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# Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia

ed. Jildiz Nicharapova  
and Sebastien Peyrouse

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# **Integration Processes and State Interests in Eurasia**

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## Table of Contents

*Acknowledgments*  
Jildiz Nicharapova

*Introduction*.....p. 7  
Sebastien Peyrouse and Jildiz Nicharapova

*Chapter 1. Uneasy Development Options for Central Asia*.....p. 17  
Ivan Safranchuk

*Chapter 2. The Eurasian Economic Union: Dreams, Nightmares, Realities, Prospects*.....p. 27  
Jeffrey Mankoff

*Chapter 3. The EEU and OBOR: Economics, Security, or Both?*.....p. 43  
S. Andrew K.T. Lo and Piotr Dutkiewicz

*Chapter 4. Competitive Partners: Tensions Between Russia's Goals for the EAEU and the Chinese Vision of the BRI in Central Asia*.....p. 57  
Jeanne L. Wilson

*Chapter 5. Which Regionalism for Central Asia? The Challenges of China's, the U.S.' and Russia's Integration Projects in Central Asia*.....p. 73  
Paulo Duarte

*Chapter 6. From Regional Integration to Soft Institutionalism: What Kind of Regionalism for Central Asia?*.....p. 83  
Kairat Moldashev and Ikboljon Qoraboyev

*Chapter 7. Conjunction of EAEU and the Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities for Europe*.....p. 99  
Yuri Kofner

*Chapter 8. Regional Integration in Central Asia: Lessons from Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia*.....p. 125  
Tsuneo Akaha with Kuanysh Agaidarov

*Chapter 9. Integration Processes in Central Asia*.....p. 145  
Nartsiss Shukuralieva and Jildiz Nicharapova

## **Chapter 6. From Regional Integration to Soft Institutionalism:**

### **What Kind of Regionalism for Central Asia?**

*Kairat Moldashev, Narxoz University*

*Ikboljon Qoraboyev, KAZGUU University*

The first term of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Islam Karimov's successor as president of Uzbekistan, has brought some liberal reforms to the domestic politics of Uzbekistan and also opened the country to higher levels of cooperation with its neighbors. Mirziyoyev's proactive efforts to strengthen regional cooperation in Central Asia and support other states in the region since 2017 have attracted scholars' attention to the dynamics of regionalization in Central Asia. The consultative meetings among Central Asian leaders, the cooperation among their governments' strategic think tanks, and official discussions on mutual visa recognition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are all evidence of increased collaboration in the region.

Experts and journalists in the region have started to talk about regional integration in Central Asia and the possibilities for establishing a regional organization. Although cooperation has progressed significantly, we argue that it is neither feasible nor necessary to create regional organizations at this stage. Instead, we suggest soft institutionalism as a possible way of strengthening relations in Central Asia. Pursuing regional integration in Central Asia that necessitates hard institutionalism (as embodied in the EU and EAEU) may result in initiatives that are little more than ink on paper. It may also activate a strategic rivalry among external actors for influence in the region, as it would require Central Asian states that are members of other organizations to renegotiate their commitments.

Soft institutionalism (along the lines of ASEAN) is more appropriate, as it may allow for the strengthening of collaboration without requiring the renegotiation of existing commitments, while also avoiding unnecessary institutional burdens. Soft institutionalism, or soft regionalism (the terms are used interchangeably here), is based on informality, pragmatism, nonconfrontational bargaining, and consensus-building (Acharya 1997, 2009; Söderbaum 2012; Zhao 1998). Hard regionalism, by contrast, relies on formal structures, the delegation of power to supranational bodies, and legal agreements (Börzel 2016; Söderbaum 2012; Zhao 1998). When compared to the

EU, which is a model of hard regionalism, Central Asian regionalism is a failed project. Its revival and future success are often associated with the ability to build formal structures and institutions, with the EU model often proposed as a benchmark for regionalism in Central Asia (Tolipov 2017). However, we argue that given the empirical reality of domestic and international relations in Central Asia, the soft form of regionalism is a more viable alternative at this stage. The remainder of this paper will address two main research questions: (1) Why do we need a new debate on Central Asian regionalism? and (2) What kind of regionalism project is viable for Central Asia?

