

REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

At the time of writing, slightly less than a decade has passed since the formal disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Central Asian states, in their modern form, are very new entities. Thus, they have no established strategies to guide them in responding to the challenges of an environment that, at the regional level as well as the international level, presents opportunities for development, but also threats to security and stability. Since independence, the Central Asian states have joined a wide range of international and regional organizations. The latter comprise different groupings of member states. This paper will trace the evolution of the key regional groupings and considers their aims and objectives. Most of these formations are still very new and detailed information on structures, programs and content of agreements is not always to be found in the public domain. Nevertheless, despite the fact that it is not as yet possible to undertake a thorough evaluation of these organizations, a descriptive overview of the current situation is useful in that it casts light on emerging trends.

Defining the Region

Historically speaking, 'Central Asia' is an amorphous concept.¹ Since the demise of the Soviet Union, however, in international relations it has gained currency as the designation of the five newly independent states that lie to the east of the Caspian Sea, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These states are regarded as constituting a natural region, characterised not only by contiguity and interdependence, but also by a dense web of shared socio-cultural characteristics.² Central Asians themselves have been enthusiastic proponents of this idea of a common regional identity.

Yet in recent years two contrasting trends have emerged that challenge this idea of Central Asia as a discrete region. On the one hand, these states have adopted markedly divergent political and

economic systems. Increasingly, the dissimilarities seem to outweigh the similarities, calling into question the notion of a homogenous 'Central Asian' space. Various explanations can be advanced for such differences, but undoubtedly they owe something to the fact that traditionally, these societies were very diverse. Even today, the ancient divide between the nomad world of the north and the settled communities of the south is reflected in attitudes towards the ordering of society.³

On the other hand, there has been a move to strengthening ties with neighbours to the south and east, as well as to the north and west. Again, this is not a new development but rather a revival - or rediscovery - of latent ethnic, cultural and economic linkages. In the context of these wider regional formations, the Central Asian states (in no small measure as a result of their common Soviet experience) currently constitute a distinctive sub-region. However, this situation is by no means immutable: there are already indications that this 'core' could fracture, with the possibility that segments might be absorbed into different politico-economic configurations. Given this fluidity, it is pointless to impose rigid terminological definitions. Hence, 'region' will here be used in a loose sense to refer both to the five Central Asian states (the main focus of this paper) and to more extensive groupings of adjacent, or nearly adjacent, states.

Challenges of Independence

During the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics were largely isolated from the external world. There were almost no direct communications or transport links with neighbouring countries. All foreign relations were handled through Moscow. Consequently, with the exception of a handful of senior officials and eminent academics, very few Central Asians had any firsthand knowledge of life beyond the Soviet borders. At the same time, direct cooperation between the Central Asian republics was also limited, since the planning and organization of regional projects was directed from Moscow. Thus, when the Soviet Union collapsed - unexpectedly, with no transitional period - the governments of these new states were virtual novices in the field of foreign affairs at the international level, and also at the regional, intra-Central Asia level.

The first stage in the development of external relations was the very basic process of establishing an organizational infrastructure.

Remarkably, this was accomplished within a very short period, thanks to a high level of education and of professional training.⁴ Functioning Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations were established in all the Central Asian states within some eighteen months. They were soon able to open embassies in the USA and key European and Asian centres, also in the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). By the mid-1990s, each of the Central Asian states had established trade and diplomatic links with over one hundred foreign countries.

Foreign policy planners in these new states were confronted with several tasks simultaneously: finding their bearings in the international arena; defining their national interests; identifying friends and partners; and prioritising objectives. This entailed a steep learning curve. During the first years of independence, understandably, the approach of the new states was mainly exploratory; policies were tentative and largely reactive to external pressures. Within a relatively short period, however, more nuanced positions began to emerge. Also, divergences between these states in priorities and approaches to foreign policy issues became increasingly manifest.

International Organizations

One of the first priorities of the new states was to accede to the main international organizations. Membership of such bodies was a crucial gauge of external recognition and acceptance. This in turn was a means of protecting and consolidating their still fragile independence. Moreover, participation in such organizations provided these small states with a voice in international affairs, and eventually, through the tactical use of voting rights, enabled them to extract benefits from larger, more powerful members. All five Central Asian states were formally accepted as members of the United Nations on 2 March 1992. They subsequently joined the main UN funds, programs and special agencies (including UNDP, UNHCR, UNCTAD, UNESCO, International Civil Aviation Organization, International Labour Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank); also the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Kyrgyzstan is to date the only Central Asian state that has been accepted as a member of the World Trade Organization, though Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are current applicants and Turkmenistan has observer status.

The Central Asian states likewise acceded to several non-UN international governmental organizations. Several of these bodies have a political-ideological bias. The Central Asians have sought to maintain a balance by the diversification of such links. Thus, they have joined inter alia the Commonwealth of Independent States; the Organization for Islamic Conference;⁵ the North Atlantic Cooperation Council; the NATO Partnership for Peace programme (except Tajikistan); and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are members of the Non-Aligned Movement.⁶ All five have joined the Asian Development Bank; the European Bank for Reconstruction; and the Islamic Development Bank.

