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THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract: This article examines the shared civilizational foundations and history of statehood of the peoples of Central Asia. It also discusses the priority areas of Uzbekistan's foreign policy and the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia.

Keywords: United Nations, integration, civilization, foreign policy, international treaty, Central Asia

Introduction

The Central Asian region is bordered by the Caspian Sea to the west, China to the east, Russia to the north, and Afghanistan and Iran to the south. In recent years, new threats and challenges have emerged that pose serious risks to the sustainable development of the international community. Under these circumstances, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized the advisability of developing an interstate programme to protect and strengthen the borders of Central Asian countries [1].

Many researchers argue that the regional security of Central Asia depends primarily on the United States, Russia and China. The parties seeking to strengthen their political positions and protect their economic interests in Central Asia attempt, by various means, to influence the foreign and domestic policies of the countries in the region.

Second, regional security in Central Asia also depends on the geopolitical

situation in the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, the South Caucasus, South Asia and the Middle East.

Third, regional security depends on the dynamics of relations and the progress of integration processes among the Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

As President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has stated, "Developing good-neighbourly relations and addressing regional security issues are fundamental pillars of New Uzbekistan's foreign policy" [2]. This conceptual approach is acquiring renewed meaning within the contemporary framework of Uzbekistan's national idea. In other words, today the national idea is not confined to the borders of a single state; it also encompasses an ethos of regional solidarity, tolerance and long-term stability.

Main Body

When analysing Central Asian integration (from Latin integratio, meaning restoration or completion, and integer, meaning "whole"; a concept describing the state of interdependence among the parts and functions of a system or organism, as well as the process that leads to such a state; in politics, it refers to coordinating and uniting the economies of two or more states) [3], particular attention must be paid to its historical and cultural foundations. The shared civilizational roots of the peoples of the region are determined by several factors.

First, in geographical terms, the basins of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, the Turkestan mountain ranges, and the Kyzylkum and Karakum deserts bring the region together into a single natural and geographical system. The transboundary nature of water resources has historically connected the peoples of the region.

Second, the region lies at the heart of the Great Silk Road, which made it a crossroads not only for trade but also for the exchange of ideas, technologies and cultural traditions.

Third, the region shares traditions of science, law and ethics within Islamic civilization, Sufi teachings and a spirit of religious tolerance.

Fourth, there are linguistic and ethnocultural affinities, shaped by centuries of interaction among peoples belonging to the Turkic and Iranian language families and by the widespread use of bilingualism.

Fifth, the peoples share ways of life and customs, including hospitality, the hashar tradition of communal work, respect for elders and similar family ceremonies.

Water resources occupy a central place in the logic of regional integration. The Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins connect the countries of the region within a single hydrological system. Water originates in upstream countries, while downstream countries use it for agriculture and the needs of their populations. This interdependence historically fostered norms of cooperation. In contemporary conditions, restoring this tradition at the interstate level is one of the most complex and, at the same time, most essential tasks of regional cooperation.

The tragedy of the Aral Sea has created a shared historical experience and a sphere of common responsibility for the region. The consequences of this environmental disaster do not stop at state borders: salt and dust storms, climate change and public-health problems affect the entire region. International cooperation to restore the Aral Sea area, including the United Nations Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region, is a practical example of regional solidarity. Environmental issues also provide a favourable arena for people-to-people diplomacy because they are politically neutral, readily understood by society and of considerable interest to young people.

The common elements in the spiritual heritage of the peoples of the region also have deep roots. The tolerant tradition of the Hanafi school, Maturidism, and the spiritual legacies of the Naqshbandi, Yasawi and Kubrawi Sufi orders are shared by the peoples of the region. Shrines in Bukhara, Samarkand, Khiva, Turkistan, Osh and

Kulob have historically served as pilgrimage destinations for people from across the region. This spiritual space can still act as a unifying force, particularly when presented as an alternative to extremist interpretations.

Great figures such as Al-Khwarizmi, Al-Farabi, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Ibn Sina, Al-Bukhari, At-Tirmidhi, Ulugh Beg, Alisher Navoi and Abdurahman Jami cannot be confined within the logic of today's national borders; they are part of the shared heritage of the entire region. This heritage is one of the strongest foundations of regional identity because it represents a common contribution rather than the superiority of one people over another.

At the same time, historical unity does not automatically lead to modern integration. The region experienced complex processes throughout the twentieth century. The borders established through Soviet-era national-territorial delimitation often did not fully correspond to patterns of ethnic settlement, later giving rise to enclaves and border disputes. The region's economic specialisation was oriented towards the centre, while horizontal links within the region were artificially weakened.