### **Is a New Edition of the Central Asian Regionalism Debate in the Making?**

Regionalism is one of the major paradigms through which debates on contemporary Central Asia have unfolded since 1991. If the scholarly and policy literature focused heavily on endogenous Central Asian regionalism through the 1990s and early 2000s, this focus has gradually faded away to make room for regionalism projects initiated by external powers.

A brief reminder of the main lines of early debate on Central Asian regionalism is important in order to make sense of the phenomenon and to elucidate its future in the region. Three elements are relevant to this paper. First, the regionalism debate relied on a strong argument in favor of endogenous Central Asian regionalism. Second, the concept of regional integration dominated the pro-regionalism literature. Third, unfulfilled promises of regional integration led to frustration and disappointment among policymakers and scholars by the mid-2000s, which in turn moved them away from an exclusively Central Asian regionalism. Calls for a Central Asian regional framework became commonplace the moment the Central Asian republics achieved independence. The following quotation is a good summary of arguments in favor of Central Asian regional frameworks that were in vogue in the early 1990s:

Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991 there was an expectation that the newly independent Central Asian states would form a coherent economic and security complex. A number of factors underpinned this regionalizing logic: the five states were geographically proximate and shared a common material culture, social structure, cultural value-system and historical memory; and, not least, they were bound by both the Soviet legacy and the need to find a way of collectively managing the region's transboundary natural resources (Bohr 2004).

The idea of Central Asian regionalism was promoted by different actors, including presidents, political and intellectual elites, international institutions, scholars, and experts. These calls for regional cooperation and integration can be grouped into three main arguments: unity, transition, and geopolitics.

The unity argument advances the idea that Central Asian nations enjoy many commonalities based on their shared historical experience as well as socio-cultural, linguistic, and religious elements. As a united region, the argument goes, Central Asia was prosperous and made important contributions to global scientific, political, cultural, and industrial processes. Hence, restoring Central Asian unity will enable the region to once again become an important player in global trade and economic exchanges (Canfield 1992; Starr 2013).

The transition argument underlines that Central Asian countries face the same kind of challenges as other newly independent countries in terms of political development, economic growth, and social modernization. It is therefore logical for them to address these common challenges through a common regional framework. According to this argument, the development of regional cooperation and integration will facilitate economic growth, modernization, and development for all Central Asian countries (Asian Development Bank 2006; UNDP 2005).

The geopolitical argument asserts that geography demands Central Asian unity. Located in the immediate neighborhood of powers like Russia and China, Central Asia sits at the juncture of Eurasian transport corridors and contains large reserves of natural resources—making it attractive from a geo-economic perspective. Central Asia will increasingly become a zone of geostrategic and geo-economic competition between great powers. Regional integration among Central Asian states is the only way to avoid great power confrontation and the “vassalization” of Central Asian countries (Tolipov 2002, 2010).

Arguments in favor of Central Asian regionalism rely heavily on the concept of regional integration. In particular, this concept was frequently used by policymakers and scholars of the region throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. According to Farkhod Tolipov (2002), a consistent proponent of Central Asian regional integration, “Central Asia today is an objectively integrative unit with many aspects, free from nuclear armaments, it is a single market, a historical entity, an indivisible security system, a single ecological system, and the independent geopolitical unit (a buffer, the Heartland, a center of power)”. It is now necessary for contemporary actors in the region to find and implement a form of integration relevant for modern Central Asia. In the opinion of Inomjon Bobokulov (2006), “Stronger regional cooperation yielding to the multifaceted integration

of the Central Asian states is the only viable avenue to achieving political stability, stimulating economic growth, and reinforcing the notions of democratic sovereignty.” Umirserik Kasenov, who is from Kazakhstan, has argued that it is only possible to strengthen the fragile state sovereignties of Central Asian countries by deepening regional cooperation and integration in parallel with efforts to build nation-states (cited in Qoraboyev 2010).