Regional Organizations

In regional relations, the Central Asian states have followed a multi-track approach, joining a range of organizations. Most of these regional bodies have similar policy aims and objectives, though they differ in political orientation. Moreover, there is a high degree of overlap in the membership of these groupings. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, belong to six of the regional organizations. Turkmenistan, by contrast, has opted for a stance of 'positive neutrality'⁷ and to date has joined only three regional organizations; even in these bodies, it favours the role of passive observer rather than active participant.

These regional organizations may be categorised in various ways, but an obvious difference is that one set comprises CIS members (though they are not necessarily pro-CIS), while the other set combines CIS and non-CIS members. A more tenuous distinction is that some of the CIS groupings, notably the Economic Eurasian Community and the Central Asian Economic Forum, appear to have full integration as their goal, while others emphasise institutional cooperation and limited harmonisation of regulatory frameworks. However, all are still at an early stage of development and in several cases have already undergone structural modifications. These transformations have usually been accompanied by changes of designation. The following sections give a brief account of the evolution of these bodies.

Intra-CIS Organizations

Eurasian Economic Community (EEC)

All the Central Asian states joined the CIS in December 1991, on

the eve of the formal disintegration of the Soviet Union.⁸ Very soon, however, differences of attitude emerged. Kazakhstan was a vigorous (though not uncritical) supporter of the CIS; Kyrgyzstan, though less outspoken, adopted a similar stance. By contrast, Uzbekistan took an increasingly sceptical approach, while Turkmenistan gradually distanced itself from any collective involvement; Tajikistan, engulfed by civil war 1992-97, was engrossed in its internal affairs.

In March 1994 Kazakh President Nazarbayev mooted the idea of transforming the CIS into a more tightly knit 'Eurasian Union'. This was firmly rejected by Uzbekistan; Turkmen President Niyazov also expressed reservations about the proposal. Nevertheless, President Nazarbayev continued to air his Eurasian concept and gradually, this project gained momentum. In early 1995, a preliminary agreement on a customs union was concluded between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Belarus. This became the basis for the quadripartite agreement on 'The Regulation of Economic and Humanitarian Integration', signed by these states on 29 March 1996 in Moscow. The main aims of the agreement included the creation of a united economic area; the development of common transport, energy and information systems; and the co-ordination of foreign policy. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan refused to participate in this new bloc, but Tajikistan became a member at the end 1998.

On 10 October 2000, this five-member group of CIS states (i.e. Belarus, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) signed a treaty on the formation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), to take effect from 1 April 2001. The new organization's highest policy-making body, the Inter-State Council, is to be located in Moscow. Kazakh President Nazarbayev was elected chairman at the inaugural meeting held in Minsk on May 31. Other organs include the Integration Committee and an Inter-parliamentary Assembly. The primary aim of the EEC is to further economic cooperation (which the CIS signally failed to achieve), while respecting the sovereignty of member states. It is empowered to represent the interests of member states in discussions with other countries and international organizations on matters relating to international trade and customs policy; this includes negotiating special terms for the accession of EEC countries to the WTO.

Critics of the new body see it as a vehicle for reasserting Russian influence; Uzbek President Karimov disdainfully dismissed it as empty posturing.⁹ However, the EEC Charter contains provisions designed to

minimise the danger of 'great power' domination. A weighted voting system has been adopted. This allocates the lion's share of voting rights to Russia (40 per cent, with 20 per cent each for Belarus and Kazakhstan, 10 per cent each for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan),¹⁰ yet major policy decisions require a two-third majority; this can only be obtained by a coalition of three states.¹¹ The decision of the member states to delegate some decision-making functions is a highly significant development; if it is implemented effectively, it will strengthen the process of integration.

Central Asian Economic Forum (CAEF)

The Central Asian Economic Forum (CAEF) developed in parallel to the Eurasian Economic Union. Initially, it seemed as though moves to create a specifically Central Asian entity might lead to the defection of these states from the CIS, or at least to the formation of a strong sub-regional group within the CIS. However, all but one (Uzbekistan) of the members of what eventually became the CAEF also opted for membership of EEC. This blurred and weakened the focus of the nascent CAEF.

The origins of the CAEF date back to 1993. On 4 January of that year a summit meeting of the presidents of the five Central Asian states was held in Tashkent. The initiative for this event came from Uzbek President Karimov, but there was general agreement amongst the participants on the need for regional cooperation. This was symbolically underlined by the decision to adopt a single collective designation for the region, namely 'Central Asia' (Tsentral'naya Aziya), in place of the Soviet-era formula 'Middle Asia (Srednyaya Aziya) and Kazakhstan', which was felt to be divisive. Agreement was reached on broad principles for the creation of a regional common market, but a formal confederation was not envisaged at this stage. As President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan commented: 'Everyone wants to live in his own apartment, not in a communal flat. The same goes for sovereign states'.

