

# Central Asia's Challenging Prospects for Regional Cooperation: External Advocacy and Local Inactivity

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Received: April 27, 2022

Accepted: May 11, 2022

Online Published: May 19, 2022

doi:10.5539/ass.v18n6p33

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v18n6p33>

## Abstract

While Central Asia is widely recognised as a region, we cannot identify an indigenous regional cooperation process. Whereas from an outside perspective, one may assume the existence of a strong regional cohesion, this is not the case when taking a view from within the region. So far, an indigenous Central Asia regional cooperation process is largely missing, even CAREC may provide a first attempt for an indigenous regional cooperation process. Instead, regional cooperation processes are based on great-power strategies, with Russia and China taking on prominent roles, though we can identify clear differences in their approaches as Russia's EEU focuses on a closed economic sphere, whereas China's BRI favours an open process. The implications are, that, for the foreseeable future, the likelihood that we can observe a process of regional cooperation, originating from within the region, is rather doubtful.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, regional cooperation, EEU, BRI, CAREC

## 1. Introduction

Central Asia includes Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; thus, a Central Asia indigenous regional cooperation process needs to focus on those countries. However, for the time being, such an indigenous cooperation process is missing, with external great-power influence more prevalent when it comes to the issue of supporting a regional cooperation process involving Central Asian states. For the time being, Central Asia's regional cooperation is generally characterised by bilateral agreements between the regional countries, and in their relationship with non-regional powers like China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Some Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are even become member of an external regional cooperation process, Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). While BRI and EEU are external projects of supporting regional cooperation, one could argue that the Asian Development Bank's Central Asian Economic Cooperation (CAREC) may be described, at least, as a partial indigenous Central Asian regional cooperation process. Partial, since its membership includes non-Central Asian states as well. The non-existence of a formal indigenous regional cooperation process is a rather surprising fact, given that various forms of commonality, based on culture, language, religion and shared history, do exist. Indeed, during the Soviet period, the region was characterised by a well-established regional entity and an integrated economic sphere. It is a legacy that one would expect to have a greater impact. Yet the dissolution of the Soviet Union represented a strong catalyst for fundamental change and the well-established and integrated economic sphere disintegrated. With the independence of the former Soviet republics, the geostrategic landscape in Central Asia changed fundamentally. The newly independent states are still undergoing a nation-building process and facing border demarcation issues, which is not conducive to forming a regional cooperation process. Indeed, the impression of an international observer is that there is a more established outside awareness of a Central Asia region than what actually exists among the countries in the region. At the same time, we can identify a number of external attempts, led by neighbouring great powers Russia and China, to facilitate closer regional cooperation within Central Asia, even though their respective projects (EEU/BRI/SCO) are different in their character. With great-power interests, the topic of 'sphere of influence' always comes up, as well, not least because the distribution of power between Russia and China has changed considerably in favour of the latter. Yet, despite China's rising economic influence in Central Asia, it does not envisage any political integration projects, the way Russia does. Therefore, while an indigenous Central Asian cooperation process is hardly identifiable the region is also witnessing a re-distribution of power among its neighbouring great powers.

To assess the likelihood of an indigenous regional cooperation taking place, one has first to evaluate to what extent incentives to support such a process exist within the region, like economic incentives, and to what extent external cooperation processes may represent an alternative course or action. The enquiry starts with some consideration of the characteristics of regional cooperation, followed by an evaluation of the challenges facing an indigenous regional cooperation process, of the great power impact and a final assessment of the challenges an indigenous regional cooperation process is facing.

## 2. Regional Integration Processes

In focusing on regional cooperation and integration processes, that is to say, the formation of a region, a number of aspects need to be addressed. For example, how the specific integration process can be characterised? Does it follow a 'top-down' approach, in which states and central governments will take the lead, or will it be a process based on local initiatives, described as 'bottom-up', with sub-state actors, local economic actors and parts of the civil society as the driving forces behind it? In academic research, a generally applied differentiation with regard to regional cooperation processes is made between 'Old Regionalism' (state-led, top-down) and 'New Regionalism' (locally inspired, bottom-up). The differentiation between 'Old Regionalism' and 'New Regionalism' also has a historical association. Whereas 'Old Regionalism' occurred in the context of the bi-polar Cold War period, while 'New Regionalism' originated from the 1980s onward, within a multilateral global setting. Another applied, but related, differentiation found in academic writing is that between regionalism (formal, top-down) and regionalisation (informal, bottom-up). Breslin and Hook assess, that regionalism refers to conscious, deliberate and purposive attempts made by national states to create formal mechanisms ('top-down' in character), whereas regionalisation characterises a process based on non-state actors' activities when supporting local economic development (Breslin and Hook, 2002, p. 4).

All these distinctions are quite relevant when investigating a specific regional integration process, since they will help to identify the character of a specific integration process, its drivers and supporters. Another aspect that also requires our attention is that no region exists by itself, even though geographic features like international river basins, mountain ranges and valleys, or coastal areas, may offer at first an 'image' of a region. Another source for imagining a region may be based on the geographic concentration of economic capacity or connected urban areas. Yet another basis for regional integration is based on the existence of a shared identity based on religion, culture or language. Nonetheless, while geographic proximity and a shared identity are vital aspects for region formation, it still requires political, economic, and social entrepreneurship, or a combination of them, to support a regional formation process.

