

## Central Asian countries are gradually developing a sustainable architecture of regional cooperation



The Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States, held on September 14 in Dushanbe, had literal historical and political significance.

It completed the entire cycle of Central Asian summits, which began in 2018 at the initiative of Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and endorsed by the leaders of all countries in the area. The Dushanbe Summit was held in an atmosphere of open and trusting communication and a productive exchange of ideas. The leaders of Central Asian states evaluated the outcomes of past Consultative meetings and emphasized their unwavering commitment to continuing collaborative efforts toward gradually building a sustainable regional cooperation architecture.

The main conclusion of the five-sided meeting is that the process of regional rapprochement has reached a qualitatively new phase of integrational development, as evidenced by the greater willingness of the region's states to formalize and institutionalize multidimensional interaction, making it systematic and continuous.

The leaders of Central Asian countries stated that it is in their best interests to strengthen interstate cooperation, good neighborliness, and mutual trust in Central Asia.

The decision to form a Council of National Coordinators for the Consultative Meeting of the Heads of Central Asian States, aimed at increasing the effectiveness of interstate cooperation, is evidence of this.

And there's a reason for it. Regional countries could “make serious progress in resolving vital issues and to fill cooperation among Central Asian states with a qualitatively new content” thanks to shared political will and concerted efforts, as the President of Uzbekistan underlined.

Many barriers that were sources of interstate tension have been dismantled in recent years. Primarily, neighboring countries were able to address critical border issues, allowing transportation communications to resume.

The discourse on the mutually beneficial use of water and energy resources and guaranteeing water, energy, and food security is currently underway.

Cooperation links among Central Asian states are strengthening in a variety of fields. They formed joint investment entities, work is underway to build cross-border industrial and trade zones, and interstate projects in the industrial, agriculture, automotive, and energy sectors are being launched. A visa-free regime has been implemented, as well as circumstances for the free movement of citizens and active cultural and tourism interactions.

Since 2016, Uzbekistan has increased the number of checkpoints with Central Asian countries to 78, tripled the number of bus services, and more than doubled the number of air flights.

Today, the boundaries between Uzbekistan and Central Asian countries can legitimately be called bridges of peace and goodwill. For example, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border can now be crossed with the display of an internal document – a general civil ID card – starting September 1 this year.

The trade and economic, transport, and energy cooperation work has reached a new stage. Thus, in 2020-2021, Uzbekistan created joint investment funds and companies with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and in 2022 and 2023 began construction of cross-border industrial-trade and industrial zones with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

Projects are underway with Kyrgyzstan to build the China-Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan railroad and the Kambarata hydroelectric power plant, with Tajikistan – the Yavan hydroelectric power plant on the Zarafshan River, and with Kazakhstan – a multimodal transport and logistics center in Tashkent. These are just some examples of many in other Central Asian states.

Of course, there are still concerns to be addressed. The most important thing is to sustain dialogue and a solid path toward mutually accepted concessions. Today, it is critical to overcome narrow national egoisms, see the inextricable relationship between the region's sustainable future and its development possibilities, and reach mutually beneficial solutions that fulfill the interests of all parties. And given the inertia of regional collaboration, this appears to be feasible.

“It is necessary to find common approaches and join efforts to find mutually acceptable solutions”, the President of Kyrgyzstan stated. “There are no intractable problems, all we need is political will”.

Central Asia – a space of good-neighborliness and new opportunities

Central Asia is emerging as a key hub for interregional connectivity and global industrial and logistical chains. According to President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev, “Stability and unity are strengthening in Central Asia, it is turning into one of the important centers of economic growth and investment activity, and it is once again regaining its historical role as a transport hub connecting the West with the East and the North with the South.”

The leaders of other Central Asian countries agree with this assessment. Thus, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon stated that “Central Asia is consistently and confidently transforming into an area of

mutually beneficial cooperation, into a stable, economically developed, and, in the foreseeable future, very prosperous region, into one of the most important centers of the modern world and unique geographical nodes”.

In turn, the Leader of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev notes that regional cooperation not only brings tangible mutual benefits, but also alters the entire structure of the Central Asian economy by opening up new opportunities for trade, investment, business, science, and innovation.