The first positive step towards intra-Central Asia integration was the establishment of the Central Asian Union, a customs and economic union between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, soon augmented by the accession of Kyrgyzstan. This tripartite agreement was underpinned by a pact on military cooperation, signed in February 1994. In 1995, the decision was taken to create an Inter-State Council; President

Nazarbayev was appointed chairman for the first year. Regular working meetings were instituted at ministerial and presidential level. Regional problems were the chief focus of attention, particularly the on-going civil war in Tajikistan. Also, there was agreement on the need for joint action to alleviate environmental problems. The Nukus Declaration on the Aral Sea, signed in September 1995, summed up the common position of the member states on this issue.

Further moves to strengthen regional integration were undertaken the following year. At the tripartite summit held in Almaty in August 1996, documents were signed concerning the formation of the Central Asian Bank for Cooperation and Development. It was also agreed that free economic zones in border regions of the three countries should be created. The three Presidents further approved the formation of a joint Central Asian peacekeeping battalion, Tsentrazbat, to operate under the aegis of the UN. At the end of that year, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan put their signatures to a Treaty of Eternal Friendship. It was agreed that Tajikistan and Russia should be granted subsidiary membership status. Tajikistan later became a full member.

In July 1998 the Central Asian Union was transformed into the Central Asian Economic Community. However, although economic issues were still ostensibly the main focus of the organization's activities, security concerns were becoming more prominent. In April 2000, at a summit meeting in Tashkent, a 100-year treaty was signed between the four member states on joint efforts to combat terrorism, extremism, transnational organised crime and other common security threats. These issues were again highlighted at the meeting of the five heads of state held in Almaty on 5 January 2001. Particular emphasis was placed on the dangers of Islamic extremism, likewise on the destabilising role played by the Taleban. Uzbek President Karimov used the occasion to castigate member states for the dismal record of the Central Asian Economic Union. He noted that many resolutions had been adopted, but there had been little progress in implementation. It was decided to rename the organization the Central Asian Economic Forum.

GUUAM

The acronym GUUAM designates an organization that comprises Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. The founding

members were Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Azerbaijan. The original intention of this alliance, first established in 1996, was to facilitate the development of a Eurasian TransCaucasus transportation corridor (TRACECA) that would bypass Russia, thereby underpinning the independence of these former Soviet countries. Other aims included the promotion of democracy and the enhancement of regional cooperation in a wide range of sectors, including commerce, financial services, security, science, education and culture. In alignment, it was very definitely pro-Western; in particular, it sought closer links with NATO.¹² The group was subsequently joined by Uzbekistan; this was formally announced on 24 April 1999, at a meeting of the five heads of state in Washington DC, on the occasion of the NATO Golden Jubilee celebrations.

Despite assurances that GUUAM was 'not aimed at any third country or group of countries', it was clearly intended as a counterbalance to Russian influence.¹³ However, despite very considerable Western (more specifically, US) support and encouragement,¹⁴ progress towards setting a policy agenda or creating viable working structures was slight. By June 2000, President Karimov was expressing open irritation at the delay in the creation of institutions. Some of the documents that were put forward for joint signature were also unacceptable to Uzbekistan.

A more fundamental problem is that there is little in terms of a genuine community of interests between Uzbekistan and fellow member states. From a regional perspective, GUUAM is firmly oriented towards the Black Sea and Central and Eastern Europe, while Uzbekistan, located much further to the east, is linked to Asia. Moreover, the organization tends to be dominated by the ambitions of its largest component, Ukraine.¹⁵ Other member states, too, often pursue national interests, especially in their dealings with Russia, to the detriment of group solidarity, thereby calling into question the credibility of the organization. Uzbekistan is very much on the periphery of such political manoeuvrings, and is unable to play much part in shaping the outcome. When the GUUAM summit meeting planned for March 2001 failed to materialise it seemed as though the group had finally disintegrated. However, this turned out to be a temporary setback. The event was rescheduled and eventually held on 6-7 June in Yalta. The chief outcome was the signing of the Yalta GUUAM Charter defining the goals and objectives of the organization, the principles of multilateral cooperation, and the format and regularity of summit meetings.

Regional Organizations with CIS and Non-CIS Members

In the early 1990s, there was much speculation as to whether the newly independent Central Asian states would opt for an 'Iranian model' of governance (i.e. Islamic nomocracy) or a 'Turkish model' (i.e. secular democracy), and by extension, whether they would adopt a pro-Western or an anti-Western stance. However, underlying this purported political-ideological rivalry, there was also cultural competition between the Turks, who belong to the same ethno-linguistic family as the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbeks, and the Iranians, who share a similar bond with the Tajiks. Yet the Central Asians proved averse to the establishment of exclusive 'special relationships' with either Turkey or Iran. Nevertheless, both these countries have developed conduits through which to exert indirect influence. Thus, Iran has fostered the Economic Cooperation Organization, while Turkey has sponsored regular Turkic Summits.

China did not immediately exhibit a desire to develop institutional links with the Central Asian states. However, by the mid-1990s it became clear that there were a number of issues that required a co-ordinated regional approach. Mechanisms that were created to deal with local concerns (e.g. border regulations) were transformed into regional structures. The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2001 provided a basis for the institutionalisation of ties between the member states.