At that time, the practical realization of Central Asian unity also seemed to be underway. The leaders of Central Asian countries, excluding Turkmenistan, created several frameworks to this effect: the Central Asian Community (1994),<sup>1</sup> the Central Asian Economic Community (1998), and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (2002).

However, the concept of regional integration implied supranational structures, hard institutionalism, and the abandonment or sharing of sovereignty. Even if the idea of Central Asian integration appealed to the public imagination, its implementation would conflict with the central paradigm of independence. Moreover, the economic and foreign policy preferences of Central Asian countries were increasingly becoming differentiated (Rosset and Svarin 2014). Hence, political leaders and policymakers either shifted away from the concept of integration or intentionally kept integration agreements strictly on paper.

This unfulfilled promise of regional integration led in turn to the third feature of the Central Asian integration debate: frustration and disappointment among the public and in academia. This was preceded by the official dissolution of an exclusively Central Asian framework (the Central Asian Cooperation Organization) in 2005, when it was merged with the Eurasian Economic Community. The merger was the natural consequence of Russia’s accession to CACO earlier in 2004. In Tolipov’s (2005) words, Central Asia ceased to exist as “a quasi-political structure and institutionalized region.” As stated by Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, “All attempts to create regional institutions in which only the five Central Asia countries are members have therefore failed, due to a lack of political will” (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2012). For scholars, it seemed that not only was regional integration elusive, but even regional cooperation was difficult (Bohr 2003; Spechler 2002).

This reality saw scholarly attention shift away from the question of Central Asian regional integration to other aspects of post-Soviet regional dynamics. Security regionalism seemed to replace regional economic integration as an object of scholarly attention (Allison 2004; Bohr 2004;

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<sup>1</sup> Officially, there was a Treaty on Creation of Common Economic Space between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which was later joined by Kyrgyzstan. In the public sphere, these efforts were usually referred to as the “Central Asian Union” or the “Central Asian Community.”

Collins 2009). Endogenous Central Asian regionalism disappeared from scholarly works, making way for outside-in regionalism projects. This refers to region-building efforts by external entities, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or Eurasian Economic Union, that were more in keeping with great power geostrategic designs (Flikke and Wilhelmsen 2008; MacFarlane 2004; Qingguo 2007; Russo 2018). From the perspective of outside-in approaches, Central Asia was also studied as a zone of normative rivalry between great powers (Kavalski 2007; Russo and Gawrich 2017). Central Asian regionalism is increasingly subsumed into Eurasian integration projects (Hancock and Libman 2016; Moldashev and Hassan 2017). From the perspective of Central Asian states and societies, the objects of these works are better characterized as “great power tools for Central Asia” rather than “Central Asian regional institutions.” This is because these outside-in processes most often result in the “unmaking” of Central Asia, as they lead to the fragmentation of traditional Central Asia.

Discussions on exclusively Central Asian regionalism thus seemed to have reached a dead end by the close of the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, recent events are showing that perhaps the discussion is not yet over; another round of the Central Asian regionalism debate may be forthcoming. A resurgence of interest in Central Asian regionalism is evident today both inside and outside the region. Uzbekistan’s (re)turn to the Central Asian region, the resumption of summits between Central Asian leaders, external actors’ hosting of multilateral meetings in the format of “Central Asia + 1 Dialogue,” the launch of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and the increasing politicization of the Eurasian integration process help to explain the need for further debate on Central Asian regionalism. Importantly, the initial debate on Central Asian regionalism started in the context of the 1990s, characterized by the leaders of young nations locally and great geopolitical transformations globally. In 2018, both the regional and the global context are qualitatively different from those years. It may therefore be appropriate to re-imagine and reframe Central Asian regionalism under the new conditions of the evolving global order.

The global order should be a reference point for the renewal of Central Asian regionalism. In the first stage of the Central Asian regionalism debate, which involved the form of regional integration and cooperation, the main reference point was the local context. The debate was framed mostly with respect to the local dynamics of Central Asian politics and of the broader post-Soviet region, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the newly acquired state sovereignties being the most important determining elements. In what follows, we argue that the second stage of the Central Asian regionalism debate should take the global order as a reference point and then incorporate the experience of other regions to reframe Central Asian regional frameworks so that

they are more on a par with global trends. This is because regionalism has become a constant feature of world order and comparative regionalism provides a variety of important lessons derived from the experience of other regions across the world. Central Asian regionalism could benefit greatly from engaging in cross-fertilization with regionalism elsewhere.

