

Post-Soviet Regional Dynamics: Evolution of Relations among Central Asian States (1991-2025)

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Annotation

The research examines the evolution of relations among the five states – Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The study analyses political, economic and security relations, in addition, the factors which affected to cooperation and conflict in the region. The research bibliography includes literature, policy papers and reports, and applies historical and comparative analysis. The results demonstrate that the first years of independence were characterized by competition, disputes over water resources and borders, national sovereignty and unrest among the states. However, in the following decade, they changed their relationship due to shared economic interests, common security problems and significant influence of external actors such as USA, Russia, China and Afghanistan. Sustainable regional cooperation requires the reinforcing of trust, efficient management of general natural resources and balanced political approach toward external states.

Keywords

Central Asia, Post-Soviet States, Regional Dynamics, Regional Cooperation, Regional Integration, Geopolitics, Security Challenges, Water Resources, Border Disputes, Multi-vector Foreign Policy, External Powers, Economic Cooperation.

Аннотация: В данном исследовании рассматривается эволюция отношений между пятью государствами — Узбекистаном, Таджикистаном, Кыргызстаном,

Казахстаном и Туркменистаном — после распада Советского Союза в 1991 году. Анализируются политические и экономические связи, а также вопросы безопасности и факторы, влиявшие на сотрудничество и конфликтные ситуации в регионе. Работа опирается на научную литературу, аналитические документы и отчеты, а также использует методы исторического и сравнительного анализа. Результаты исследования показывают, что первые годы независимости характеризовались конкуренцией, спорами вокруг водных ресурсов и границ, вопросами национального суверенитета и нестабильностью в отношениях между государствами. Однако в последующее десятилетие характер этих отношений изменился под влиянием общих экономических интересов, совместных проблем безопасности и значительного воздействия таких внешних игроков, как США, Россия, Китай и Афганистан. Для обеспечения устойчивого регионального сотрудничества необходимы укрепление доверия, эффективное управление общими природными ресурсами и взвешенный политический подход к взаимодействию с внешними государствами.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, постсоветские государства, региональная динамика, региональное сотрудничество, региональная интеграция, геополитика, вызовы безопасности, водные ресурсы, пограничные споры, многовекторная внешняя политика, внешние силы, экономическое сотрудничество.

The collapse of that powerful Soviet Union in 1991 led to the emergence of five independent Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. In the first years of independence, relations among these states were shaped by shared Soviet legacies, including economic interdependence and centralized governance structures based on very strong political elite groups. However, over time, their interactions evolved due to national interests, leadership changes, and regional

difficulties. Issues such as border disputes, water resource management, and security concerns have significantly influenced regional dynamics.

It is really important to understand the evolution of relations among Central Asian states for analyzing regional stability, economic cooperation, and increasing security issues. The region plays an important role in global geopolitics due to its strategic location and natural resources. Studying these dynamics helps explain how post-Soviet states transition from a centralized system to independent regional actors of geopolitics.

The purpose of this research is to examine how relations among Central Asian states have evolved since independence in 1991, with a focus on political, economic, and security dimensions. Despite almost same historical and cultural ties, Central Asian states have experienced periods of both cooperation and conflict. Weak regional institutions, competing national interests, and external influences have often limited effective cooperation. Furthermore, some leaders of countries caused many problems due to their authoritarian regimes. The key problem is to understand why regional integration has remained limited despite the potential benefits. How have relations among Central Asian states evolved since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and what factors have shaped this evolution and why these culturally and regionally same nations had lots of conflicts in the first years and certain ones are continuing even today?

To analyze the historical development of regional relations;

To identify key factors influencing cooperation and conflict especially after independence in 1991;

To examine the role of political leadership and domestic policies; To evaluate the impact of economic and security challenges;

To analyze external effect to these five countries (especially by Afghanistan, The US, Russia and China)

This research hypothesizes that relations among 5 Central Asian states have

evolved from initial fragmentation and competition toward gradual cooperation, driven by shared economic and security interests. However, persistent political differences and external influences continue to limit deeper regional integration.

Scholars and all other specialists have noted that early post-Soviet relations among Central Asian states were characterized by fragmentation and limited cooperation. Many studies highlight that newly independent states prioritized national sovereignty over regional integration. Research also emphasizes the importance of resource-based conflicts, particularly water and energy disputes between upstream and downstream countries. Because Central Asia is a country where there are lots of deserts than rivers, lakes and seas. These issues have often created tensions, especially between countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. During the first government of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov did not allow neighbor countries use the water of two rivers – Amu Darya and Syr Darya to any country at any time for 27 years. More recent literature points to a gradual shift toward cooperation, particularly after leadership changes in key states. Regional summits, economic agreements, and security cooperation have increased, reflecting a growing recognition of mutual interests. However, scholars also argue that external actors, including major powers, continue to influence regional dynamics, sometimes complicating cooperation among Central Asian states.

