



Regional integration in post-Soviet Central Asia

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Between economic crisis, international terrorism and identity issues: a regional integration that struggles to overcome political postures.

Central Asian states face constraints in terms of economic sovereignty that hamper cross-border cooperation mechanisms. Moreover, these states, faced with security risks generated by the violent demands of political Islam, are struggling to implement development strategies that reconcile national sovereignty and regional integration.

In October 2011, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, in his speech presenting the plan to establish the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), stressed that the Russian Federation's economic and social development should be based on the principles of the Euro-Asian Economic Union. That the demarcation of the borders between Russia and Kazakhstan was no longer necessary in view of the progress made in terms of, inter alia, customs integration. Twenty years after independence, the Central Asian States could thus appear to have achieved sustainability and developed a harmonious regional integration process. However, progress in regional integration still appears to be timid. Moreover, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), initiated by the countries of the region after the break-up of the USSR, has never experienced a reality that goes beyond political postures.

Regional integration has not experienced the boom that could have been expected when the reconfiguration of this space resulting from the disintegration of the USSR took place. Questioning the mechanisms of regional integration therefore seems particularly relevant in a region where the issues of national identity, security and economic development are systematically transnational in nature.

Subjected to strong geopolitical and security constraints, the Central Asian states, whose identity and territorial boundaries are sometimes still fragile, find it very difficult to set up transnational cooperation. They seem far from being able to reconcile the imperatives of

economic development with the preservation of their national sovereignty.

In order to be convinced of this, after identifying the assets that can facilitate regional cooperation, we will naturally seek to clarify the geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries between the countries of the region, and then detail the identity and security issues that slow down their implementation.

A context conducive to the development of cooperation

Central Asia as defined here (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) is a region whose isolation limits the prospects for sustainable development. Its economic development and requires the establishment of cross-border cooperation with countries that have access to the main world trade routes - Russia and China. This situation arose at the time of independence, as the cost of opening up the region was, until then, borne by the Soviet regime. This isolation also creates a situation of interdependence which, a priori, encourages the development of cross-border cooperation in order to improve transport infrastructure and regional integration mechanisms.

Moreover, the States born out of the collapse of the USSR have complex territorial configurations that generate mobility phenomena conducive to cross-border trade. Indeed, these States have a very dense urban distribution on their border peripheries and include minorities from neighbouring peoples. In addition, they are confronted with seasonal territorial discontinuities, which require border crossings. In addition, the region is experiencing a strong migratory flow towards the Russian Federation, facilitated by the absence of visas for Central Asian nationals. These interdependencies linked to Soviet legacies are also particularly present in the field of infrastructure, and mainly concern the maintenance and operation of networks or the payment of transit fees for the transport of passengers, freight or hydrocarbons. In addition, in parallel with their membership of international organisations, the new States have joined a multiplicity of regional cooperation organisations designed to either to maintain the mechanisms for political, economic and military cooperation between former Soviet countries - the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the treaty organisation (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), or to establish partnerships with countries bordering the former Soviet Union (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). harmonise trade, infrastructure and economic relations - Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) and Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO). However, the scope of these organisations is limited due to structural difficulties: political and economic inequalities, the dominant position of Russia, divergent political systems, competition from the productive structures of the Member States (particularly as regards cotton and hydrocarbons), the persistence of tariff barriers or the lack of a mechanism for settling trade disputes.

Geopolitical and geo-economic rivalries

The geopolitical interplay of the major powers seeking, through bilateral relations, to strengthen their influence in order to satisfy their security, economic or energy interests is a brake on the development of transnational cooperation and the modernisation of the

production infrastructures of these countries.

Thus, after a relative lack of interest during the five years following the dissolution of the USSR, Russia has gradually regained the levers of its influence in Central Asia thanks to its preponderant economic weight, its military cooperation, the maintenance of "complacency" towards authoritarian regimes and pressure in the energy field. Nevertheless, this capacity for influence is limited, in the economic sphere, to bilateral cooperation. However, given the geopolitical game developed by China, its positions can no longer be considered as guaranteed.

Indeed, China is imposing itself by its economic power. Beyond the progress achieved within the framework of the SCO, it allows China to negotiate agreements in its favour in the field of hydrocarbons and water resources through bilateral relations. In this context, a possible Sino-Russian partnership based on a tacit division of responsibilities - Russia: security; China: economic development - could be put to the test.

The US presence has focused mainly on transit projects bypassing Russia (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Ezerum gas pipeline) and security projects in the Caspian Sea and Afghanistan. It has asserted itself through a privileged partnership with Kazakhstan and especially with Uzbekistan. However, Uzbekistan has moved closer to Moscow after the strong American criticisms formulated during the bloody repression of Andijan in 2005. This period marks a retreat of American influence on the Central Asian terrain, amplified with the disengagement of forces from Afghanistan.