### **Central Asian Regionalism since 1991: Experimenting with Hard Institutionalism**

In the 1990s, Central Asian states were participating in wider post-Soviet regionalism projects and also pursuing Central Asia-only initiatives. One of the first Central Asian initiatives was the Protocol for the Establishment of the Common Market, signed by the leaders of all five Central Asian states in Tashkent in 1993. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed the Agreement on Single Economic Space in 1994 and established an intergovernmental council. In a broader post-Soviet framework, the Customs Union Agreement was signed by Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan in 1995. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan actively participated in both Central Asia-only and Russia-centered projects. It should be noted that the customs union or single economic space agreements require the creation of common customs territory, are exclusive in nature, and are to be pursued simultaneously. It was possible for some countries to pursue such deep forms of integration with various groupings in the 1990s, as these initiatives were never fully implemented. Trade and economic relations among countries were mostly based on bilateral free trade agreements that enabled tariff-free trade for most goods, with an annual review of exemptions.

The next step toward regional integration in Central Asia was the establishment of the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) in 1998, after Tajikistan joined the agreement made in 1994. The signing of such agreements and high-level intergovernmental meetings occurred in parallel with the weakening of relations in certain respects. Border delimitation, the upstream and downstream division of the water resources from the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers, and small-scale inter-ethnic conflicts were persistent issues. In 1999, Uzbekistan planted landmines in some areas of its border with Tajikistan and created additional barriers to the movement of people across the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border (Dadabaeva and Kuzmina 2014). That year, Turkmenistan introduced visas for citizens of Central Asia states. Amid these developments in Central Asia, the political changes in Russia that saw Putin come to power increased Moscow's interest in post-Soviet regional arrangements. Russia was always cautious with respect to Central Asian integration processes. The first attempt to build Central Asian institutions in 1993 was interpreted by some

Russian experts as the revival of Turkestan and the erosion of the Kremlin's influence in the region (Saidazimova 2000).

Putin's Russia used economic integration as its main tool to reclaim its influence in the post-Soviet space (Laumulin 2009). The signatories of the 1995 Custom Union agreement—Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan—established the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) in 2000. However, Central Asian states were still trying to maintain the existing regional framework, and in 2002 the CAEC was transformed into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). But it lost its Central Asian character after two years when Russia, previously an associate member, joined the CACO as a full member. The CACO was fully integrated into EurAsEC in 2006, as the two organizations had similar structures and goals. Uzbekistan withdrew from the EurAsEC in 2008 after two years of membership. Karimov justified the move by noting the EurAsEC's duplication of CIS structures and activities as well as Uzbekistan's disagreement with the principles of the Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia customs union (BKR CU) that was to be built on the foundations of the EurAsEC (*RIA Novosti* 2008). The divergences in the Uzbek and Kazakh approaches to the scope and content of regional projects became more apparent in 2004, from which period onwards we can talk of Central Asia-skepticism.

The erosion of intergovernmental-level cooperation since 2004 has not led to the end of Central Asian regionalism. The non-governmental actors within the region and external actors such as Japan, the US, and the EU have contributed to regionalization in Central Asia. The epistemic community in the Central Asian states, which consists mostly of experts and scholars, has sustained the discourse on the necessity of regional integration (Moldashev and Nursha, forthcoming). The EU as a bloc and certain European countries have been promoting human security and development in Central Asia. U.S. policy is mostly associated with traditional security and linking Afghanistan to Central Asia. Japan and South Korea also maintain a regional approach alongside bilateral cooperation with Central Asian states. All of this allowed the idea of regionalism in Central Asia to survive the period of Central Asia-skepticism associated with a low level of interstate relations.

When Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the new president of Uzbekistan, expressed his new policy of openness to the region in 2017, this was welcomed by communities in the region and external actors supportive of Central Asian regionalism. It also coincided with a stalemate in Eurasian regionalism, as Moscow entered into conflict with Ukraine and sanctions imposed by the EU and US led to further divergence between Russia's foreign policy and those of its partners within the EAEU

and CSTO. The period of Central Asia-optimism since 2017 has been characterized by the intensification of intergovernmental and private sector relations. Media coverage of regional issues has increased significantly. Currently, the discourse on Central Asia regionalism is dominated by speculation as to the possibility/impossibility of regional integration and by the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan rivalry for the leadership role in Central Asia. This discourse ignores non-integrationist forms of regional governance and inhibits cooperation, as it suggests rivalry among the biggest economies in the region. In the next section, we suggest a possible strategy for Central Asia that avoids repeating previous failures in regional institution-building.

### **Soft Regionalism for Central Asia**

There are a number of exogenous and endogenous factors that hinder regional integration and the implementation of a hard regionalism model in Central Asia. The exogenous factors include the membership of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the EAEU, which requires delegating decision-making on international trade issues to the supranational level. Alongside this formal arrangement, Moscow is very cautious about developments in its “near abroad” that may reduce its strategic influence. Endogenous factors include divergent interests on certain issues (e.g., the upstream/downstream divide related to water resources), and regimes with high power concentration where relations between leaders significantly affect interstate (non-)cooperation. However, the region faces many pressing issues that require a regional response, including environmental problems, the spread of diseases, drug trafficking, and migration.

As integration or hard regionalism is not a viable option for Central Asia due to the aforementioned factors and failures, different models should be considered seriously. Contributions to the comparative regionalism studies field provide the theoretical foundations for considering other forms of regional governance (Acharya 2009; Börzel and Risse 2016; Fawcett 2004; Söderbaum 2012). Regional governance need not be considered as formal institution building and a purely state-led enterprise. Regionalization can be informal and society-based (Börzel 2016). In conceptualizing the “ASEAN way,” Acharya (1997, 329) notes that it “involves a high degree of discreetness, informality, pragmatism, expediency, consensus-building, and non-confrontational bargaining styles which are often contrasted with the adversarial posturing and legalistic decision-making procedures in Western multilateral negotiations.” ASEAN has platforms for ministerial-level and bureaucratic consultations and problem-solving, but it has avoided building supranational institutions and delegating authority (Acharya 1997, 2009).

This kind of informal and non-confrontational approach can be regarded by its critics as just another explanation of states' failure to cooperate and compromise. Notwithstanding such criticism, soft regionalism is valuable: in the process of continuous consultations, consensus-seeking, and interaction on different levels, regional actors can find ways to reconcile divergent interests and proceed in those areas where consensus is achieved. As theoretical concepts, the formal and informal modes of governance should be viewed as ideal types rather than the reality in certain regions. We usually find a combination of these two modes, with one of them having a dominant role. For instance, EU governance is characterized by a mix of networked governance based on intergovernmental negotiation and bargaining that operates in the shadow of a regional hierarchy in decision-making based on supranational institutions (Börzel 2010). ASEAN governance is more informal, with few formal structures that mostly serve as a platform for promoting consultation and problem-solving. In certain areas, such as trade and investment, ASEAN members have been able to reach a consensus and formalize relations.

Informal regional governance also provides room for non-state actors to play a greater role. Some regional networks that are comprised of trade unions, migrant rights organizations, and migrants' associations, such as the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers (TF-AMW), contribute to the promotion of migrants' rights in Southeast Asia through three channels: through engagement with ASEAN structures; from below, by organizing and coordinating the work of civil society organization in member states; and by using a "vertical boomerang" that secures support from international actors (UN, ILO) to advocate for migrant rights on the regional or national level (Rother and Piper 2015).