While different actors within a particular geographic setting, depending on the specific integration process as outlined above, will take crucial roles, external actors, such as powerful countries with an interest in a specific geographic space and in a specific regional integration process, need also to be recognised as actors. While recent academic research on regional integration processes is more willing to refute great-power influence on regional integration processes, especially by downgrading the notion of hegemonic regionalism, the idea that the world order should be managed by a number of regional groups, with each of them led by a regional great power (Acharya, 2012, p. 5), has not disappeared; therefore the potential impact of great powers on a particular regional integration process needs to be taken into consideration. Indeed, political-economic power constitutes an internal aspect of every regional integration process in the long term, though a crucial aspect is to what extent political-economic power is mobilised from within the region or from outside the region. After all, without the participation of powerful countries within a particular region, a regional integration project is less likely to succeed. We can imagine the impact on European integration if neither Germany nor France had been interested in supporting it. Great-power impacts on sub-regional integration processes may differ, since a bottom-up integration process is characterised by a local response to local underdevelopment or missing infrastructure connectivity. But even in such cases, the potential of great-power influence cannot be ignored. A related argument in reducing the perception of great-power influence on regional integration processes states that regions are constructed from within; consequently, horizontal relations, relations within a region, are emphasised, while vertical, great-power, relations are less valued. Therefore, there is an emphasis on the internal cohesion of a region, which in turn represents another vital aspect for every regional cooperation and integration process. Even so, we can also identify different levels of internal coherence associated with specific regional integration processes; we just have to compare the EU with ASEAN. However, it is worth recognising that this different level of internal coherence may be a deliberate outcome of a particular regional integration process, yet, over time, missing internal coherence may still become a specific challenge for a particular regional integration process. Even within this focus on horizontal relationships, the impact of external great-power interests cannot be denied, but once again the implications of it will be case-specific.

### 3. Central Asia: A Region Without an Indigenous Cooperation Process

Turning to Central Asia, it is quite interesting to note that a locally inspired regional cooperation process from within Central Asia is missing, not least as Central Asia is commonly referred to as a region in academic writing and remains in the focus of great-power politics. One can get the impression that there exists a strong awareness outside Central Asia that a Central Asian region exist, while a regional perception within Central Asia seems rather weak.

#### 3.1 Lack of Regional Cohesiveness and Awareness

This lack of regional cooperation is rather surprising since the area had been integrated within one political and governance space during the Soviet period. Krapoh and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, p. 347) also stating that this non-existence of an indigenous regional cooperation process is rather puzzling, while Patnaik (2019, p. 147) points out that the previous existing cohesiveness during the Soviet period has all but been lost. However, it should not be forgotten, despite the passage of time, that the now independent states were never meant to become independent states, as the former administrative boundaries drawn within the area during the Soviet period were based on the administrative requirements of the central government of the Soviet Union. While the Central Asian countries have already experienced a lengthy period of nation building, they still can be described as newly independent countries, guarding their national independence, territorial unity and championing non-interference in domestic issues. This in turn limits the political will and preparedness to share power and identity within a regional cooperation process, consequently contributing to a weak local inspired regional integration process. The underlining animosity over existing border demarcations and attempts of redrawing some of their common borders, leading to ethnic riots and water-sharing conflicts, does not support regional cooperation as well. One just has to remember the violent conflict in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan, leading to several hundred people dead, thousands injured and tens of thousands of people becoming refugees as member of the Uzbek community fled across the border into Uzbekistan. Border disputes are an ongoing source of disagreements and conflicts, especially within the Fergana valley. In April 2021 we witnessed yet another conflict escalation, on this occasion along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border (Kyrgyzstan's Batken region) over how to share a local water resource, leading to dozens of deaths, even the use of artillery and the burning down of whole villages. These kinds of episodes hardly support a regional cooperation process or the image of regional cohesion. Buranelli (2021, p. 3) argues that regionalism has only limited, if at all, impact on Central Asia as the region is beset by division, mistrust and conflict. In an even stronger way argues Spechler (2001) describing Central Asia countries as pathologically non cooperative. The 'strong-man' leadership style we can identify in all of Central Asia's countries, also undermines support for an indigenous regional cooperation process. Krapoh and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, p. 348) stating that Central Asian states authoritarian political structures are problematic for supporting regionalism. While power sharing, or limiting national power, is not a serious political option for strong presidents, it should not in general be interpreted as going against a regional cooperation process. (Note 1)

We can identify another aspect that works against an indigenous regional cooperation process: the distribution of economic strength between Central Asia's countries. Related data on GDP clearly highlights this diversity, with Kazakhstan taking a strong lead. It is followed, at a much lower level, by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and at an even lower-level, by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (see Chart 1). Yet it is interesting to note that in the early independence period (1995 to 2000) the GDPs of all Central Asian countries were aligned rather well. However, a differentiation in their GDPs, and especially Kazakhstan's rise, occurred from 2001 onwards, a trend that continues.

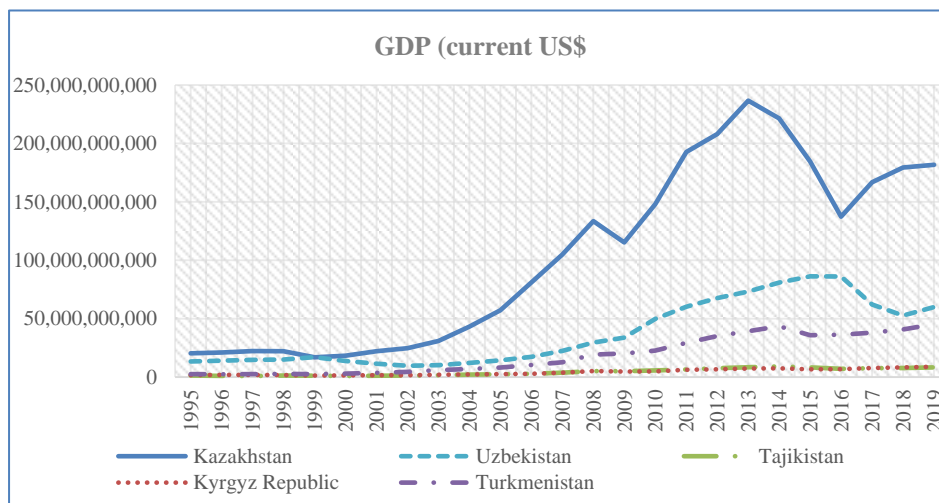


Chart 1: GDP (current US\$), derived from World Bank data online

Another missing incentive for support from within for a regional cooperation and integration process is the weak economic interlinkage within the region, since access to economic markets outside the region offer more attractions than those within the region.

