will mention that these will

be cooperation programs, it is worth considering that the projects rather imply the unification of policies and joint management, which can be attributed to the element of integration. Also, words such as “we must work together and unitedly”, “further expansion of trade and economic relations”, “creation of the Association of Media of the States of Central Asia”, and “highest award” can refer us to joint decisions and associations, in the sense that they are aimed at a higher form of cooperation (Rakhmon,2023).

*The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev about integration of CA*

The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan also demonstrates readiness for possible integration by his words at the 4th consultative meeting. An example of integration is the use of the word "alliance" in speech, which can be considered as an action and a step towards closer cooperation related to integration (NCA, 2022). In his speech, he also touches on the economic sphere and its development. The President focuses on expanding cooperation and increasing exports between countries. Such statements may be evidence of steps towards integration in this area. Also projects such as the Concept of Cooperation of Central Asian States, “an expert platform to develop mutually acceptable approaches to border delimitation”, AIFC Multipass,” engagement between the countries within the framework of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea”, “Common Goods Transmission System of Central Asian”. All these projects refer us to the creation of deeper cooperation, which involves the creation of common policies and legal frameworks, as well as the joining of efforts involving steps towards integration. Speaking about the same AIFC Multipass, the president says it “will provide AIFC partners with full access to the territories of member countries,” which implies deeper cooperation than relations that are based only on simple cooperation and does not imply a joint policy and legal framework (Nca,

2022). To confirm his intentions, the president also uses the words “close cooperation” to call for the removal of any systemic barriers that impede him (NCA, 2022). It can be also often found the words “joint measures”, “joint product promotion”, “establish close ties” “We must unite” “strengthening our ties” “rapprochement” and “increased engagement between the countries” (Nca, 2022). In the speech, one can also find words that indicate that regionalism is advancing and adopting a model of cooperation rather than integration. For example, “common interests”, “consolidating our efforts”, “unity and solidarity”, “resumption of full-fledged cooperation”, “expand cooperation”, “comprehensive cooperation”, and “close cooperation” (NCA, 2022). However, such words are often accompanied by words such as "full-fledged", "consolidating" and "close" which can be stronger when it comes only to cooperation that does not imply anything deeper (NCA, 2022). Some words could relate us to the idea of integration, for example, “joint measures”, “joint product promotion”, “establish close ties” “We must unite” “strengthening our ties” “rapprochement” and “increased engagement between the countries” (Nca, 2022).

We can conclude that even though the president speaks only about cooperation and collaboration, he also tries to balance his speech and not use words that directly indicate integration. He only indirectly touches on this idea, by proposing some common political decisions or projects, which in turn may have the nature of deeper cooperation.

#### *The President of Uzbekistan about the integration of CA*

However, one can also trace the mention of possible economic integration: “Trade and economic cooperation is the main driver of regional partnership and integration”. Such references

can be traced back to the talk about the possible creation of a free trade zone. Also, an important element is the creation of regional programs for further deeper cooperation and integration of state economies: “cooperation between sectoral ministries and national companies”. The speech also contains references to transport integration, including such elements as transport connectivity, as well as agreements aimed at transport connections, which may indicate integration in this area, which in turn is one of the key elements in the context of economic integration.

### **Cooperation of Central Asia in the speeches of Central Asian Leaders on the summits 2022-2023**

The leaders of the countries of Central Asia were much more willing to talk about cooperation in the region than about integration, since this is a “softer method” of cooperation that does not imply serious changes at the structural level, as a result of which cooperation and everything that is interconnected with cooperation at a level that does not include the excessive and labor-intensive deepening of relations in Central Asia without legal ties and radical changes is mentioned more often.

#### *The President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Zhaparov about cooperation of CA*

Since the fourth consultative summit of 2022 was held in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, the speech of the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov, as the host of the event, was given special attention and the leader of the country has a significant responsibility to open the event with a speech that can set the tone of respect and cooperation. In his speech, the President of Kyrgyzstan maintained a formal tone, using emotionally charged language, openly demonstrating

Kyrgyzstan's positive attitude towards cooperation in Central Asia. In the speech of the President of Kyrgyzstan, the integration of the countries of the region was not mentioned, while the opportunities, benefits and prospects of collaboration were emphasized several times.

