

The Role and Development of Humanitarian Diplomacy in Central Asia

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Abstract. In the context of contemporary globalization, the process of rapprochement among the Central Asian states is gaining increasing relevance. This article analyzes the complex and multi-layered dimensions of regional integration and highlights the strategic approaches necessary for its effective implementation. In particular, strengthening mutual trust, expanding cooperation, and developing human capital are considered key factors of integration. Furthermore, the necessity of forming a common regional strategic culture while preserving the national and cultural identities of each state is substantiated. In this regard, reducing the negative impact of certain shortcomings that emerged during the early years of independence, as well as pursuing policies grounded in constructivist approaches, plays a significant role. The article also examines recent socio-political transformations in the region and analyzes Uzbekistan's distinctive approach to humanitarian diplomacy, particularly its application of "soft power" through education, culture, and dialogue.

Keywords: Central Asia, regional integration, humanitarian diplomacy, soft power, constructivism, strategic culture, national identity, cultural identity, human capital, regional cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

Today, Central Asia is gradually transforming into a region with an evolving geopolitical identity. In recent years, the clear delimitation of borders among the five states, along with the establishment of regular consultations among their leaders, demonstrates that mutual trust and rapprochement in the region have significantly accelerated. At the same time, it would be incorrect to perceive integration as a simple and natural process. In the current volatile global environment, any form of rapprochement emerges as a result of the interaction of multiple factors. One of the most important among them is dialogue grounded in shared historical roots and closely related cultural values. Thus, integration cannot be built solely on economic interests or calculations. Since interests tend to change over time, such variability cannot ensure stable unity. In contrast, factors such as common history, culture, religion, and mentality provide a solid foundation for long-term convergence. In this regard, the degree of similarity among the national identities formed within the region also plays a crucial role.

After gaining independence in 1991, the Central Asian states entered a new historical phase, each choosing its own development path. One of the reasons for this was the absence of a clear historical model to replace the Soviet system. Prior to that, the region had been governed by khanates and emirates, with entirely different value systems. However, the long duration of the Soviet period and policies aimed at shaping a "Soviet identity" left a lasting impact on societal thinking. Today, these factors are among the elements complicating the process of forming a unified regional space.

Therefore, addressing existing challenges requires focusing on several priority directions: developing an education system that fosters an independent and distinctive cultural identity, strengthening cooperation in regulating intra-regional migration, and reinforcing mutual ties through cultural diplomacy. In



addition, each state must deeply understand its own strategic culture and unique identity. Only through the alignment of these factors can genuine and sustainable integration emerge in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework of this study is based on an interdisciplinary understanding of the concepts of strategic culture and identity. Although these categories originated within political science, they have developed at the intersection of political anthropology, cultural studies, and political sociology, enabling a comprehensive analysis of social, political, legal, and economic relations. Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach was adopted as the primary methodological framework of the research. The study employs several specific scientific methods. Sociological analysis was used to examine identity formation and value systems within society, while comparative historical and political analysis allowed for the comparison of development models across different periods and regions. In addition, the method of modeling was applied to outline potential trajectories of regional integration, and systems analysis enabled a comprehensive assessment of interrelated processes.

The concept of strategic culture was first introduced into academic discourse in the 1970s by American political scientist Jack Snyder. Initially, it was developed to explain the role of cultural factors in shaping security policies and strategic decision-making during the Cold War. Subsequently, this concept was expanded by other scholars and came to be regarded as a significant factor influencing state behavior across various policy domains.

Furthermore, diverse theoretical approaches were employed in addressing issues of identity and decolonialism. This contributed to strengthening the theoretical foundation of the study and facilitated a deeper analysis of contemporary processes in Central Asia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the emergence of five independent states in Central Asia took place under complex and unique circumstances. The primary reason for this complexity is that, although the legal and institutional foundations of modern statehood were largely shaped within the Soviet system, the post-independence period required a departure from this model. However, the necessary experience and alternative conceptual frameworks for building new systems were not sufficiently developed in all republics. As a result, the absence of a ready-made historical model to replace the Soviet system became evident: pre-Soviet khanates and emirates were not compatible with modern requirements, while the direct transplantation of European or Asian development models proved ineffective in the regional context. This transitional condition can be explained through the concept of “anomie,” introduced by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In his work *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim emphasized that transitional phases in social development are often complex and may, in some cases, lead to social disintegration¹. Anomie refers to a state in which old norms have collapsed while new ones have not yet been established. It is characterized by weakened social order, the erosion of moral standards, and the absence of institutions that ensure social cohesion. The political and economic crises, collapses, and conflicts observed in the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe at the end of the twentieth century can, to some extent, be interpreted as manifestations of this condition.