Economic Cooperation Organization

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) developed out of a series of previous regional alliances (dating back to 1955) between Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. In 1985 it was relaunched, on the initiative of Iran, under its present designation. An intergovernmental organization, it aims to promote economic, technical and cultural cooperation among member states. The principal policy and decision-making organs are based in Tehran. In November 1992, the five Central Asian states, also Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, were admitted, bringing the total membership of the organization to ten. The institutional base was expanded and given new operational impetus. A sustained program of activities has been initiated, including projects to develop transport and communication networks; also to encourage economic, commercial, cultural and scientific cooperation. Summit meetings are

convened annually in the capitals of member states and regular working sessions are held between ministers and senior civil servants. The focus is firmly economic, not political (Uzbekistan in particular has taken an unequivocal stance on this point). Lack of capital, however, has been an obstacle to the implementation of large-scale multilateral projects. Some eight regional institutions are being developed (including a Trade and Development Bank, Chamber of Commerce and Cultural Institute) but in most cases these bodies are still at the planning stage. To date, ECO's greatest success has been in facilitating bilateral contacts between member states.

Turkic Summits

Turkey is an active member of ECO, but it has also developed its own direct links with the Turkic states of the CIS (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). These include regular meetings between the heads of state of these countries. In 1992, Ankara hosted the first Turkic Summit. There was an expectation in Turkey at this time that the crumbling of the Soviet Union heralded the emergence of an integrated pan-Eurasian Turkic bloc. Many Western policy-makers shared this enthusiasm, assuming that Turkey, by virtue of its ethnic and linguistic links with the newly independent Turkic states, likewise its wealth of experience in international organizations, would be the natural leader of this grouping. Moreover, it was believed that Turkish leadership would ensure that these states adhered to a pro-Western orientation, thereby denying Russia and Iran influence in the region.

However, the results of the Ankara Summit did not live up to expectations: the Central Asian leaders were less than enthusiastic about proposals for integration, and rejected plans for such projects as the creation of a Turkic Common Market and a Turkic Development and Investment Bank. However, President Ozal's visit to Central Asia and Azerbaijan in April 1993 (undertaken shortly before his death) was deemed a success. The next Turkic Summit was held in Istanbul in October 1994; the closing 'Istanbul Declaration' reiterated the call for closer ties between the participating states.¹⁶ Subsequent Turkic Summits were held in Bishkek, Tashkent, Astana, Baku, and most recently, Istanbul. A wide range of issues has been discussed at these meetings. Increasing emphasis, however has been placed on the need for economic cooperation (especially in the energy sector), and for joint action to combat terrorism and drug trafficking.

In his address to the Seventh Summit (Istanbul in 26-27 April 2001), Turkish President Sezer spoke of the role of these meetings in promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation between member states by providing a high-level forum for the exchange of views. However, in the nine years since they were initiated, there has been little structural evolution. To date, the level of institutionalization is minimal. No permanent secretariat has been created, and there are no specific agencies for implementing regional projects. Moreover, the Turkic Summits do not appear to have developed mechanisms for resolving, or defusing, tensions between member states. It was noteworthy that Turkmen President Niyazov did not participate in the Sixth Summit, held 8 April 2000 in Baku, very probably on account of disagreements with Azerbaijan over the Caspian Sea. Uzbek President Karimov failed to attend either the Sixth or the Seventh Summits; there was media speculation that his absence reflected displeasure with Turkey's supposed support for Uzbek dissidents. The strengthening of ethno-linguistic ties has also not proceeded as rapidly as anticipated. Although all the participating states speak warmly of the importance of the Turkic languages, they still feel more comfortable expressing themselves in Russian.¹⁷

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization developed out of efforts to resolve bilateral issues between China and adjacent CIS members. The first such priority was border demarcation. China shares long frontiers with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan; in the 1990s, several stretches of these borders were either not formally demarcated, or were regarded as disputed territory (a legacy of the 'unfair treaties' of the nineteenth century between the Tsarist empire and China). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, China initiated moves to resolve these problems through bilateral as well as multilateral negotiations. On 26 April 1996, the five heads of state met in Shanghai to sign the 'Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions'.

This event marked the beginning of a series of annual meetings between the leaders of the so-called 'Shanghai Five' group. Regular working meetings were also convened at ministerial level. Subsequently, broader areas of common concern were added to the original agenda. Thus, at the fourth summit meeting, held on 25 August 1999 in Bishkek, a joint declaration was signed on regional

security and cooperation, with particular emphasis on practical cooperation to combat international terrorism, narcotics and arms trafficking, illegal immigration and other transnational criminal activities.

By 2000, a more political tone was becoming apparent. At a meeting of the Defence Ministers, held in Astana on 30 March 2000, objections were voiced to US plans for drawing Taiwan into the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system. A joint communiqué stated that 'the deployment of a regional ABM system in the Asian-Pacific region may result in upsetting stability and security in the region'. The ministers stressed the need to promote nuclear non-proliferation in the area and to facilitate the enactment of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. At the following meeting of the heads of state, held on 5 July 2000 in Dushanbe, there was an even clearer emphasis on political goals. The group collectively declared its support for Beijing's 'One China' policy, also for Moscow's actions in Chechnya. UN efforts for a political settlement of the Afghan conflict were likewise endorsed. The basis for cooperation between the members was clarified by the affirmation of 'each state's true right of choice of their own course of political, economic and social development in line with their realities'. Moreover, 'interference in each other's internal affairs', even on the pretext of 'humanitarian intervention' and 'human rights' was renounced. Uzbek President Karimov was present at this meeting and expressed the view that the security interests of his country coincided with those of the 'Five'; he welcomed the contribution of Russia and China to guaranteeing security in Central Asia. Subsequently, Uzbekistan, and likewise Pakistan, sought membership of the group.