Sadyr Japarov began his speech by mentioning the 30th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations in the region, thereby showing the unity and common history of strong relations among the participating countries. To characterize and describe relations between Central Asian countries, the President uses phrases such as “strong friendship”, “harmonious coexistence”, and “five fraternal peoples” (Nca, 2022), which expresses an optimistic perception of the dynamics and interconnections in the region. However, Mr Japarov also mentions the “ups and downs of history” experienced by the countries of Central Asia, thereby speaking about the successes of cooperation and, in an extremely delicate manner, avoiding mention of the conflicts and declines that occurred on the territory of Central Asia.

According to President Japarov, the main goal of the region is “to preserve the integrity and security, to ensure the development and prosperity of our countries and peoples.” (NCA, 2022) However, this formulation does not express whether Kyrgyzstan is more supportive of cooperation and integration. However, in the very next sentence after this, the Summit Host openly announces that Kyrgyzstan “supports the format of the Consultative Meeting of the heads of Central Asian states” (Nca, 2022) and emphasizes that this format has a positive effect on “region-wide cooperation in political, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian spheres and international affairs.” (Nca, 2022) Thus, for the first time in a speech, he mentioned the cooperation of the Central Asian countries and leaned towards it. Moreover, the President has repeatedly mentioned that international relations are currently in crisis, implying the Taliban group coming to power in Afghanistan. From this, Japarov made an intermediate conclusion that

cooperation is important in these difficult and unstable times, very straightforwardly demonstrating an optimistic attitude towards rapprochement in the region: “I would like to note Kyrgyzstan’s desire for close cooperation with the countries of the Central Asian region.” (Nca, 2022).

Another problem highlighted in the speech of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan is the decrease in the volume of water resources as a result of climate change. Mr. Zhapparov very openly expresses dissatisfaction with the situation, as the main representative of the position of Kyrgyzstan: “Kyrgyzstan does not yet receive adequate compensation from the accumulation and conservation of water resources,”(NCA, 2022) thereby speaking about what Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have failed to cope with, masterfully avoiding direct mention and accusation of the names of these countries. The President at the summit noted that “Kyrgyzstan also advocates expanded cooperation in the hydropower sector,” thereby offering and encouraging countries to strengthen cooperation in this area.

In his speech, the President talks about economic cooperation and the importance of reducing tariffs to attract foreign direct investment. To do this, according to the leader of Kyrgyzstan, it is necessary to improve the infrastructure “primarily in terms of increasing the level of integration within the region,” thereby also mentioning integration along with cooperation.

Thus, summing up all of the above, we can conclude that the President of Kyrgyzstan Japarov in his speech speaks directly about the importance of cooperation in the region for fostering sustainable development, maintaining security and economic growth, and also speaks without hesitation about environmental and political problems in Central Asia, openly opposing the country's position. In his speech, he often spoke about the importance of cooperation in the

region, much less often mentioning integration, although many of the ideas and proposals during the speech indirectly implied the integration of countries.

At the fifth meeting, as in his speech at the previous summit, he often mentions the importance of cooperation, only occasionally touching on integration in the region. For example, Sadyr Japarov calls for cooperation between countries and their leaders in particular: “The Kyrgyz side considers it important to further expand the forms and directions of cooperation in the field of ensuring security in the region” (Admin, 2023). The President encouraged the country to cooperate urgently and straightforwardly: “The current crisis conditions of world politics dictate the need for our countries to cooperate even more closely” (Admin, 2023), thereby supporting the discourse of cooperation.

*The President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov about cooperation of CA*

The speech by the President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov follows a similar pattern to the speech of the President of Kyrgyzstan, also mentioning several times and promoting cooperation in the region, however, at the same time, offering several ideas for resolving and strengthening the situation in Central Asia. However, Mr. Berdimahemedov in his speech places greater emphasis on joint projects, as well as the participation of the UN and UNESCO in helping to streamline the political order in the region through projects like the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia and speaks about the ongoing challenges in a very vogue manner.