Yes, this is the case. The development indicators for the entire region, which display a consistent growth pattern, prove this. Particularly between 2016 and 2022, the Central Asian region's international trade turnover increased to 225 billion.

Simultaneously, commerce among the region's states increased 2.5-fold, from 5.5 to 13.5 billion, and is expanding in both structure and nomenclature of commodities, which has a substantial stabilizing effect on prices in the local markets of Central Asian countries.

Stability and the emergence of a robust market in Central Asia are increasing interest in the region. In particular, over the same period, the share of investment in Central Asia of the global total has increased from 1.6% to 2.8%, rising to 40 billion in 2022 and by 45% since 2016 of the total accumulated investment of 250 billion. Moreover, mutual investment increased 6 times and almost doubled intra-regional tourism.

Interest in the region has increased due to stability and the developing of a thriving market in Central Asia.

For example, over the same period, Central Asia's portion of global investment climbed from 1.6% to 2.8%, reaching \$40 billion in 2022 and growing by 45% since 2016 of the total accumulated investment of 250 billion. Additionally, mutual investment surged six times, and intraregional tourism nearly doubled.

As a result, the region's total gross output is expanding gradually. At the end of 2022, it increased by 6% and reached around \$400 billion, 40% higher than in 2016 and double the dynamics of the global economy. At the same time, growth projections for the coming year range from 5 to 6 percent.

Consolidation is an effective response to the challenges of our time

In general, today's Central Asian states, despite numerous challenges and threats exacerbated by the rise of geopolitical rivalries and contradictions, as well as crisis phenomena in the global economy, manage to maintain an atmosphere of friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation in Central Asia, build relationships with external actors while keeping regional stability in mind, and ensure security and sustainable development in the interests of the people of our common Central Asia nest.

As the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov put it succinctly, “Joint work, constant dialogue, and communication, based on mutual respect and consideration of each other's interests in the spirit of good neighborliness allow us to overcome all obstacles and difficulties, develop, and maintain the sense of commonality and unity of the peoples who have inhabited our vast and rich region since time immemorial”.

Summarizing the outcomes of the first cycle of consultative meetings, we can state with confidence that the previous stage of Central Asian cooperation has become a breakthrough in the overall process of regional construction, enabled the establishment of ongoing intra-regional dialogue, developed a sense of commonality of interests, significantly strengthened mutual trust, and created a solid ground for the transition of regional cooperation to a qualitatively new stage of development.

As the summit in Dushanbe's outcomes has demonstrated, the leaders of the Central Asian states have shown that they are committed to moving forward with closer cooperation, have articulated their vision and particular priorities for regional cooperation, and are prepared to turn challenges into opportunities, create a new sustainable model of regional interaction that will ensure the continued development of the

Central Asian states.

Central Asia is a consolidated actor devoted to collaborate

The Consultative Meeting confirmed the desire of the leaders of the Central Asian states to continue bolstering political consolidation and shared solidarity, to take on the duty of addressing issues on the regional agenda jointly and on their own, to show unity in overcoming threats to regional stability and security, and to adopt a coordinated and unified stance in their dealings with actors outside the region.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev, the President of Uzbekistan, remarked that Central Asia is now universally acknowledged as a single entity with international subjectivity. This, he claimed, “is demonstrated by the approval of 8 UN resolutions since 2017 on significant Central Asian cooperation and development issues, as well as the formation of more than 10 “Central Asia Plus” formats.

In this respect, the President of Uzbekistan called “to develop common approaches to joint work within these formats at the level of foreign ministers”. The President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, also underlined the importance of “common or maximally similar positions demonstrating the solidarity and unity of the region's states”.

Emomali Rahmon, President of Tajikistan, in response, emphasized the significance of the “unity of Central Asia” and urged the need to take more active steps towards integration within the region, including developing and making specific proposals for the joint development of Central Asia available to partners, including within the framework of the “Central Asia Plus” format.

Undoubtedly, strengthening political consolidation, coordination, and coherence of activities would allow Central Asian states to “protect and promote the region's common interests in the world” even more effectively, noted Sadyr Zhaparov, Leader of Kyrgyz Republic.