The move from what was essentially an informal forum to a formal regional organization was accomplished in 2001. The Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was signed at the sixth summit meeting of the group, held in Shanghai on 14 June. Uzbekistan's application for membership of the organization was approved, and President Karimov, too, became a signatory to the Declaration. Pakistan (with Kyrgyz backing) had also applied for membership, but admission was deferred. However, there were indications that an eventual enlargement of the organization, to include not only Pakistan, but other border states such as India and Mongolia, was a possibility.

The declared aims of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) included the creation of 'a new international and political order featuring democracy, justness and rationality'. The need for multi-

polarity in international relations was stressed. There was reiteration of previous pronouncements regarding the upholding of the 1972 ABM Treaty, and opposition to US plans to deploy a theatre missile defence system in the Asia-Pacific region; also renewed support for UN efforts to seek a peace settlement in Afghanistan. The importance accorded to regional security was underlined by a separate Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, also signed by the six heads of state during the June summit meeting. This document provides a legal framework for increased regional cooperation in police operations and intelligence gathering. It was confirmed that the anti-terrorism centre, discussed during the previous summit meeting, was to be located in Bishkek (see section on Security Issues below).

Conference on Cooperation and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CCCBMA)

An ambitious attempt to create an Asian counterpart to the OSCE was initiated by Kazakh President Nazarbayev in 1995. A loose association of 25 states, it spans the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia. Its aim is to promote regional stability through military and political cooperation. However, to date it has not proceeded far beyond the planning stage. Some preliminary meetings have been held, but by mid-2001 the basic principles of cooperation were still under discussion. China, Pakistan and Uzbekistan showed little enthusiasm for the organization, though there was a more positive reaction from some of the Middle Eastern countries. It was hoped that a meeting, scheduled to be held in Almaty on 8-10 November 2001 would give new impetus to the association.

Obstacles to Central Asian Integration

In the immediate aftermath of independence, the Central Asian states embraced the idea of regional integration - interpreting 'the region' as the five former Soviet republics - as a vital strategy for development and the consolidation of economic independence. This perception was strengthened by the realisation that there were many common social and environmental problems that could only be solved by concerted joint action. Moreover, regional integration was strongly supported by consultants and specialists from donor agencies. They argued that the economies of the Central Asian states, taken

separately, were too small and weak to be of interest to foreign investors; only by uniting to create a larger economic space would they attract much needed investment. It was also stressed that training programs and other forms of technical assistance would have greater impact, and be more cost effective, if a regional approach was applied.¹⁸

However, it soon became clear that there are many obstacles to integration. Firstly, the newly independent states, acutely sensitive in matters of national sovereignty, are reluctant to cede powers of decision-making and control to multi-lateral institutions. (Only the EEC, as mentioned above, has addressed this problem and it is too soon to judge whether or not it will be.) Secondly, there are issues of national dignity and honour that impinge on attitudes to socio-economic questions. Thirdly, there is a lack of confidence in regulatory instruments; this engenders a deep sense of insecurity. These problems are exacerbated by asymmetries between the five states: they differ greatly in size of territory, population, defence capability, resource endowment, and access to arterial transit routes.¹⁹ The smaller states - Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - feel vulnerable in negotiations with their larger neighbours. Rightly or wrongly, they fear that 'collective' goods will not be distributed equitably and that in cases of extreme discord, their territorial integrity will be violated.

Other factors that inhibit integration include the calibre of state officials. Many are young, with relatively little administrative experience. Those of the older generation, who worked in the Soviet bureaucracy, often find it difficult to adapt to new conditions. The result is that institutions for inter-state cooperation may be in place, but frequently they do not function effectively. Another adverse factor is the weak tradition of regional cooperation. There is little practical understanding of how to plan and manage multilateral projects. Consequently, such skills must be acquired almost from scratch.

Yet the most serious potential obstacle is the polarisation of the two larger states, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The leaders of these states have adopted very different stances on regional cooperation. Kazakh President Nazarbayev has consistently advocated alignment with Russia within the framework of a Eurasian alliance. Uzbek President Karimov, meanwhile, has emphatically distanced himself from Russia. However, it is not clear whether this posture is motivated by strategic considerations or whether it is an attempt to bolster personal authority and reputation. His criticisms of the various regional organizations

(whether or not Uzbekistan is a member) have been both public and forthright. Some such complaints are certainly justified, but the manner in which they are delivered is often provocative and belligerent, revealing little desire for constructive engagement in any form.²⁰ By contrast, Kazakhstan has pursued a more measured and consistent approach, working steadily towards establishing itself as the central pole of attraction. Undoubtedly this internal dissension weakens prospects for Central Asian integration. To date, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have avoided taking sides and thereby prevented further fragmentation. However, under pressure, the situation could well deteriorate, resulting in serious regional rifts.