3.2 Lack of Economic Perspective for Indigenous Regional Cooperation

Three countries – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – have been selected for this analysis. The selection is based on the regional trade integration of both economically strong and weak countries, but also on the availability of trade data for an extended period of time. closer look at the regional trade data for Kazakhstan, the strongest Central Asian economy, indicates that its major export markets are China and Russia, with China taking on a more prominent role during the 2008-2015 period. The other regional countries are considerably less relevant, being at the bottom of the scale, with Turkey as the third most relevant destination for Kazakhstan exports (see Chart 2). Regarding Kazakhstan’s imports, Russia clearly dominates, followed at a lower level by China, while the other Central Asian countries hardly make an impact at all, including Turkey (see Chart 3).

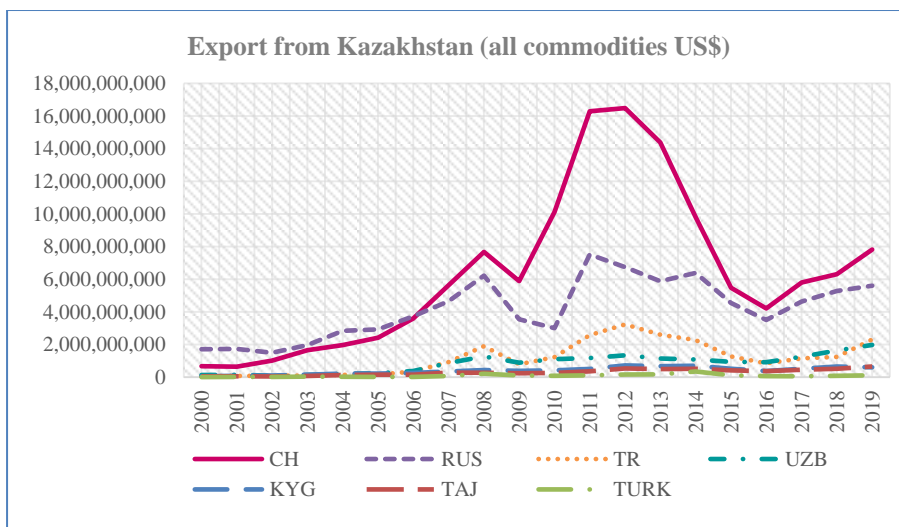


Chart 2. Data derived from comtrade.un.org, online

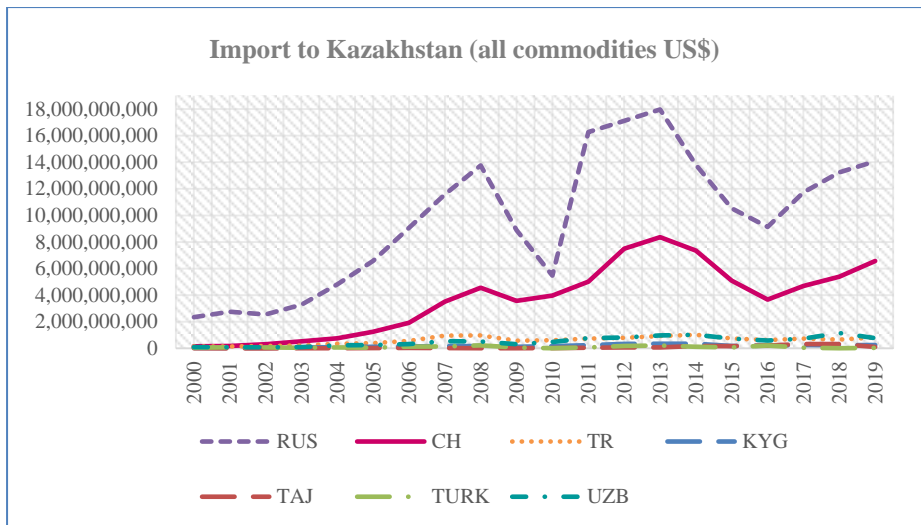


Chart 3. Data derived from comtrade.un.org, online

Regarding the trade data for Kyrgyzstan, the picture is a bit more mixed, as Central Asian countries take on a more prominent role. The two top export markets are Russia and Kazakhstan, with the latter taking a strong lead during the 2001-2016 period. Uzbekistan, too, represents an important export market, by taking the third position, although it shows some strong variations over time. The other Central Asian countries form a more or less single group, though Turkey takes the lead within this group (see Chart 4).

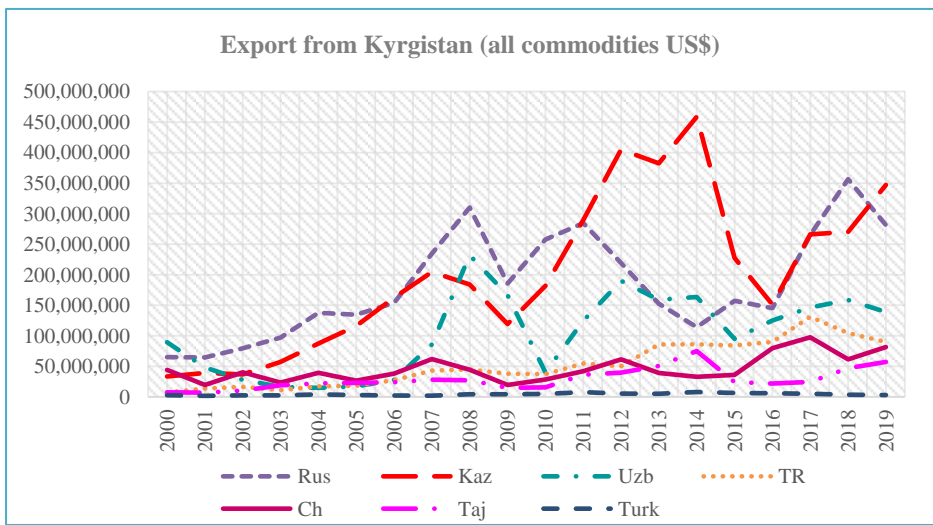


Chart 4. Data derived from comtrade.un.org, online

The data on Kyrgyzstan’s imports offers a different picture. Here, Russia and China have leading positions, with Russia taking a clear lead, at least until 2015. At a lower level, Kazakhstan takes third position, while the other Central Asian countries are located lower on the scale, with Turkey taking the lead among this group (see Chart 5). While one could argue that, from Kyrgyzstan’s trade perspective, regional trade counts a bit more than it does in the previous case of Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan’s rather small national economy does not offer a strong incentive for a Central Asia-led regional cooperation process and it strongly relies on the remittances sent from its worm migrants working in Russia.