President Berdimuhamedov several times emphasizes and encourages the participating countries to cooperate. Firstly, he proposes to continue to hold summits and meetings in this format to “intensify and strengthen political and diplomatic cooperation.” Further, the speech mentions the President of Turkmenistan expressing his position regarding the situation in Afghanistan, calling for cooperation: “The most important part of cooperation in the field of regional security is still joint work in the Afghan track.” Moreover, Berdimuhamedov in his speech proposed “hold consultations at the level of the heads of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of the Central Asian States,” (NCA, 2022) which in itself is an aspect of cooperation. Cooperation in Central Asia is directly supported by the leader of Turkmenistan with the phrase “Turkmenistan believes that today the trade, economic and investment cooperation of the Central Asian states”, from this phrase the desire to maintain and develop interaction with countries in the region is clearly expressed” (Nca, 2022).

At the 5th summit, President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov emphasized two main aspects in his speech. Firstly, Mr. Berdimakhumedov expresses his position regarding the importance of the summits, thereby encouraging cooperation in the region. His words: “The format of consultative meetings of the heads of Central Asian States as an interstate mechanism designed to become a guarantor of maintaining consultative regional cooperation” (Turkmenistan Attaches Great Importance to Meetings of Heads of Central Asian Countries - President, 2023) emphasizes the inestimable importance and inclination towards cooperation of the countries of Central Asia.

The second aspect raised is Berdimuhamedov’s speech speaks of the significance of such a document, the UN General Assembly resolution of June 28, 2022, confirming and documenting



Central Asia as “a zone of peace, trust and cooperation” (Turkmenistan Attaches Great Importance to Meetings of Heads of Central Asian Countries - President, 2023).

Leader Berdimuhamedov's speech focuses on emphasizing the legal aspects of regional partnership and also does not mention integration, leaning more towards interaction at the level of cooperation among the countries of Central Asia.

*The President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev about cooperation of CA*

The next speech that will be discussed in this work is the speech of the President of Uzbekistan - Shavkat Merziyoev, in which the leader of the country also placed the greatest emphasis on cooperation between the five countries of the region in various areas, such as infrastructure, trade, logistics, conflict resolution and diplomacy.

President Merziyoev mentioned that economic collaboration in the region has not been carried out sufficiently, thereby motivating the participating countries to improve trade ties. According to him, to reduce dependence on imports, the countries of Central Asia need to have “a system of border trade zones with unified rules and simplified procedures for the supply of goods.” (NCA, 2022) which indicates a desire for integration in the economic sphere.

However, further in his speech, the President says that it is necessary to strengthen cooperation in the field of the industry: “Another important task is to promote joint projects of industrial cooperation.”(NCA, 2022) shifting the desire for collaboration without the need for integration. To also promote the development of interregional cooperation, Merziyoev proposed

the “launch of the annual Forum of Central Asian Regions,” (NCA, 2022) which would also strengthen ties and potentially increase the number of interactions between countries. Moreover, the importance of multilateral cooperation in the environmental aspect was highlighted, measures of which include decarbonization of production and rationalization of the use of water resources. Also, the President proposed organizing the Central Asian Festival of Art, Cinema and National Cuisine (NCA, 2022) to promote public awareness and common history. In addition, special attention was paid to maintaining and improving cooperation in the field of regional security. In his speech, Shavkat Merziyoev emphasized that partnership is important because “socio-economic reconstruction of Afghanistan should remain a top priority,” (NCA, 2022) once again speaking about the situation in Afghanistan and highlighting it as the main goal of cooperation at the moment.

At the end of his speech, Shavkat Merziyoev stated that the summits “strengthen the strategic partnership and trust of Central Asian countries, encourage promoting joint practical cooperation projects.” (NCA, 2022) emphasizing cooperation that does not turn into integration and unification, but providing arguments for mutually beneficial cooperation and partnership.

As in the speeches of previous presidents, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev(2023) at the fifth meeting also emphasized that cooperation is the driving force for the development of the region: “We have made serious progress in resolving vital issues and filled our cooperation with a qualitatively new content». He also often uses the words «our» and «we»: «our countries», «our region», «we intended», and «Our key priority» which can describe the relations of the President of Uzbekistan towards the countries of Central Asia as friendly and having common goals and objectives partners. He also touted the industrial cooperation «industrial cooperation of Central Asian countries for the long term». The focus is on creating the

foundation and conditions for trade and removing existing barriers. In general, the speech was aimed at emphasizing the success and cooperation projects between the countries of Central Asia in such areas as culture and security. There is also a frequent use of the word "partnership", which may indicate that the President of Uzbekistan sees further cooperation with the countries of Central Asia in a more equal and cooperative model: «successful partnership», «regional partnership», «Regional Partnership Program» and «strategic partnership of our countries».