Moreover, Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) who was one of the greatest scholars of political science ran lots of research writes that, Central Asian nations are related to each other and they are influenced by external powers especially by China and Russia.

This study builds on existing research by examining both conflict and cooperation trends over time and analyzing their underlying causes. One of the researchers writes that, “Historically, Central Asia has always had a passive position in international relations, struggling in the whirlpool of the empire-competing game and failing to become a real regional power (Hopkirk, 1992). In contrast, after the collapse of the

Soviet Union, the independence of the Central Asian countries resulted in the region becoming an independent geopolitical entity, and it is no longer a “passive recipient, but a decisive player” in the great power competition. The Central Asian countries have gradually established their geopolitical relations in line with their national conditions, which have provided a unique opportunity to examine the evolution of the geopolitical relations and strategies in newly independent states surrounded by great powers this is also key information about relations and shows factors of development in the future.

This research adopts a qualitative approach of methodology. This design is appropriate for this kind of research, because the evolution of regional relations involves complex historical, political and economical, social processes that require detailed examination and interpretation rather than statistics written with numbers only.

This research relies on secondary data. All sources include academic articles, journals, political research papers and reports from specialists like Mirzokhid Rakhimov, Ajay Patnaik and Nurettin Can. The main research strategically method is historical and comparative case analysis of five independent Central Asian republics — Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The study divides the period into two main periods: the early post-independence years (1991–2000s) marked by competition and very dangerous rivalry, and the later period (2010s–2025) showing increased cooperation. Problems such as border disputes, water conflicts, security threats, and economic initiatives demand more attention while studying the relationships of states especially ones which are located in a same area. Some of them had more potential to develop faster and had less social or political issues, but certain ones had lots of conflicts inside that are why stayed undeveloped. The comparative method used in this study evaluates similarities and differences across countries and across time periods to understand what drives conflict and what promotes cooperation.

This methodological approach provides a systematic understanding of how

relations among Central Asian states have developed and came to such situation. Its main strength is that it connects theoretical ideas with real historical developments and explains both the challenges and positive trends in this ancient region. Furthermore, this research analyses the upcoming relations of these five countries and offers paying more attention to develop themselves together. This study draws on very crucial theoretical perspectives from regional research and international relations to explain the changing extraordinary relations among Central Asian states. The main frameworks include new regionalism theory, geopolitical realism, and the concept of multi-vector foreign policy.

The most important and central theory of this study is regionalism and regional cooperation. Experienced scientists such as Mirzokhid Rakhimov (2010) and Ajay Patnaik (2019) explain the process that how states in a same region change their policy from competition to cooperation. After 1991, the USSR collapsed, there were 15 independent states and all them tried to build national identity and keep sovereignty from other global powers especially from Russia - an official heir of the Soviet Union, as a result, this policy caused fragmentation among these nations. Over time, shared economic needs, security threats, and resource issues pushed them toward gradual cooperation through summits, agreements, and different organizations.

The research also uses neorealist theory, which focuses on how states act in such complex period of international relations. In Central Asia, countries competed over borders for a long time and rivalry for water resources always exists especially for Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers and energy as well. This explains early conflicts between countries like Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (especially during the first governments of both states). At the same time, the theory helps show why cooperation has increased in recent years due to common security challenges. Another really important factor is the role of external powers. Major superpower actors such as Russia, China, the United States, and a weak, but very troubled, war torn country – Afghanistan have strongly

influenced the region. A famous scholar Nurettin Can (2014) and other scientists highlight how Central Asian states balance relations with these powers while trying to develop their own regional identity. This creates both opportunities and obstacles for deeper integration among them. Another important approach is multi-vector foreign policy. All Central Asian states – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan try to balance relations with superpowers – Russia, China, the United States, and certain others – without becoming too dependent on any one of them. A famous scientist Nurettin Can (2014) and other researchers point out that external influences sometimes help regional cooperation but often create obstacles by offering competing opportunities to the five countries. Furthermore, China's growing economic influence and Russia's traditional security influence were getting bigger and bigger year by year in each country by the time they started supporting each other in all fields including economy and security after certain processes in some of those nations, for example in Uzbekistan after new president Shavkat Mirziyayev came to power in 2016.