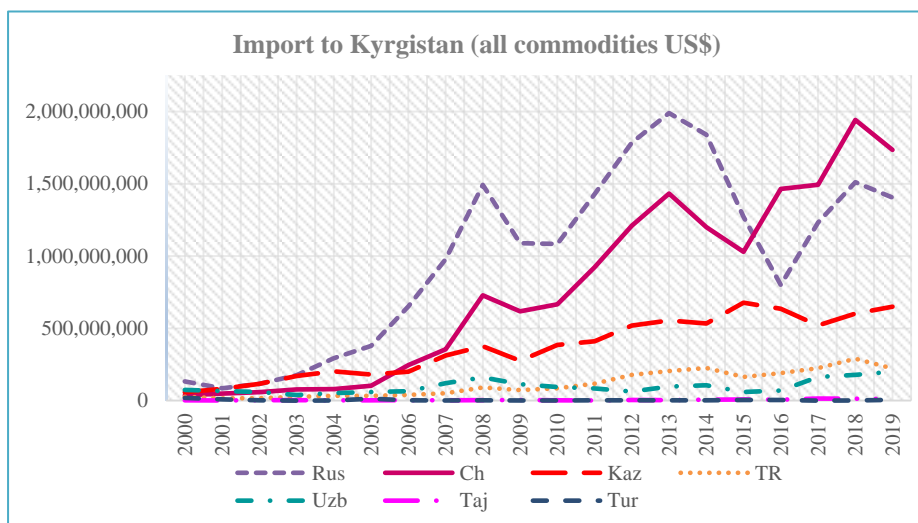


Chart 5. Data derived from comtrade.un.org, online

Trade data for Uzbekistan provides another interesting impression. With regard to its export markets, Russia dominated strongly, at least until 2014. From 2014 onwards, Russia’s position declined markedly to a level comparable with China, which had increased its relevance as an export market for Uzbekistan continuously since 2008. A comparable assessment can be made for Kazakhstan, though from 2014 onwards its relevance as an export market began to decline, even though it keeps a higher ranking than the other Central Asian countries, which are rather negligible as export markets (see Chart 6). Regarding imports, again Russia dominated until 2017, when China’s volume increased considerably, overtaking Russia in 2018. The other Central Asian countries figure rather low, though Kazakhstan stands out to some extent (see Chart 7).

Thus, when considering the export and import data of the countries within Central Asia, trade among Central Asian states is not of much relevance, an assessment also supported by Nurseit (2020). Consequently, trade offers little incentive to support a Central Asia-led and regional focused integration and cooperation process.

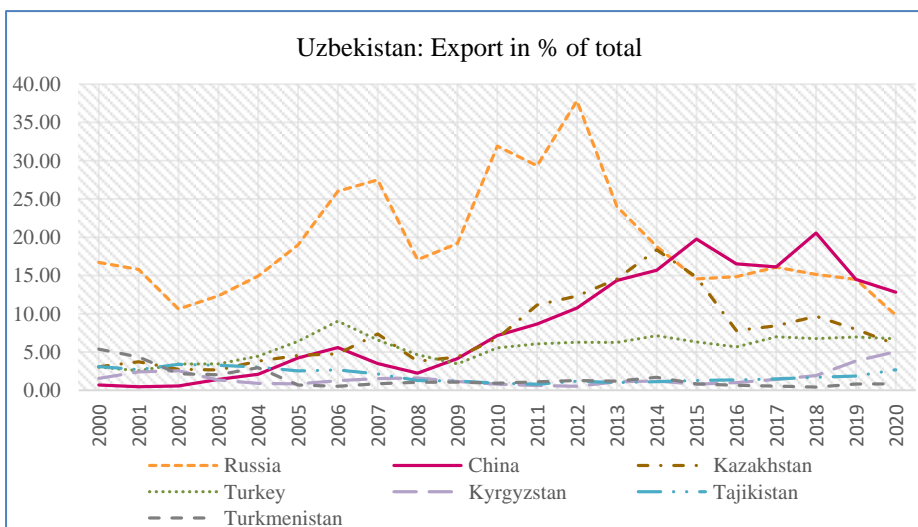


Chart 6. Data derived from The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Statistics)

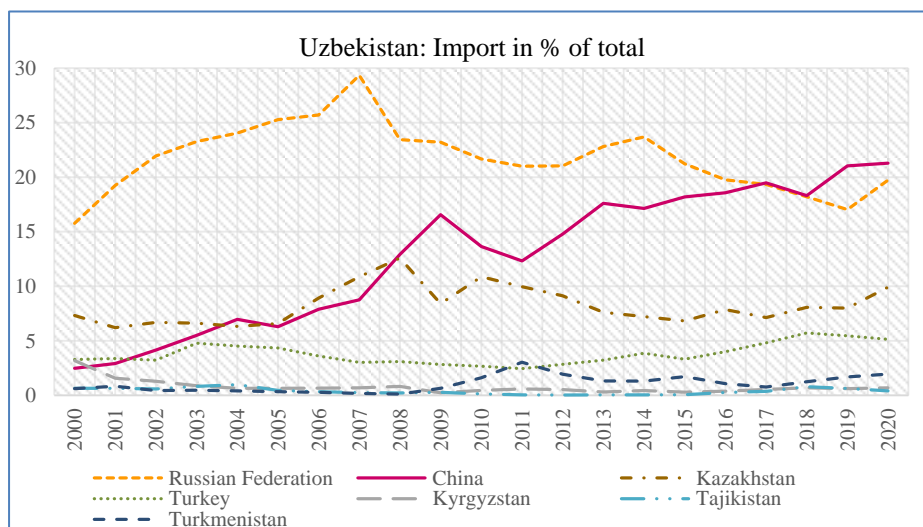


Chart 7. Data derived from The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Statistics)