*The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon about cooperation of CA*

The statement of the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon(2022) contains elements of both integration and cooperation.

Speaking about cooperation, it is worth noting the emphasis that was placed on actions aimed at improving the socio-economic plan and cultural exchange. They are aimed at mutually beneficial cooperation and assume common prosperity. Speaking about cooperation, the words “good neighbourly and friendly relations” were used several times, which implies a mutually beneficial partnership on equal terms, which can be considered as an element of cooperation (Nca, 2022). Some words can have 2 meanings: “close cooperation ties”, “boost cooperation”, “strengthening interaction”, “coordination between special services to create specific mechanisms for joint struggle against challenges and threats to regional security”, and “expanding regional cooperation”(Nca, 2022). Although all of them imply cooperation, there is also an emphasis on its deepening and expansion, which refers to integration.

In general, in the text, one can find both aspects of integration and aspects related to cooperation. The speech of the President of Tajikistan also touches on the areas of security in the region and the joint efforts that will be aimed at resolving the situation with Afghanistan and terrorism. He also mentioned the expansion of cooperation in such areas as transport, culture, and economics.

In general, the text from the fifth meeting itself and the language in this text shows that the President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon (2023) sees future relations between the countries of Central Asia more in the model of cooperation than integration. Phrases and words such as “mutually beneficial cooperation,” “joint efforts,” and “strengthening interstate cooperation” emphasize that the basis of regionalism will be cooperation, not competition and struggle (Rakhmon, 2023). The agenda and issues raised at this meeting, such as cultural exchange or trade, also indicate that developments in relations between the countries of Central Asia are focusing on cooperation. Frequently used words like “our” and “we” also give a vision of cooperation between countries at the level of mutually beneficial friendship. For example, the President of Tajikistan used the word combination of “our consultation meetings”, and “our peoples”, and also used the words “fraternal peoples”, referring to the countries of Central Asia and the ties that bind states to fraternal relations, equal and similar (Rakhmon,2023). The President also used the words “trust, friendship, and cooperation”, which also makes it clear that he sees relations between countries in a friendly context, where countries will work together to achieve their tasks and goals (Rakhmon,2023). In general, in the speech one can find more references to cooperation, for example in the field of security, culture, and social life, but one can also find elements of integration.

*The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev about integration of CA*

When starting his speech, the President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (2022) used words such as “good-neighbourliness” and alliance (NCA, 2022). The use of such words makes it clear that the president, first of all, treats countries with mutual respect and the intention of not interfering in the internal politics of countries. Also, the use of these words in speech will indicate that the relations between the countries assume and are friendly and a willingness to cooperate with common goals for the benefit of all parties. The alliance also implies mutually beneficial cooperation and refers to formal rather than friendly agreements and partnerships in certain areas, such as economics or politics. This type of cooperation entails the achievement of both common goals and common objectives. In the speech of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, one can notice a balance between integration, in particular economic, and cooperation. The same balancing can be seen in such sentences as “mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation”, and “Active cultural and humanitarian ties” (NCA, 2022). Such words can refer to cooperation, suggesting that countries will work together to resolve issues. However, such statements can also be attributed to the ideas of integration, in particular, they can be implemented in such areas as, for example, the creation of a common economic policy and common agreements.

The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (2023) begins his speech by emphasizing that the relations that exist and will develop between the countries of Central Asia are of the nature of “mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation.” This

statement gives reason to think that the foundation of relations is a collective approach in setting tasks and goals aimed at the benefit of all participants, thereby showing that the common benefit is a priority.