Moreover, the Central Asian republics, faced with local geo-economic factors, are struggling to engage in economic transition. This space was integrated within the framework of a planned economy that maintained interdependencies. However, this integration is today hardly compatible with development issues based on the affirmation of national sovereignty and control of resources.

These difficulties are particularly acute in the field of electricity production, which was mutualized under the Soviet regime. Thus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the main suppliers, received Uzbek hydrocarbons as compensation. However, at the time of independence, the States used their

deliveries. Faced with rising oil prices, the two countries have reduced their summer releases to save water or caused large releases in winter to produce for their own needs. These practices have adversely affected agriculture in the Amu Darya and Syrdarya basins of Uzbekistan, and in 2008 the Uzbek President expressed concern about the potential for inter-state conflict over the issue.

Enidentity and security games

Favouring an identity-based logic intended to ensure the stability of regimes and the viability of republics with territorial envelopes that are still fragile, the political choices made at the time of independence have amplified antagonisms and weakened the economic coherence of the region. Indeed, these decisions aimed at consolidating the nation-state character of the new republics have led to the emergence of multiple fragmentations (political, social, ethnic and linguistic) which still contribute to hampering the economic development of the region.

The redefinition of citizenship according to Soviet principles changed national affiliations

by favouring the adoption of citizenship of the country of residence at the expense of ethnicity. The introduction of a visa regime for reasons of security or sovereignty increased regional partitioning. The promotion of the national languages introduced by the Soviet authorities generated inequalities in access to the civil service, leading to the exclusion of ethnic minorities. These policies exacerbated national identity and undermined ethnic balances, particularly in the enclaves of the Valley, where social and economic functions are defined according to ethnicity. In this regard, against the backdrop of the economic crisis, tensions over the allocation of water and pasture resources have reactivated opposition between farmers and stockbreeders on the one hand, and between stockbreeders and merchants on the other, on an ethnic basis. The latter are further amplified by the fact that these deeply intertwined borders separate towns, villages or houses. The emergence of these multiple borders has contributed to the deconstruction of local solidarity and the dynamics of exchange within the region. In this respect, the example of the Ferghana Valley is particularly significant. The Ferghana Valley, a hotbed of civilization on the Silk Road, the cradle of Zoroastrianism and the Mughal Empire, was a fertile and prosperous region, but it has been the subject of intense tension since independence. These developments attest to the destruction of traditional ties and supra-State regional groupings and the disintegration of the local economic and social fabric. This degradation led to protests in Andijan in 2005 and Osh in 2010, which were suppressed in blood.

In this deteriorated economic context, the risk carried by the development of the terrorist threat is likely to hinder the opening up of political systems and produces a logic of confinement that constitutes an obstacle to the development of cross-border cooperation. Thus, even if security concerns against the backdrop of the fight against Islamist movements pre-existed at independence, they were heightened during the war in Afghanistan and are still growing in the region with the civil war in Tajikistan. As such, in the 1990s, the opposition of the Islamic Renaissance Party (PRI) to the communist regime contributed to reinforcing fears of destabilization by political Islam.

The example of Uzbekistan is symptomatic of this situation. The severe repression of the Islamic opposition there has led to a radicalisation of refugee activists in Afghanistan. The latter created the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and became involved in international terrorism. In this context, the porous nature of the borders made it possible, in 1999, for attacks to be carried out in Tashkent by armed elements infiltrated from Afghanistan via the Kyrgyz border. The August 1999 hostage-taking in Kyrgyzstan was attributed to PRI elements from Tajikistan. Faced with the risk of infiltration by MIO elements, President Karimov initiated a unilateral demarcation and equipping of the border with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Noting that "Uzbekistan is in a region where the system of collective security is not yet in place," President Karimov reproached Tajikistan for its lack of effectiveness in the fight against radical groups. This argument has legitimised the unilateral closures of the borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. After its withdrawal to Afghanistan, the MIO was not completely destroyed by the American strikes unleashed after September 11, 2001, and the Ferghana Valley experienced, in 2004, new attacks attributed to the MIO or to Hizb ut-Tahrir.

The Central Asian republics thus maintain a permanent mistrust not only of the PRI and the MIO, but also of the fundamentalist movement Hizb ut-Tahrir. In this context, Uzbekistan regularly accuses Tajikistan of harbouring terrorists on its territory. These security concerns have been the source not only of the policies of border closures, but also of a reluctance to engage in effective political pluralism. Thus, the persistence of the Islamist risk and current concerns linked to the return of Central Asian jihadists who fought in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq, particularly in Tajikistan, are likely to hinder any transition mechanism and amplify regional compartmentalisation.

In conclusion, twenty-five years after independence, the states of the Central Asian region, despite political postures calling for integration, are encountering constraints in terms of economic sovereignty that are holding back the development of cross-border cooperation. Moreover, these States, faced with security risks linked to the violent demands of political Islam, are struggling to implement development and political transition strategies that reconcile national sovereignty and regional integration.

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