Traditions of statehood occupy a special place in the region's shared historical experience. The Samanid, Qarakhanid, Khwarazmshah and Timurid states covered territories larger than today's national borders and united different peoples within a shared political and cultural space. The administrative traditions, legal norms and patronage of scholarship that developed in these states form part of the region's common political culture.

The phenomenon of the Great Silk Road fostered a tradition of openness and readiness for dialogue. The Silk Road was not merely a trade route; it was a communicative space where different civilizations met. Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Christian, Islamic and Manichaean traditions coexisted there, while languages, scripts and technologies were exchanged. This historical experience strengthened tolerance

and interest in other cultures within the region's societies, thereby providing a favourable cultural foundation for contemporary people-to-people diplomacy.

Alongside periods of cooperation, the region's history also includes periods of competition and conflict. Presenting history in an exclusively idealised form is ineffective in the long term, because such a narrative loses credibility when confronted with genuine historical knowledge. A scientifically grounded approach recognises historical complexity while emphasising the shared heritage.

During the first decades of independence, several attempts were made to promote regional integration. In 1994, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on a common economic space, which Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan subsequently joined. This structure operated first as the Central Asian Economic Community and later as the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, but ceased its activities in 2005. According to researchers, the reasons these initiatives failed were related less to objective economic barriers than to subjective and social factors: a lack of mutual trust, caution during the consolidation of national sovereignty, competition among external powers and, most importantly, insufficient public support for the idea of integration.

An analysis of the experience of 1990–2005 offers several important lessons. First, integration structures were created from above through political decisions, but sufficient social and economic demand at the grassroots level had not developed to sustain them. Second, the organisations were assigned overly broad tasks that did not match their actual capacities. Third, mechanisms for implementing agreements and systems for monitoring progress had not been developed. Fourth, and most importantly, the idea of integration was not promoted at the societal level, and its benefits were not explained in ways that ordinary citizens could readily understand.

These lessons remain relevant today. Particular attention must be paid to the

social foundations of new structures and documents so that they do not repeat the mistakes of the past.

A qualitatively new stage began in the region in 2016. Uzbekistan's decision to make Central Asia a foreign-policy priority, its policy of resolving border issues through negotiations, and the restoration of transport and communications links fundamentally changed the regional atmosphere. In 2017, an initiative to organise Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia was put forward from the rostrum of the United Nations General Assembly [4], and this format began operating regularly in 2018.

The distinctive feature of the Consultative Meeting format is that it relies on direct dialogue among heads of state without creating a rigid institutional structure. The signing in Cholpon-Ata on 21 July 2022 of the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighbourliness and Cooperation for the Development of Central Asia in the Twenty-First Century strengthened the format's legal foundation [5].

The seventh Consultative Meeting, held in Tashkent on 15–16 November 2025, marked an important stage in the history of regional cooperation. At its conclusion, a Joint Statement, the "Concept of Regional Security and Stability in Central Asia," and a regional cooperation programme for 2026–2028 were adopted. The Republic of Azerbaijan was admitted as a full member of the format. Initiatives were put forward to transform the dialogue format into a strategic platform called the "Central Asian Community," to declare 2026–2036 the Decade of Practical Action for the Rational Use of Water in the region, and to establish a regional centre of competence in water management [6].

Table 1.1. Chronology of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia

No. Year Venue

I 2018 Astana, Kazakhstan

II 2019 Tashkent, Uzbekistan

III 2021 Avaza, Turkmenistan

IV 2022 Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan

V 2023 Dushanbe, Tajikistan

VI 2024 Astana, Kazakhstan

VII 2025 Tashkent, Uzbekistan

As the table shows, the format operates on a regular, rotating basis, indicating its institutional stability. Each meeting has built on the outcomes of the previous one and opened up new areas for cooperation.

The resolution of border issues has been particularly important in strengthening trust across the region. The completion of the delimitation of the state border between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan demonstrated that an issue unresolved for decades could be settled through negotiations [7]. This experience indicates the emergence of a culture of peaceful conflict resolution in the region and creates a positive context for people-to-people diplomacy.

Qualitative changes have also taken place in the region's external relations. "Central Asia + 1" formats are operating as dialogue mechanisms with the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Germany and Italy. At the first Central Asia–European Union summit, held in Samarkand on 3–4 April 2025, the parties adopted a declaration on establishing a strategic partnership [8]. These processes indicate that the region's standing as an international actor is growing stronger: Central Asia is increasingly viewed not as an arena for competition among external powers, but as a single negotiating partner.