The President also touched upon the topic of joint ventures and cooperation in the field of trade, focusing on creating the necessary basis for cooperation and eliminating existing barriers. This step shows the strengthening of cooperation between countries for mutually beneficial trade. He also emphasized that the mutual benefit that brings us to cooperation can also be achieved through the import of products. Such statements may refer us to the idea of cooperation in the field of economics and focusing on partnerships between countries. However, the statement “unified electronic database” can also be found in the speech, which implies the storage of information about producers (Tokayev, 2023). Such a step could be seen as the beginning of integration in the region. On the other hand, such a step may not involve the creation or unification of state institutions, and may not entail changes in the state structure that could be relevant to integration. Such a step will only strengthen the co-trulness and deepen it, but will not lead to deeper integration. Even though there were also discussions regarding the same Council of National Coordinators or Secretariat consultative meetings, such steps signal the same deepening of cooperation rather than integration. He, like the President of Tajikistan, also emphasizes fraternal relations between countries, which are based on equality and mutual benefit. In his speech, one can also find “partners”, which also emphasizes the equal relations that countries strive for. In addition to the previous one, the President of Kazakhstan also mentions in his speech the “five-sided format of mutual relations” (Tokayev, 2023).

**The result of such meetings can be the signing of several documents, such as**

1. Joint statement on the results of the Fifth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States, which also emphasized the main priorities of cooperation between the countries, including in the economic, and transport sphere and concerning social life and the participation of youth in it (Tokayev, 2023).
2. Agreement between the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan on common directions of youth policy. This policy is aimed precisely at strengthening the participation of young people in such areas as politics, economics, and social life in the countries of Central Asia (Tokayev, 2023).
3. Agreement on strengthening land transport interconnectivity in Central Asia, aimed at strengthening cooperation in the transport sector between the countries of Central Asia (Tokayev, 2023).

**Discussion**

The research revealed that all five leaders of the Central Asian countries structured their speeches around four main themes. For a deeper and more sophisticated analysis of the content of the summits, it was decided to highlight and identify the differences in the approaches that each President used to cover them. These areas include issues of Security in Central Asia, Ecology and the State of the Environment in the region, the Creation of a Unified Transport Corridor and Trade facilitation.

## **Security and threats**

Consultative meetings of Central Asian leaders have become an excellent platform for discussing pressing and pressing problems in the region. In this context, it would be unwise and counterproductive to avoid mention of current military conflicts, potential security threats and political instability occurring in the region. This would also cause distrust and scepticism regarding the necessity and effectiveness of the new format of cooperation in Central Asia on the part of the media and the population of the countries. That is why the leaders of the Central Asian countries discussed security threats, but each leader of the country did this in his manner, setting priorities and emphases depending on their national interests.

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, in his speech at the 4th Consultative Meeting very delicately proceeds to highlight security issues, tactfully referring to them as “factors of instability in the region” (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022), without directly naming any of the current threats. However, despite this, the President strictly indicates that, in his opinion, the only way to resolve the matter is through peaceful means and adherence to the principles of international law (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan does not miss the opportunity to emphasize his status as a “peacemaker” in the region, to increase his credibility among the participants, focusing on his



contribution to the peaceful settlement of territorial issues in the area, speaking of himself as “Kazakhstan, as the only post-Soviet state that has completely delimited its long border” (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022) and offers his assistance in this matter. Moreover, Tokayev proposed an intriguing initiative to create a special expert platform to standardize border delimitation. (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022)

At the fifth consultative summit in Dushanbe, President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Japarov repeated the agenda from his speech at the fourth summit, re-emphasizing the importance of resolving the situation in Afghanistan: “peace and stability in Afghanistan is one of the priority conditions in the regional security system,” while emphasizing that Kyrgyzstan respects the rights of Afghan citizens to “determine their future” (Admin, 2023).

Serdar Berdimuhamedov structured his speech in such a way that his focus revolved around security problems, however, the problems themselves were mentioned very vaguely in his speech. To name and characterize them, phrases such as “attempts to destabilize the internal political situation in the states of our”, “attempts to destabilize the internal political situation in the states of our”, and “the consequences of military-political conflicts taking place” were used in relative proximity" (Nca, 2022) (presumably the situation with Afghanistan and Russia's intervention on the territory of Ukraine), as well as "the consequences of military-political conflicts taking place in relative proximity". All phrases do not directly point to the sources of complications and dangers in the region, avoiding confrontation.