Security Issues

In the early 1990s, regional alliances in Central Asia were regarded primarily as a means to achieving economic development. However, as local conflicts became increasingly violent, it was clear that without stability and security there could be no genuine regional cooperation. There was a frightening rise not only in outright fighting, but also in conflict-related problems, such as the mass movement of refugees; trafficking in drugs and arms; and extra-territorial support for rebel groups. This in turn fostered an upsurge in terrorist attacks, often linked to extremist Islamic slogans and/or separatist movements.

Contrary to many predictions, the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-97) did not trigger a 'domino effect' of conflict throughout Central Asia.²¹ However, there was a spillover effect of lawlessness and violence that continued long after the signing of the peace agreement. In 1995-96, the rise to power of the Taleban, a militant and ultra-conservative Islamist group, in neighbouring Afghanistan added to the volatility of the situation. Transborder criminal cooperation intensified. The smuggling of drugs and arms increased dramatically. So, too, did the flows of refugees, with all the attendant social and economic costs. At the end of the decade, a long and severe drought caused further problems. Throughout the region, consecutive years of poor harvests intensified popular discontent and anger. This, too, prompted uncontrolled population movements, particularly from Afghanistan into neighbouring countries.

With the deterioration of socio-economic conditions, militant Islamist groups, propagating an uncompromisingly anti-government agenda, have become more active in the Central Asian states.

Allegedly, they are linked to organised crime and are responsible for acts of terrorism. Uzbekistan has been the main target for such activities, but Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, too, have suffered heavy insurgencies. Separatist ethnic movements, particularly of Uighurs in Xinjiang, have also been linked to criminal incidents. Official sources insist that they receive assistance from expatriate groups, particularly from transborder communities of the same ethnic origin.

In this highly unstable environment Central Asian governments have become increasingly concerned about regional security. At the same time, there are markedly different threat perceptions. There are suspicions in some quarters that security threats are to some extent being exaggerated in order to legitimise external interference and aggression. Uzbek officials have laid such claims against Russia, but equally, Kyrgyz and Tajiks have voiced similar fears about Uzbekistan. Such actions as Uzbek aerial attacks on Kyrgyz and Tajik villages, and the mining of border areas, supposedly undertaken in self-defence, have been viewed with extreme nervousness by the neighbouring states. There are fears that this is but the start of more concerted attempts to gain territorial control of border regions.

Nevertheless, given the transnational nature of the primary security threats - drug smuggling, militant religious extremism, and separatism - there is a consensus that such problems can only be addressed within a regional framework. Regional alliances not only multiply resources, but also, for the smaller states, they diminish the threat of an abuse of power by the larger states. As indicated above, 'the region' can be defined in a narrow sense, comprising the five Central Asian states, or more widely to include some, or all, of the neighbouring states. Hierarchies of size, and thus of vulnerability, depend on the configuration of this definition. Thus, in the context of the narrow Central Asian region, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are (or share the perception of being exposed to pressure from Uzbekistan. In a wider context, the 'core' states have similar concerns about Russia and China.

Three of the Central Asian states have recently joined two separate, but overlapping, regional security organizations: the SCO anti-terrorist centre (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) and the CIS anti-terrorist centre (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan).²³ Both are to be based in Bishkek. How these two bodies are to interact, either on a political or on an operational level is not clear. Yet there are a number of potential

advantages. Firstly, this duplication is in itself a means of containing and balancing the influence of China and Russia. Secondly, it reduces the possibility of one of the 'core' Central Asian states forging an intra-organizational axis with one of the larger powers and thereby gaining a tactical advantage over its neighbours. Thirdly, it raises the possibility of competition between the larger states in providing resources, which could very well be turned to the advantage of the smaller states.

Conclusions

The Central Asian states are still very young. The regional organizations discussed above are also very new. They were created in haste, against a background of political upheaval and rapid social and economic change. Not surprisingly, there was initially little real understanding of the complexity and magnitude of the tasks that lay ahead. Aspirations far outstripped capabilities; consequently declarations of intent rarely coincided with actual performance, resulting in a lack of credibility. Structurally, these bodies are still in flux. They have scarcely had time to consolidate. In most cases, membership has changed; so, too, has internal organization. Aims and objectives have likewise altered, often in response to emerging crises. Levels of activity are also subject to fluctuation (GUUAM, for example, appeared to be moribund in March 2001, but a few months later underwent a vigorous revival). Given these uncertainties, it is impossible to pass definitive judgements on any of the bodies under review. However, some general points can be made.

Firstly, it is always difficult to create effective multilateral organizations. Even when conditions are favourable, progress can be slow (as the history of a body such as the European Union has amply demonstrated). In the developing world, the problems of cooperation are greatly magnified. The experience of the Central Asian states in this respect is reminiscent of the post-colonial world of the 1960s and 1970s. In Asia, as in Africa (and indeed, Latin America), regional organizations encountered very similar difficulties. Thus, plans for economic integration were often derailed by threats to security; disparities in size and resources created tensions between neighbours, causing smaller states to seek external protection (including from the former colonial power); natural disasters triggered social instability; overlapping alliances proliferated. Specific case studies may differ, but the one clear lesson that emerges from these different

parts of the globe is that regional structures cannot be created overnight. There must be a genuine convergence of aims, and a critical degree of complementarity. There must also be stability, adequate levels of development and the necessary human and material resources. It is by no means certain that these conditions are yet to be found in Central Asia.

