

Central Asia's Multilateral Diplomacy and Emerging Conceptions of International Order

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Abstract.

This article examines how Central Asia is positioning itself in the context of the evolving Eurasian security environment associated with the emerging prospects for a Russia–Ukraine ceasefire. It proceeds from the assumption that the cessation of active hostilities is unlikely to restore the pre-2022 regional order. Instead, the transition to a post-conflict environment may generate new patterns of interaction, alter existing balances of influence, and stimulate discussions on the future principles of regional and international security. The study analyses the development of regional cooperation mechanisms in Central Asia between 2017 and 2025, with particular attention to the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, the strengthening of intraregional political dialogue, and the region's engagement with external partners. On this basis, the article explores several features of the Central Asian approach that may be relevant to broader debates on post-conflict order-building. These include the emphasis on connectivity and interdependence, the pursuit of balanced relations with multiple external actors, and the preference for preventive and dialogue-based mechanisms in addressing regional challenges. Empirically, the analysis draws on the outcomes of the Seventh Consultative Meeting held in Tashkent in November 2025, the trilateral border agreement concluded in March 2025, and a number of regional initiatives advanced by Central Asian states at the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly. The article argues that the institutionalization of regional dialogue, combined with an open and multivector foreign policy orientation, has contributed to the emergence of a more coordinated regional voice in international affairs. While the Central Asian experience cannot be directly transferred to other regions, it offers an instructive example of how middle and small states seek to strengthen regional agency under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty.

Keywords: Central Asia; regionalism; multilateral diplomacy; international order; Uzbekistan; preventive diplomacy; connectivity; post-conflict order.

1. Introduction.

The winding down of active hostilities in the Russia–Ukraine war does not return Eurasia to its previous condition. The contours of a ceasefire that have begun to take shape in recent months open, instead, a period of re-founding rules, of redistributing interests, and of revising the security architecture of the continent. For the states situated between the principal centres of power, such transitions have historically been moments of acute vulnerability. The central claim advanced here is that Central Asia approaches this juncture differently from the early twentieth century, when the region figured merely as an inexperienced and passive object of rivalry among great powers. Today it arrives as a consolidated collective subject that has elaborated its own model of

multilateral diplomacy - and that model, as the analysis below seeks to show, contains the elements of a distinct conception of international order [4].

The argument proceeds in four steps. The article first reconstructs the institutionalization of Central Asian regionalism and the quantitative dynamics that underpin it; it then examines the open, multivector character of the region's external engagement; it considers the global projection of Central Asian multilateralism through the United Nations; and it finally distils three conceptions of order that the regional experience offers to current debates on post-conflict settlement.

2. From Object to Subject: The Institutionalization of Central Asian Regionalism.

The principal institutional mechanism of regional consolidation is the format of Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia, initiated by the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in 2017 and convened for the first time in 2018. Over the intervening years the format has travelled from a cautious dialogue to a durable regional institution, after almost a decade of stalled integration between 2006 and 2016 [4]. The Seventh Consultative Meeting, held in Tashkent on 15–16 November 2025, proved to be a watershed in several respects [1; 3].

Its most consequential decision was the admission of Azerbaijan to the format as a full-fledged participant, a step that builds, in the words of the Uzbek presidency, a unified space of interaction between Central Asia and the South Caucasus [2]. The summit also advanced the institutional deepening of the format itself: proposals were tabled to transform the consultative mechanism into a more strategic “Community of Central Asia,” to adopt formal regulations, to establish a rotating secretariat, and to upgrade national coordinators to special presidential representatives [6]. In parallel, the agenda of economic coordination - a common investment space and a programmatic horizon for regional trade - was given fresh impetus [6].

The Tashkent summit also consolidated an achievement that appeared unattainable only a decade earlier: the comprehensive legal delimitation of state borders in the region. In March 2025, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan concluded a landmark agreement on their shared frontier, and on 31 March 2025 the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed, in Khujand, a treaty defining the junction point of the three states' borders, together with the Khujand Declaration on Eternal Friendship [8; 9; 10]. These instruments closed more than three decades of intermittent border disputes in the Ferghana Valley without external arbitration and without the use of force.