Sadyr Japarov, President of Kyrgyzstan, in his speech at the fourth rally, places greater emphasis on the military situation in Afghanistan (Admin, 2022), speaking directly about the problem, unlike most speakers. Overall, Japarov's speech evokes reluctance to recognize the Taliban government in Afghanistan but acknowledges that these are realities that need to be adapted to (Admin, 2022). Also, he emphasizes that Kyrgyzstan has actively begun to develop relations with Afghanistan and emphasized that “Last year they delivered humanitarian cargo to Kabul and Badakhshan.” (Admin, 2022). Kyrgyzstan actively calls on the countries of Central Asia to facilitate humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and adhere to the principles of anti-terrorism and countering drug trafficking. Another problem that Japarov directly highlights is the delimitation of the state border of Kyrgyzstan with fraternal Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Admin, 2022).

President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan also drew attention to security problems in his speeches, speaking mostly about drug trafficking, referring to them as “sleeping pills”, as well as about the problems of border terrorism and the problems of religious fanaticism and extremism (Admin, 2022). Unlike the President of Kyrgyzstan, the President of Tajikistan did not readily express support for Afghanistan and rather spoke about the discomfort of the countries of Central Asia in connection with the events in Afghanistan (Admin, 2022).

The President of Turkmenistan also paid attention to challenges to the security of the region, referring to them as “attempts to destabilize the internal political situation” (Admin, 2022). He included drug trafficking, political extremism, and terrorist activity in their list (Admin, 2022). Unlike his colleagues at the summit, Serdar Berdimuhamedov also mentioned the threat of illegal use of information, hacking of secret databases, as well as the penetration of “ideas and attitudes that run counter to the historical traditions of the peoples of Central Asia” from the outside

(Admin, 2022), allegedly implying democratic, tolerant and liberal views on the part of the West, wanting to preserve the traditional values of the region and emphasizing the conservative position of the country on these issues. Moreover, the President of Turkmenistan emphasized that the countries of Central Asia border Afghanistan and must also contribute to solving the destabilization of the country in cooperation with the UN (Admin, 2022).

## **Ecology and Environment**

Central Asia is a region whose political interactions are directly influenced by disputes around environmental issues and natural resources, which is why discussion of these issues at consultative meetings was necessary and inevitable. However, each of the five participating countries voiced exactly those problems that coincide with their national interests and priorities.

At two consultative meetings, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev was one of the most ardent proponents of solving environmental problems and devoted a significant part of his speech to this at the fourth meeting. Tokayev drew the attention of his colleagues to such problems as the need for rational use of water resources to preserve the Aral Sea, as well as a critical decrease in the volume of glaciers which will subsequently lead to a decrease in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya by several times and once again emphasized the urgency of the problem of change climate, providing the necessary statistics (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). As a solution, Mr. Tokayev proposed creating a “Central Asian project office for environmental protection and implementation of a coordinated policy on

climate change in the region” (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022) and called for contributions to the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea and spoke positively about assistance from Kyrgyzstan (Speech by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev at the Fourth Consultative Meeting of the Heads of States of Central Asia - Official Website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022).

The problem highlighted in the speech of the President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan is the decrease in the volume of water resources as a result of climate change. Mr. Zhapparov very openly expresses dissatisfaction with the situation, as the main representative of the position of Kyrgyzstan: “Kyrgyzstan does not yet receive adequate compensation from the accumulation and conservation of water resources,”(Admin, 2022) thereby speaking about what Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have failed to cope with, masterfully avoiding direct mention and accusation of the names of these countries. The President at the summit noted that “Kyrgyzstan also advocates expanded cooperation in the hydropower sector,” thereby offering and encouraging countries to strengthen cooperation in this area.

Shavkat Merziyoev in his speeches placed special emphasis on the environmental aspects of cooperation. The President of Uzbekistan emphasized that Uzbekistan initiated the “Green Agenda” framework for the countries of Central Asia and called for a focus on decarbonization of the region (Admin, 2022) and also proposed initiatives and solutions such as “advanced development of alternative energy with the organization of mutual supplies of electricity, the widespread introduction of water-saving and environmentally friendly technologies, as well as the rational use of water resources.” (Admin, 2022) Also, the President expressed his regrets that the countries of Central Asia lag behind their Western colleagues in issues of environmental security

(Admin, 2022). Like Kazakhstan, unlike Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Merziyoev did not talk about problems associated with military invasions and destabilization, such as the situation in Afghanistan, but framed his speech around environmental concerns.