As such, in our view, soft regionalism premised on informal governance is a viable option for Central Asian regionalism at the current stage. The following points support our argument:

First, divergent interests prevent the realization of an integrationist or hard-institutionalism model in Central Asia. The EAEU shows that divergences in trade policies are difficult to reconcile even within a strongly institutionalized framework with supranational bodies. Member states can find loopholes in existing rules and follow national interests at the expense of regional ones (Delcour 2018). For instance, despite the adoption of the Common External Tariff (CET) for goods imported to the EAEU customs area, the exemption list from CET includes more than 3,000 items. Regional cohesion within the EAEU also suffers from the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, U.S. and EU economic sanctions, and counter-sanctions by Russia (Movchan and Emerson 2018). Russia's partners in the EAEU face limitations on trade with Ukraine and endure the costs of

additional non-tariff barriers imposed by Russia to prevent the re-export of sanctioned goods through their territory. These problems are the consequence of pushing integration forward by building institutions without achieving full consensus among members of the EAEU. Thus, Central Asian regionalism should focus on achieving consensus before building any formal and legally binding institutions.

Second, informality is often regarded as a deficient feature of regional governance when compared to the formal institutions of, for example, the EU. However, in certain areas, informal and extensive consultations, dialogue platforms, and interactions provide better problem-solving opportunities than do hierarchical structures. The significance of interpersonal relations among the leaders and the high concentration of power in their hands make informal contacts a necessary precondition for furthering cooperation in Central Asia. Informality is also preferable in an environment where formalization may lead to over-bureaucratization of regional affairs, leaving very little room for civil society participation.

Third, flexible and soft regionalism allows various forms of membership in regional initiatives. In situations when all five post-Soviet Central Asian states reach consensus, the CA-5 format can be used. Where some countries abstain from participation in a regional initiative, the CA-3, CA-4, and Central-Asia-minus-X formats are options. Many initiatives can start as CA-2 if they are in principle open to the participation of other countries in the region. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan recently agreed to recognize visas issued by the other in order to boost tourism. Although it was a bilateral agreement, other countries in Central Asia and outside the region were invited to join. In relations with other international actors, Central Asian states may adopt CA+X or CA3+X formats.

Fourth, soft regionalism in Central Asia will help to engage with a Turkmenistan that emphasizes sovereignty and neutrality. It is hardly possible to involve Turkmenistan in a regional organization with a hierarchical structure and a supranational mode of decision-making. But it is possible to establish dialogue and problem-solving platforms that include all five Central Asian states.

Fifth, countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, bound by strong commitments to the EAEU, will avoid the burden of re-negotiating previous agreements in order to proceed with the soft regionalism project in Central Asia. The strengthening of trade relations in Central Asia can take a bilateral form or involve deeper FTA agreements between EAEU members and non-member Central Asian states. The proposal of a Visegrad model for Central Asia seems very timely in this

regard (Saruhanyan, 2015), and V4+CA meetings have recently begun (Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018).

## **Conclusion**

There are many problems in Central Asia that cannot be addressed at national level and require regional responses. The low level of interstate cooperation in the last decade has created many pressing issues in the region. The new period of Central Asia-optimism, which is often associated with the political changes in Uzbekistan since 2017 and other countries' readiness for cooperation, raised questions about the future of regional integration in Central Asia. The failure of hard regionalism projects focused on institution-building that were attempted in the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s has added to doubts about the possibility of integration. There are structural factors that impede the creation of strong regional institutions, including the role of actors outside the region and intra-regional divergences.

However, regionalization in Central Asia can successfully proceed if a soft regionalism approach is adopted. The establishment of a regional bureaucracy and formal structures without full consensus and commitment is not viable. Instead, countries may accept informality as a matter of fact and proceed with it. The increase of informal platforms for constructive dialogue and problem-solving may lead to consensus on certain issues and provide grounds for more compromise decisions where consensus is not possible.

The focus should be not on building structures per se, but on developing processes that will help to solve problems at regional level. A focus on process and informality will create more room for non-state actors too. Regional governance that includes civil society and societal issues such as migration, health, the environment, and human security is more sustainable and cooperation-enhancing than governance that focuses only on states and so-called "national" interests.

The soft regionalism approach may help Central Asia to develop norms through intensive interaction without relying on excessive institutional structures. These mostly informal norms will create a more predictable and stable environment for interstate relations and people-to-people cooperation in the region. As interpersonal interactions in Central Asia often require that tea be on the table, the term "Central Asian *Chaikhana*" (teahouse) is appropriate for referring to informality in regional governance.

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