The economic data corroborate the political dynamic. The combined gross domestic product of the region surpassed USD 500 billion in 2025, having grown roughly two-and-a-half-fold since 2016 [7]. Intra-regional trade has approximately doubled, reaching the order of USD 11 billion, with regional leaders projecting a near-term rise toward USD 20 billion [3]. Mutual investment, industrial cooperation and the steady removal of trade barriers have reinforced these trends, while regional industrial output has grown at a pace roughly twice the global average [3; 6]. The substance of

these figures is a shift from declarative good-neighbourliness to a working unity grounded in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect [5].

3. Open Regionalism and Multivector Engagement.

A defining feature of the Central Asian model is its openness. Regional consolidation is not directed against any external actor, and it does not require an exclusive choice between partners. More than a dozen dialogue platforms operate in parallel: “Central Asia plus China,” “Central Asia plus Russia,” the “C5+1” format with the United States - in place since 2015 - and formats with the European Union, Japan, the Republic of Korea, India and the Gulf states [13]. The first Central Asia–European Union summit, held in Samarkand on 4 April 2025, elevated inter-regional relations to a strategic partnership and gave prominence to trans-regional connectivity, including the Trans-Caspian corridor [14].

What is decisive is that, within these formats, the five states of the region increasingly act from coordinated positions. External partners, in consequence, find themselves engaging not with five fragmented states but with a region as such. This is the practical content of regional subjecthood: the capacity to convert a shared geography into a shared diplomatic voice.

4. The Global Projection of Central Asian Multilateralism.

Central Asian multilateralism also carries a global projection. At the 80th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2025, Uzbekistan advanced a series of concrete proposals: the establishment, jointly with UNIDO, of a regional hub for green technologies in industry; an international cooperation mechanism for the gratis exchange of artificial-intelligence solutions in healthcare, education and culture; programmes on the rational use of water resources; the hosting of a World Summit on Vocational Education; and the adoption of a General Assembly resolution supporting the efforts of the Central Asian states to deepen regional partnership and economic integration [11].

A consistent line on Afghanistan complements these initiatives - the prevention of the country’s isolation and the development of trans-Afghan transport and energy corridors - which the region frames as a contribution to the stabilization of the wider Eurasian space [6]. In the same register stands the Samarkand Solidarity Initiative for Common Security and Prosperity, advanced by Uzbekistan as a philosophy of engaging all constructive forces in a global dialogue free of geopolitical rivalry [15]. This diplomacy builds on an established record at the United Nations: in May 2021 the General Assembly declared the Aral Sea region a zone of ecological innovations and technologies, on an initiative put forward by Uzbekistan and co-sponsored by some sixty states [12].

5. Central Asia and the Post-Conflict Order: Three Conceptions.

The cumulative significance of these developments lies in the conceptions of international order they imply. Three may be distinguished.

5.1. Order as connectedness, not as dividing lines. Classical models of post-war settlement were built on the balance of power and on spheres of influence. The Central Asian experience proposes a different logic: security through interdependence - through

transport corridors, energy and water projects, and trade. In a post-conflict Eurasia, the significance of the Trans-Caspian route, of the North–South corridors and of the trans-Afghan railway is likely only to grow, and the region is being transformed from a landlocked cul-de-sac into a continental node of connectivity [14].

5.2. Order as cooperative multipolarity. The model demonstrates that middle and small states need not be objects of great-power competition. By consolidating, they form their own centre of gravity, one that lowers the conflict potential of external rivalry. External partners, on this account, derive greater benefit from cooperating with a stable and predictable region than from contesting a fragmented space [3; 6].

5.3. Order as preventive diplomacy. The settlement of border disputes in Central Asia - between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - was achieved at the negotiating table, without external arbitration and without the use of force [8; 10]. In an era when international law is being tested, this experience of the peaceful transformation of long-standing conflicts holds a value that extends well beyond the region's own borders.

6. Conclusion.

A Russia–Ukraine ceasefire opens both a window of opportunity and a period of heightened uncertainty. For Central Asia, the answer to that uncertainty is the deepening of its own regional consolidation and the widening of its network of multilateral partnerships. The region's states are no longer confined to a binary choice among centres of power, nor to a posture of merely adaptive survival. The Central Asian experience - institutionalized dialogue, open multivectorism, preventive diplomacy and a wager on connectivity - constitutes, in the argument advanced here, a prefiguration of the cooperative international order in which the majority of the world's states have a stake. As the initiator of the Consultative Meetings, Uzbekistan is likely to continue to advance precisely this agenda of peace, trust and joint development [5; 11].

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