## **Transport corridor**

The transport corridors were one of them. There are 4 main topics on the agenda at the meeting of the 5 presidents of Central Asia. Effective use of its position at the junction of North-South, and East-West routes was one of the tasks set for the near future.

The President of Kyrgyz Republic Sadyr Zhaparov in his speeches emphasizes that transport routes are extremely important for Central Asia and for the development of the region since the countries are landlocked. He emphasized that to achieve goals in this area, integration is necessary, as well as "connections to global transport hubs and corridors"(NCA,2022). He also gave a comparison of the success of these transport corridors with the success of the Silk Road. In his speech, he also emphasized the railway route that runs through China, as well as through Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, thereby connecting China with Central Asia. The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev also spoke on the same topic, this was his 4th aspect, which he touched upon in his speeches. He, like the President of Kyrgyzstan, focused on the geographical location of the region and spoke about the importance of the Trans-Caspian route. In his speech, he also encouraged other heads of state to use the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran route, which he mentions as "connecting East Asia and the Persian Gulf". At the same time, he also emphasized the importance of working together to optimize transit traffic. President of

Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon also supported the initiatives of the heads of state and stressed the importance of "improving transport corridors to create favorable conditions for the movement of goods (NCA,2022). The President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov, in turn, stressed the importance of integration in this area and expressed "readiness to work together on the routes Central Asia – Caspian Sea–Black Sea and Central Asia – The Persian Gulf"(NCA,2022). Moreover, he proposed to hold a "meeting of the heads of transport departments of the Central Asian countries"(NCA,2022). He, like previous heads of state, expressed a desire to revive the Silk Road. The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, also expressed support for the idea of transport corridors and advocated the development of routes to India, Pakistan and China.

From the speeches of the five presidents at the meeting, it can be concluded that transport corridors and their development are an important step for achieving the success of the region, as well as its development. Projects aimed at improving routes will have a positive impact not only on the transport and logistics sector but also on the economic sphere, optimizing trade and simplifying market entry.

### **Trade facilitation**

Another topic was the creation of an information base to optimise trade and simplify the necessary procedures. In this vein, President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (2023) expressed a proposal to create a "unified database of manufacturers of goods within the framework of the Central Asia Gateway portal," which would not only increase trade turnover but also simplify customs control. Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2023) also supported the initiative and in his

speech expressed the idea of creating a "free trade zone" to eliminate barriers and create a common database as well as to "launch a regional e-commerce platform." The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, in turn, stressed the need to ensure security in the information field and space and noted that security is a priority for the region. The President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov (2023) also spoke in favour of simplifying customs procedures to "optimize the flow of goods and services."

## **Findings**

Upon having conducted a discursive analysis of the last two consultative meetings of the heads of Central Asian states, which took place in 2022 and 2023, it was noted that even though at the fourth meeting, the presidents maintained a balance between regionalism and cooperation, touching upon projects that would be aimed at both cooperation and integration, at the last meeting the prevailing idea was still cooperation. For example, at the fourth meeting, speaking about cooperation, the heads of state emphasized cultural and social joint projects aimed at rapprochement. It was also often possible to find words like "five fraternal peoples", "good neighborly and friendly relationship", and "Dear colleagues", which refers to the idea of rapprochement in the model of cooperation. However, along with this, there were words and ideas related more to integration. For example, statements such as "We must unite" and "create a single cultural space in the region" refer to a deeper connection than cooperation. Some projects involve integration, such as "a system of border trade zones with unified rules and simplified procedures for the supply of goods", "AIFC Multipass" and "Common Goods Transmission System of Central Asia". There were also statements whose significance balanced between these two models of

development of regionalism. For example, "consolidating our efforts", "unity and solidarity", and "resumption of full-fledged cooperation". Although such words were spoken in support of cooperation, however, the use of amplifiers such as "full-fledged" and "consolidating" which can be stronger when it comes only to cooperation that does not imply anything deeper. In general, it can be said that in their speeches, the heads of state used and supported the ideas of two directions of development of regionalism.