Secondly, the Central Asian states are facing new and unconventional threats. The chief 'enemy' is not an identifiable external aggressor, whose capabilities can be calculated, but a combination of internal opposition and indeterminate transnational networks. Criminal activities blur into ideological struggles. 'Insider' and 'outsider' perceptions of the nature and severity of security threats are frequently at variance. This ambiguity readily gives rise to suspicions of bad faith and political manipulation. Distrust is further fuelled by a historic legacy of fear of neighbouring powers. It will require very considerable political will to overcome these obstacles. There are no existing models for creating effective structures for collective security in these conditions. Thus, the Central Asian states must find new mechanisms for cooperation.

Thirdly (and again as in other parts of the developing world), external rivalries are being projected on to the region. By contrast with the Cold War period, however, the actual level of competition between the major powers has been very much lower than media rhetoric suggests. In the political arena, the West (the US, and to a somewhat lesser degree, the European Union) has tried to promote democratic reform and respect for human rights. Yet the impact has been negligible, with Central Asian governments paying little more than lip service to these values. The primary focus of Russian interest in the region has been the reconstruction of a common economic space - an aim that coincides with the Eurasian vision of the Kazakh leadership. The anticipated struggle for control of Central Asia's natural resources has not materialised; such factors as the high costs of exploitation and transportation, as well as a hostile business culture, have inhibited Western investment. China's involvement in Central Asia was initially low key, directed mainly towards issues of bilateral cooperation.

This situation changed with the founding of the SCO in June 2001. China has now explicitly stated its intention to create a political bloc that will challenge Western (specifically US) ascendancy in world affairs. This development has generated a torrent of speculation.²⁴ With regard to Central Asia, there has been much discussion as to

whether, or why, the West has 'lost' the region. Yet it will take far more than a declaration, however belligerent, to influence the orientation of the Central Asian states. The crucial factor will be the degree of support - financial and technical - that any external sponsor is able to provide. China's capabilities in this respect are still very limited.

The above comments indicate that regional cooperation in Central Asia will not be easy to achieve. This is not, however, entirely owing to internal obstacles. The larger external players have not set a good example. Actors within as well as without the region are in general agreement on several common concerns: the need for economic development, and also the need to combat the major security threats, namely drug trafficking and terrorism. There is likewise agreement that Afghanistan is the fulcrum of regional instability and that a peaceful resolution of the situation there is of vital importance. Yet rather than combining forces to address these problems, each donor/sponsor country (or bloc of countries) has sought to establish its own sphere of influence. Regional cooperation is lauded, but only acceptable if it is 'under our aegis'. This partiality casts doubt on the sincerity of these external advocates for cooperation. It is difficult, therefore, for Central Asians to take their advice seriously. Genuine commitment to regional cooperation will very likely only be possible when the Central Asian states are themselves strong enough and mature enough to understand and accept the full costs and benefits of integration.

Figure 1: Regional Groupings - CIS Members

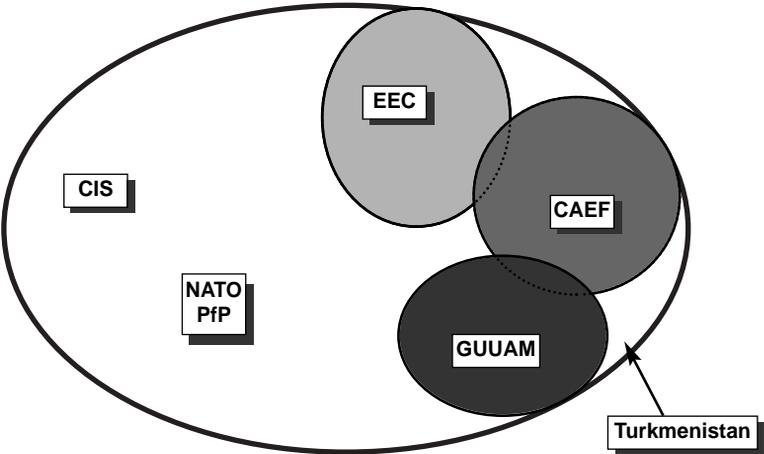
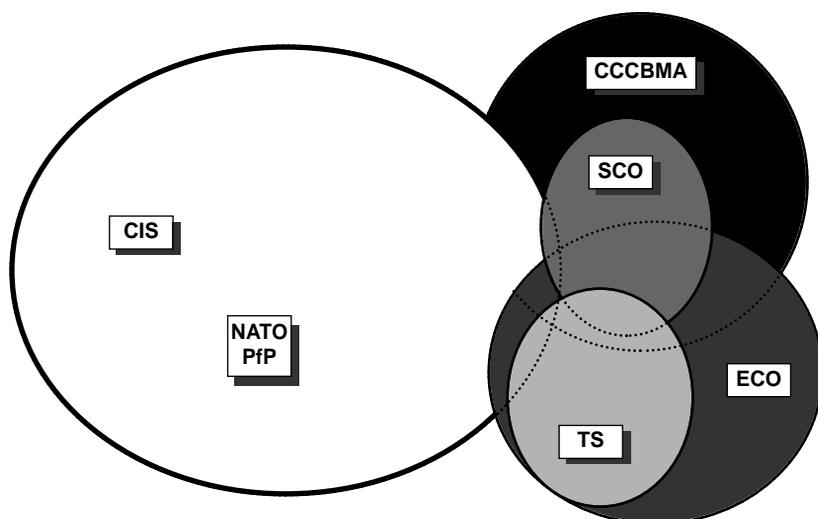