### 3.3 Past and Recent Attempts at Forming Indigenous Regional Cooperation

Before turning to potential external sources of regional cooperation, we should remember that there had been an early attempt to form a regional cooperation process from within Central Asia, back in 1994: the Central Asian Union. Bobokulov (2006) points out that the underlying goal was to create a single economic space, including the free movement of goods, services, labour and capital. Yet, Krapoh and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, p. 361) state that, after it failed to support regional economic and trade policies, it became rather ineffective in the early 2000s, with the consequence that regional cooperation in Central Asia stalled. However, ‘Central Asia 2050’ represents another, rather more academic, attempt to support an indigenous regional cooperation process, by identifying the potential for and relevance of an indigenous regional cooperation process. In identifying Central Asia a potential connection point between Europe and Asia, Madhur (2016, p. 223) states, that Central Asian countries need to follow and open regionalism, based on: intraregional integration; interregional cooperation and integration; and global integration. While Kholi, Katus, and Kholi (2016, p. 70) point out that, to reach the Central Asia 2050 vision, Central Asian countries have to conclude their national transformation processes, by implementing four crucial tasks: transforming their predominantly rural society towards an urban society; promoting the manufacturing and service sectors; supporting a market economic system; and establishing transparent, accountable and effective institutions.

The ADB’s CAREC project initiated in 2001, offers another attempt in facilitating regional cooperation by supporting an, albeit only partial, indigenous approach to Central Asia regional cooperation as its membership extend beyond the five Central Asian countries, including Georgia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and Mongolia. As stated on its official web page (CAREC 20), CAREC focuses on the promotion of development through cooperation, with the aim of generating economic growth and reducing poverty. Adding, that an acceleration of Eurasian integration provides a strong momentum for the CAREC process. A primary focus of the programme is to strengthen physical infrastructure development, by first developing transport corridors and then transforming them into economic corridors. According to CAREC 2030 (2017, p. 11), an economic corridor represents an integrated economic space, an agglomeration of economic resources, one which generates a strong growth effect and attract further investment. However, the ADB’s CAREC strategy faces considerable challenges, going beyond an ongoing demand for physical infrastructure since regional supporting cooperation also requires to address the ‘software’ aspect of cross-border transport and trade. The Central Asia 2050 report stress that time-consuming border-crossing procedures, such as providing a variety of documentation, visa requirements, and inefficient border facilities, are causing substantial interruptions for trade between Central Asian countries (Nag, Harinder, and Kohli 2016, p. 228). The CAREC 2030 process also puts some emphasis on enhancing policy coordination and an institutional framework, even though the primary focus is on project implementation. To further support regional cooperation, CAREC 2030 focuses on five principles: aligning with national strategies; adopting a dual-track approach (enhancing existing cooperation and facilitating new areas of cooperation); deepening policy dialogue between its members; further incorporating the private sector and civil society participation; and establishing an open and inclusive platform to build and enhance synergies between



the member countries and cooperation partners (CAREC 2030, p. 2017). From an institutional perspective, CAREC 2030 supports a further strengthening of the institutional architecture, which is comprised of the Minister Conference, Senior Official Meeting, Sector Committees, and the CAREC Secretariat. In addition, CAREC 2030 also established operational priorities by focusing on selective cluster development, including economic and financial stability; trade, tourism, and economic corridors; infrastructure and economic connectivity; agriculture and water; and human development (CAREC 2030, p. 2017). While CAREC still faces various challenges, it may be considered a potential nucleus of an indigenous regional cooperation process within Central Asia, although some of its members are placed outside the region.

The current lack of development of a truly indigenous regional cooperation framework is rather astonishing, when considering the history of regional integration during the Soviet period. While CAREC may offer a first attempt at supporting a more indigenous regional cooperation process from within Central Asia, when we consider the political relevance of regional cooperation processes, we have to extend our focus to include proposals for regional cooperation from outside the region. Indeed, as Patnaik (2019, p. 160) reminds us, since the 19th century, outside powers have had a strong impact on Central Asian regionalism.

#### **4. Great-power Involvement in Central Asia Regionalism**

As discussed in the previous section, indigenous approaches to Central Asia regional cooperation failed in the early post-Soviet era and hardly exist today. However, while a truly indigenous approach to regional cooperation is missing, we can identify various external strategies of engagement with Central Asian countries in supporting regional cooperation, though they are associated with great-power interests. The two most relevant great-power contenders within Central Asia are Russia and China; while Turkey also has a stated interest in Central Asia's regional cooperation process, it commands neither the political nor the economic capacity to instigate a viable approach to Central Asia cooperation on its own, even though it has some 'soft-power' leverage. Indeed, the economic data previously presented also indicate its less relevant role for Central Asia's economies. One could also argue that India may enhance its role and influence in Central Asia regionalism, but for any economic benefits to be generated through trade, it faces two formidable geographical and security challenges: Pakistan and Afghanistan. Any overland transport or pipeline route between India and Central Asian countries would have to pass these two countries, and based on their domestic political instability and conflictual relations with India it is rather unlikely that India will become a relevant economic actor within Central Asia in the near future.

When focusing on the potential of Russia's and China's impact on Central Asian regionalism, two approaches can be identified: Russia's EEU and China's BRI. As a result, one crucial topic is to what extent each of those approaches impact on a Central Asian cooperation process. To answer this question, the first step is to identify the different characteristics of the two approaches, as they differ considerably in their institutional outlook.