This study hypothesizes that relations among Central Asian countries have evolved from fragmentation and competition in the first years of independence, toward gradual cooperation, driven by shared interests, even though political differences and external influences continue to limit full regional integration as in Europe or America.

All of these theories provide a clear framework to understand and realize the political, economic, and security evolution of the countries of Central Asia from 1991 to 2025.

This research shows the evolution of relations among five Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan Tajikistan Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan from 1991-2025 and illustrates a complex shift from initial fragmentation and intense rivalry towards selective, pragmatic cooperation. Nevertheless, deep institutional integration has not been achieved by any of them yet. In the first years of independence (1991-2001) almost all of these new independent states preferred to keep national sovereignty rather than

cooperation in economy, political processes and solving all kinds of external issues because of natural resources, lack of water and certain institutional troubles. A famous scholar from Central Asia – Rakhimov (2010) highlights how shared Soviet legacies of economic interdependence initially fostered limited interactions, but the absence of strong regional institutions and the dominance of powerful political elites led to fragmentation rather than unity in this strategically important region.

In this region, one of the biggest problems is water and energy conflicts, particularly between upstream and downstream countries over Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers which are defined as the longest and the deepest in whole Central Asia. Upstream countries are Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, downstream states are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Rivalry for water resources caused lots of conflicts among these five nations a few times. For instance, during 27 years of presidency of Islam Karimov (1989-2016) in Uzbekistan, restrictive policies on water usage exacerbated bilateral strains, reflecting broader resource nationalism and in also global stage, interests of these five nations were always against each other for almost 30 years. Patnaik (2019) writes that such rivalries, combined with leadership styles rooted in old authoritarian governance, hindered early attempts at regionalism. Furthermore, not only Islam Karimov, but leaders of other four countries were also authoritarian and their policy focused mainly on strengthening sovereignty and continuing rivalry for water and other energy sources. Imamali Rahman (1994), Nursultan Nazarbayev (1991-2019), Gurbanguli Berdimuhamedov (2006-2022), Askar Akayev continued authoritarian system and rivalry with each other as well.

Ateed and O‘zjan (2019) identify key impediments including weak infrastructure, poverty, institutional fragility, and the disruptive influence of great powers. After years, the influence of external powers - Russia with security mechanisms, China through economy, trade systems like Belt and Road initiative, the US by sporadic engagement

and instability in Afghanistan which has been continuing for almost 50 years created a multi-vector environment, forced the states to unite, cooperate at least in certain fields such as economy or ecological problems (for example in solving the problem of Aral Sea). One of famous scientists who has run many studies over this issue - Nurettin Can (2014) describes this as “contending political rationalities,” where national elites pursued pragmatic policies prioritizing sovereignty and selective partnerships.

From the 2016, particularly after leadership transitions in Uzbekistan under Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a period of detente emerged. Increased high-level summits, border delimitations, and economic agreements signaled growing recognition of mutual interests in security, trade, and connectivity among those five independent nations. Rakhimov (2010) and Patnaik (2019) emphasized the development in bilateral relations and regionalism which was based on new kind of pragmatism. In conclusion, this research has traced the evolution of relations among Central Asian states from 1991 to 2025, highlighting a trajectory from post-independence fragmentation and resource-based conflicts toward pragmatic cooperation during ongoing challenges. By relying on the studies of Rakhimov (2010), Patnaik (2019), Ateed and O‘zjan (2019), and Nurettin Can (2014), the analysis demonstrates how historical legacies, leadership changes, economic necessities and external influences have shaped this kind of regional dynamics.

Moreover, relations have shifted from competition toward gradual cooperation driven by shared interests in security and development. However, persistent political differences, institutional weaknesses, and competition among great powers for this rich region is continuing to limit full regional integration not only in economy, but in society as well.

Theoretically, the information given in the research contributes to understandings of new regionalism by showing how multi-vector foreign policies enable states to navigate great-power rivalries while advancing limited collective goals. Also, the political situation in the first years of independence and the findings about the process in certain

fields and government shows openly failures and successes of the nations. Practically, they underscore the need to balance national sovereignty with collective action.

The research has limitations, primarily its reliance on secondary sources. Future studies could incorporate more recent empirical data up to 2025.

To sum up, the post-Soviet experience of Central Asian states reveals that sustainable regional cooperation requires reducing internal inequalities, building mutual trust, and effectively managing external pressures (especially from Russia and China). As the region continues to evolve, prioritizing infrastructure development and inclusive dialogue will be essential for transforming potential into genuine regional stability and prosperity.

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