Figure 2 : Regional Groupings - CIS and Non-CIS Members



Note : Abbreviations of Regional Organisations

CAEF	Central Asian Economic Forum
CCCBMA	Conference on Cooperation and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organisation
EEC	Eurasian Economic Community
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

Table 1 : Selected Data

	Area (sq.km.)	Population (2001 estimate)	Per Capita GNP at PPP in US\$ (World Bank 1999)	Per Capita GNP in US\$ at official/ market exchange rate (2000)
Kazakhstan	2,717,300	15,000,000	4,408	1,225
Kyrgyzstan	198,500	5,100,000	2,223	275
Tajikistan	143,100	6,600,000	981	158
Turkmenistan	448,100	5,100,000	3,099	415
Uzbekistan	447,400	25,700,000	2,092	298

1. Generations of scholars have grappled, unsuccessfully, to define this term. See further S. Akiner, 'Conceptual Geographies of Central Asia', *Sustainable Development in Central Asia* (eds S. Akiner, Sander Tideman and Jon Hay), Curzon Press, Richmond, 1998, pp. 3-62.
2. In colloquial international usage these new countries were soon dubbed 'the Stans'.
3. The nomads were predominantly Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. They were forcibly sedentarised in 1930.
4. Diplomatic training was also provided as part of post-Soviet technical assistance programs by donor countries, for example, by the Netherlands, Sweden, Turkey, and the UK.
5. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in 1992, Kazakhshtan in 1995 and Uzbekistan in 1996.
6. Uzbekistan in 1992, Turkmenistan in 1995.
7. Formally acknowledged by a resolution of the UN General Assembly passed in December 1995.
8. At a summit meeting of the leaders of the ex-Soviet republics, convened by Kazakh President Nazarbayev in Almaty on 21 December 1991.
9. He has described it as 'an initiative to distract people's attention, an attempt on the part of some CIS leaders to claim the laurels of integrationists' (*Respublika*, no. 22 (89), 7 June 2001, p. 13).
10. Russia is also responsible for 40 per cent of costs of the organization.
11. But Russia does retain the right to exercise a veto on major issues.
12. The document of incorporation stressed that GUUAM would operate within the framework of international organizations such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the NATO Partnership for Peace programme.
13. See, for example, T. Valasek, *Military Cooperation between Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan Azerbaijan and Moldova in the GUUAM Framework*, Cambridge MA, Caspian Studies Program, December 2000.
14. The official GUUAM website (<http://www.guuam.org>) gives an overview of the extraordinary level of activity that has been generated around this organization. The volume of conferences, media statements and publications could surely not have been maintained without a very high degree of financial and technical support from Western sources.
15. See further Oleksandr Pavliuk, *Ukraine's Regional Politics: the Case of GUUAM* (presentation delivered at Kennan Institute, 12 February 2001).

16. A good account of Turkish initiatives in Central Asia in the early 1990s is provided by Gareth Winrow, *Turkey in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 1995.
17. At the Seventh Summit, for example, the Uzbek representative, Parliamentary Speaker Erkin Halilov, and Kyrgyz President Akayev both addressed the assembly in Russian.
18. It is not only in Central Asia that regionalism is the preferred strategy. Cf the report *Central America 2020*, commissioned by the European Union and USAID, which advances very similar arguments with regard to the Central American states (*The Economist*, 11-17 August, 2001, pp. 44-45).
19. See appendix for basic data on the Central Asian states.
20. Thus, for example, within hours of signing up to membership of SCO, President Karimov was stating reservations regarding Uzbek participation. He also stressed the need "to rely on our own strength and power". Interview to Uzbek TV First Channel, reported, partially verbatim, in *Turkestan Newsletter*, 18 June 2001.
21. For a discussion of the causes of the Tajik war and prospects for peace, see S. Akiner, *Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?* Royal Institute of International Affairs, London 2001.
22. The Central Asian leaders have repeatedly called for renewed international efforts to resolve the Afghan crisis. Most recently, Kazakh President Nazarbayev raised this issue at the inaugural meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (June 2001).
23. The CIS body is linked to the CIS Joint Programme to Combat International Terrorism and Extremism. Formally entitled the CIS Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, it came into being officially on 1 August 2001. It is to consist of a battalion each from the four member states.
24. Media coverage in the Asia-Pacific region has been especially lively. See, for example, articles in the *Times of India*, the *Straits Times* (Singapore), the *Age* (Melbourne), in June-July 2001.