##### *4.1 Eurasian Economic Union*

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) focuses on economic integration, to facilitate free movement of goods, services, capital and labour among its members, thus enhancing their close economic cooperation and their national development. The EEU also includes a governance structure, consisting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, Eurasian Intergovernmental Council, Eurasian Economic Commission, and the Court of the Eurasian Economic Union. This provides a strong indication of creating an institutional setting as part of this regional cooperation project. Yet, when considering the political character of the EEU, Bordachev (2014, p. 26) asserts that the EEU is an indication of Moscow's geopolitical ambition to establish political-economic influence through regional cooperation. Popescu (2014, p. 13) argues, that Russia's regional projects are aimed at preventing third countries access to the former Soviet space. Certainly, there is a widely held assumption, based on statements by Russia's leadership in an academic writing, that Central Asia still belongs to the Russian sphere of influence. While the strategic consideration of declaring a sphere of influence has lost some of its prominence, in comparison with the Cold War period, it has not disappeared. In differentiating between a traditional approach to spheres of influence – the act of generating a dominant hegemonic-like influence within a specific geographic setting – and a newer approach, Buranelli (2016) provide an alternative conceptualisation, by characterising contemporary approaches as a structural relation, as a negotiated hegemony, in which an influential state takes a strong leading and influencing role, but where smaller states still retain their political independence.

One can argue that the EEU does have the characteristics of such a negotiated hegemony, after all, while the above considerations provide evidence for great-power-inspired geopolitical projects on the part of Russia, it does not necessarily imply that other EEU member countries cannot profit from participation in the EEU or take countermeasures against unfavourable Russian policy. Kazantsev, Medvedeva and Safranchuk (2021, p. 62) refers to the 2014 Russian decision to introduce a more flexible exchange regime for the Russian Ruble,



resulting in a considerable amount of its value lost with the immediate effect that Russian exports become cheaper and thus more competitive within the EEU. Kazakhstan, accusing Russia of a deliberate violation of the EEU agreement through currency devaluation, and implemented a counter trade policy. Devaluation of the Ruble also reduced the value of remittances Central Asian migrant worker in Russia could send back home. Yet economic integration with Russia is still popular in parts of Central Asia. Regarding Kazakhstan's EEU membership, it is further worth remembering, as pointed out by Kudaibergenova (2016, p. 99) that previous President Nazarbayev was one of the most active supporters of a Eurasian integration project, since this would re-establish a common economic sphere among former Soviet republics. Therefore, one may judge that Kazakhstan joined the EEU out of national self-interest, after all Russia represent a crucial market for Kazakhstan's exports. Kudaibergenova (2016, p. 105) also identified a similar case of self-interest with regard to Kyrgyzstan's EEU membership, since not only is it one of the smallest and least developed countries of Central Asia, but Russia is also the destination of almost 92 percent of its migrant work-force, while the remaining 8 percent migrate to Kazakhstan, another EEU member. Zvyagelskaya et al. (2016) highlighted the significant contribution of migrant worker remittances to national gross domestic product for Tajikistan (50%) and for Kyrgyzstan (33%). There are additional implications of EEU membership for Central Asia and any indigenous regional cooperation processes. Krapoh and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, p. 362) point out that EEU membership offers Kazakhstan economic opportunities through its access to Russia's market, a market potential a Central Asia regional cooperation cannot offer. They add that, since the EEU represents a customs union, Kazakhstan's membership forecloses bilateral trade treaties with non-member countries and limits therefore the options for an indigenous Central Asia regionalism. After all, Kazakhstan is the strongest economy in Central Asia. Yet its inability to join an alternative Central Asia cooperation process has even further implications for any future prospect of regional cooperation within Central Asia, at least when following Nurseit's argument. Nurseit (2020, pp. 18-19) stated that Central Asian regionalism would require a strong and respected country from within the region, one with a strategic vision for the region, to become a regional integration leader, and Kazakhstan could fulfil this role, he argues. However, as long as Kazakhstan is an EEU member, it will not be able of taking up such a leadership role. For that reason, Krapoh and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, p. 361) argued that Kazakhstan's EEU membership represents a fundamental challenge for any future indigenous Central Asian regionalism.

#### *4.2 Belt and Road Initiative*

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) became synonymous with infrastructure development, based on individual projects. Such cooperation is supported by bilateral relationships and agreements. Indeed, so far, no institutional development aiming for deeper cooperation has been attempted between China and the countries participating in BRI projects. However, it is worth remembering that the most relevant document describing the character of the BRI, the 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' emphasised various strategies for deeper cooperation, going well beyond infrastructure development. For example, it asked for the integration and coordination of the development strategies of the participating countries, for deeper market integration, for economic policy coordination, and for in-depth regional cooperation (Vision and Action 2015, pp. 2-3). While those focuses may indicate a strategic approach to facilitating formal regional cooperation, any further references to a specific future institutional setting are not offered. Consequently, promoting regional cooperation should be achieved through bilateral cooperation, leaving less space for regional institutional development. At the same time, enhancing bilateral cooperation through multilateralism does represent one strategic focus of BRI, as existing multilateral forums should be supported in various regional settings (Vision and Action 2015, p. 9) as, for example, with the ADB led CAREC, though China's relationship with Central Asian countries is based on bilateralism (Note 2). Rather recently, Turkmenistan decided to extend its pipeline infrastructure via Kazakhstan to China which is seen as an alternative market for its gas resources.

From a Central Asian perspective, BRI provides additional infrastructure development and thus access to the Chinese and in extension to global markets, but without the requirement of joining a regional treaty arrangement. With such conditions, China's BRI seems to follow an open approach in supporting regional cooperation in Central Asia, which contrast with the 'closed space' approach characterised by Russia's EEU. Consequently, while BRI enhances China's presence and influence in Central Asia, it does not exclude access by other countries to the region. Even in the event that the policy coordination process among BRI members, as envisaged in the BRI document, were implemented, which is not the case for the foreseeable future, it would not necessarily lead to the establishment of a closed grouping of countries like those in the EEU.