The social dimension of economic cooperation in the region also deserves attention. The restoration of trade links produces important social benefits as well as economic ones: traders, transport workers and service providers maintain regular

contact with neighbouring countries, and these ties are natural and based on mutual interests. Cross-border trade complexes, joint ventures and transport corridors all function simultaneously as economic and social infrastructure.

Labour migration should also be considered in this context. Intra-regional labour migration gives millions of people experience of crossing borders. This experience is not always positive: people may lack protection for their rights, face administrative barriers or, in some cases, encounter negative attitudes. Improving regional mechanisms to protect migrant workers' rights is important not only for social justice but also for strengthening the social foundations of regional integration. A negative migration experience can shape an entire generation's perception of a neighbouring country for years.

There are three foundations for the formation of a Central Asian regional identity. The historical-civilizational foundation comprises a shared past, common intellectual heritage and the traditions of the Great Silk Road. The social and everyday foundation consists of family ties, similar ways of life, shared customs and connections formed through labour migration. The pragmatic foundation lies in common challenges—water, the environment, energy and security—and the need to address them collectively, as well as the opportunity to become more competitive in global markets as a region.

It is also necessary to define norms and boundaries when shaping regional identity. Any process of identity-building can become artificial and encounter resistance. The main way to prevent this risk is not to construct an artificial identity, but to make existing natural connections visible and facilitate them. In other words, the task is not to invent a new identity, but to bring to light a sense of commonality that already exists but has not yet been fully recognised.

Language policy plays a particular role in shaping regional identity. Three linguistic strategies can currently be observed in communication among the countries

of the region: using Russian as a lingua franca, switching to English, and communicating directly in the national languages. The first strategy comes naturally to older generations, but its usefulness is diminishing among young people. The second facilitates engagement with the global arena, but makes communication within the region dependent on a third-party language. The third strategy is the most promising, but it requires systematic investment in translator-training institutions, language-learning programmes and the development of digital translation tools.

The affinity among Turkic languages is an important resource in this regard: Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Turkmen are sufficiently close to facilitate mutual understanding. Although Tajik belongs to the Persian-Tajik language family, centuries of coexistence between Uzbek and Tajik communities have led to widespread bilingualism. This linguistic landscape creates favourable opportunities for direct communication across the region.

Family and kinship ties play a special role in the formation of regional identity. Because the borders of the countries in the region often cut across patterns of ethnic settlement, millions of families live on opposite sides of a border. Connections maintained through weddings, funerals and holiday visits are exceptionally close and regular, in ways that no official programme can match. An important task of people-to-people diplomacy is to reduce administrative barriers to these natural ties, simplify border-crossing procedures and develop transport links.

At the same time, a number of sensitive issues arise in the process of shaping regional identity. These include differences in interpreting historical heritage, varying approaches to certain historical figures and traditions of statehood, and conflicting interests concerning the use of water and energy resources. Rather than denying these issues, it is advisable to discuss them through open and respectful dialogue. This is where the preventive function of people-to-people diplomacy becomes apparent: issues

that are difficult to raise at the official level can be discussed among experts and members of the public.

Conclusion

Theoretically, three possible models of regional identity can be distinguished.

The ethnolinguistic model is based on common Turkic roots, but excludes the Tajik people and therefore cannot serve as a foundation for regional unity. The religious model relies on Islamic values, but also encompasses countries outside the region and does not express the region's distinctiveness.

The civilizational-geographical model, by contrast, is based on a shared historical space, common intellectual heritage, similar ways of life and present-day common interests. It is this model that includes all the peoples of the region on an equal basis. The dissertation argues in favour of the third model.

The role of historical memory. Historical memory is crucial to the formation of regional identity. Two extremes must be avoided. The first is idealising the past: presenting the history of the region as an uninterrupted period of solidarity is scientifically unfounded and will ultimately undermine trust. The second is overemphasising the history of conflicts, which transfers historical grievances into present-day relations. A third, scientifically grounded approach acknowledges historical complexity while focusing on shared heritage, cultural exchange and experiences of cooperation.

Thus, the historical and cultural foundations of Central Asian integration are strong and provide a natural basis for contemporary integration. However, activating this foundation in public consciousness will not happen automatically; it requires purposeful communication, namely systematic work in the field of people-to-people diplomacy.

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