At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize that the Central Asian states demonstrate the region's openness to cooperation with extra-regional countries, international and regional organizations and their willingness to rely on international law norms and principles and to firmly integrate the region into the international community as a responsible subject of international relations. And the world community supports this.

This is demonstrated by the invitation to the summit of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, head of the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia K. Imnadze, and the address to the participants of the meeting by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The enormous number of tangible ideas proposed during the Consultative Meeting attests to the Central Asian governments' determination to begin a new phase of cooperation. They represent a similar view of risks, problems, and opportunities and complement and mutually reinforce each other, providing a solid foundation for their practical implementation.

Compounding of advantages and formation of a new mode of economic development

Economic growth and raising the standard of living for residents of the region have been recognized as the two main imperatives for cooperation among the Central Asian countries.

According to the President of Uzbekistan, “Trade and economic cooperation is the main driver of regional partnership and integration”, the President of Tajikistan has called for a “strategic breakthrough in the economic direction”, involving the full potential of the region's states, and the President of Kazakhstan has proposed transforming Central Asia into a “space of new economic opportunities”.

The Leader of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhamedov, and the President of Kyrgyzstan Sadyr Zhaparov, also stressed the importance of enhancing trade and economic links, boosting bilateral trade turnover, and harnessing huge untapped potential.

Along with the promotion of intraregional trade, the presidents of Central Asian countries gave special attention to the expansion of regional industrial cooperation.

The President of Uzbekistan, in particular, proposed developing and adopting a Strategy for the Development of Industrial Cooperation. At the same time, the President of Kazakhstan initiated an Action Plan for the Development of Industrial Cooperation. President Emomali Rahmon proposed the development of separate cooperation programs in agriculture and industry and the active introduction of new technologies.

The energy sector was another area where similar approaches were proposed. Thus, the President of Uzbekistan emphasized the need to guarantee energy security, which might pose a barrier to Central Asian nations' long-term sustainable growth.

He underlined the need for collaboration in developing energy infrastructure, energy source diversification, attracting investments and technology in alternative energy, and generating “green” hydrogen.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are willing to actively collaborate with Central Asian nations to create “green energy” based on their hydropower resources.

In exchange, the Leader of Turkmenistan indicated his country's determination to assist in meeting regional demand for energy resources and deliver natural gas and electricity to Central Asian countries and through their territory to overseas markets on mutually advantageous conditions.

President Serdar Berdimuhamedov suggested creating a new type of five-sided contact – the Energy Dialogue of Central Asian Countries – to make cooperation more systematic and practical.

Traditionally, the leaders of Central Asian countries have focused on expanding our countries' transport and logistics capabilities and diversifying transportation corridors. At the same time, participants in the meeting approved the Five-Party Agreement on Strengthening Connectivity of Land Transport in Central Asia.

However, the heads of state did not limit themselves and proposed several concrete initiatives. Thus, the President of Uzbekistan proposed developing an Agreement on Transport and Transit in Central Asia, forming specific mechanisms to promote efficient transport corridors to access the markets of China, South Asia, and the Middle East, the European Union by applying business-friendly tariffs.

He also suggested preparing a Program of measures to liberalize the transport services market, optimizing permitting procedures, and considering creating a new integrated digital Platform for international transport.

In line with Uzbekistan's idea, Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov proposed considering the possibilities of establishing a Central Asian transport and logistics platform.

Without a doubt, all of these initiatives are crucially important for the states' long-term development and attest to a shared desire to create a new way of economic growth in the region based on the competitive advantages and complementarity of Central Asian economies, to form an extensive market in the region and integrate it into global value chains, and to transform Central Asia into an essential link of interregional connectivity.

In this context, the President of Uzbekistan's idea seems to be in demand to form a Central Asian Economic Council, which might become an efficient instrument for assuring collaboration and coordinating efforts to promote economic initiatives that fulfill common interests.

#### Decisive steps towards overcoming climate challenges

The effects of climate change on the environment, water consumption, and food security were also cited as challenges and risks relevant to the Central Asian countries.

Summit participants were unanimous about the necessity for coordinated cooperation in this area as they all expressed worry over the effects of climate change and presented comparable ideas.