#### *4.3 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*

Over the last 20 years, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has developed into a strong, recognisable

international organisation, with its most prominent international profile linked to supporting security, political stability and anti-terrorism. Yet its membership and the number of cooperation partners have expanded considerably, reaching beyond Central Asia. When taking a closer look at the SCO charter, its founding document, the description 'in the region' is used on various occasions, yet 'the region' is never described. As a result, the geographic scale of what constitutes the 'the region' is left open. While this ambiguity may work well when increasing its membership, its increasing membership and cooperation partners also indicates that Central Asia can no longer be interpreted as the SCO's regional focus, even this was the case at the beginning. Indeed, with Pakistan and India becoming members, the geographic diversity of the SCO increased, a process even further supported when regarding the countries with observer and dialogue status; the first includes Iran, and the second Turkey, Sri Lanka and even Cambodia. Therefore, any attempt to consider Central Asia the heart of SCO loses some of its validity, even though its core focus on security and political stability is still centred on Central Asia, Russia and China. Admitting India and Pakistan to the organisation may also contribute to higher friction within the SCO. One just has to remember how the regional rivalry between them undermines, indeed paralyses, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to function as a regional organisation. We have to remember that, within the SCO decisions made requires all members consensus. What's more, China-India relations also became very confrontational after the violent May 2020 confrontation between their soldiers in the Galwan River valley, leading to about 50 soldiers being killed and the subsequent mobilisation of tens of thousands of soldiers on each side of the shared border. It is not a situation inviting close and friendly cooperation, even though it would be in the interests of both countries. For these reasons, SCO faces some profound internal challenges, which may limit its ability to engage with external actors, so its potential for acting as a major contributor to an indigenous Central Asian cooperation project actually decreases with the extension of its membership. Another noteworthy aspect is, that so far, no attempts has been made at supporting supranational institutional development. Still, a number of functional bodies within the SCO have been created to support its operations (Charter 2002). Among them, to identify the most influential ones, is the Council of Heads of States, which represents the supreme body of the organisation; the Council of Heads of Government, which has a number of specific tasks, like the approval of the budget; and the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, focusing on current issues but also preparing the Heads of State meeting. Once again, based on its extended membership and the various countries granted observer and dialogue status, the SCO has already become, or is on the way of becoming, an Asian organisation, as opposed to a Central Asian organisation.

### **5. Considering Central Asia's Regionalism: Taking Stock**

As the evaluation has shown, there exist few economic incentives to support a regional cooperation entity from within the region. Adding to this situation is a region-wide process of continuing state building, of emphasising national power, which in turn leaves less political space for sharing political power within the context of a regional cooperation process. Patnaik (2019, p. 159) wrote that, even after 28 years of independence, Central Asian countries are still working to resume good diplomatic ties, while a Central Asian regional cooperation process involving only Central Asian states still requires a long process to be implemented, an assessment supported by this author. However, when taking a perspective beyond an indigenously supported Central Asian regional cooperation process, we can identify a variety of attempts to connect and integrate the regional space of Central Asia. Among them are two great-power-supported approaches, namely Russia's EEU and China's BRI. While the SCO represents something of a shared undertaking with regard to support for regional cooperation. Another process with potential for supporting regional cooperation is represented by the ADB's CAREC process. Therefore, when we consider the various approaches, it raises the issue of how to compare the possible implications for a regional cooperation process. After all, to some extent they focus on the same geographic area and may even have similar focuses, such as infrastructure investment, in support of local and regional development. But they differ in their extent of institutional development, membership and political-strategic focus. Yet, with infrastructure development as their focus we witness an integration of regional space, though the extent of economic cooperation and integration will be limited by the protection of national economic interest and national sovereignty.

To begin with, aside from influence by the great powers, Central Asia's regional cooperation and integration is confronted by a continuing lack of regional leadership supporting an indigenous regional cooperation process. The two biggest countries within Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, seem, for the time being, unwilling to take on such a role, either alone or in cooperation. In the case of Kazakhstan, its membership in the EEU represents another obstacle, even as mentioned before, that President Nazarbayev was one of the earliest proponents a regional cooperation process, by supporting an economic re-integration of the previously existing integrated Soviet economic space within Central Asia. In this respect, it should be remembered that the

dissolution of the Soviet Union represented not only a fundamental political process, but a comprehensive destruction of a once-unified economic sphere, as well. However, as pointed out earlier, there are strong economic arguments for Kazakhstan to remain in the EEU. Such economic considerations also apply to Kyrgyzstan's EEU membership, but from a rather different perspective. While membership does expand potential markets for Kyrgyzstan's products, work migration to Russia, where 92 percent of its citizens who work abroad are living (the remaining 8 percent living in Kazakhstan), provides a fundamental consideration for EEU membership (Kudaibergenova, 2016, p. 105). For this reason, it is equally unlikely to see Kyrgyzstan leaving the EEU to follow an alternative regional cooperation process focusing only on Central Asian countries. We have to remember that the EEU concentrates on the establishment of an integrated economic sphere, which emphasises a clear distinction between members and non-members. As pointed out by Wisniewska (2013), integration within the EEU framework intends to deepen economic ties between Russia and some Central Asian states by permanently linking their markets to that of Russia.

There is also a low likelihood that Uzbekistan will be taking on a regional leadership role in support of an indigenous Central Asia cooperation process. Indeed, during the previous, lengthy presidency of Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan was a strong opponent of any type of regional cooperation, or what Kudaibergenova (2016) described as 'any form of domination from the centre', through unionism. While the current Uzbek president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, has signalled more openness towards cooperation with the other Central Asian countries, it seems rather unlikely that Uzbekistan will become a champion of Central Asian regional cooperation. A comparably strong emphasis on national independence can be identified within Turkmenistan, as it prefers to stay out of any formal, structural, regional integration and cooperation process. As assessed by Samokhvalov (2016, p. 87), Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are following an independent, self-reliant foreign policy strategy, avoiding any commitment to Central Asian multilateral cooperation.