In particular, policies such as Mikhail Gorbachev’s “perestroika,” the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, and the “shock therapy” approaches applied in the post-Soviet region were primarily aimed at dismantling the old system but proved insufficient in establishing stable new norms. Structural functionalist Talcott Parsons argued that the stability of a social system depends on strong institutions, which can help reduce the risks associated with anomie². However, practical experience has shown that

¹ Durkheim, É. (1984). *The division of labor in society* (W. D. Halls, Trans.), p. 368.

² Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.



institutional structures alone are not sufficient. The insufficient formation of identity and the lack of a clear political concept grounded in cultural values further complicated the transition processes in Central Asia. These processes are further explained by the work of British scholar Benedict Anderson, who emphasized the role of identity and collective consciousness. According to Anderson, national identity is constructed through shared historical memory, symbols, and narratives, forming a fundamental basis for state-building¹. A similar perspective is advanced by Anthony Giddens, who argues that the stability of modern states depends on the harmony between social cohesion and national identity².

Thus, any process of integration or state-building cannot rely solely on institutional or economic factors. Without a strong socio-cultural foundation—namely, a well-developed identity and collective consciousness—it is unlikely to achieve long-term success.

National Identity and Its Relevance in Central Asia

In the context of ongoing socio-economic transformations and political developments in Uzbekistan, the issue of national and cultural identity has become increasingly significant. This is not only essential for Uzbekistan but also for the entire Central Asian region to gain a distinct voice in the international arena and to develop its own regional brand. In this regard, the effective use of the region's rich cultural resources in shaping soft power policies represents an important economic, social, political, geopolitical, and integrative task. At the core of this process lies the formation of an independent national identity. The complexity of the situation stems from the fact that, in the early 1990s, Central Asian states, like other post-socialist countries, faced the challenge of redefining their norms and value systems. Previously dominant narratives such as communism, the proletarian society, and the Soviet nomenklatura were gradually criticized and dismantled. However, the lack of a systematically developed new identity to replace the old one led to a deep social crisis—*anomie*. In particular, radical religious movements and ethnic tensions became manifestations of a broader crisis of social cohesion linked to insufficient national identity formation.

In Uzbekistan, despite 34 years of independence, the concepts of “Uzbek” and “Uzbekistani” identities have not yet been fully developed on a comprehensive conceptual basis. During the presidency of Islam Karimov, this issue remained largely secondary and did not gain significant social importance within the framework of a relatively closed political model. In contrast, Kazakhstan has recently intensified efforts to shape a unified “Kazakhstani” civic identity aimed at consolidating society. Meanwhile, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, attempts to strengthen national identity have sometimes been associated with the exclusion of other ethnic groups, occasionally resulting in ethnic conflicts. In Turkmenistan, due to its closed political system and relatively homogeneous society, the issue of national identity has been less prominent. Today, the increasingly open and multi-vector foreign policies pursued by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, along with constructivist approaches, have once again brought the issue of national identity to the forefront. The formation of a unified regional space in Central Asia requires a strong and well-defined national identity; otherwise, national interests may become blurred, identity may weaken, and external influences could lead to assimilation or an identity vacuum. Therefore, it is essential to revisit the postcolonial trajectory in Central Asia and to approach societal development from a decolonial perspective. This process can primarily be implemented through education. The countries of the region should strengthen cooperation in the field of education, place greater emphasis on regional solidarity in teaching history and literature, and actively promote the idea of Central Asia as a “common home.”

¹ Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso. p 6. (Original work published 1983)

² Giddens, A. (1985). *The nation-state and violence* (Vol. 2). University of California Press. pp. 116-120.



Evolving Agreements and the Formation of a New Geopolitical Environment

In recent years, particularly during the second “Central Asia – Russia” Summit held in Dushanbe on October 9–10, along with the subsequent meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), important signals have emerged indicating the renewal of political discourse and the formation of new diplomatic approaches in the post-Soviet space. First, the organization of this summit suggests a gradual decline in the relevance and influence of the CIS as a platform for dialogue. The fact that Central Asian states, which are members of the CIS, engage in dialogue through a separate format indicates a decreasing effectiveness of this structure. Second, this format demonstrates that Central Asian states have begun to act as a more cohesive regional entity, negotiating in line with their shared interests and seeking to balance the influence of major powers such as Russia. Third, the simultaneous organization of these summits in the same region reflects an important shift in Russia’s geopolitical strategy in the post-Soviet space. It indicates that traditional reliance on CIS-based mechanisms is no longer as effective, and that region-based approaches are becoming more prominent. Symbolically, the meetings in Dushanbe represent the transition from an outdated system of relations toward a new phase based on regional solidarity. In this context, the 7th Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State, held in Tashkent on November 15–16 under the chairmanship of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, can be viewed as a significant milestone in regional cooperation.