However, at the fifth meeting, everything was more unambiguous than at the fourth consultative meeting. The heads of State gave priority and preference to the model of cooperation and emphasized this in their speeches. For example, the use of such statements as "joint effort", "our", "we", "our consultation meetings", "our peoples" and "partners" refers to the fact that the presidents of the Central Asian countries see the future of regionalism in the model of cooperation. Speaking mainly about integration, the heads of state touch only on the idea of "transport integration".

This is consistent with our first hypothesis, which states that the model for cooperation between the states of the region will be cooperation and answers the research question posed. Moreover, the discursive analysis also shows that the elements of cooperation will continue to shape the future dynamics of the region.

### **Key observations**

1. During the last two consultative meetings, the dominant idea was to achieve mutual understanding, as well as to achieve cooperation between the countries of Central Asia
2. To achieve goals such as solving regional problems and developing the region, the importance of the role of joint initiatives and collaboration was emphasized.



3. The use of statements in support of integration was significantly less than statements aimed at the idea of cooperation.
4. At the last meeting, there were marked shifts towards the model of cooperation.
5. 4 main topics on the agenda were identified: transportation, trade facilitations, ecology and security.

### **Implication**

The dominance of the idea regarding cooperation over the ideas of integration gives us the basis to ensure that heads of state accept common commitments, and in the future will focus not only on solving the problems of the region through common decisions and actions but also on building harmonious relations. These steps make it clear that future relations will be built on cooperation, partnership, and mutual respect.

### **Conclusion**

Even though the discourse and steps towards regionalism and cooperation began in the early 2000s, it was the consultative meeting that gave a new impetus in this direction and countries began to come and make common decisions more and more. The factors that prevented this kind of cooperation were both internal and external influences. Under external influence, the countries and organisations that influenced and dominated the region and decision-making in the

region through their policies were considered. The internal factors included the priority given to sovereignty, different national interests and the restructuring of the state after the collapse of the USSR, then these factors were not developed institutions and not ready for this kind of cooperation. The consultative meetings, which were less formal and practical in nature, were a platform for dialogue between the "fraternal peoples", as well as their discourse provides an extensive understanding of how relations between the Central Asian countries are built and emphasizes the importance of both open opportunities and obstacles faced by the Central Asian countries and their leaders, among others. Recent consultative meetings, which were attended by all 5 leaders of the Central Asian countries were a historically important event and give a fresh look at the dynamics of the region's development. The analysis provided an understanding of the prospects for regionalism and its development and also answered the question of which direction and what model regionalism in Central Asia is taking. Unlike the fourth meeting, at which the leaders balanced ideas towards regionalism and cooperation, at the fifth meeting, cooperation was given greater priority and the projects considered at the meeting were aimed specifically at it. The consultative meetings showed the growing dynamics of understanding mutual benefit, which can be achieved through this cooperation. During the last two consultative meetings, there were 4 main topics on the agenda aimed at strengthening the development of countries and the region as a whole. Such meetings provide a foundation for further closer cooperation, and commitment to such meetings gives an understanding that the heads of state are looking for new ways for mutually beneficial relations and partnerships. Summing up, it is worth noting that regionalism at its best is still developing, although it has not quite achieved the success that was planned, it continues to develop and gives promising hopes. Countries, in turn, are increasingly coming to

mutual understanding and common solutions, which in turn allow them to open up more and more opportunities and achieve new goals and objectives set for themselves.

Based on all of the above, it can be concluded that the perception of Central Asia as a region that has failed in regionalism may have been true, however, since 2017, the Central Asian countries have been actively moving towards cooperation. All leaders of the five countries express their approval and commitment to cooperation in matters of security, economic cooperation and achieving sustainable development. Despite the fact that prospects for integration in the region were indirectly mentioned in almost all speeches at the last two consultative meetings in terms of ideas and initiatives, the main emphasis of all countries in the area is on in-depth cooperation. Relying on the words used in the speeches of the leaders of the nations of Central Asia, their promises and the priorities set, it is rational to make a forecast that further collaboration in the region will deepen further and the level of disorganization will rapidly fall, which may happen with the help of external actors since neighbouring countries and regional organizations are also interested in the rapprochement and unification of the countries of Central Asia.

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