When considering China's BRI as a potential source for Central Asian regional cooperation, it is vital to recognise BRI's own character, which is based on extensive infrastructure projects. BRI, for the time being, does not support any formal institutional development comparable to the EEU, or any formal regional cooperation process. As a result, the Russian-supported EEU process is much more exclusive than China's BRI. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that the primary document outlining BRI's character and aims does envisage a possible closer cooperation of BRI participants in their development and economic policy strategies. Yet, for the time being, and the foreseeable future, it seems rather unlikely that we can envisage a closer, more institutional based, cooperation among BRI's participating countries. Indeed, China's relations with BRI participating countries are based on bilateral relations. Therefore, as pointed out by Stronski and Ng (2018) Central Asia's regional elites interpret China's growing regional presence as a stabilising factor, thanks to Chinese infrastructure investment, which contributes to regional development. A position shared by Moldashev (2019), stating that many members of Central Asian elites believe that China's BRI offers a large number of positive aspects consistent with the pressing needs of Central Asian states. This contrast with what Wisniewska (2013, p. 26) describes as Central Asian countries' ambivalent attitude to a Russian-led integration process. While closer economic cooperation with Russia offers economic benefits, a project of political integration is facing strong resistance. Indeed, as pointed out by Stronski and Ng (2018, p. 9), lack of a political agenda for a structured regional cooperation process enhances the BRI's appeal to several Central Asian countries. As China's engagement with Central Asian countries is based on bilateral relations and BRI investments are project related, China's growing influence within Central Asia does, for the time being, not support a formal regional cooperation process.

However, BRI, through its infrastructure investment, does contribute to a closer integration of the regional space, an aspect that BRI shares with CAREC. Yet, from a Central Asian perspective, CAREC may hold the most promise for supporting an indigenous regional cooperation process, even though its membership includes countries from outside Central Asia. When we consider its emphasis and underlying strategy, the focus on Central Asia becomes evident. In addition to its infrastructure investment strategy, CAREC also offers a rudimentary institutional setting but with strong prospects for supporting regional cooperation. With regard to great-power politics, it is interesting to note that CAREC has China among its members, but not Russia. It is also worth noting that the major document regarding BRI lists CAREC, among other regional cooperation processes, as a potential cooperation partner. Still, it would be premature to believe that an indigenous Central Asian cooperation process is already taking place. As Patnaik (2019, pp. 159-160) assert, a regional cooperation process, involving only Central Asia countries and based on a formal institutional setting, is still only a distant possibility, adding that, since the 19th century, regional cooperation in Central Asia has been constructed by outside powers. Even, as Nurseit (2020, p. 20) assert, that it would be in the national interests of Central Asian countries to act as a united group, to enhance their negotiation powers on regional and global topics. However,

Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes (2020, 348) remind us that, as that a weak common regional identity does not support an indigenous regional prospect for regionalism Central Asia.

Consequently, these considerations support the perception that, for the time being, a vertical power structure, based on great-power interests, and not on horizontal relationships within Central Asia, strongly influence any potential regional cooperation process. Regarding the differentiation made earlier between top-down (government-led) and bottom-up (local actor-led) processes, and between regionalism and regionalisation, for the time being, the regional cooperation processes focusing on Central Asia are government-led, top-down processes, and can be described as 'regionalism'. Such a characterisation also applies to the so far only potentially indigenous Central Asian cooperation process, CAREC.

## 6. Conclusion

When one considers Central Asia as a region, it seems that such a perception appeals more to an outside observer than to the countries within Central Asia. Indeed, some of them still have not been able to solve their border disputes since they became independent, leading to occasional conflicts and ethnic riots. This in turn undermines the prospects for regional cooperation. Thus, when investigating Central Asia's regional cooperation processes, we are left with the impression that an indigenous process only exists rudimentary in shape, in the form of the CAREC project. At the same time, we can identify external, great-power inspired, cooperation processes that to some extent generate an impact on Central Asian regional cooperation. Among them are the EEU, BRI and the SCO by offering various possibilities for regional cooperation, but are supported by great-power interests, namely Russia and China. Since they differ in their character, their potential impact also varies. As for the EEU, a rather restricted integration project, it tends to limit the external economic relations of its members and thus generates a rather negative impact on the prospect of supporting an indigenous Central Asian cooperation process, not least since two Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, are members. The strong Russian leadership of the EEU – which leads many observers to insist that the EEU is an expression of Russian great power ambitions, wanting to secure its own sphere of influence would not even support an indigenous Central Asian cooperation process. With BRI, the situation is rather different, not least because of its character, in supporting infrastructure projects, but without any demand for joining a political cooperation project. While BRI does ask for closer cooperation on development policy among the participating countries, so far, no attempt at setting up a formal process has been undertaken. Although BRI does enhance China's economic and political impact on Central Asia, it does not follow a strategy of establishing a formal integration project or a policy of restricting third party access. Consequently, it would not undermine the dynamics of an indigenous Central Asian regional cooperation process from a formal structural perspective while at the same time its infrastructure focus contributes to a stronger integration of the Central Asian space and economies. This strong focus on supporting Central Asia's infrastructure development and, by extension, the region's internal cohesion BRI shares with CAREC. However, this emphasis on infrastructure development also offers new external linkages for Central Asian countries, which may contribute to their economic development, though the potential implications for an indigenous regional cooperation process are not straightforward at the moment, as it could either contribute to a regional cooperation, by either supporting regional cohesion when addressing external impacts, or it could undermine regional cohesion if individual countries opt to participate in different external cooperation processes, which is actually already happening. One has to remember Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's EEU membership, though even this is based on economic considerations. A final point with regard to an indigenous cooperation process is that regional leadership in support of it is missing, since the two strongest countries within Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are either not ready for taking up such a leadership role or, in the case of Kazakhstan, opted to join a different regional cooperation process. In sum, for all of the above reasons, we are left with the perception that vertical power relations, from outside Central Asia, as opposed to horizontal relations, from within the region, are more relevant for organising regional cooperation processes. At least for now.

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## Notes

Note 1. One may consider the experience within MERCOSUR. Malamud (2006) assess that the high profile of national presidents, characterised as unified political power, represented a core element of MERCOSUR's integration process. However, a crucial difference between presidential power among MERCOSUR members and presidential power in Central Asia exists, since in the first case they are democratically elected. Hence, a strong national executive power not necessarily go against a regional cooperation process.

Note 2. It is worth remembering that the first agreement on a pipeline project between China and a Central Asian country, Kazakhstan, was signed in 1997, with the initiative originating from Kazakhstan.

## Abbreviations

ADB	- Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	- Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	- Belt and Road Initiative
CAREC	- Central Asian Economic Cooperation
EEU	- Eurasian Economic Union
EU	- European Union
GDP	- Gross Domestic Product
SAARC	- South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SCO	- Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

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