Kyrgyzstan, in particular, has initiated a significant endeavor to set up a Regional Center to introduce resource- and energy-saving technology. It is consistent with the Turkmen side's suggestion to create a Regional Center on climate change technologies.

In reply, the President of Uzbekistan suggested the establishment of a multilateral forum called "Central Asian Dialogue" at the level of ecology ministers, as well as drafting a Regional Strategy on Climate Change Adaptation.

Furthermore, the President of Uzbekistan announced the first Samarkand international forum dedicated to the climate topic in 2023 and initiated the joint submission of a UN General Assembly resolution titled "Central Asia in front of global climate challenges: consolidation for a common future".

Without a doubt, the Samarkand Forum has the potential to become a multilateral venue for the entire debate of Central Asian initiatives and the establishment of broad international support for regional efforts to confront climate change and adapt to its repercussions.

We cannot but appreciate Central Asian governments' environmental action, and all proposals put forward by Central Asian countries should be viewed as components of regional efforts to address climate concerns. This dynamic is critical in the context of the impending Regional Climate Summit in Kazakhstan in 2026 under the auspices of the United Nations, which President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev proposed during the Astana Forum this summer.

**Strong commitment to the formation of collective security mechanisms**

The leaders of Central Asian countries putting forward specific security proposals demonstrated the region's high degree of confidence, the establishment of collective security mechanisms, and the readiness to share responsibility for Central Asia's stability. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, for example, suggested launching a Dialogue on Security and Cooperation, which Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan welcomed.

The President of Uzbekistan proposed a robust foundation for cooperation in border protection and protecting the territorial integrity of Central Asian countries, as well as a cooperative counteraction to mutual security problems and threats. Initiatives were put up, in particular, to construct an Interstate border security and strengthening Program and establish a regional system of forecasting, preventive, early warning, and cooperative reaction to emergencies.

Taking into account all Central Asian countries' interest in normalizing the situation in Afghanistan and preventing challenges and threats emanating from its territory, it was proposed to establish a Contact Group at the level of special representatives on Afghanistan to establish a coordinated dialogue with the Afghan side on border security, water use, and trade development.

**Sustainable efforts to build a common regional identity**

The desire to forge a shared regional identity – a crucial need for developing shared responsibility and solidarity in boosting Central Asia's well-being and prosperity – was another example of the commonality of viewpoints.

The region's leaders recommended various measures to preserve Central Asia as a distinct cultural and civilizational zone and expand cultural and humanitarian linkages to improve and deepen regional collaboration. In this regard, the Uzbek side initiated the adoption of an action plan to deepen cultural and humanitarian interaction between Central Asian countries, as well as the establishment of an international media platform "History and Culture of Central Asia: One Past and Common Future", which could be promoted based on the Association of Central Asian States Mass Media, the establishment of which was proposed by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon.

Furthermore, to foster the concept of a shared regional identity among young people, the President of Uzbekistan proposed establishing regional scientific and educational grants and scholarships in honor of Al-Khwarizmi, Farabi, Jami, Magtymguly, and Chingiz Aitmatov.

In general, the leaders of Central Asian governments are determined to make youth the primary beneficiary and driving force behind the development of a long-term regional integration plan, the framework and supporting structure of a shared Central Asian nest.

The adoption at the summit of the Agreement among Central Asian countries on common directions of youth policy was an obvious confirmation of this.

Undoubtedly, all of the above and many other specific initiatives form a solid basis for moving forward, building effective mechanisms of interaction, and forming a solid Central Asian architecture of cooperation.

It is becoming clear that our nations have already recognized the primary areas of collaborative development. At the same time, we have not only developed a common agenda for strengthening and extending collaboration, but we have also begun implementing practical measures and initiatives.

In general, the summit confirmed Central Asian leaders' strong and decisive attitude toward shouldering responsibility for our region's security and sustainable development, comprehensively deepening and expanding regional cooperation in the interests of our peoples, and making every effort to transform Central Asia into a space of peace and collaboration, an essential link in interregional connectivity and global value chains. This contributes to the stability and security of the shared Eurasian space.

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**source**