Furthermore, the state visits of the leaders of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Uzbekistan during this period clearly demonstrate the intensification of cooperation within the region. Notably, the inclusion of the Republic of Azerbaijan as a full and equal participant in the consultative format has played a crucial role in expanding the concept of Central Asia and strengthening regional cooperation. This development also introduces the necessity of using the term “CA” instead of “C5,” reflecting a broader understanding of Central Asia as a unified geopolitical space¹.

In addition, the completion of border delimitation and demarcation processes among Central Asian states has significantly enhanced regional security and mutual trust. The joint support for the candidacy of the Kyrgyz Republic for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council for 2027–2028 further confirms the strengthening of mutual confidence among these countries. Finally, the analysis of achievements over the past seven years indicates that Central Asia is on the verge of forming a unified political and economic space, as well as a more robust regional institutional framework. This suggests that regional integration is likely to advance to a new and higher level in the near future.

The Manifestation of Education and Culture in Uzbekistan’s Humanitarian Diplomacy

In the context of ongoing transformations, one of the key manifestations of Uzbekistan’s humanitarian diplomacy is clearly expressed through initiatives in the field of education. In recent years, large-scale school construction projects have gained particular symbolic importance in diplomatic relations. The construction and commissioning of a 630-seat school in the Sughd region of Tajikistan in September 2020 as a gift from the Government of Uzbekistan², the establishment of a 330-seat school in the Batken region of Kyrgyzstan in April 2022³, and the opening of the Mirzo Ulugbek School in the Fuzuli district of Azerbaijan’s Karabakh region in September 2023, designed for 960 students, are of significant importance⁴. These initiatives represent not only expressions of friendship and regional cooperation but

¹ Gazeta. (2025, November 17). *O chem govorili prezidenty stran Tsentral'noy Azii i Azerbaydzhana na vstreche v Taishkentse*. Gazeta.Uz. <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2025/11/17/central-asia/>

² Kun.uz. (2020, September 28). *Tojikistonda O'zbekiston tomonidan qurilgan maktab ochildi*. Kun.Uz. <https://kun.uz/news/2020/09/28/tojikistonda-ozbekiston-tomonidan-qurilgan-maktab-ochildi>

³ Gazeta.uz. (2022, April 3). *Qirg'izistonda O'zbekiston tomonidan qurilgan maktab ochildi*. Gazeta.Uz. <https://www.gazeta.uz/uz/2022/04/03/new-school/>

⁴ Xabar.uz. (2023, September 19). *Ozarbayjonda O'zbekiston sovg'asi sifatida qurilgan maktabda o'qish boshlandi*. Xabar.Uz. <https://xabar.uz/uz/mahalliy/ozarbayjonda-ozbekiston-sovgasi-sifatida-qurilgan-makta>



also a clear manifestation of Uzbekistan's soft power potential. Such projects contribute to strengthening mutual trust between states and play a crucial role in shaping a positive national image. At the same time, the younger generation educated in these institutions is nurtured in the spirit of friendship and mutual respect toward Uzbekistan and other regional countries, contributing to the formation of a constructive and forward-looking generation.

In the cultural sphere, the recognition of shared regional heritage and its promotion on the international stage play a vital role. In recent years, Uzbekistan has actively organized cultural exhibitions that significantly contribute to enhancing the country's global image. Notably, the exhibition dedicated to Uzbekistan's cultural heritage held at the Louvre Museum in Paris from November 23, 2022, to March 6, 2023¹, as well as the exhibition titled "Archaeological Treasures of Uzbekistan: From Alexander the Great to the Kushan Empire" held at the James Simon Gallery during the President's visit, have contributed to strengthening the country's international standing². Presenting cultural heritage not only as the legacy of Uzbekistan but also as part of the broader Central Asian heritage fosters regional cooperation and strengthens mutual trust. Furthermore, the holding of the 43rd UNESCO General Conference in Samarkand—approximately 40 years after it was last held outside Paris—marked a significant milestone in the cultural life of the region. This event enhanced the international prestige of Central Asia and further strengthened its cultural and diplomatic significance on the global stage. At the same time, ensuring accurate representation of these processes and emphasizing their regional importance contributes to increasing their overall impact and effectiveness in shaping humanitarian diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

Integration processes in Central Asia should not be limited to economic or political agreements alone, but must be grounded in a deep socio-cultural foundation. The sustainability of regional rapprochement is closely linked to the formation of a shared historical memory, cultural commonality, and a unified identity. In this regard, humanitarian diplomacy plays a crucial role. Through education, culture, and social interaction, trust and cooperation between states are strengthened. In particular, shaping a sense of regional solidarity among the younger generation serves as a solid foundation for long-term integration. Furthermore, within the framework of a constructivist approach, the development of a decolonial identity and strategic culture contributes to reinforcing both the theoretical and practical foundations of Central Asian integration.

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